

The Clock of the Universe



J.H. Sweet

Clock Winders Book Four

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Unless otherwise noted, quotes from the *Holy Bible* used in this
book are from the Revised Standard Version.

The Clock of the Universe is Book Four
of the *Clock Winders Series*

Clock Winders Series

Wind Horses and Horned Lions

Burnished Doves and Sky Serpents

Netherwind and Laurelstone

The Clock of the Universe

The Once and Forever Mountain

“A generation goes, and a generation comes,
but the earth remains for ever.
The sun rises and the sun goes down,
and hastens to the place where it rises.
The wind blows to the south,
and goes round to the north;
round and round goes the wind,
and on its circuits the wind returns.
All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full;
to the place where the streams flow,
there they flow again.”

—Ecclesiastes 1:4-7

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Prologue

Twenty-four years had passed since that eventful summer spent at Netherwind, and the world had changed quite a lot; but not for the better because dark times lay upon the earth, with even darker ones looming on the not-so-distant horizon.

With Satan basically as influential, persistent, and powerful as ever, persecution against Christians had increased a hundredfold; and this hadn't happened at a snail's pace, but rather at something akin to a fast trot.

In this particular season of time, some of the earliest trotting and headway made by Satan's followers involved the passing of laws prohibiting Christmas decorations in all hospitals and nursing homes. These buildings were prime targets for Satan, since they were places where many people expire, and where many of those about to die might be inclined to repent of their sins and seek some sort of assurance of eternal life by turning to Christ. Bibles were banned next from all public places including nursing homes and hospitals. They were not even allowed in private rooms of these facilities because they could not be brought into the buildings to begin with, since reception areas and hallways were designated as public places. In the same manner, they could not be passed through windows because the grounds were also, as defined by law, public. This included bibles in various electronic formats, which wouldn't have been very accessible anyway because both devices and use of the internet were limited in these settings, as outside influences had been deemed detrimental to the health of the residents.

If any bibles were found inside rooms, the residents possessing them were deemed lawbreakers and were instantly removed from the facility, with some being jailed, because there couldn't be lawlessness in these settings. However, despite these laws, all was not totally bleak because people with a certain gift, that of having perfect memory, ended up visiting nursing homes and hospitals. Having memorized the various

versions of the *Holy Bible*, these visitors provided full access to God's Word, both verbally and occasionally by writing certain passages down for people who still had access to paper and pens.

How could these laws have been passed, we might ask? It was easy. Sorcerers and their followers controlled pretty much all government bodies in the United States, and were beginning to infiltrate other countries as well. The government had taken over the running of all hospitals and nursing homes. They had tried to take over the running of all public schools; but this had as yet failed because the individual states still wanted to be involved, especially those in the South holding some of the larger communities still friendly toward bible-based Christians. However, the sorcerers were gradually gaining a hold in education systems, already having done so in many colleges and universities, since most of them were in various ways government funded. Many of these institutions, under pressure, had stopped teaching the works of writers and philosophers such as John Milton and C.S. Lewis.

Since sorcerers were human beings, they were easily able to deceive in most settings, basically blending in; though, in using a good many supernatural tactics, it was a wonder sometimes how many of their atheist followers were still able to claim an atheism status. The explanation seemed to lie in the fact that it was still trendy to be an atheist, which ended up capturing the fancies of many of the more insecure and weak-minded human beings, or simply those easily misled. Sadly, these people would soon discover themselves (along with many millions of others on the earth) to be nothing more than slaves to the sorcerers taking orders directly from Satan and his fellow fallen angels. With Christ's victory assured, it was simply a question of how many might be saved before the Endtimes, so Satan was in a bit of a hurry to collect as many lost souls as possible for hell.

At around the same time that bibles were banned, the phrase "In God We Trust" was removed from money, though actual money wasn't used much anymore, so it almost seemed a wasted effort.

Attacks on free speech were also prevalent, and in the oddest forms. A federal law was passed prohibiting anyone staging *A Christmas Carol* from using the phrase "God bless us, every one!" "Everyone, cheer!" was the recommended replacement phrase. A few months following,

another law relating to *A Christmas Carol* was passed stating that any characters' dialogue implying anything to do with God had to be rewritten. The name of the play when staged had to be changed too, to simply *Scrooge*. The play was banned entirely two short years after that; but it had already stopped being performed by that time because, watered down, it had no meaning.

Activists and government officials had tried to ban Christmas altogether (celebrations, decorations, worship services, mention of the name, etc.), under the guise of preventing Muslim terrorist attacks, which were rapidly increasing both in numbers and intensity. This hadn't passed, as there supposedly was still some religious freedom in the United States. The outlawing of Christmas had been tried again using the argument that the holiday was discriminatory because Christians didn't believe there were other ways to heaven, only through Christ. This also didn't pass; again, because there was still some religious freedom, though the amount of freedom was rapidly dwindling.

While these attempts failed initially, by some very interesting twists and turns of the law, other attempts would succeed. Christmas would definitely be banned because Christians in the future were not going to be allowed to practice their faith, not only openly but also in their own homes, with this being how many underground churches were started.

Shortly after the Pledge of Allegiance was officially changed to eliminate the words "under God," the U.S. Constitution was deemed outdated, and also changed in many facets. Many anti-gun laws were passed, though residents of some states did retain the right to own and possess firearms. This included Alabama where Doyle Mansion, Netherwind, and Laurelstone were all situated. However, with gun owners forced to register their weapons, and registration lists being made public, many gun owners had their weapons stolen. With criminals now being mainly the only ones armed, and ordinary law-abiding people not having a way to defend themselves, crime had escalated. Police were still armed, but these organizations fell under governments, which were corrupt and full of various forms of malice. Any non-corrupt law enforcement personnel were outnumbered, and threatened, and eventually driven out of the profession.

The plantations of Netherwind and Laurelstone hosted one large combined school, with elementary classes being held on the Netherwind property, both at the house and in a separate building officially named Netherwind Elementary School. Laurelstone Middle School and Laurelstone High School both operated on the grounds of Laurelstone. In having magical protectors, the schools were fairly safe. And since private schools didn't have to adhere to the rules of public ones, they had been able to continue to operate fairly freely.

Public schools had continued to change to the point that no one was allowed to speak of or display anything related to Christianity, with infractions punishable by fines, arrest, and incarceration, even of the youngest of minors. The incarcerations took place in facilities mixing ages, which often allowed horrible abuse of younger students by older ones, as well as by some of the jailers.

Laws were passed forbidding Christians to speak out regarding issues such as abortion and gay rights. Anyone daring to stand up for their beliefs in these matters was arrested, tried, and convicted of a hate crime because this type of speech could incite others to believe the same things or possibly persecute people in favor of these practices.

Special interest groups had become majorities, not because a majority of people actually believed in the causes, but because people were too afraid to disagree. However, while these groups may have thought they had won victories, they had, in fact, been deceived. Satan was still the Great Deceiver; and the deception would be revealed, at a time not too distant in the future when nearly all of the human race would be enslaved by the sorcerers in service of Satan.

While the dark times would be difficult to live through, Christians would have the assurance that God is still fully in control. Hope still abounds amidst the bleakness, part of this coming in the form of the Clock of the Universe, a device controlling the intricate workings of everything taking place in the dimensions that human beings have access to. All creatures serving God are part of the workings of this machine. They also help to wind the clock, which is currently gearing up for something, working towards something very big. And not even Satan with all his power can delay or stop what's coming—that which is God's Plan, His plan for the earth and for His children.

Chapter One

The Wordsmith

Em hadn't planned to accept the Nobel Prize in Literature she had just won, but Charlie had convinced her to go to the award ceremony and accept the prize. "You can donate the money to charity," Charlie had stressed, "and do whatever you want with the little medallion." Seeing the benefit of the money being used for something good, Em had decided to go.

Ugh, the Dress Code, her mind complained, naturally, because she fully thought the uncomfortable, overly-fancy, and constricting clothing to be pretty silly. But, of course, she would comply. She had learned over the years to go along with certain things—that old saying about choosing battles wisely being perfectly correct, and essential to survival in the fallen world.

With her sewing skills not limited to simply puck troll clothing, she made her gown, using a couple of Mrs. Doyle's old church and party dresses that Violet had carefully preserved. With the garments in such good shape, Violet had encouraged Em many times to make the vintage clothing into something that could be used. "Cousin Frances would have wanted that," Violet had insisted. While Em had been reluctant to do so, it now seemed meant to be because the gown turned out perfectly lovely, although fairly simple in comparison to what the other women at the award banquet would likely be wearing. But Em had, long ago, learned not to do much comparing because it was neither godly nor healthy.

In trying to pack light for the trip to Sweden, the gown was crammed fairly tightly into her small suitcase. *I can get the hotel service to steam out the wrinkles*, she decided. With December being fairly chilly in that part of the world, she shoved in a cape jacket as well before, literally, sitting on the case in order to force it closed.

Em was going by herself, mainly because it wasn't always safe to attend public gatherings, with sorcerers ever present. Even Sweden,

long known for its non-corrupt government, might not be safe. The members of God's elect had learned over the years not to gather together too many in one place at the same time.

Zapor flew her to the hotel in Sweden, but would not be bringing her home because Em would be embarking on a short mission to Canada after the ceremony. He would monitor her movements, and she could call on him in an emergency, but the mission was actually something she would need to do alone.

In the hotel room, with her freshly-steamed gown (hanging from a sconce) staring at her, Em went over her acceptance-speech notes. She had already submitted her required lecture the month before, one she had recorded at her writing desk in the mansion, in the same informal manner she occasionally recorded English lessons for the school children at Netherwind and Laurelstone. For the speech, she would begin with a poem she had written while making her gown, then proceed with the rest of her notes, which might not go over very well; but she would say what she planned to say anyway, regardless of the reception. Having timed the speech, she would likely come in just under the fifteen-minute mark which had been set as the time limit for banquet speeches after two prize recipients in the same year, five years previous, had rambled on for well over an hour each. The officials setting the time limit had reasoned that a person could ramble on in his or her lecture, but not at the award ceremony, especially since many attending were elderly and simply couldn't endure sitting for so many long hours straight.

Em was a little surprised she was still being given the award after submitting her lecture, since she not only had spoken on the novel that prompted the nomination, but also on her views of awards and the competitive nature of the world in general. And being a little shy of any kind of praise, she had almost wished the committee would find some way to say it was a mistake, and that someone else had really won. Yet, here she was, on the verge of getting the award, likely, she reasoned, because some places in the world still did allow free speech.

The banquet dinner was excellent, reminding Em of some of Charlie's most memorable creations.

Fourth up for award acceptance, she was glad she had thought to bring the cape; sitting still for so long, she felt cold, and even rather stiff in heading to the front of the hall.

With her opening poem being considered less-than-quality literature, she received quite a few jeers and shouts upon delivering it:

The Wardrobe and the Closet

A man of around age thirty lived in a fairly small house,
By himself, for the most part, except for a secretive mouse.
A tall wardrobe and a closet occupied the largest room;
Not much separated them, just a bed and a wooden loom.
In debating which one was best, the mouse heard the wardrobe say,
“If the man moves, he’ll take me with him, while you will have to stay.”
The closet replied, “I’m sturdier, connected to the floor.
Besides that,” he added, “I’m twice as large, so I hold much more.
Plus, he stores his loom supplies on my shelves, along with his books.”
“But he hangs his clothes,” the wardrobe said, “on my large metal hooks.”
“The bible on my shelf,” the closet countered, “he reads each day.”
“But I hold shoes,” the wardrobe replied, “which help him find his way.
And his warm coat, which he finds handy when snow falls from the sky.”
“The umbrella in my corner,” said the closet, “keeps him dry.”
“Being mobile,” the wardrobe answered, “I can move into halls.”
“While you can only hug one,” the closet said, “I’m made of walls.”
When by chance a large tornado tore them both to smithereens,
The two rivals stopped comparing; they no longer had the means.
From the small house, the man salvaged every single thing he could,
Even taking quite a few pieces of badly splintered wood.
In his new home, the closet scraps edged a mirror on the wall.
For the man the height was just right; for the mouse it was too tall.
With the pieces of the wardrobe, the man made a picture frame.
Here, the wardrobe and closet were now pretty much the same.

Em was unaffected by the jeering. Continuing calmly and steadfastly, she told the audience that God had basically written the book, *Graham Rumpole*, and that she deserved no credit for it. She then thanked Him in prayer for giving her the skill to write, and for working in her and through her.

For the rest of her allotted time, she recited bible passages, including all of the ones that had led Vini to her first unicorn. After only four passages, more jeering and shouting from certain audience members interrupted her, basically drowning her out. However, the

interrupters were escorted from the hall rather quickly, allowing her to continue.

When the fifteen-minute buzzer sounded, Em calmly explained that she would be going over the time limit in order to finish because she had been interrupted. No one stopped her; it seemed fair to allow her to finish, which she did, less than two minutes later with Isaiah 55:12. ““For you shall go out in joy, and be led forth in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall break forth into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.””

While the applause wasn't as loud for her as it had been for the previous three prize recipients, it was polite.

On her way to Canada the next morning, Em took a boat instead of a plane. In her cabin, studying the medal she had received the night before, she reflected on her work. She had been writing as E.R. Tremaine since her college years, the E.R. standing for Emerson Rae, her first and middle names, and Tremaine being her last name.

She was still incredibly surprised by the prize, mainly because she didn't think anyone writing overtly Christian books would be either nominated or selected as winner. *Maybe they didn't notice it was a Christian book*, she thought. To a casual reader, the story wouldn't have appeared to be Christian. That had been her main intent in writing it, to get people to read it that might not otherwise, and to draw them to Christianity. The work had been both intricate and subtle; even someone reading it twice might not notice what was hidden in it.

Surely the committee noticed, her mind countered. *Surely those evaluating work for a huge prize in literature would be able to see what that work is. They had to know.*

This had indeed been the case; both the nominator and several members of the selection committee had recognized the book for what it was—a fictional novel with the story of Salvation worked into it, also containing a warning of what would happen to those who weren't saved. However, the nominator and committee members didn't realize the book would actually cause many people to come to Christ as a result of reading it.

Though they hadn't influenced the committee, the nomination itself had been the result of moves by Boko and Etowa. They had both made the same move—called an “even-through” in their gaming language—

but were, of course, each hoping for a different result. Whether she had won or not, Boko had hoped Em would succumb to pride, which God hates, while Etowa had been fairly certain she would not.

Again, as in most of their even-through turns, Etowa had won. His faith in certain humans had rarely wavered over the course of playing the game, which would continue until the return of the Savior. As far as celebrating the victory, Etowa was cautious; and he felt it wise to remind himself of a particular failed move. As humans count time (which Etowa did not, of course, since he was outside of time), this would occur roughly twenty-four years into the future when one of God's children would end up terribly disappointing him.

Em would donate most of her prize money to her church, and she would stow the medallion in the subbasement library. She had won a few other literary prizes over the years; but as with this one, she didn't care much about them. The writing was what was important, not the accolades. Her short story, "The Wind Witch and the Water Waif," had won two awards; and she had received an honorary doctorate after her novel, *We're Not Listening*, became a bestseller. The book was about stories the trees were telling us from their observations, including stories of political corruption, murders, and other types of evils that many people were turning a blind eye to. Though definitely fiction, many aspects of the book had a definite ring of truth to them. By the time it was published and became widely read, many people were listening, or at least noticing, but most were too afraid to try to do anything about what was happening in the world.

Fingering the medal, she again puzzled over the prize. She couldn't imagine who the nominator might have been. But when she thought about it, she didn't particularly care because it didn't really matter. Even if she did care, she wouldn't be able to find out who it was for fifty years, since the rules kept the nominations secret for that long. *At eighty-eight, I'll probably be dead by then*, she thought. *But who knows, I might live to over a hundred*. Em smiled in thinking that a centenarian had been a central character in *Graham Rumpole*.

Probably God made this happen for some reason, she decided a few moments later. *The money I'm going to donate to the church is likely needed for something important. It's as simple as that. Everything always happens for a reason.*

However, while pondering that everything happens for a reason, Em's mind suddenly came under attack by Satan, in the form of anger over her husband's life being cut horribly short by cancer. Not only had Herbert not been able to fulfill many of his own hopes and dreams, she felt cheated in having had such a short time with him. They had only been married four years when he got sick; then he died three years after that, which is when Em had returned to live at Doyle Mansion where she intended to remain for the rest of her life, caring for her parents as they aged. While Dave and Violet, both in their seventies, were still very healthy and active, they would likely need her help in the future.

Em had struggled with anger, ugly thoughts, and unforgiveness her whole life, relating to various people and life events, but had only gained a measure of control when realizing that she was never meant to go it alone when battling these problems. She couldn't do it alone. Being a weak and flawed creature, she didn't have the strength on her own to conquer these things. When she finally recognized and accepted this, and turned the matter over to God, things became much more manageable, easier to bear and deal with.

Recognizing the ugly thoughts and feelings very quickly, Em pushed them away, instead focusing on what she planned to do with the rest of the prize money. *I will buy bunches of bibles, distributing some, and storing the others in the Labyrinth Library for use in the future.*

Even in Em's college years, bibles were already starting to be banned from college campuses. To start with, they definitely weren't allowed in any public areas. By her junior year, they were banned from most campuses entirely, including dorm rooms, which fell under the same laws as nursing homes and hospitals. People wishing to read bibles had to find places off campus in order to do so. Recalling the sadness of this, she wondered how long it might be before *Graham Rumpole* was banned, as it would eventually become known that the book included the full story of Christ, including His presence before the world was made, the foretelling of His birth, His actual birth, His teachings, death, resurrection, ascension, and all the way through to His impending Second Coming.

In truth, the majority of her writing was not of the type to win awards, but it was nonetheless powerful; in fact, it was divinely

powerful, a true gift, the use of which was often able to bring about surprising outcomes.

While she most enjoyed crafting poetry and a variety of fictional prose, Em had actually started her career by writing magazine articles. One of the first, when she was still in college, was on the subject of how poorly things like newer vacuum cleaners and dishwashers were made—mostly plastic, so they wouldn't last, and overly complicated, which made them inefficient and easily breakable.

The article had sparked something of an appliance revolution, with people seeking out older-model vacuums (metal ones) to have them refurbished, or doing without, or getting hard-surface floors, even to the point of some people making their own brooms, by her suggestion. "Even a broom should last at least fifteen years! So we shouldn't be paying money for anything that falls apart in two," her article had said.

The dishwasher problem was not only in the cheap construction, but in the way they were designed to function. They didn't clean well and the controls no longer allowed users to limit the run-time. With sensors in control, if the temperature wasn't right, or the water quality was deemed poor, the dishwasher would simply run for hours upon hours. "Instead of buying new dishwashers, we might as well hand wash our dishes." When many people started to do this, and sales drastically declined, the manufacturers were forced to offer more substantially-made models, and ones allowing users to control the run-time.

"In the future, mechanical things aren't going to work anyway, closer to the Endtimes," Em had written, when encouraging people to use well-made brooms and to hand wash their dishes. Fortunately, the magazine she had been writing for at the time was one that still allowed free speech, so she was able to work in a Christian element to anything she was writing about.

Another of her articles had targeted air-quality-control systems installed in many homes. "They think they are smarter than people. I live in a huge house, and the system is set for the smallest house possible, and yet it runs forty minutes every hour. That's insane! The noise drives me crazy. So I have to climb into the attic to shut it off, or pay for the more expensive remote-controlled model than can be turned on and off more easily. But the whole notion is completely stupid; it's utterly stupid not to allow people control over mechanics like this in

their own homes. Why not design the system with a timer? Why not let us set it to run twice a day for fifteen minutes each time to exchange inside air for outside air? I'll tell you why not, because that would be sane! We can't have that! I've actually found myself wanting to throttle the person who designed it, or at least give that person a good hard smack. So I'm convinced Satan is behind all of this. His goal: to make me angry enough to hit or even hurt someone. He's everywhere; if not him, then his followers. I wouldn't be surprised if fallen angels were actually working in these manufacturing plants, helping to design things just to drive us crazy. 'New and Improved' products frequently aren't better than the originals; they're just different, often poorly made and inefficient, with the designs based on saving a dime in manufacturing costs, or following stupid trends and whims."

Bi-fold doors were her next target. While some older models may have worked well, the ones installed in the past few decades were a frustration to most homeowners, always coming off their tracks. Again, Em figured Satan had probably had a hand in the design, because he wanted people to actually get mad enough to throw a door across a room. As a result of the campaign, people started having regular doors put on their wider closets, ones beautifully and simply designed to open up like French doors; and how happy people became with their closet doors because of this.

Em also while in college successfully stopped the nonsense of manufacturers putting 55 tissues into a box that could easily hold 400. This was called the Handkerchief Movement. Not that all people stopped using paper tissues and started using handkerchiefs, but the manufacturers that were over-packaging no longer sold tissues because companies that had started doing the right thing (selling boxes containing at least 200 tissues) were outselling them.

While a couple of the magazines Em had written for over the years were exclusively online, she always kept copies of her work in actual print, so as to still have access to them in the future when electronic things were not going to work and people would still need to be able to read things. People were definitely going to need actual books in the future. Bookmakers were now pretty much using exclusively either bamboo or synthetic paper; so saving trees, paper shortages, and waste had pretty much become nonissues. Em herself still favored taking

notes in a spiral binder. She still wrote most of her poetry this way as well. And while she occasionally did use voice recognition software, she preferred actual writing, mainly on her old computer, which was still keyboard friendly.

The success of her early articles had given Em an inkling that something about her gift of writing was unusual, namely, the effect it seemed to be having. She had never touched the Gift Key, the magical sphere occasionally used at the Netherwind-Laurelstone Schools to reveal gifts hidden inside certain individuals. No, instead of some sort of device, God Himself had been the One to reveal the gift to her, as He guided her every step—every word, pen stroke, and key stroke.

She had figured out fairly quickly that the gift didn't simply allow her to write things that captured attention and persuaded people in an ordinary sort of way to take up a particular cause. No, it was much more than that, to the point that the results were obviously supernatural, with large numbers of people acting on what she had written, often with a fervor that was almost shocking. At least, the supernatural part was obvious to Em, which meant that she needed to be very careful. Indeed, she soon discovered that she could influence her college roommate to buy forty-seven items at the grocery store simply by writing a single short sentence on the message board in the kitchen. Four written words on a sticky-note got the guy next door to ask her out on a date. And a simple scrawl at the bottom of a midterm-exam blue book influenced the professor to give everyone an extra credit assignment, thus, lifting over half of the students' grades in that difficult class.

While many people in the world were truly talented writers, few would ever have the supernatural power that would eventually become known as the wordsmith gift, which mostly applied to the written word, but could also work when speaking, especially speeches, which were most often carefully arranged in writing beforehand.

What a successful career Em's gift might have afforded her in advertising, a cheating career, in using something like this for personal gain, which she of course knew better not to do.

Upon recognizing the power in her words, Em did strive to be very careful in the use of her gift. But with college being a time of growth of maturity, she did end up making a few mistakes, which she had learned

from, though they still occasionally haunted her, particularly when Satan was attacking her mind with guilt.

She had resisted many temptations to misuse the gift in college, such as against a group of girls making her sophomore year very unpleasant. Being incredibly hurt and angry one particular time, she had actually written out the exact eighteen words that she knew would likely influence a person to commit suicide; and she had almost handed the paper to the leader of that miserable little clique. But blessedly, she had managed to resist; and she tore up the paper, never writing those eighteen words, in that exact sequence, again. However, in her senior year, she did end up writing a short note (containing nine seemingly innocent words relating to a weekend picnic) and passing it to the boyfriend of one of the girls of that group, which resulted in the couple breaking up. On another occasion, for a friend who was failing a class, she wrote a letter to the Dean of the School of Business, resulting in a higher grade being given, which might not have been a good idea because her friend, from that point on, seemed to think many other things in life should be given to him without his having to work for them. Many years of his life ended up being frustrating for him, as well as for others such as his friends, family, colleagues, and employers.

Em had regretted her actions, and had asked forgiveness for using the gift in ways God hadn't intended; but while she knew He forgave her, she also knew she might mess up again. This, coupled with the weight of realizing she could end up changing people's whole lives with her words, actually made her afraid to write, for a time. However, with a lot of prayer, she was able to recognize how much good she might do in the world with proper use of the gift. Plus, in going forward, whenever she was tempted to misuse the power, she fortified herself with 1 Corinthians 10:13. "No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it."

Looking out the porthole in her cabin, Em fondly remembered traveling on a boat a couple of times as a kid. But this was quite a different journey, being entirely under water, which to her view afforded an even better view than if she had been on a skimmer. While the ship was currently traveling too fast for her to see any wildlife, the

colors and movement were beautiful. Plus, she could imagine the sea creatures that might be out there. With most of the world's seas under laws of protection, the waters were still fairly teeming with life, which boats rarely interfered with, being required to emit signals that kept most creatures away.

With the view being so inspiring, using her pocket computer, Em set to work making notes for a short story. *Something to do with water*, her mind mused. She was currently writing weekly articles for a particular magazine, and one short story per month for another, as well as working on a new novel.

While the reading of books in the traditional paper form was no longer a common practice, people's love for reading had not diminished. In fact, reading had become much more popular than watching what was currently offered on television, mainly because it had been years since anyone had made anything for television that was new, exciting, or innovative, let alone anything that could be called "quality." Plus, many worthwhile programs of the past had either been banned or altered to the point that their meaning was changed (meaning removed, that is), so there was no longer any point in watching them. Television writers, producers, and such had also discovered that they could no longer shock people. That is to say, they couldn't be more violent, more graphic, more lewd, or more disgusting because these extremes had finally found their limits. All had been done and seen, so there could be no "topping" of something else. They couldn't be more excessive in these things, other than just offering assembly-line, around-the-clock murders, tortures, etc. Even a show featuring toddlers being hung from trees and beaten like piñatas by teenagers, then sliced up like salami in order to be fed to a nearby pen of hungry dogs, was deemed boring by critics because it was "just more of the same." The only thing that may have been shocking was that some people still enjoyed watching these sorts of programs. That could still shock a few people.

No, reading was definitely the current trend. And while things published in traditional formats were becoming scarcer, the contents of what had once filled books, newspapers, and magazines were being offered to readers in a fairly large variety of ways.

People could, of course, read at any time and in just about any place; but as far as what might be considered routine, some people

chose to read their morning news (or the latest gardening article or whatever) on their bathroom mirrors while getting ready for work. An even more popular choice of display was on a wall picture that would feature art or nature scenes at other times of the day. The picture was most often hung in kitchen seating nooks for reading while breakfasting, or when mothers were getting their children prepped for school each day. Retired people often chose a favored spot in a sunroom to mount the picture. The displays were customized according to preference of reading material, with most being voice activated and controlled, though some were light activated to turn on with the sunrise, or from various home lights. Smaller models of the pictures were mounted in driverless cars so people could read on their way to work. Even smaller models were favored by drone commuters and those using public transports. Those missing actual newspapers often received newsprint each day on a device about the size and thickness of an ordinary placemat. Smaller versions could be worn on forearms, contoured to a jacket sleeve. Fold-up pocket-sized versions were also available. Eye implants were not as popular as other devices, since most people still didn't like having their bodies messed with. All of the subscription services featured archives, so people could catch up on what they might have missed, or reread as they chose.

Small holographic projection systems, called no-screens, were not yet affordable to the masses; at least, not the good-quality ones. And the cheaper models took on too much interference to be of much use to anyone, with transmissions being a muddled mess much of the time. The filters were evidently the expensive component to produce; therefore, only wealthier individuals had the good devices. And with the expense being so great, many people only had one, generally worn on pendants or attached to wristwatches, or simply moved around inside a home and mounted in various places using magnets or clips. The expense was not the only problem because all no-screen devices were regulated, in specific, not permitted in certain areas because they tended to interfere with the operations of hospitals, law enforcement facilities, and even some businesses and schools.

Upon discovering her gift, Em had done some research in the Labyrinth Library at Laurelstone, and had discovered a few instances throughout history of others having the wordsmith gift. An essay had

once inspired a revolution, a haiku had been as effective as any love potion, a novella had stopped a war, a paragraph had permanently cured someone of an addiction, and a speech had united a nation after a civil war. A wordsmith operating in her own area, very near Doyle Mansion, twenty-five years earlier had caused an elderly man to take revenge by killing the brother of the boy who had murdered his grandson. For centuries, it seemed, Satan had sought out wordsmiths, attacking them early if they could be identified, before they were saved and fully Christ's, in order to make use of them. The wordsmith who had influenced the grandfather was no longer operating because he had been killed in a car accident caused by a drunk driver.

Em did initially find it somewhat surprising how some of the oddest combinations of words could cause the strangest things to happen. For example, the message on the board for the roommate had nothing to do with food or the grocery store, but rather with Em's schedule for the week. The sticky-note to the neighbor was about his cat. Her research had indicated that a person with the wordsmith gift in the past had been able to get others to commit murders by simply writing about a row of tulips being mowed down accidentally by a gardener veering off course when stung by a bee. However, while this was somewhat confusing at first, as her skill in using the gift grew, these things became easier for her to understand.

There was no denying the power of words, in particular, the *Holy Bible*, the greatest book ever written, written by God Himself working through certain human beings. Therefore, the concept of a supernatural wordsmith shouldn't have been surprising. But as far as how the gift actually worked, Em had never been able to fully explain it, not even to herself. She had only been able to liken it to certain things, such as the concept of how yawns are catching; or how reading before bedtime can help one fall asleep, with the movement of the eyes back and forth—left to right, over and over again—simulating the natural movement of the eyes just before a person drops into sleep. Or perhaps comparing it to hypnosis being able to help a person quit smoking or lose weight might be a better way to explain it, with the power of suggestion being in the form of specific words either written or spoken in a certain way. But whatever the gift might be compared to, the powers were definitely amplified, to the extreme, which made it difficult to control.

Indeed, Em was never sure exactly what impact her words might have on readers. Often, articles and stories she thought were powerful left almost no impression at all, while other things that she regarded as trivial stirred up the most emotions and brought forth the strongest reactions. The unpredictability was why she relied on constant prayer, and careful listening to God, to guide her every move.

His ways are certainly mysterious, Em thought, particularly in contemplating the prize she had just received. Smiling, she recalled Vini describing the six dimensions human beings have access to, the sixth being the Dimension of Mystery. And that would have been the best way for Em to describe her gift, if she had to, as a mysterious one.

In the middle of writing exciting notes about sea elves, Em took a pause in thinking of how water creatures were prominent in a couple of chapters of *Graham Rumpole* too, relating to baptism. While she knew a good many things about the story God had led her to write, including that it was intended to bring people to Christ, one thing Em didn't know was that anyone reading the prize-winning book to a certain sentence, shortly past mid-way in the book, would definitely become a believer during his or her lifetime.

When the sorcerers figured this out, Em's predictions about the book being banned turned out to be correct. In a mere two months' time, not only was *Graham Rumpole* banned, but all copies were ordered to be destroyed, including electronic versions (to be deleted). Anyone in possession of the book, which had been officially classified as "a work inciting religious fanaticism and terrorism," was imprisoned. But how were they to prove possession of the book in the case of eidetic individuals who had already memorized it?

At the time, Em would not be particularly troubled by all of the uproar, and would actually think, *Don't they know that banning only makes people want to read the books more? It's funny how stupid the sorcerers and their slaves can be sometimes. It's like they're stepping on their own feet.*

While most of the original copies of *Graham Rumpole* would be destroyed (electronic versions deleted), genie bookwrights would end up making magical versions of the book that could not be destroyed. If destroyed, another book would automatically come into being. Not

only that, but genies were masters at multiplying things, so copies of the book would always be plentiful.

Also in the future, genie-made books would be pretty fabulous in other ways too, particularly bibles, which would be made to change sizes. As small as postage stamps (but slightly thicker), bibles would be worn on charm bracelets, and sized up for reading. Bible tie pins and cufflinks would also be popular.

Along with her weekly articles and monthly short stories, for the past four years, Em had been busy doing several freelance projects per month, ones related to the task she was heading towards. As the boat slowed in nearing its destination, she stowed her computer in her pocket and packed her medal into her suitcase. *Time to put the ceremony behind and thoughts of sea elves to the far back of the mind*, she told herself. In getting ready to switch from boat to train, she needed to focus. With the boat ride having taken only three hours, and the train ride expected to take less than an hour, her task was quickly sneaking up on her; rather too quickly, in fact, since it was something she was very much dreading. But she knew she had to do it because God was directing her. And she would obey. Not just because she was more afraid of God than of any human being, including sorcerers and their many evil followers; even if she didn't have a healthy fear of God (that all should have toward their Creator), she would have wanted to obey, and do what was right, to save others.

While many people were currently shy of trains due to a recent train terrorist attack in Canada that had killed over two hundred people, Em wasn't the slightest bit worried about boarding. Again, God was directing her steps. But she did find the task ahead of her incredibly sad—that of confronting another wordsmith, one who was abusing the gift God had given her. This person was obviously in service of the sorcerers.

Although the wordsmith gift was rare, it wasn't particularly surprising to Em to discover a rival operating on the same continent, since this would be what Satan would have wanted—for the works of this other person to be in the same language Em wrote in, thus, often negating what her writings were accomplishing, that of instilling some hope in those struggling against the evil forces currently dominating the fallen world.

Without being able to initially locate her rival—who was publishing exclusively under the pseudonym, H. Elle Follows (presumably meaning hell follows, specifically following Death, the rider of the pale horse in Revelation)—Em had spent the past four years expending efforts to counter the horrendously evil activities of this person.

But for many years before that, before Em even noticed, H. Elle Follows (whose real name was Jessica Brown) had committed what might have been considered lesser crimes against the unsuspecting, with her words causing and feeding addictions such as gambling, pornography, and foolhardy spending, to the extent that many people lost their jobs and homes and even families. Relationship problems abounded as marriages were wrecked, children were abused, and estrangements occurred. This was the time when Ms. Brown was honing her craft.

Em did notice the moment her rival began what became known as the Suicide Campaign, targeting college campuses and nursing homes. While there were several people in the world with the incredible gift of being able to stop suicides, at this time, Em didn't even know of their existence. Plus, the gifted people couldn't be everywhere at once and stop all suicides. Ms. Brown was also successfully causing people to become homicidal.

Just as with Em's writings, everyone reading the works was not affected. (Despite scientific and medical advances, the workings of the human brain were still very mysterious; and with each person being an individual, these types of complexities would likely never be fully understood.) But even if only three people out of a hundred reading a poem tried to commit suicide, or one out of five hundred attempted to kill a grandparent, this was still a monumental problem. And the people doing these things were ones who would have never been prone to either despair or violent behavior; therefore, exactly who might be susceptible was not at all predictable. So Em just had to do the best she could with getting what she called her "countering work" out to as wide an audience as possible. Blessedly, she had quite a large following at this time; and in writing her counters outside of what was involved in subscription services, her work was widely shared in many public forums. She was writing more than she ever would have intended to, in

order to give hope, calm impulsive violence, and thus curb the numbers of suicides and stem the flow of murders.

As far as Em's success in countering, many of her stories, poems, and essays did serve to cool down these situations, basically neutralizing what Ms. Brown was doing. But this was time-consuming and only minimized the damage. Em really needed to cut out the disease, which was what God was telling her to do—to take care of the problem at its root. And she was determined that if she couldn't convert Ms. Brown, to save her, she would do what God was commanding in doing away with her rival. Em wasn't nervous because she was assured God would give her the means to deal with her opponent. And while she knew this likely wouldn't be by any sort of physical fight, Em would be armed, with her dagger.

Since she couldn't travel by boat and train with weapons, Zapor had already taken the dagger to a safe spot near Ms. Brown's home. Em knew exactly where to find it, on the roof of a church, and being guarded by a gargoyle. All gargoyles were in God's service; throughout the centuries, sorcerers had never been able to corrupt them. Therefore, creatures like Zapor often sought their help.

Em was in good physical shape, and had had some training, so she could use a dagger effectively. As far as training with other weapons, Weatherly had taught Em a few skills with ropes. However, Em had discovered that she preferred a fighting stick, especially because she could also use it as a hiking stick in wilderness areas. How handy to have a multipurpose tool. Kip, too, liked the fighting stick and regularly sparred with his sister to help her keep up her skills. Since not a magical weapon, as was common in Kivetel (where Kip still regularly trained), Em and Kip had ended up over the years as the only brother-and-sister stick-fighting team in several of Kivetel's exhibition tournaments.

Em might have wished she had moved more quickly on her opponent, before H. Elle Follows' lengthy manifesto had been published, especially because the untitled work—attributing every problem of history to the Christian faith, including every war, every disease, and every act of terror—would be the catalyst for Christianity to eventually be outlawed. However, those working for evil can never overcome the truly righteous; and God's elect were still very much

present and effective in the world, even with Satan's hold on his territory (basically the whole earth) currently the strongest than at any other time in history. The manifesto would be Ms. Brown's main legacy. And it was already out there, so Em could do nothing about it. She could only write her own work to counter it, which she had done with *Graham Rumpole*. Oddly enough, Jessica Brown had also been nominated for the Nobel Prize, for a novel the previous year, but hadn't won. (Having already been defeated by Christ, Satan can never actually "win" anything.)

Picking up her dagger (and leaving her suitcase temporarily in the care of the gargoyle, whom she thanked simply by thought), Em knew she was heading for a duel, but an unusual one that likely wouldn't involve any sort of physical combat. But it was still comforting to have the weapon snugged up against her side, particularly because it was magical, having once been placed into a bagical. The magical aspects, oddly enough, had little to do with fighting. Instead, the dagger could perform tricks like providing heat, to the point of keeping her warm in subzero conditions. It could also act like a divining rod, leading her to fresh water in the wilderness, which it could then purify, making it safe to drink. The dagger could also prevent accidental cuts by temporarily blunting itself, as she had discovered once when stumbling and falling upon it. When thrown at long-range targets, it could extend its flight path, almost like floating at fast speed the last couple hundred yards or so, to actually reach what would have been unreachable by her arm's ability. Even after all of these years, Em wasn't sure she had discovered all of the tricks of her blade.

Upon reaching Ms. Brown's small bungalow midafternoon, in order to clandestinely enter through the back door, Em used her magic key, one that could unlock just about any door. And it worked, of course; God had provided it to her, so of course it would. And for the record, this was a gift she had never misused, even when tempted to, though she could imagine the danger of it in the hands of criminals, intent on stealing, killing, or whatever. However, Em knew God could take the key away from her at any moment, so she had resisted times in college when she thought of using it to enter a classmate's dorm room to play a prank, or on the door of an office to gain access to a professor's computer.

Before opening the bungalow back door, Em made sure her cross pendant was visible, hanging outside of her shirt. If not an influence to the other wordsmith, or a talisman to protect her, it was fortifying to have its nearness and to know it was out, in the open, particularly because public display of crosses was currently limited and, by Em's reckoning, would soon be outlawed.

While Em's rival had been expecting the visit (because the standoff was bound to happen sometime and because she had been warned in a dream that it would occur soon), Jessica wasn't expecting Em's first move in the duel, which was use of a flashcard to put her to sleep. This was how Em had helped cure many people of their insomnia over the years. Jessica had simply been sitting on her couch in the living room when Em appeared in the doorway from the kitchen.

"Slumber so cozy in soft clouds of pale grey, such a deep longing," the card read, the words slanting gently from left to right to have the greatest impact. And the words did succeed in causing the target to fall gently to the left on her sofa and into sleep. (In order to work, the word grey could not have been spelled gray with an "a" and the tails of the first "y" and the second "g" had to be elongated, which had been easy to do, hand writing on a flash card. In print, she would have done it using different fonts.)

Who still uses paper flash cards, Jessica's mind whined in complaint, just before her head hit the light grey toss pillow, which felt rather like a cloud, softly holding her head as the weight of sleep pressed upon her.

Though around Em's age, Jessica looked younger, as though she might still be in her twenties, except that being a rather gaunt-looking woman with sunken eyes betrayed her age, also giving her the look of someone who might be demon possessed. She wasn't, though she might as well have been for as long as she had lived under Satan's hand. Like Em, Jessica had lost her parents as a teen and had been placed into foster care. Unlike Em, she had never gained new loving parents, had never been exposed to believers interested in helping her come to Christ, and had never learned to rely on divine help for managing issues such as anger and unforgiveness.

While the card had worked to put her opponent to sleep, Em was wary, not only because this was one of the oldest of the wordsmiths' tricks, but also because the air in the bungalow felt so heavy and dark.

Jessica was in the habit of using a chalkboard set up in her living room, for outlines and some of her notes. Currently empty, Em speedily wrote several bible quotes on it, in an effort to dispel some of the evil vibes in the home. It worked; the atmosphere almost immediately felt lighter, less oppressive.

Having been expected, Em had of course walked into a trap; and she soon discovered Jessica's first move in their duel, in the form of two words scrawled on a legal pad on the lamp table next to the couch. The message "the walls" had been written in such a way—with the words scrunched together and with both the "t" and second "l" distorted—as to make Em feel immediately claustrophobic, as though the walls were closing in. And the feelings were so intense, especially in the stuffiness of the small room, that she had great difficulty breathing. Rushing to the kitchen, Em flew out the back door, where she gulped air and tried to quell the dizziness that had suddenly come over her.

Blessedly, she did manage to make it back inside fairly quickly, where Jessica was still sleeping soundly. Based on someone resisting the induced sleep, Em estimated she would have about fifteen minutes before her rival would wake.

Dragging a chair from the kitchen table into the living room, Em sat for a moment, gazing at Jessica. From her appearance—so scrawny and fairly helpless-looking, almost like a sickly bird—it was hard to imagine the power of her malice. But it was definitely powerful. From Em's certain knowledge, two pastors had killed themselves, a teenager had murdered two of his younger siblings, and several nannies had left toddlers in hot cars to die, with one of the nannies committing suicide afterwards from the horror of what she had done.

In preparation for the next stage in the duel, Em went to the kitchen to get a glass of water, for herself actually because she was feeling thirsty, which is when she noticed something she had missed on her previous trips through the kitchen. Lentils were strewn over the counter. In thinking they had simply been spilled, Em didn't take caution when giving them a glance; and the words spelled out by the lentils hurriedly flooded her brain. "Drifting deep as ocean blues is the

sleep which heals and renews.” This particular sleep sentence, used by wordsmiths of the past to put people out for surgeries when no anesthetic was available, was actually more powerful than the one Em had used, and would have rendered most targets unconscious for many hours. For as much as Em was fighting it, the sleep might have only been short term, except that her head hit the edge of the sink as she fell; and while she wasn’t seriously injured, this would result in a longer sleep than if she hadn’t hit her head.

Jessica may have been weedy, but she wasn’t stupid. And she was well aware of what Em was capable of, having read a good bit of her work over the years. In truth, Jessica actually admired her rival, and even felt she probably deserved the Nobel Prize, though she hadn’t read *Graham Rumpole*. (If she had, this encounter might have been quite different.) But while Em might have been considered to be a worthy opponent, she was still an enemy, and one that needed to be dealt with. Fully intending to deal with her in a deadly fashion, Jessica had set several traps in her home, including a couple upstairs in the form of words written in lipstick on the bathroom mirror and a message done in chalk on the floor of the hall.

Even with fighting against the heavy sleep that had overtaken her, Em would have woken up much later than Jessica; and Jessica might have killed her, if not for something that actually happened five minutes before Jessica woke up, involving both time travel and the red rope Em was wearing as a belt, which she had intended to bind Jessica to the chair with.

Chapter Two

Diamonds and Sapphires

While Em lay sleeping in Jessica's kitchen, she had a very odd dream, relating to something that had happened about a month before her trip to Sweden. In her dream, she kept bringing Chelsea Haywood and Gavin McWhirter, hidden in the safe room at Doyle Mansion, biscuits and honey, though the pair didn't like biscuits and honey, and kept telling her that they didn't like them. But day after day, Em kept bringing them.

This biscuit-thing hadn't actually happened. The visitors hiding in the mansion in early November had been provided with plenty of food, and of a good variety, but not one biscuit, and not one jar of honey. The dream was simply the result of Em seeing a biscuit on a plate sitting beside a jar of honey on Jessica's counter just before falling to the kitchen floor.

Prior to being hidden in Doyle Mansion for a full week, Chelsea and Gavin had been on the run for many years, from hunters, evil men trained by sorcerers. The sorcerers had many types of hunters working for them, each with specialty targets such as dragons or magicians. The ones searching for Chelsea and Gavin were designated Stone Hunters because they were basically hunting what they considered to be living jewels that were, more specifically, humans who could produce jewels of great power.

Chelsea was what was known as a Diamond Girl, a person with the incredibly rare gift of her tears turning to diamonds the moment they fell from her eyes. In all of history, there had only been four other individuals with this gift, and all of them had been girls. Diamonds produced by her happy tears had the power to bring good health, happiness, wealth, and other such fortunate blessings to those in possession of the stones. Tears from being upset or angry produced cursed diamonds, much varied in the types of misfortunes the stones brought about, as well as in intensity of effects. Some of the diamonds

simply caused physical symptoms and illnesses such as body aches, nausea, colds, and flu, while others could bring about death, sometimes instantly, other times by long-term illness. Loss of fortune and being prone to accidents were also common effects of possession of the cursed diamonds. Even from a young age, Chelsea had been able to discern which of her diamonds were blessed and which were cursed. She could also tell the intensity of the cursed ones, though not specifics as to what might happen if a person was exposed to one, this being mainly because human beings were all individuals that would react in different ways to the exposure.

Gavin's gift was actually rarer than Chelsea's, in that there had been only two Sapphire Boys in all of history, himself included. His tears, as they fell, turned to sapphires that were actually considered even more valuable than the diamonds of a Diamond Girl because they were more specialized, and more predictable, providing healing and protection, which was exactly why the sorcerers wanted him, alive, to produce these stones for them. Sorcerers and hunters, after all, were humans, and could become sick and injured. Many of the oldest ones had been taking an elixir to keep them young for so long that they were insane, and the sapphires could cure insanity. And while they had managed to capture dragons, the sorcerers and hunters, as yet, had been unable to force the beasts to produce healing tears for them. Also, with regard to value, none of the sapphires Gavin produced were malignant, at least none that he had produced so far in his life were.

Of course, Gavin, at sixteen, was already a young man, instead of a boy; but it didn't seem right to say "Sapphire Man" especially because anyone having this incredibly rare gift would know of it from boyhood, even infancy. And no one would call a child of two or five or six, a man. At thirteen, Chelsea would have more been called a young lady than a girl, or a woman; but as far as how people would refer to these gifted individuals in legend, or just in conversation, it would always be Diamond Girl and Sapphire Boy.

Chelsea and Gavin hadn't known one another in their earliest years of growing up; but shortly after both were forced to abandon all ties to friends and family (for the safety of these people), they had, blessedly, found one another. The pair had been on their own now for over five years. Being able to survive on the run was not difficult, as both were

intelligent, and well self-educated, the result of having spent massive hours in libraries, which were often safe havens for many gifted individuals.

In order to have money to live on, they had sold some of the sapphires and blessed diamonds, though in limited numbers so as not to draw too much attention to themselves because the trail of stones was definitely how the hunters were tracking them. Gavin and Chelsea had managed safety much of their time on the run simply by not staying in one place too long, moving from state to state, and even country to country, purchasing new identities as they traveled. They had God's help too, both of them being devoted to Christ from very young ages.

Other than survival, they considered their greatest task to be that of destroying the cursed diamonds, taking regular trips to active volcanoes in order to do this, since intense heat was pretty much the only way to destroy the stones.

At first, they had sought the help of rookhs, giant blackbirds as large as thunderbirds, to drop the stones into the lava. But Gavin at age twelve had figured out that certain of his sapphires (ones with a slightly cloudy appearance) were protective like shields to any bearer, even protective against extreme heat. Also, his skin had qualities related to sapphires and their hardness, which made him hard to injure or kill. Sapphires, while not as hard as diamonds, were as close as any stones could get to diamonds on the hardness scale. And the ones acting like shields didn't just protect against physical attacks, but acted like talismans too, to protect against many evil influences such as temptations, lures into Demon Pockets, deceptions, and even certain sorcerers' spells. His clearer stones were the healing ones. They cured illnesses, healed wounds, and could even save a person very close to death, though not bring someone back from death as dragon tears could.

The shield-like quality of Gavin's skin had grown over the years, coming into full effect as he went through puberty; and at this point, if the sorcerers wanted to kill him, they would likely have to do so from within, by poison. But since there was no shortage of sorcerers who were conjurers, in full command of deadly potions and poisons, if they could catch him, and if he couldn't be turned to evil to do their bidding, this would likely be their means of doing away with him. Along with pronounced skin shield qualities, as Gavin had matured, he had gained

greater control over his emotions, as though having an emotional shield, the result of which was that he couldn't be forced to cry. He was able to resist even when mentally attacked by Satan and certain of his followers (mainly fellow fallen angels and demons), which happened frequently as they planted thoughts relating to the deaths of his parents.

In truth, he hadn't known his parents well; and the memories were very faint. He had been sent to live with distant relatives very young and had only seen his mother and father a handful of times. Though he was sad in learning that they had been tortured and murdered by Stone Hunters, he would be able to resist shedding tears when forced to fully relive their ordeal in his mind (at a time in the future when captured by sorcerers), reserving the tears for a time when he was apart from other human beings, and safe, in God's company only.

Chelsea hadn't known her birth parents at all. In fact, in fear, they had abandoned her as a baby in a church dumpster after one of her cursed diamonds made her nanny sick. Blessedly, she had been found and taken in by one of the ministers of the church, an elderly man who had never had children of his own. His wife having died in a car accident shortly after they married, he had never felt led to remarry. Upon discovering the baby in the dumpster, Reverend Haywood had named her Chelsea, after his wife. In recognizing that she cried diamonds, he had done some research and learned something about her gift. After that, he retired from the ministry and spent the rest of his natural days looking after her, and teaching her because she couldn't very well attend school with a gift like hers. He also protected her by moving frequently. The man Chelsea had come to know as her father was gone now, having succumbed to colon cancer when she was eight, which was when she met Gavin, at a public library.

As a Diamond Girl, Chelsea had shield qualities similar to those of Gavin's, but without the talisman effect against evil influences. She also had longevity as a characteristic of her gift, which meant that, if not found and murdered by hunters or sorcerers, she would live a longer life than most other human beings. Indeed, even some of her blessed diamonds could impart long life on individuals in possession of them. Amplified energy, clarity of thought, poise, courage, and insight were common bestowments as well.

Chelsea had once read a magical legend asserting that diamonds were made from all other precious stones combined, and she had only to notice the prismatic colors of the stones in the light to see how the legend came into being. In other legends, diamonds were associated with rainbows and promises.

As far as personality, Chelsea was sensitive, helpful, giving, kind, and caring. If she hadn't been on the run, she would have wanted to do charity or mission work. She did some of this in her travels in often buying food, blankets, and even lodging for the homeless; and she did these things before worrying about her own dinner, warmth, and shelter for the night. She also often bought sweaters, coats, and food to give away. Gavin occasionally used his sapphires to heal the sick and injured that they came across in their travels, but was forced to do so clandestinely and sparingly, so as not to draw too much attention to either himself or Chelsea. While he, too, felt a need to help, in order to above all protect Chelsea, his head often overruled his longing to stop and render aid to masses of sick and hurting people. He had gained the capacity to do this because the lore surrounding sapphires included the aspect of wisdom, which would often serve to rule above his emotions. Also associated with the stones were heightened powers of concentration, reasoning, and discernment; these, Gavin had found handy over the years, particularly in the area of self-education, both bookwise and streetwise.

Dreams, too, were attributed to sapphires, including prophetic ones; and this was how Gavin knew exactly how and approximately when Chelsea was destined to die. He wouldn't reveal this knowledge to her, or anyone; but until the time of her death, he would protect her with every ounce of his strength and being. With the sapphire being a heavenly stone, like the diamond, it was also associated with rainbows and promises. And Gavin could feel God's promise (both in his heart and his head) that everything destined to happen was part of His plan, and was fully under His control.

Although the sorcerers wanted Gavin more than they did Chelsea, they were definitely after her too because even though the cursed diamonds were unpredictably dangerous, those on the side of evil were planning to find ways to make use of the stones, as weapons against their enemies.

The week of hiding at Doyle Mansion began as Em made a trip to the grocery store in her car. Chelsea and Gavin were standing under an overpass at a highway intersection very near the grocery store. Chelsea had just given a homeless panhandler a sandwich, a pair of jeans, a shirt, a coat, and a scarf. Sitting in a double line of cars at a red light at the intersection, Em hadn't seen the pair; but she did get a very odd feeling of something evil in the area. Glancing around, she immediately noticed the Stone Hunter, in the back of a police car containing two policemen, sitting next to her in the line of cars. He was easy to recognize by the tattoo on his neck, shaped rather like a cut diamond and filled with odd markings. While she had never seen a Stone Hunter in person, Em had seen drawings of the tattoo, done by Pizzo, who himself had seen one of these specialty hunters and who wanted to show others what to look out for. Em had seen a Dragon Hunter in person, bearing a similar neck marking, though paisley in shape; but she might have recognized this hunter even without his identifying mark, simply by the evil vibes he was giving off.

Honestly, she thought, what are the tattoos for? Just for giving themselves away? How stupid can these people be?

The Stone Hunter wasn't under arrest, but had asked the police for help by telling them that a couple of teens, a boy and a girl, had just stolen his wallet and watch outside the grocery store.

In the same way that Em could sense the evil from the hunter, so could Chelsea and Gavin (even being more than quadruple the distance from him than Em was); and the pair was now fairly well hidden, tucked up under the overpass.

Having seen neither Chelsea nor Gavin before, Em wouldn't have recognized them. But she knew of the Diamond Girl and Sapphire Boy from Charlie, who had had visions about them. Em did know their ages and that they were on the run. At this time, an informal Gifted Grapevine existed, comprised of people like Charlie and Em, who were interested in helping individuals such as Gavin and Chelsea, and sharing information in order to do so. This would be strengthened in the future, with a task force actually seeking out the gifted, in order to help keep them safe, and possibly recruit them for the battle against evil. While no one would ever be forced or even coerced to join the fight, many would choose to do so.

In recent months, Em had tried a couple of times to get a message to this pair using her writings, offering a place of safety and help. While she hadn't thought she had reached them, she actually had, Gavin having just read one of her message articles that had caused him to leave Oregon and head to Alabama, and to this specific city roughly twenty-five miles north of Montgomery.

Em became aware that the Diamond Girl and Sapphire Boy were under the overpass when Zapor, in the skies overhead, laid a thought message onto her brain. After going through the intersection, Em pulled into a parking lot used by three row stores (a haircut place, a lawyer's office, and a bike shop), which the police car also pulled into. Hopping out of the car before the police and hunter had a chance to get out of their vehicle, she swiftly made her way to the panhandler Chelsea had just given food and clothing to. Borrowing his cardboard sign, and pulling a felt marker out of her pocket as she flipped the sign over, Em swiftly went to work. A mere twenty seconds later, as the policemen and hunter were just getting out of the police car, she ambled closer to their position, with the sign pointed directly at them.

Less than twenty seconds after that, the three reentered the police car, and a minute later pulled out of the parking lot to head across town. The message on the sign, "Joe cups Circles of Coral under blanket wraps," written in an exacting way, had been a powerful influence for the police to hurriedly seek out the best coffee and kolaches in town, at a café on Coral Circle, before the café ran out of their daily batches of kolaches. The hunter had been susceptible too, in having been in the area for a while, and knowing about the wonderful kolaches and various gourmet coffees served by the Coral Circle Café.

After handing the cardboard sign back to its owner, Em made her way under the overpass, where she called to Gavin and Chelsea. "Hello, I'm Em. I think I'm meant to help you. God is telling me to help you hide. If you can trust getting into my car; I can get you to safety."

Having just seen what had happened with the police and hunter, the pair did trust enough to come out of hiding and follow Em to her car.

Once safely on the road and heading to Doyle Mansion, Em said, "A gryphon is watching out for us in the skies overhead; he'll make sure we make it home safely."

Her plan as she drove was to get them into the safe room, with something to eat and maybe a few books to read or games to play; then she would go back out for groceries in the afternoon since she hadn't quite made it to the store before being diverted.

As far as the trip to get coffee and kolaches, a funny thing happened when the hunter was coming outside to find a table at which to sit and have breakfast (because all of the tables inside were packed). He was knocked into by some sort of golden streak, which he assumed was something like a ghost for as fast as it was there and gone. The hunter was pretty upset when his kolache fell to the ground and his iced mocha got sloshed all over the front of him. Zapor, overhead, was snickering at his fun. He already knew Em and her new friends had safely reached Doyle Mansion, so he felt justified in adding a little excitement to his normal protection duties.

Also funny (but actually more wonderful than funny) was what happened to the man who was panhandling, when he stopped using his normal sign message of, "Hungry, God Bless You," and started using Em's flipside message. The message in his hands had a different effect than it had on the policemen and hunter. Instead of people flocking to the café, they gave money to the hungry man so that he could go get kolaches and coffee. (Many of those giving money even suggested the Coral Circle Café to him.)

With forty times the donations of any normal day, the man was able to rent a motel room for a week, where he got cleaned up. Wearing the clothes Chelsea had given him, he interviewed for and got a dishwasher job at the Coral Circle Café. In a month's time, he would be making kolaches and donuts, and would no longer be homeless because the owners of the café helped him find a place to stay when first starting his job, so that he could get back on his feet.

After a week at Em's house, Chelsea and Gavin were taken to Laurelstone Manor, atop Zapor and Folto, where they would stay for a time, while figuring out what they wanted to do next. When leaving Doyle Mansion, Gavin secretly left one of his protection sapphires for Em in a small jewelry box on the dressing table in her bedroom. He did this in secret because Em had firmly said she would accept no payment of any kind for helping them. When she discovered the stone a few

months later, she was pleased, and had it set into a ring by a genie jewelry maker.

During their stay at Laurelstone, upon discovering what the residents of Laurelstone and Netherwind were working towards, Chelsea and Gavin changed their minds about destroying the cursed diamonds, and began saving and storing them instead. They also both finally understood why they had been given these gifts. They had always known they were on a mission from God, but didn't know their exact purposes until now. The stones produced could be used by God's people in the future, as the world drew closer to the Endtimes. Gavin's sapphires would be used to protect and heal. Chelsea's blessed diamonds would help give hope to those struggling through the dark times, while the cursed ones could be used against an enemy.

Fairly early on in their stay at Laurelstone, Chelsea gave Ben the diamonds that would be secreted in the Chinese puzzle box and brought back in time for Em to find in the staircase at Netherwind.

Ben had just acquired the puzzle box from Em, and his bagical had just produced Em's magic key. He thought it pretty funny how the key could be in two places at once, in both his possession and hers. The diamonds, too, were currently in multiple places, hidden in the past in a secret place by Pizzo and Heike, and in the possession of the Diamond Girl who had recently produced them. About twenty-three years from now, Ben would travel back in time to place the puzzle box into the stair drawer where Em would find it. Then he would travel back in time once more to tell Pizzo and Heike the story of the Diamond Girl so that they could get the cursed diamonds away from Em. While this may have seemed a strange way to let certain people know about the Diamond Girl, it had already happened, and Ben didn't want to risk changing anything about the past.

Only two amongst the handful of stones Chelsea turned over to Ben could cause death, and those would have needed to be in the possession of a person long term, several months, to bring about death. The rest were ones that could only sicken bearers, and to lesser degrees than major illnesses, such as by causing headaches and vomiting. So Chelsea felt okay with handing them over. She also definitely decided that the people helping her and Gavin could be trusted, especially because Ben had somehow known that she currently had exactly sixty-

three cursed diamonds. She had so many at once because she and Gavin hadn't lately been able to get to a volcano; and they had never met a dragon, though they knew that dragon fire could also destroy diamonds. A firebird evidently couldn't, as Chelsea soon discovered upon meeting both Beme and Jelzey, because the fire needed to be hotter. While firebirds were full of flame and heat, they were more creatures of divine light, so their fire was not the same kind of intense flame and heat as that of dragons.

As far as the stones being used in the future, the diamonds would mainly only be effective as weapons for about two decades because, when people figured out that some diamonds were causing not only misfortune and illness, but also death, most people no longer desired them. Even diamonds that weren't cursed lost their value, to become worth practically nothing in the diamond market; and many people would think it quite ironic that something once thought to be of such great value could end up being pretty much worthless.

Of course, some people were reluctant to give up their diamonds, even cursed ones. Human beings could be so stubborn sometimes, to the point that one particularly fabulous ten-carat diamond ended up causing eighty-four deaths before it was destroyed.

Chapter Three

Time Key Travels

As Em lay on the kitchen floor dreaming about giving biscuits and honey to Chelsea and Gavin, Weatherly arrived in the living room of Jessica Brown's bungalow by stepping through the arbor window portal of Laurelstone carrying the Time Key, which she had long since learned the official name of from Vini.

For many years, Weatherly had been training certain others to take the trips. With her many responsibilities, she couldn't go on all of them. Plus, others would have to take this on in the future; that is, if God still wanted His children to time travel. While Kip had once gone on many of the missions, for about the past twenty years, he had rarely accompanied any of the travelers because he was fully engaged in running the Netherwind Plantation, and in training others in the use of rope, mirror, and music weapons, with music being his specialty, most specifically, the flute, though horn and percussion weapons were becoming more widely used, and he was proficient with them. His military duties also kept him busy, as he was of a high rank in the rapidly-growing Underground Army that Weatherly was assembling. Kip lived at Netherwind with his wife, Jane, and their twelve-year-old daughter, Merriweather (known as Merri), who was one of Weatherly's protégés, not only for time travel, but also in use of ropes, the domain of which Weatherly was a master. Merri had closely followed Weatherly through the arbor window.

"Hurry, Merri," Weatherly urged. From the same voice she had heard in the back of her head for years, she knew their task at the bungalow had to be completed quickly.

Merri had lately been hearing the voice too, the voice of God, guiding her not only during time travel, but in many other aspects of her life as well.

Able to tell right away that Em was not seriously injured, in knowing not to interfere with her cousin's task, Weatherly simply left

her on the kitchen floor. Merri had been assessing three things—the position of the chair in the living room, the woman sleeping on the couch, and the rope Em was wearing as a belt. With red ropes being better for binding opponents than either blue or gold ones, Merri could tell what Em had been intending, and what they needed to do. As Weatherly moved the sleeping woman into the chair, Merri retrieved the rope from Em’s waist and used it to bind Jessica to the chair.

“Good job,” Weatherly said, after giving the rope a quick inspection.

“Thanks, Aunt Weatherly,” Merri replied. (Though Weatherly was actually her second cousin, because of the difference in their ages, Merri had always called her Aunt Weatherly.)

The pair then swiftly stepped back through the arbor window, which had automatically appeared when Weatherly retrieved the Time Key from her pocket and moved closer to the exact location where they had arrived.

When Jessica awoke five minutes later, she was absolutely livid to find herself bound to the chair; and since she could see Em’s legs in the kitchen from her position, she could only imagine that her rival had bound her before going into the kitchen and seeing the lentil message.

Em woke about six minutes later. Staggering to the living room and finding Jessica struggling against the rope, but not making any progress in getting loose, Em was able to figure out that her help had likely come from time travel; and based on the way the rope was knotted, the help was probably Weatherly herself, or perhaps one of her protégés.

Of course I would need help, Em thought. *I’m not a warrior or a military general like Weatherly.* During a short prayer of thanks to God for sending help, she also asked for continued guidance. *Please let me hear Your voice clearly for the rest of my task. In Jesus’ name I pray, Amen.*

After retrieving a second chair from the kitchen and placing it facing her opponent, before sitting down, Em took a hand-held cross from the pocket of her jeans, placing it on the lamp table next to Jessica’s chair.

Em next relied on God to guide her words as she witnessed to her rival, telling Jessica about Christ, His help in her own life, how He had guided her through many struggles, as well bringing many blessings.

“As soon as I trusted Him, and asked for His help, He provided it,” she emphasized. “He’s never let me down. And He’ll help you too. God is ready and willing to help any of His children. But to be part of His family, you have to repent and accept Jesus as His Son, and as the sacrifice for and payment for sin.”

What followed was Em talking in length about Salvation, and about how believers are given the Holy Spirit, as a Comforter and Guide. She also spent some time describing Satan’s tactics (causing division, despair, discord, suspicion, illness, and even depression) and what would happen to those who reject Jesus Christ. And she didn’t put it lightly when talking about hellfire, with those condemned to it suffering endless torture, isolation, and eventual insanity.

Jessica never spoke, but simply sat and fumed. Several times as Em went on, her rival did look pitifully depressed, and like she might be about to give in. But Em could tell an act. And sure enough, what followed each act was Jessica spitting and hissing at her.

Using a handkerchief from her pocket, Em calmly wiped spittle from her face and arm, as she quietly recited bible quotes. She didn’t need to be loud because the Word of God had power in a mere whisper.

A couple of times, however, Em did feel angry at being spit upon, especially in thinking of Jessica’s deeds—all the suffering and death she had caused. And Em might have wanted to hurt her rival, except for recognizing the planting of these ugly thoughts and impulses by Satan.

After about an hour of talking to Jessica, Em was ready for a break. She wasn’t planning to quit because she knew she needed to wait for God to tell her the case was hopeless, before giving up and doing away with the woman. God’s timing was always perfect, and it was not for human beings to make these kinds of decisions on their own.

“I’m going to get us some dinner,” Em announced, “from that little deli I noticed two blocks down the street. What do you want? A panini, a salad, a piece of pie maybe?”

Jessica didn’t answer, though Em waited for one before gagging her to keep her quiet while she was gone.

“Just stay calm while I’m gone, and we’ll talk more when I get back. Or I’ll talk and you can spit, whatever you decide,” she added as she was slipping out of the house, using the back door so as to be less noticeable to any neighbors.

Em returned not quite thirty minutes later to a pretty big surprise. Jessica had somehow gotten loose from the chair and was hanging by the neck from a ceiling beam on a cable that looked like something that might have once been attached to an old computer or television set.

Sitting on the coffee table was a scrap of paper containing a note Jessica had written to herself before climbing onto the back of the couch and launching herself into the room with the cable around her neck.

While Em was wary, she dared to read the words on the note of two lines. “The art of suicide. The hanging of art.” The way the words were written was significant—a slight slant from right to left in the first line and an opposite slant in the second, to suggest a person hanging and gently swinging back and forth. Also, the dots of the “i”s in the word, suicide, were connected to the bottoms of the letters, as though the bottoms might be hanging from the dots.

Reading the lines did slightly affect Em, in temporarily planting a sort of longing inside for an escape from the evils of the world; but the longing wasn’t strong enough to make her want to kill herself.

Em had no way of knowing if Satan had caused her rival’s impulsive act by a sudden attack of thoughts, or if Jessica was simply wishing to end it all as a means of escape. Either way, the whole situation deeply saddened her. *What a waste; a life terribly wasted, a gift terribly wasted*, she thought. *But probably no one ever cared about her, or took the time to help her, which is also horribly sad.*

Em took the paper because she didn’t want anyone else to hang themselves. She would destroy it later. *They wouldn’t have been able to make much out of it as a suicide note anyway*, she reasoned.

In reflection, Em would wonder why Jessica hadn’t used the red rope to hang herself. Being somewhat thin, as well as soft and silky to the touch, she might have thought it wouldn’t be strong enough. Or perhaps she knew what it was and didn’t want to end up headless. In truth, if she had hung long enough on it, the rope would definitely have severed her head.

Retrieving the rope, Em slipped it back through her belt loops and tied it. She then took some time to carefully erase her prints from various places in the bungalow with a kitchen towel.

As far as what Jessica’s might have been currently working on, Em decided it would be too suspicious to take her rival’s computer; and she

definitely didn't want to spend time trying to break passcodes to wipe the device. So she would just have to be diligent in countering anything of Jessica's that might be published posthumously.

Em would never know how Jessica got loose from the chair, though she pretty much knew that Weatherly hadn't made any mistake with the knots. This was true; neither Weatherly nor Merri had made any sort of mistake.

What happened involved a demon. Under Satan's command, the creature had arrived just after Em left to fetch dinner, and had loosed the red rope. But he met his end only about twelve seconds later by a somewhat strange series of events beginning when he noticed the cross on the lamp table, which at first he hadn't seen. His eyes burning and blinded by the dreaded object, the demon had rushed towards the kitchen, intent on escaping out the back door. However, he missed his mark and ended up running into Em's dagger sitting on the kitchen counter, which skewered him, dissipating him in a mere two seconds.

When Em passed out, her dagger had been sitting on the counter. Grappling for it as she fell, the blade ended up positioned facing into the room and hanging over the edge of the counter with the hilt butted up next to the edge of a cutting board that was bumped up against a bread box next to the wall, so the knife had no way to slide backwards when the demon ran into it. Even if the dagger hadn't been magical, it would have killed the creature fairly easily, being made of ancient metal. When collecting her knife before leaving the bungalow, Em had noticed the greasy sludge on the blade and had wiped it on a kitchen towel, but had only thought the residue was from being in a home so permeated by evil. The idea of a demon never entered her head.

Anxious to get home quickly after this ordeal, Em had called to Zapor, who arrived in less than five minutes. After picking up Em's suitcase from the gargoyle, the pair made it home less than an hour later, having along the way enjoyed the turkey sandwiches and strawberries Em had earlier picked up from the deli.

At the same time Zapor was landing in the gardens of Doyle Mansion, at Laurelstone Manor, having just arrived back from helping Em, Merri was preparing for another trip, but without her Aunt Weatherly this time. Instead, she would be accompanied by Dell Brinker, a sixteen-year-old boy, not only proficient with mirror

weapons, but also already something of a brilliant math scholar at Laurelstone High School.

Weatherly had taken to calling her protégés, Time Key Travelers, or TKTs for short sometimes; and Dell was already a TKT that didn't need much supervision. In fact, she trusted him to take missions as they arose without even consulting her first, though each time anyone stepped through the portal without her being present, they were required to document their pre-departure details in a log in the study containing the arbor window. This included not only the date and time, but a description as to what the stained glass window was displaying, which was always a scene of the destination.

While Dell didn't hear the voice in his head as often as Weatherly and Merri did, he had good instincts and common sense, and wasn't afraid to take action. On the rare occasions when he made mistakes during missions, he was able to problem-solve, and right the situations fairly quickly.

Scribbling in the log, Merri was glad for Dell's company today because he was one of the more efficient of the time travelers and she knew she could trust him. He was more serious about things than a lot of boys his age, and wasn't prone to horsing around, or lollygagging. Being conscientious and taking the tasks seriously were key factors in Weatherly deciding which of her protégés could travel without her.

Each time a trip was taken, the Time Key Travelers said a prayer before departing. "Heavenly Father, please show me the way, and help me to do Your will. In Jesus' name, Amen."

The arbor window was currently displaying what appeared to be a parking lot behind a church; and as the pair stepped through, Merri told Dell, "We need to hide behind that row of bushes by the dumpster, and wait for a man to come out of that side door."

It was the dusky evening hours, perhaps only about twenty minutes or so before sunset, and both the parking lot and church appeared deserted, the exception being a lone sedan parked fairly far out in the lot.

When they were safely crouched behind the bushes, Merri quietly added, "When he comes out of the building, we need to draw his attention to the dumpster. There's a baby inside, but she's asleep. He won't know she's there unless we draw his attention to her."

Quickly thinking, Dell gathered a few pebbles from the ground surrounding the bushes and made ready.

“Yes, that’s him,” Merri said in a whisper, to Dell’s look of query as an elderly man emerged from the side door, locking it behind him.

As the man began striding toward the sedan, Dell began tossing pebbles at the dumpster, listening for each ping of contact before tossing the next.

Sure enough, the pinging not only drew the attention of the man, but also woke the baby, who began to cry.

From their well-secluded spot, Dell and Merri watched as the man hastened to the dumpster. A moment later, they heard him exclaim, “What on earth? Oh my! Oh my!”

Having recognized the cry as that of a baby, Reverend Haywood’s surprise was not so much in finding a child, but in seeing diamonds falling from her eyes, which was very obvious even in the low light of the evening. “Okay, okay now,” he said. “I got you; it’s okay.”

As he reached into the dumpster and picked the baby up from where she was perched atop several large bags of trash, she immediately stopped crying. Holding her close, he then swiftly made his way to his car with her, carefully buckling her into the back seat as best he could because he didn’t have an infant car seat. But this was about to change; he would get a car seat the very next morning, while one of his neighbors, a trusted friend, was looking after Chelsea, as Reverend Haywood had by that time already christened her.

Merri and Dell had waited until the man had driven away to emerge from the bushes and make their way back to the correct spot to activate the portal to home because they wanted to make sure they weren’t seen, and subsequently accused of abandoning a baby in a dumpster.

As Merri was making a note in the log indicating their return (but not documenting a new time because no time ever passed on their time-travel trips), Weatherly entered the study to inform the pair of another mission they would need to undertake on this day.

While most time-travel missions were still taken by observing the arbor window automatically changing to display the next destination, for the past five years, some trips had been taken in a slightly different manner. This came about from a weekend when Pizso and Heike had been visiting Laurelstone, with their five-year-old twins (now ten),

Pipac and Kisi, a boy and a girl. While exploring on the second floor, the puck trolls had found an odd little secret room, basically no bigger than a closet, containing shelves upon which sat several strange-looking objects, one of which turned out to be a complex device that could set the arbor window to just about any location, date, and time in history, the only exceptions being anything before God created time.

Heike and Pizzo immediately showed their find to Weatherly who at first couldn't figure out the function of the device, which was roughly the size and shape of a bowling-ball box. The various gears, pins, wheels, cogs, and levers were labeled with numbers, symbols, and letters. In noticing that the numbers dominated, with far fewer symbols and letters, Weatherly had wisely turned the device over to an eleven-year-old gifted mathematician at Laurelstone Middle School, who was none other than Dell. Though it took him some time, he eventually did figure out that this was a time-setter that would work on any time-travel portal. While there were four portals in the world, the time travelers at Laurelstone only currently had access to the one in Weatherly's study, called such because the room was exclusively for her use. Although her older brother, John, still lived at Laurelstone Manor with his wife and son (Miriam and Harold), he had his own office. Though the study was small, Weatherly felt very comfortable there. Having once been used by her father, who died of cancer when Weatherly was in college, she loved the memories associated with the room, not only in connection with her father, but also from the many adventures over the years through the arbor window. John rarely accompanied his sister on time-travel missions anymore, as he was busy teaching science classes at the school and working with the horses on the plantation, in specific, helping Vini run her hippotherapy program that had been in full swing now for over fifteen years.

Like many things at the manor, the odd little closet, which had seemed perfectly ordinary to start, turned out to be something much more, namely, the entrance to an enormous Magicians' Laboratory. Weatherly had first noticed an anomaly in the closet when examining an object on one of the shelves that turned out to be basically a magical piggy bank, but one the shape and size of a small acorn squash, and containing far more coins than should have fit inside, roughly enough to fill a large potato sack. The anomaly was in the form of a slot, just big

enough for a person to slip their hand into, and from which Weatherly could feel a draft of cool air. Without being able to make anything of the slot herself, again putting her brain to the matter, Weatherly wisely sought out one of the magicians teaching at the schools. Mr. Palladino, called Mr. P for short, had determined that the slot was what was known as a Magicians' Hallway. Activated by the hand of a magician, and only a magician, the slot could widen itself to about the size of a normal hallway, then allowing any number of people to enter and reach whatever might be secreted at the end of the hallway, in this case, the huge and fully-equipped laboratory.

The four magicians currently residing at the schools—one in the attic of Netherwind and the other three in the boys' dormitory—already had a smaller lab located in a secret room in Netherwind's basement. Now, they had a much better facility to work in, one the size of a small warehouse and equipped by various magicians over the years who (as evidenced by various items found in the lab) had not only designed many of the features of both manor houses, but also the weapons modeled after the ones in Kivetel.

Soon after Dell identified the purpose of the device, Mr. P had provided a couple of much needed adjustments to the time-setter, in order to make it function properly. Then Weatherly began using it, though sparingly. While God was allowing her to make her own decisions about this, because He knew He could trust her, she knew that she needed to take care.

On this day, the mission stemmed not from God's voice in the back of Weatherly's head, but from one of Charlie's visions, which were also from God, simply a different form of instruction. Setting the time-setter to the correct location, day, and time—a spot in Canada, the day of the recent terrorist train attack, and about twelve hours before it occurred—Weatherly explained the mission to Dell and Merri. They weren't to prevent the attack, but rather, keep a particular person off of the train. They actually wouldn't have been able to prevent the attack because they didn't have enough information as to exactly how it had been planned. Also, if the time travelers had tried to warn authorities, and if their story was believed, they might have been accused of being involved in the planning of the attack. Plus, they likely would have been taken into custody while the authorities were investigating, which

would have then interfered with their task of keeping the particular person off of the train. While it may have seemed heartless not to warn the rest of the people who would be on the train, the TKTs knew they needed to do only what God was directing them to do.

The twelve-hour early leeway mainly had to do with the way the time-setter set the destination windows. While the ones set by God, and occasionally by Etowa or others of God's divine helpers, were completely accurate as far as location, the ones the time-setter produced weren't as precise. The device did generally put the travelers within a hundred miles of their destination, but there was no guarantee it would be any closer.

Weatherly wouldn't be accompanying the pair, but she would wait for them to make sure they made it back right away; and she was greatly relieved when they reappeared again through the window almost instantly, but looking very tired, and subdued. They were also mussed and grimy, and Merri had several deep scratches and what appeared to be an animal bite on her arm. From what kind of animal Weatherly couldn't imagine, though it looked like something a medium-sized dog might inflict. As it was pretty clear that neither Merri nor Dell wanted to share anything about the mission yet, Weatherly didn't press, but instead sent them off to the infirmary so that Merri could have the bite and scratches tended to. The pair then got showered, had a meal, and went to bed early.

It would take Merri several days to tell her aunt what had happened in Canada; and even then, she didn't share all of the details of the mission that had actually taken over twenty hours, including the travel time back to the portal.

Sure enough, they had arrived in Canada a fair distance from where they needed to be, about eighty miles. Quick thinking had helped them determine that a bus would be the best option for travel, but they had ended up waiting nearly two hours to catch one.

After the bus ride, they jogged (rather than walking, to speed the journey) about six miles, in order to make it in time to the workplace of the man they needed to save. This was a small factory that made toilet seats, and his commute home by train was what they needed to change. They knew they couldn't get him to simply take the tram instead of the train, because the tram was slower than the train, and often more

crowded. So they had to figure out a way to keep him at work an extra hour, thus forcing him to take the tram.

Guided by the voice in Merri's head, they accomplished this by sneaking into the factory and breaking a piece of machinery, specifically, a heater that kept the liquid plastics the toilet seats were made from at the right temperature so the material could make it through the tubing lines to enter the molding machines.

The breaking of the heater hadn't been difficult, and did succeed in making the man miss his train. And while the TKTs would never know it, the man taking the tram had another fortunate outcome because he met his future wife on the tram that very day. However, while the main task may not have been a problem, what happened after was.

Based on a move by Boko, a sorcerer in the area had been alerted to the location of the time travelers; and on their walk back to the bus station, when in the middle of a secluded field with no other people around, Merri and Dell were set upon by a pack of gremlins. This was unusual because gremlins hardly ever attacked human beings, and were rarely ever found in packs.

The main problem, of course, had been that the creatures were invisible. However, it turned out not to be much of a problem because both Merri and Dell had been trained so well, with some of their training occurring blindfolded. While surprised by the bite on her arm, Merri had shaken off the gremlin, which she had surmised was a gremlin because she would have been able to see a hobgoblin or a narck, both of which, though often expertly camouflaged to blend in with their surroundings, were not invisible as gremlins were. Immediately closing her eyes and tuning in to her other senses, Merri calmly drew the gold rope she had been wearing on her belt. With several leaps and spins, and deft moves of the wrist and elbow, she struck with extreme precision, killing eleven of the nasty beasts in less than three minutes, and suffering only scratches from their advances.

Dell fared rather better with the fourteen gremlins that had set upon him in that he suffered no initial bite. However, from the opening pounce of six of the creatures at once, he was knocked sideways and then to his knees. The initial assault also served to separate him about twenty feet from Merri, which turned out to be a good thing, otherwise, he might have injured her with the mirror he swiftly produced from his

pocket to engage in battle. With mirror weapons being more powerful and harder to control than either ropes or flutes, he needed room to work. However, he didn't dare close his eyes when fighting, for fear of accidentally hitting Merri, whom he knew could look after herself, except perhaps for stray hits by a friend whose weapon could reach much farther than hers, so he needed to be careful.

With the function of the mirror weapons based on capturing light, and because it was starting to get dark, Dell worked as swiftly as possible, and did manage to gather enough light to dispatch all but one of the fourteen gremlins assaulting him in right around the same time Merri finished killing the eleven that had attacked her. Merri ended up polishing off the last of Dell's fourteen, as the lone gremlin, now in fear from having lost all of his companions, turned to flee from Dell and basically ran right into her.

Like demons and hobgoblins, gremlins weren't made of much earthly substance, so when a fatal blow was struck, they simply dissipated, melting away. So there was no danger of anyone tripping over invisible body parts. Any residue left would simply wash away with the next steady rain.

Based on the limited gear they were carrying, the time travelers were only able to render basic first aid to Merri's bite and scratches, which made the rest of the journey back to the portal pretty miserable for her, with the itching and swelling of the wounds. Fortunately, gremlin bites and scratches were not poisonous, just nasty and festering.

The infirmary nurse soon had the festers, swells, and itches calmed. Unfortunately, Merri's insides were still in turmoil, from not being able to save others from the train attack, which she and Dell had heard about on the bus ride back to the portal. Dell, too, was troubled, but didn't show it as much as Merri, who felt depressed for some time after the mission, this manifesting itself in loss of appetite and energy for the next few weeks, along with being distracted a lot and having trouble sleeping. Prayer over the matter helped, but it was still hard for her to understand why God allowed many of these terrible things to happen.

"We're not meant to understand why God allows certain things, or does certain things," Kip told his daughter, when she confided in him what was troubling her. "We're simply human beings, and He's God. If we could understand everything about God, He wouldn't be God."

This definitely made sense to Merri, particularly because the Holy Spirit had pretty much been telling her the same thing.

“What we need to focus on is what we do know and understand about Him,” her father went on. “God loves us very much, and always knows what is best for us, and He will never leave us nor forsake us.”

“If people understood everything about God,” Merri said, voicing a thought that had just entered her brain, “they might start to think themselves to be gods. And there is only one God.”

“Correct,” Kip replied, very much admiring her insight.

Along with prayer, focusing on training and school helped to get Merri’s symptoms of depression under control.

In truth, a lot of people were depressed in the world. This was simply the nature of the state of the fallen world; how could people not be depressed, at least sometimes, living in or surrounded by what was pretty much an enormous and ever-growing cesspool.

The time travelers had been correct in predetermining that they couldn’t have stopped the train attack, and that they would have failed in their mission if they had tried to alert authorities. The terrorists were basically two suicide bombers with bombs implanted in their bodies, the devices shielded from detection not only from the living tissue of the bodies, but because of their basic design. While things like toilet seats were not much more advanced in the world by this time, explosives were a lot more sophisticated, with most of them in either liquid or gel form. The carrying methods were not at all clunky, but were most often sleek capsule-type designs. Even timers were not mechanical, most often operating by voice signals of certain words spoken at a specific volume. The designers of these devices were actually very close to being able to activate them simply by brain waves.

The mission had been crucial because the wife of the man they saved would eventually give birth to the person with the gift of overproducing human goodness, to the point that magical creatures in abundance would have plenty to eat during the gifted person’s lifetime. Even unicorns would have plenty to eat, and their presence in the future would be crucial to battling great legions of Satan’s evil followers. And this would help bring about more humans living their lives in a manner prone to producing goodness, to sustain even more magical creatures in the more-distant future.

Chapter Four

Mimics and Print Doubles

The issue of print doubles, as far as exactly what they were and how they operated, had long confounded those on the side of good. As it turns out, print doubles were a type of mimic, a creature that was basically an advanced form of a demon, the advanced part being largely in their shapeshifting abilities. While all demons were able to shapeshift to imitate simpler-form objects and animals like a log or a smooth-shell turtle, mimics could imitate more complex objects and creatures such as a piano, the family dog, or even a person. As a result of centuries of genetic experiments on demons and humans by sorcerers, the science of creating mimics in the past forty years or so had advanced to the point that many of the creatures were able to shapeshift intricately enough to imitate human fingerprints; thus, print doubles came into being. Regular demons did still far outnumber these specialized ones, at around five hundred to one; but with over three million demons operating worldwide (and more being created each day by the sorcerers), this equated to several thousand mimics and print doubles in circulation. And while print doubles were still not as numerous as basic mimics (because some demons simply couldn't master the more complex skills), their numbers were rapidly growing. The speech of mimics and print doubles sounded exactly like the person being imitated, this being an advancement over regular demons whose speech was generally rather crude—mainly short sentences, grunts, and snarls—though the nasty creatures had always been experts at planting thoughts and communicating with one another by thought.

In truth, sorcerers had been using mimics successfully for over a century to impersonate certain people, for various political and monetary reasons, as well as anything else that might best promote evil in the world. By murdering a person and taking his or her place, workplaces were infiltrated, and even certain households. This had been useful in gaining top-level classified information. For example,

the prime minister of England never guessed he was spilling secrets to a mimic and not to his wife. Likewise, the governor of New Hampshire hadn't known that his lieutenant governor was a mimic. In often using these shapeshifters as assassins, if there were any witnesses to the killings, the persons being imitated would take the blame. Getting noticed was often intentional, so that certain people could be convicted of crimes they hadn't committed. And since the world had long held the belief that no two people could have the same fingerprints, when a print double committed a crime, the person being impersonated was sure to be convicted.

In their natural state, mimics and print doubles tended to look a lot like regular demons, though a smoother version because these later models didn't have skin as rough and lumpy as their predecessors. They also didn't have visible wings because the sorcerers' experiments had managed to minimize them to small flaps, which weren't functional as wings unless the creature decided to shift to the form of a regular demon in order to sprout wings for some reason, perhaps as a means of quick escape. But no matter what their natural appearance, mimics and print doubles were unlikely to be discovered because they could hold the shapes they took on for long periods of time—often thirty or more hours depending on their skill and endurance—before needing to return to their natural state to rest. Then, rejuvenation only took about two hours before the demon could again shift and hold the form, again for thirty or more hours. Endurance training could prolong the hold time, but this was generally unnecessary because it was easy for the creatures to find hiding places in which to rest for two or three hours at a stretch. Plus, the shifting process generally went very quickly, with only a few seconds needed to take on the overall form. In order to imitate down to the fingerprints, the print doubles simply needed a sample; then the process to form the prints took about forty seconds.

In recent years, mainly the last fifteen or so, one of Satan's main uses for print doubles had been in getting certain people elected to public office, often at the highest levels, which then ensured the passing of certain laws.

Fingerprint I.D. Systems had long since been established as a standard for voting practices, in the hopes of eliminating fraud; and this was true for all types of voting, whether electronically from various

devices, or in person, which was becoming somewhat rare. Posing as election workers, print doubles made sure they had access to everything coming in. In having a sample of a fingerprint, they could then easily vote a second time for people not supporting their preferred candidate, thus, nullifying both votes of that person. Those wishing to vote in person were shuttled to large voting facilities; and with print doubles staged at these locations, imitating these voters was also easy, again nullifying many votes. A single print double could manage around four or five hundred shifts per day, if needed, which ended up being very effective. And in addition to many misguided and even evil politicians being elected, the sorcerers themselves took numerous gubernatorial, senatorial, and even high-level cabinet positions. Not only was Satan the Great Deceiver, his followers were getting to be masters of this as well, and would come to be known as Deceiver Disciples.

Regarding the skewed elections, many scores of voters didn't just have their votes thrown out, but were arrested for voting fraud as well; and this served to have a good many Christians put in jail. But this was actually meant to be because it drew attention to the print doubles, confirming the existence of these evil beings. Sadly, not much could be done about cleaning up the voting practices because people were required to use a fingerprint to vote. Plus, it hardly would have mattered to clean things up because the damage was done—the tide of evil had already shifted. Those in power would remain so, from this time forward until the Endtimes.

Knowing of the existence of print doubles also served to explain how so many people were being blamed for crimes they didn't commit. Sadly, this too was a difficult problem to solve. People couldn't just go on a campaign for everyone to wear gloves so that fingerprint samples would be harder to obtain because everyone, in the United States at least, had their prints taken and retaken regularly, from very young ages—at schools, doctor's offices, banks, and when registering to vote. So there was not much of a way to win against this. Print doubles also regularly broke into the homes of people with print-type security systems, in order to do whatever they pleased with the residents and their belongings. However, because human eyes were so specialized, print doubles were as yet unable to duplicate them well enough to fool retinal scanners, which became more popular as a security option.

The activities of the print doubles of course didn't just involve gaining political control and committing crimes like theft and murder because, why would Satan and his followers stop at just these things. No, they had to infiltrate other venues as well including universities, financial institutions, even churches and ministries, particularly large ones whose members practiced watered-down religion, picking and choosing from the bible basically to just having their "ears tickled" so that they could continue living their worldly, fleshly lives. And the deceptions grew stronger and stronger, as far as many people believing that the bible was outdated and contained errors, and that only certain parts of it need be applied to our lives. Even churches that were firmly bible based were not immune to the influences of mimics and print doubles who often infiltrated these institutions in order specifically to cause division and strife amongst members.

All of these evil events had been foretold, both in the bible and by certain more recent prophets; and with even more trials looming on the horizon, the times were becoming increasingly difficult to live through. However, no matter how black the darkness, a light was still shining through, in the form of believers, God's children, who were patiently enduring the hostile world, and would continue to do so until the Second Coming of Jesus. There was still hope for the future, resting in God's love, help, and promises.

While print doubles had been operating for decades, the case nearly twenty-five years in the past of Bobby Wilson's fingerprints showing up unexpectedly in a database designed to locate missing children was actually something different, namely, time travel, by none other than Bobby himself, who journeyed back in time to plant his own fingerprints so that he could be found by his real mother and an FBI agent at a city park and returned to his original family, from whom he had been snatched by people working for an unscrupulous adoption agency. In the present, this very time-travel trip was about to occur.

Bobby Hamilton, as he was named after being snatched and adopted, had become a police detective. From a certain move by Etowa, Bobby became aware that he had been stolen as a child. (A move by Boko in Bobby's early childhood had actually been the catalyst for his abduction.) Through intense prayer, involving both

petitioning and careful listening, Bobby had been able to determine what God wanted him to do with the information.

Weatherly had actually met Bobby a year earlier when he came to her with what might have been considered an outlandish story of satanic operatives known as sorcerers, mimics, and print doubles. At that time, God was directing Bobby to travel back in time to the seventies to work with a particular FBI agent. Weatherly surprised Bobby by believing every word of his story, mainly because she was already fully aware of mimics and print doubles, having a lot of inside information being provided to her by certain gifted individuals, and having use of magical objects such as the Truth Key and the Mind Key.

Through careful research and planning, Bobby had been able to infiltrate the FBI, stay several months in the seventies, and work with a man who believed his story and was anxious to do what he could to thwart evil and provide help for the future. While there was no way to stop what was happening, there was at least a way to let certain people know about it, so the evil could be identified more quickly by those in the future, who could take action to make certain things better, more bearable, at least.

Weatherly had allowed Bobby full use of the Time Key to take the trip by himself because the voice in her head was telling her his quest was fully God directed. And in keeping with all other time-travel trips, Bobby had arrived back instantly, so the Time Key was not gone for any length of time.

Shortly after his trip back to the seventies, God had instructed Bobby to go back in time again to right the wrong of his abduction. The year delay in going back was because Bobby had struggled, significantly, over doing what God was telling him to do. He had loving adoptive parents, and they hadn't known that he was stolen or that the adoption agency was a shady one. Plus, it was a scary thing, to change one's life so drastically, and the lives of the mother and father he had known. While Bobby wasn't married and didn't have children, the issue of his parents, especially since he was an only child, was definitely weighing on him.

However, there was no denying God; so after much struggling, Bobby finally gave in. He would do what he knew God was telling him to do, in his brain and in his heart, especially because he didn't want to

end up like Jonah, who tried to run from God by heading for Tarshish, instead of going to Nineveh as instructed. Praying the night before the proposed trip, Bobby told God, *I want to go to Nineveh, not run to Tarshish; and I definitely don't want to end up swallowed by a whale. Please help me to be strong, and do Your will.*

Weatherly was going on this trip, along with two kids from Netherwind Elementary who showed promise as future regular TKTs. Mark Wellington and Alesha Canute were both eight. They would be needed not only to perform certain tasks, but also to help Bobby and Weatherly gain access to the school where the children's fingerprints were being taken.

After setting the window, the four travelers ended up about twenty miles from their destination, which was not a problem because they were planning to rent a car anyway. Since the trip wasn't all that far into the past, it was easy to have money for use in this time for the rental car and other whatnots. It had been about nine in the morning when they left Laurelstone, and it was about the same time here.

As they rolled along in the sedan, Weatherly remarked on how clunky and noisy cars used to be. "I guess I should have remembered that," she said. "This is about the time I was in middle school. Come to think of it; I am in middle school, as we speak, about forty miles from here." Even after taking nearly a thousand trips, certain aspects about time travel could still surprise Weatherly, and even unsettle her on occasion, such as the fact that her younger self wasn't all that far away.

"You think this is noisy," Bobby responded, "the cars from when I went back to the seventies were even worse. But they were made better at that time, sturdier anyway."

At the school, Weatherly and Bobby posed as couple picking up the forms needed for their kids to get transferred from a school in Idaho. They had just bought a house in the area and would be moving in a month.

"Yes, we will probably need all of the forms—physical, vaccinations, and grade transfer," Weatherly told the receptionist.

"Our school can probably do most of the transfer online," Bobby explained, "but since it's a small private school, we want to make sure the process goes smoothly—that we have everything we'll need."

Mark and Alesha asked if they could see the library while their parents were given a tour of the school. However, the pair didn't actually enter the library as Weatherly and Bobby were led away by the assistant principal. Instead, they went to where they had been instructed to go prior to the mission. (Both Bobby and Weatherly had done excellent research for this trip.)

The destination was a spot in the cafeteria set up to take the kids' fingerprints on this day, and the print technician was a middle-aged man named Mr. Owens. No other adults were in the cafeteria at this time. Getting in line with about fifteen other students, the time travelers recognized a boy named Brian Spelling from seeing his picture in a yearbook.

This was the student whose prints were going to be switched out with Bobby's, though the card containing Bobby's prints would still bear Brian's name, since he was the child enrolled in this school. The card had already been prepared by the older Bobby and was ready to go, currently secreted under Mark's shirt. When the prints were entered into a database and crossed with those of missing children, this would trigger the police, FBI agent, and Bobby's real mother coming to the school. Of course, Bobby's mother would recognize instantly that Brian was not her son, since it had only been two years since he was snatched. But this would set into motion the chain of events for Bobby to be found, at a park with his adoptive mother not far from the school, and be returned to his real parents in less than two weeks' time.

As soon as Brian's prints were taken, Alesha, now in about the middle of the line, discreetly swallowed a vomit-inducing capsule, after which, she promptly threw up on the floor. (She and Mark had drawn straws for this, and she had lost.)

While everyone in the line was distracted by Alesha getting sick, and as Mr. Owens rose from his chair and moved towards her to see if he could help, Mark, as nonchalantly possible, stepped around the crowd, and quickly switched out Brian's print card for the one under his shirt. With Alesha doubled over and groaning to continue drawing attention, no one noticed Mark making the switch, after which, he swiftly returned to Alesha, telling the print tech, "She's my sister; I can take her to the nurse's office."

Instead of going to the nurse, after stopping at a drinking fountain so that Alesha could rinse her mouth, the pair met up with Weatherly and Bobby outside of the principal's office.

The time travelers next waited in the rental car in the school parking lot for about forty minutes, until the print tech came out of the school where he got into his own car and drove away to his office, housed in the county courthouse some thirty miles away. Renting space in the courthouse, Mr. Owens actually owned a private business that was contracted not only to do prints for schools, but also to take crime-scene photos for the local sheriff's department, mainly only for crimes such as area burglaries and vandalisms because law enforcement agencies pretty much all had their own people to photograph the scenes of more serious crimes like murders and arsons.

The time travelers had followed the man to his office in order to retrieve the card with Bobby's prints so as not to leave any evidence of the deception behind. But they of course needed to wait until the prints were entered into the database. The voice in Weatherly's head was telling her they had about an hour to wait. In noticing a drug store containing a soda shop very near the courthouse, the group decided to pass the time having chocolate shakes and sundaes.

Weatherly used her magic twenty-dollar bill to buy the treats for them. The bill had been given to her by her late grandfather; and somewhere along the way, it had been placed into a bagical, the result of which allowed the twenty to always make its way back to her, no exceptions. In their own time, actual paper money was seldom used, and not even accepted at many places, so Weatherly welcomed the chance to use the bill.

As they were enjoying the ice cream, Bobby seemed a little sad; and when Weatherly queried, he told her, "After I step back through the portal, I won't remember my adoptive parents. I'll be Bobby Wilson, not Bobby Hamilton. They kept my first name, but changed the last. And I can't help feeling badly for my adoptive parents; they were told my real parents died in a car crash. So they really didn't do anything wrong."

Weatherly didn't have an answer to this, other than to pray with Bobby—that everything would go as smoothly as possible for his adoptive parents and that they would somehow make it through this

ordeal and find other means of happiness in their lives. Weatherly also said a short private prayer—that Bobby’s new life in the future would turn out to be a happy one. Obviously, something important was meant to come from all of this; otherwise, God wouldn’t have instructed them to make this trip.

Bobby was thinking about his future life as well, and he said to Weatherly, “I was wondering how it might work with me being at your house when we return. I won’t know why I’m there, so it might be very awkward.”

“I’ve thought of that,” Weatherly answered, smiling. “You were passing by and stopped in to ask for a tour. Almost everyone is interested in seeing older houses, especially those with fabulous stained glass windows.” This was indeed true as many people—parents especially, either dropping off kids at the beginning of school terms or picking them up at the end—often asked to see the windows, particularly those of Laurelstone, which had far more than Netherwind. Including the ones in the original chapel, Laurelstone had thirty, compared to the five at Netherwind.

Bobby was looking a little skeptical.

“It’ll work,” Weatherly said confidently. “We’ll just make out like you got dizzy at the beginning of the tour, and I’ll remind you a couple of times of how disoriented you got.”

Mark and Alesha wanted to know how Bobby had found out he was a stolen child.

“I was doing some ancestry research for my mother, and these odd newspaper clippings about abducted children kept popping up. Then the detective in me made me look deeper. Then one thing led to another, and I discovered who I really was. The agency I was adopted from was shut down a couple of years after my parents adopted me.”

No one in the group would ever know about Etowa’s move, or that a magic mustard seed was involved. While Boko was mainly using thistle and fennel seeds these days, Etowa was favoring mustard seeds, to influence certain thoughts and actions, and to cause other things to happen, like the newspaper articles popping up. In not knowing about these two or their game, the time travelers simply assumed God had led Bobby to the information. While this could have been so, in this case, God had allowed Etowa to act, in accordance with His will, of course,

because absolutely everything going on in the world was under God's control, including all aspects of the game Etowa and Boko were constantly playing.

With the voice in her head telling her the prints had been entered into the database, while Alesha and Mark waited in the rental car, Weatherly and Bobby carried out a plan they had made to retrieve the card from the office inside the courthouse.

Weatherly went in first, to create a distraction by asking the office receptionist what kind of ink they used to take schoolkids' prints, and where she might buy some of the little "paw-print cards" as she was calling them, so that she could do a fingerprinting activity at a kids' birthday party. "You see," Weatherly said, "my little Nancy really wants to be an FBI agent when she grows up. Last year, it was figure skater. This year, it's FBI agent. Anyway, we've got sixteen kids coming, ages five to seven."

Smiling, the receptionist actually gave her a stack of cards and two of the inking tins.

"Oh, I see," Weatherly said, "they have little sponges inside, along with the ink."

"Yes," the receptionist replied. "They're like those used for stamps when scrapbooking. But, of course, these are official fingerprinting ones. Just be sure to have lots of paper towels on hand, and soap and warm water handy for after because it will get messy."

"Will do," Weatherly replied, "and thank you. This is the start of Nancy's dream come true, until she decides she wants to dig up fossils, or maybe bake cakes."

In leaving the building, Weatherly discovered that Bobby was already outside in the car, and had the card; and she was amazed. "I never even saw you inside," she said. "I thought maybe you got lost, or delayed, and that we were going to have to make another go at it."

"Working as a detective for so long," Bobby replied, with a smile, "and with the FBI for several months, I've definitely picked up a few tricks."

The time travelers wouldn't need to stay to draw the attention of Bobby's real mother and the FBI agent to his younger self the following week at the city park because that would happen naturally by what they had already set into motion. The voice in Weatherly's head was telling

her they had accomplished what they needed to do. And while there was no reason to stay, she told Bobby that they didn't need to rush to get home, if he wanted to stay awhile, to enjoy a few more hours of memories of his family.

While this was a nice offer, Bobby chose not to linger, instead immediately driving them to return the rental car. The group then made their way to the portal. Taking a deep breath, Bobby gave a nod, after which, Weatherly produced the Time Key from her pocket to activate the window so they could all step through to home.

Back at Laurelstone, sure enough, Bobby Wilson didn't know anything about why he was at the house; and he knew nothing of Bobby Hamilton. As Mark and Alesha hurriedly headed off to their classes for the day, Weatherly pulled her study chair towards Bobby, who was definitely confused and disoriented. Handing him a glass of water, she kindly asked, "Would you like to sit down again before we continue the tour?"

Bobby Wilson didn't remember stopping to ask for a tour. And he couldn't imagine why he was out in the country, some thirty miles from his home, and nearly fifty from his workplace, a high school at which he had taught English for the past ten years. But he seemed to buy the explanation that he got dizzy climbing the stairs. And he did express that he was ready to see the downstairs windows.

As he was leaving the house about twenty minutes later, Bobby asked Weatherly to dinner. "Just as a thanks for the tour," he said, smiling boyishly at her. Evidently, like Bobby Hamilton, Bobby Wilson wasn't married.

Though she was flattered, Weatherly politely declined. But in learning that Mr. Wilson was a teacher, who might be interested in applying for a job at Laurelstone High School if a vacancy ever arose, she did encourage him to check back sometime.

As he drove away, Weatherly pondered the dinner invitation. While it was a nice thought, the idea of dating, and someday getting married and having a family, she doubted it would ever happen. She was simply too busy—running the plantation, heading an army, and training Time Key Travelers—and it was a satisfying kind of busy, to the extent that she never felt as though anything was truly missing from her life.

Although the Hamiltons were sad about losing Bobby, two years later, they adopted another child, a daughter, this time from a legitimate agency. And it was meant to be; in fact, this was the main reason the change needed to happen. If she hadn't been adopted, she wouldn't have had a life with loving parents, and she wouldn't have gone on to do missionary work that would help bring many people to Christ. Also, Bobby wouldn't have met his wife if he hadn't gone back to right the wrong, an event that was also meant to be, particularly because his two children were destined to play important roles in service to God. Another reason for going back to change things had to do with getting people like Vini and Weatherly thinking about the concept of deception with regard to fingerprints, which prompted them to do research and discover the truth about mimics and print doubles much earlier than they might have otherwise.

Knowing the truth at this time made Weatherly determined to counter many of these satanic tactics. This was war, after all, and she wasn't the leader of an army in service of God for nothing. She most certainly could and would act.

One of the first things she did was set up a time-travel task force specifically to counter many past actions of the mimics and print doubles. Doing meticulous research, the members of the task force carefully timed their actions, such as going back in time to erase fingerprints immediately after they were planted in order to save people from being convicted of crimes they hadn't committed. The time travelers were also occasionally able to stop assassinations and remove impersonators. While the task force couldn't counter everything, because there were simply too many mimics and print doubles in operation, they were able to make an impact, so much so that the sorcerers were fairly tearing their hair out, confounded as to why so many of their schemes involving mimics and print doubles were failing. They didn't know that time travelers were working against them because the task-force members were so highly clandestinely skilled.

In addition to not having the manpower to counter everything, Weatherly also knew that some things were meant to happen, even dark things. Ever diligent in listening to God and following His commands, she left many atrocities alone because the activities of the Deceiver Disciples were actually causing certain foretold events leading up to the

Endtimes to come about, such as brother delivering up brother, and children rising up against their parents to have them put to death. Suspicion and hatred were easy for the mimics and print doubles to breed within families. Fear, too, was a huge factor. When imprisoned and threatened, many people were willing to lie and deliver up family members rather than suffer torture themselves. Others turned to evil in an outright fashion, their hearts hardened to the point that they didn't care what horrors their loved ones suffered. Some even became loyal followers of the sorcerers, helping them to carry out their evil plans.

Weatherly's twenty-dollar bill came back to her exactly a week after the trip with Bobby, Alesha, and Mark. She found it simply sitting on her desk, under a glass paperweight. In truth, Merri had come across it during one of her time-travel tasks, and had known that it was her Aunt Weatherly's.

Chapter Five

The Tiny Art League

Not quite three weeks after Em returned from her Sweden-Canada trip, Doyle Mansion was hosting a Christmas Eve party. Due to a terrorist attack by a Muslim militant group two days previous—this time at an airport in the U.S., where three bombs had killed over seven hundred people—the party was rather a subdued affair, not out of fear (though many people were afraid to celebrate Christmas openly for fear of becoming targets of sorcerers, terrorists, and the ever-growing extremist atheist population), but in sadness over the current state of the world. The U.S. Government had basically started taking these horrific events as par for the course, with high-level government officials actually publicly blaming Christians (as the primary targets) for the terrorism. In keeping with many of his predecessors, the president actually cited the cause of the attack as being “Christian intolerance and unwillingness to reform, unwillingness to reject certain outdated aspects of Christianity found in the bible, unwillingness to update the bible and belief systems, unwillingness to accept other religious practices as equally valid with regard to a guarantee of blissful eternal life, and unwillingness to accept all lifestyles as acceptable according to individual human choices and rights.” (Christians were evidently not considered to be individual humans with their own rights and choices. Instead, they were expected to change their beliefs to support whatever was considered politically correct at the time.) Since the terrorists strikes were almost all from Muslim extremist groups who considered Christians to be a plague on the earth that needed to be eradicated, many weak-minded people, who knew very little about true Christian beliefs, actually fell in with this line of thinking, which then made it even easier for more and more persecution to occur, and for violent acts to be considered acceptable. Still adept at using various forms of media (as they had been for decades), many atheists, journalists, and government spokespersons were continuing to promote a variety of attacks on

Christians. The president even decreed the vandalizing of businesses, the mob beatings of peaceful Christian protesters, the burning of churches, and the stoning of Christian children by their peers at schools to be acceptable, stating, “Well, if Christians won’t change their ways of thinking, on their own heads be it.”

But even apart from the sadness over the state of the world, Christmas at Doyle Mansion had never been an extravagant affair because the residents and guests always chose to focus on God, and their worship of Him, so the party wouldn’t have been a rip-roaring celebration anyway.

In addition to Violet, Dave, and Em, Otto was visiting the mansion for Christmas. As a successful architect, he currently traveled a good deal; and with his home base currently in Illinois, he seldom made it home for family gatherings. Kip was not present, as he was celebrating with his family at Netherwind, and attending a worship service at the church that had been built at Laurelstone, very near the site of the chapel, which still held some services, though not many because of its fairly small size as compared to the church. After the service, he would be helping supervise a party for the many students staying at the schools (because their parents thought the plantations the safest place for them) for the holidays.

Mr. and Mrs. Galloway’s granddaughter, Jenny Galloway, who had inherited her grandparents’ home, attended the party at Doyle Mansion. She had come to live with her grandmother six years previous in order to help care for her after Mr. Galloway passed away. When Mrs. Galloway died two years later, Jenny decided to stay. While she did keep up the extensive gardens of the property, including the many topiaries that had been Mr. Galloway’s pride and joy, she didn’t have much to do with the farm her grandfather had owned because it had been left to Frank Wharton and his wife, Charlie, who actually went by Charlene for business purposes, which included a restaurant, a café, a catering company, and a soup kitchen. With Mr. Galloway’s own kids not much interested in the farm, and with both Frank and Charlie having invested so much time in it over the years, leaving it to them seemed the right thing to do.

Charlie had graduated from culinary school at the same time Frank finished college, and they had married right away. They were at the

party as well, along with their two children, Mira and Tobin, ages eighteen and fifteen respectively. Vini and Ben had married each other two years after Charlie and Frank were married. They and their fifteen-year-old daughter, Samantha, were not at the mansion party because Ben was pastor of the church at Laurelstone. After the service, Pastor Dellinger and his family would be briefly attending the school party before retiring to their cottage on the estate for their own private celebration.

Living at Doyle Mansion, Pizo and Heike were definitely at the party, along with their twins. And the puck trolls were quite the life of the party, with Pipac and Kisi swinging on the strings of cranberries and popcorn adorning the Christmas tree in the parlor, and their parents bringing various things to life such as a set of nutcracker soldiers, about a dozen tree ornaments, and several characters from illustrated Christmas books like a six-inch Rudolph, a four-inch Christmas puppy named Holly, and both Santa and Mrs. Claus, each about seven inches in height. Pizo and Heike were careful not to bring the gingerbreadman cookies they were going to eat later to life, because that would have been just way too morbid.

As usual, Pizo and Heike had a time keeping the twins' rambunctiousness and mischief in check, not only the swinging on the tree garlands, but also the throwing of nuts at the nutcrackers, who were adept at throwing them back, which might have proven perilous to the Christmas ornaments wandering the parlor if not for the fact that puck trolls could catch just about as well as they could throw. At one point, in order to give everyone a breather, the tiny Rudolph and Holly distracted Kisi and Pipac by giving them a long ride around the first floor of the mansion. Since the twins were currently only about half the size of their parents, the burdens were easy for the reindeer and puppy to carry.

With puck trolls often living two and three hundred years, Pizo and Heike, both in their early sixties, could still be considered very young, not only in age but also in maturity and mentality, probably around the equivalent of a couple of recent twenty-something college graduates. The twins, at ten, could perhaps be likened to very small grade-school children, so a good many of their antics were understandable, particularly the throwing of things because it was well known that all

puck trolls, everywhere, absolutely loved to throw things; it was just part of their DNA. This included Mr. Furfang, one of the art teachers at the Netherwind-Laurelstone Schools, who, at age two hundred and twenty, was actually famous for throwing brushes, paint pots, and even large wads of clay at students, often when they were acting up or loafing off, but also sometimes for seemingly no reason at all. Aside from the Christmas gathering, Doyle Mansion would be hosting a separate puck troll party the first week in January, and Mr. Furfang would be in attendance.

The party turned out to be more of an all-day picnic that included a showing of the art of many puck trolls. This occurred both inside the mansion and at various places on the grounds so that everyone could spread out. In addition to thirty-four area puck trolls, the gathering also included a few non-local visitors from places such as Idaho, Florida, Mexico, and even one from as far as Brazil. The attendees from the faraway places didn't bring as much of their work as the locals, though they probably could have if they had wanted to, in traveling to and from the party on creatures such as rookhs and gryphons who definitely could have carried quite a lot of the tiny art.

Charlie and Tobin came to the gathering, not only to see the art, but also to bring a van-load of food for the occasion, to help Dave, Violet, and Em who had begun baking (and filling a chest freezer) for the affair the week before Christmas. Early morning, Tulko brought Vini and Mr. Furfang to the party, along with fifteen of his watercolors, which she helped him set up on little easels.

Vini's brother-in-law, Sam, came on Dara a couple of hours later. Being himself very artistic, Sam was planning to spend the whole day, though he had had to pry himself away from his pottery studio, set up inside Laurelstone Middle School where he taught pottery classes.

Beme came too, ever watchful of his charge. However, quickly becoming enamored with a glass blower named Ms. Ophar, he ended up spending most of his time hovering near her, though shrunk down to about the size of a bumblebee so as not to scorch either her or those visiting the puck-sized tables upon which her magnificent pieces were being displayed. In the afternoon, in the same way he sometimes helped Sam to fire his pottery, Beme assisted Ms. Ophar with a demonstration of glass blowing. Staying small and producing flame

from the tip of one talon allowed him precise control over the heat so as not to injure anyone. This was basically like a small torch, but was plenty hot enough to make the glass fluid enough to work with.

Sam found himself rather taken with a potter named Ekas and spent most of his time visiting with him. While puck trolls didn't speak human languages, they were experts in communicating with gestures and expressions, or sometimes by writing things out, so others generally had no trouble understanding them. In addition to teaching, Sam had become a notable potter, making mostly useful items, but a few more delicate ones as well that could be considered simply decorative. Ekas' work was mostly decorative, though he made a few useful pots as well.

Since puck trolls didn't use any type of monetary currency, the picnic was something of a swap meet for art, as well as a time of gifting, since some attendees didn't have as much to bargain with as others. But being equal didn't matter because the main objective seemed to be to spread the art around, so all could enjoy it in their homes, and have variety. Heike traded several of her sculptures for pots, paintings, and vases. Gifting many of his sketches, Pizzo ended up with carvings of both wood and shed antlers, as well as several pieces of jewelry, which he intended to give to Heike on Valentine's Day.

Six visiting puck troll children kept Kisi and Pipac company. The mansion's fireplace tabby cat, whom Em had long ago named Cinders, came to life from the painting on the music room wall to help entertain the kids, doing her best to keep the tiny pucks out of trouble. Also, Charlie and Tobin had brought their dog, a girl apricot poodle named Rang-Rang, which was slang for Boomerang. Charlie's first dog, Boomer, had lived sixteen years, which was good for a poodle. Then, Charlie hadn't wanted another family dog for a while, especially since several of the farmhands had dogs. With at least one around somewhere each day, she never felt deprived of dog company. But Rang-Rang had just shown up one day in the alley behind the soup kitchen. After giving the poodle a meal, Charlie had tried to send her away; but she kept coming back, day after day, like a Boomerang. And Charlie and Rang-Rang had taken to one other right away, so it was definitely meant to be. At the picnic, Rang-Rang gave the tiny pucks rides around the garden, between which she watched them build sand castles and other

sculptures in the sandbox that Kisi and Pipac regularly played in, which was large by puck troll standards at about three feet square.

Admiring the sand creations, Violet and Dave silently and somewhat sadly took stock of the numbers of puck troll children, which seemed small for a gathering of this type. Of course, the small number was mainly due to the issue of not having enough food in the world to sustain magical creatures. With human goodness being their primary sustenance, and with it being in such short supply these days, many puck troll couples wouldn't be able to have children. Pizzo and Heike were only allowed to have the twins.

Many of the visiting puck trolls picked out articles of clothing from what Em called her Puck Fashion Shop, situated in one corner of the mansion's sewing room. She had never given up her hobby of making clothes for puck trolls. Over the years, making far too many for Pizzo and Heike to wear, word had spread for other pucks to come to Doyle Mansion for items to add to their wardrobes.

Em never wanted anything for the clothes; she simply wanted them worn and enjoyed. But puck trolls tended to like to pay their way, often giving her small presents, though most of the gifts were small only in size, since some of the art pieces she received over the years were truly masterpieces, beyond anything with regard to monetary value. Indeed, she had practically filled a curio cabinet with tiny sculptures, paintings set on easels, wood carvings, miniature marionettes, and such like. But some of the simplest gifts were actually her favorites—hair barrettes, hand-drawn thank-you cards, pastries, little bags of butter mints. She particularly enjoyed tokens from faraway places such as the cheese and jam a French puck troll had brought to trade for a hat, a pair of jeans, and three shirts. Two puck trolls from Holland had brought a bracelet to exchange for the raincoats and pajamas they selected. Another from Belgium had given her chocolates for two dresses and a pair of leggings. Locals tended to bring her vegetables and flowers, which she absolutely loved. One particular youngish boy puck troll in the area didn't have anything to give her and was therefore reluctant to take anything. But since the clothing he was wearing was rather shabby, Em insisted on giving him two pairs of trousers, a flannel shirt, a seersucker shirt, and tennis shoes. Afterwards, when walnuts and pecans started showing up regularly on the sewing-room windowsill, Em was pretty

sure the gifts were from him; and a note from Pizzo let her know the boy's name was Wrenko.

The shoes Em hadn't made. While she occasionally made puck house slippers, the shoes came from genie cobblers, who didn't just make tennis shoes, but also boots, loafers, sandals, Mary Janes, you name it. And there were many pairs of each to choose from in a great many sizes because genies had a way of multiplying things. In the past, puck trolls had generally made their own shoes; but none had been as good as the genie-made ones that were sturdy, well-sewn, ultra-comfortable, and ended up lasting a very long time, decades, in fact.

Over the past ten or so years, Pizzo and Heike had befriended several genies they had met when going through the door of the mezzanine at Netherwind containing the desert world, known as Erdém, which was where many of the genies that had once inhabited our world were currently hiding. Several genies had agreed to come back with Pizzo and Heike to meet a few of the humans the puck trolls were associated with. Though they hadn't stayed long, the genies did regularly send gifts to their new friends, as was their custom. While they didn't often grant wishes like genies in storybooks, because they knew that most creatures didn't have good judgment when it came to making wishes, they did very much like to give presents such as large batches of shoes. And they were skilled craftsmen in a wide variety of domains; in fact, their candle making couldn't be rivaled. Weatherly's favorites were a four-inch variety that could each burn for eight-hundred hours straight. This was especially helpful in lighting certain sections of the Labyrinth Library, the main entrance of which was located in Laurelstone. Having once frequented that very library, genie ironsmiths had made many of the original sconces. Now, genie silversmiths were sending lanterns and candle holders of the carrying kind. And genie bookwrights were expertly repairing the failing bindings and crumbling pages of many of the older books. Genie carpenters had enlarged the basement den where Pizzo and Heike lived at Doyle Mansion fivefold by adding bedrooms for the twins, a large living room, a library, and a fully-equipped kitchen. They also built a staircase, bookshelves for the library, and beds for Kisi and Pipac. And, an exquisite set of miniature porcelain dishes had just arrived from Erdém, as a Christmas present for the puck family.

On the day of the picnic, Ms. Ophar selected a pair of genie-made clogs to go with the dress and scarf she picked out from the Puck Fashion Shop. In exchange, she gave Em a small glass vase of lovely purple hues very much resembling wisteria blooms softly lit by evening sunshine.

Just after Ms. Ophar left, Em noticed two walnuts on the sewing-room windowsill. Quickly running outside to scan the gardens, she just barely managed to catch up to her shy little friend as he was hustling away toward the rear of the estate. Giving Wrenko a pair of coveralls and a coat she had made especially for him, Em encouraged him to stay for some food, which he did. An hour later, she was pleased to see him visiting with one of the woodcarvers. As it turns out, Wrenko liked to whittle, mainly in the form of chains, whistles, and small figurines; and when coming to the mansion the following year for a pair of boots, he would end up giving Em a tiny carving of Cinderella.

Only in the last eight years or so had the puck troll art gatherings become this large in scale. Before that, they had been much more informal, in the manner of impromptu visits to each other, and occasional small get-togethers to play games and trade creations. But Louetta, whom Pizzo was still very much attached to, had encouraged both Pizzo and Heike to expand their contacts. Nearly twenty-five years in the making, what Em liked to call the Tiny Art League had definitely grown. And their efforts had become more organized, as well as larger in scale. In many cities in the last decade, tiny art of great variety had started popping up everywhere; and people were thrilled. Small paintings and murals were done on walls and doors (usually around ankle level). Tiny sculptures and wood carvings were mounted between stair spindles in various public buildings, under stone benches in city parks, and sometimes in crooks of trees. A particularly cherished bronze sculpture, featuring two children reading books, was nestled in the “u” of the large metal letters above the front door of a public library. The rear outside stone wall of a supermarket displayed a mural of a line of mice and foxes making off with cheeses, strawberries, strings of sausages, oranges, and other such goodies from the store. The bottom of the door to a gift shop held a painting of a patch of bluebonnets being visited by butterflies and bees. And a mini stained glass window was set into the wall of a church entryway.

In many cities, people established Watcher Clubs to locate the tiny art and record the locations so that people who ordinarily might not notice them could come and see them. Since the puck trolls installed their art mainly at night, they were never observed. However, being caught in the act likely wouldn't have presented any problem because pucks could easily hide in their own paintings. One particular artist named Mr. Marikan liked to do just that; and his creations were of the type to easily lend themselves to the concealing of a puck troll, such as a mural featuring a long row of open umbrellas sitting on their sides behind which Mr. Marikan liked to hide in order to watch passersby kneeling to look at his work. He also liked to sit in an extra chair at a table of a painting depicting two hamsters having a fancy tea. Most of the people looking at him assumed the hamsters were entertaining an elf or a brownie for tea, though many members of the Watcher Clubs wondered at the mystery as to why the elf or brownie wasn't always there.

The works of the Tiny Art League were often fanciful, such as a woodcarving of a dragon, and a metal sculpture of a child holding a bunch of balloons shaped like flowers, birds, dragonflies, and bumblebees. Some of their art was biblical in theme featuring scenes like the dove returning to Noah's Ark, the raising of Lazarus from the dead, the burning bush, Moses in the basket, Jesus healing the ten lepers, and the parting of the Red Sea.

The members of the Tiny Art League were very humble about their own work, largely because they were so admiring of other artists, but also because they weren't in any way profit-driven, their main goal being to share their creations so that as many as possible could enjoy them.

Preston came to the art gathering in his car late in the afternoon with his twelve-year-old son, Ignacio. His wife, Maria, had passed away giving birth to Ignacio. Preston had been thoroughly shaken to the core by this loss, particularly since death during childbirth was incredibly rare in an age of so many medical advancements. However, remaining close to God through prayer and worship had helped him with taking on the challenge of raising a child mainly on his own. Having his sister close by had also helped tremendously, and their parents, though Mr. Aberdeen had died of a heart attack when Ignacio was ten. Preston and

Ignacio currently lived at the Netherwind-Laurelstone Schools where Preston was not only a weapons trainer, but also a dorm parent.

After only an hour of perusing the art scene, Preston and Ignacio were heading back to the schools, taking Mr. Furfang with them because he was set to teach an evening art class. In having to leave early, they missed the wonderful after-dinner concert put on by several highly-musical puck trolls playing genie-made dulcimers, drums, symbols, lutes, and tambourines.

Atop Zapor, Heike headed to the schools shortly after the concert because she was set to teach an early-morning sculpture class, and she wanted to get the classroom organized beforehand. On the evenings before her classes, she generally stayed in the dollhouse at Netherwind. Doing this once a week gave her a little break from the twins; and Pismo never minded because he had mastered a few tricks of managing them on his own, the main one involving running with the twins through the entire triangle tunnel—from the root cellar at the mansion to the barn on Wharton Farm, then to the fallout shelter on the Galloway property, and then back to the mansion's root cellar. The long run was generally followed by the trio consuming large buckets of popcorn while watching a movie, during which the twins would generally fall asleep.

Heike had taken over teaching sculpture from Aunt Eugenia who had passed away the previous year at age ninety-five. Aunt Eugenia had first come to live at the schools sixteen years before that, mainly to keep Aunt Fiona company, but also to teach, and take advantage of the large studio and classroom spaces in which she mainly crafted metal and stone crosses. Aunt Fiona, who had lived to ninety-six, had passed away two years before Aunt Eugenia. Both were buried in the Netherwind-Laurelstone Cemetery, which featured many of Aunt Eugenia's sculpted crosses as grave markers. Her work was also spread about the schools and both houses, and the caretaker's cottage, still occupied by Mr. Michaels who, at age eighty-nine, still very much had a hand in running the operations of the Netherwind Plantation, though he didn't have to expend much energy in that regard because the bigfoots pretty much ran things, and well. Whole families of them lived in the area, mostly in caves that formed a chain connected by underground passage to one of Netherwind's barns. Experts at crops and livestock, as well as other disciplines such as cheese making and bee keeping, the

bigfoots had helped to make (and keep) both Netherwind and Laurelstone self-sustaining and profitable.

Preferring to sleep during the day (because they did much of their work at night), none of the bigfoots came to the art gathering. However, they did very much like art; and many even had paintings done on the walls of their caves, not only by puck trolls, but also by certain human beings, renowned artist Louetta Nolan for one, as well as various students from the schools.

In truth, the mission of the Tiny Art League, as well as some human artists like Louetta, was not just to create art for people's enjoyment. About two decades past, in figuring out that safe rooms were not always safe—from sorcerers, various hunters, demons, enormous hobgoblins known as megahobs, and others bent on evil like criminal gangs and corrupt authorities—those on the side of good had sought other means of hiding certain individuals, mainly, persecuted Christians like evangelists, lobbyists, outspoken journalists, gifted persons, or anyone suffering persecution for standing up for their faith. While the creations of the Tiny Art League were generally not large enough for people to hide in, puck trolls could hide people in other works of art; and they often made it their mission to do so.

Louetta was part of an underground art group that created paintings expressly for this purpose. While the members of the group, unofficially named Art Moles, were not all trompe l'oeil masters as she was, most were capable of painting real enough settings to function as habitable environments when brought to life by puck troll magic. With shelter, food, and water featured and available in the works—such as a cottage with a vegetable garden beside it, situated near a stream or waterfall—people could live inside the paintings for extended periods of time fairly comfortably, especially if the depicted season was spring or fall, rather than the harshness of full-on winter or summer. Of course, the paintings needed to be large enough for a person to step into, which was why murals were favored as hiding places. Also, the perspective needed to show the usable factors—cabin, barn, apple tree, pond, whatever—far enough in the distance so that a person walking into the scene could have enough lead-in to successfully meld with the work, thereby finding the necessities of usable sizes upon reaching them. Those hidden inside could leave the confines of the paintings at any

time because puck troll magic never trapped anyone inside. But while inside, the inhabitants were perfectly safe because the magic was godly and incorruptible, to the extent that nothing evil could ever enter any work of art brought to life by a puck troll. In order to do this important work, the mural artists and puck trolls were often carted around by wind horses, rookhs, and gryphons.

Louetta had never married, preferring to devote herself wholly to her art; but in order to pass on some of her skills to future generations, she taught painting at the Netherwind-Laurelstone Schools, where she also lived, in a roomy garage apartment, most of which was a studio. This put her in a perfect position to identify certain students who wished to help with the underground activities. However, she hadn't needed to identify one of her most talented protégés, Morgan Scull, because the Gift Key had revealed his gift, which was that each of his paintings had the power to inspire peace by cooling tempers, settling conflicts, and repairing divisions amongst peoples. This might have been likened to Em's wordsmith gift, but using images instead of words. And the subtleness was even more pronounced because Morgan's subject matter was never recognizable as anything that might inspire peace, for instance, a bucket sitting on a kitchen counter with a small bundle of picked clover tucked in next to it and a four-paned window in the background. Another painting featured a grey fox yawning while sitting on a grassy hillside with three blades of grass caught between his toes. The Art Moles often hung his paintings in places of unrest, worldwide, which had the impact of stopping everything from shouting and shoving matches to more violent behavior such as beatings and beheadings.

Morgan never signed his work so that the paintings were particularly recognizable as his; he just produced and distributed them. Two young devoted male puck trolls at the schools, Luca and Pone, often helped him with things like cleaning brushes and mixing paints. Once prone to great arguments and throwing things at each other over the nuances of mixing the shades, the pair now got along famously, the transformation having occurred when Morgan hung a small painting in their workspace of seven carpenter ants crawling over a moss-covered stone nestled into a patch of melting spring snow.

The unusual cooling of certain hotspots of conflict in the world confused and infuriated Satan and his followers, particularly the

sorcerers, since they were behind a lot of the malice, and were bent on continuing to promote as much strife amongst human beings as possible. However, while they remained infuriated, they weren't confused for long. In noticing the seemingly-benign but odd art popping up in various places, and in knowing that certain human beings possessed powerful God-given gifts, they were able to deduce what was happening. Also, having gotten wind of the Art Moles, the sorcerers were fairly sure they knew exactly who was responsible for thwarting their evil efforts. But they couldn't simply kill Morgan because they were smart enough not to create martyrs. If they killed him, his work would become more in demand. And with lithographs being just as effective as original works, they surely didn't need millions of replicas of his paintings popping up everywhere.

Having long since known of puck trolls and their special talents, the sorcerers had also figured out that people were being hidden in paintings. But they couldn't simply go on a hunt for puck trolls. For one thing, most pucks lived in houses, apartment complexes, hotels, schools, and restaurants where many people either resided or frequented, so there was always a danger of any direct action being noticed by too many, or the wrong sort, namely, people willing to stand up to the sorcerers. And while many people believed in Satan and his fellow fallen angels—and demons and sorcerers (mainly because of the numerous references to them in the bible, but also some from first-hand experience)—a good part of the population still didn't believe; and Satan still needed to continue to foster as much atheism as possible.

The tide had already turned in many countries of the world, to the extent that even if a lost person somehow wished to be saved, he or she would have difficulty finding resources (such as a bible, or believers willing to harbor and help them); and Satan needed to make sure this continued. He certainly didn't want anything like a revival on his hands because revivals equaled setbacks; and he certainly didn't like setbacks, no one does. Herds of sorcerers or legions of demons seen out in the open could drastically change things, possibly turning a lot of people to Christ. No, he and his followers still had to be somewhat careful. The time wasn't quite right for everything to be out in the open. Many people still had hope, which was dangerous. More control, hurt, and despair were still needed to suffocate the remaining hope in those “on

the fence,” so to speak, when it came to religion. With he and his followers continuing to make massive headway in squashing hope—because why should people believe in goodness when nothing good is happening in their lives—the squashing needed to continue.

However, despite not being able to go on an all-out hunt for puck trolls, the sorcerers did add Puck Troll Hunters to their arsenal of hunters. They did this mainly by drawing from their pool of Dragon Hunters, which had started to be more successful in recent years, so a few could definitely be spared for the specialty assignment of discreetly tracking and trying to destroy the little art-loving (and people-loving) monsters. In knowing they could never convert puck trolls to evil, the assignment was to kill. While the assignment continued, for about the next twenty-five years, the hunters were completely unsuccessful, as far as kills, that is. Only ever getting their hands on two puck trolls, the hunters delayed the kills in order to toy with and torture their prey, because the temptation to do this was difficult for these evil men to resist. One of the pucks managed to escape by swiftly bringing a nearby fountain statue to life to save him. The other, a hunter put into a kind of high-powered sling-shot contraption, intending to hurl him to his death against a rocky cliff. But when the man made the shot, a hawk caught the puck troll in midair, afterwards flying him to safety. This was a good part of the reason the hunters were so unsuccessful, because the pucks had so many critters as friends. And it was no fun being set upon by a pack of raccoons, turned vicious from observing a hunter either pursuing or mistreating one of their tiny friends. The slingshot hunter ended up with both of his eyes gouged out by a family of hawks shortly after his prey was rescued.

While Satan and his followers couldn't openly hunt for puck trolls or certain humans like Morgan, they could target art in the same way they had targeted Christmas decorations and bibles, by using the government. Atheist activists had for years been campaigning for religious emblems and religious art to be banned, and had already been successful in that no public crosses visible to others were allowed anywhere. For the past eight years, many churches had been forced to make their crosses smaller. Many also often had to cover stained glass windows and refrain from setting up Nativity scenes, so as not to “offend neighboring properties.”

With the sorcerers and print doubles getting involved, several anti-art laws had just been passed in the past year in several countries including the U.S. All religious art other than what was inside of churches, shrines, and temples was outlawed and destroyed. While most of the art of the Tiny Art League was not overtly religious in nature, with the interpretation of art being so subjective, law enforcement officials could deem just about anything religious, such as a pretty sunrise, a scene of one person displaying charity to another, a horse running free, a building with three lighted windows that might represent the Trinity, etc. With this being the case, over half of the art displayed everywhere was ordered to be removed and burned. The burnings most often occurred in public places, except for certain things like metal sculptures that had to be carted off in order to be melted down. Whole squads of police were assigned to this task; and what they couldn't remove, they destroyed in place. Murals were blowtorched, statues were smashed.

Art was not outlawed, but all publically-displayed art had to be licensed; and preapproval was needed for things like murals, with the details of each project explicitly spelled out. Anything not preapproved, not licensed, and not conforming to the rules relating to the banning of religious art was destroyed. Even previous art that was not religious in nature could be destroyed unless the artists came forward to apply for a license. The sorcerers had hoped to get their hands on certain artists in this way, assuming that people would rather not have their work destroyed. Of course, most artists were not willing to risk their lives by coming forward.

But despite the laws and destruction, artists kept going, because they knew how important their work was for the feeding of the soul. (Art was also a key component in keeping the Clock of the Universe running properly.)

Puck trolls kept going too, despite the danger, because they knew how important it was to fight evil. Their efforts, of course, didn't just pertain to hiding people in art. For instance, during a New Year's celebration, a puck troll had singlehandedly managed to thwart a terrorist attack in Denmark by tricking a gremlin into breaking a timer on a bomb attached to a suicide bomber. The gremlin was capable of doing this because the timer was an older type, one still using some

moving parts. (Not everyone on the side of evil had the funding for, or access to, the latest technology, so some older devices were still being used.) In another instance the previous summer, the very pair of puck trolls from Holland that had gotten the raincoats and pajamas from Em had managed to save a church congregation in Tulsa, Oklahoma from being overrun by a pack of demons. The pucks had been doing some touring of the United States before returning home, and had noticed the demon pack lying in wait outside the church, which was just about to let out from its Sunday-morning service. Acting swiftly, the pair brought to life the Golden Driller Statue in front of the Tulsa Expo Center. The statue then quickly strode to the church (only about a mile from the Expo Center) where the driller stomped most of the demons to death, all but two, who had managed to take flight, but who didn't escape the grasp of the statue taking hold of them in flight and flinging them to the ground before squashing them with his enormous gloved fists.

Five days after the art gathering at Doyle Mansion, Em was packing for a trip she would be leaving on the next morning, to the cabin in Colorado that she had shared with her husband. The couple had lived there only briefly before Herbert got sick; but Em had kept it, often returning for extended stays of three to four weeks at a time, not only wishing to feel a closeness to her husband, but also because she had done some of her best writing at the cabin over the years. One of her most successful articles had been written there, one that had been the catalyst to stopping the practice of Daylight Savings Time, the nonsense of it, the messing up of people's schedules, mainly their sleep schedules. For those with depression, the changing of the time back and forth often caused symptoms to worsen. Since there was absolutely no good reason to keep a practice that caused such problems, Em had decided to use her gift to have it stopped.

Of course, opponents had lobbied to keep Daylight Savings Time, based on tradition and something to do with football. As though they couldn't change the schedule of football by one hour, or add more lights to stadiums; no, they had to make everyone else in the country suffer. While the opposition hadn't succeeded, Em had made plenty of enemies over the matter (a common response to her writing) who now regularly and heavily criticized her in various forums such as on chat sites and in doing reviews of her work. In addition to completely hateful comments

(allowed in the forums under the guise of “free speech” as opposed to her writing which was often called “a rant”), the criticism was mainly in the form of telling her to get off her “soap box” and her “high horse.” Unfazed by the critics, Em started prefacing many of her articles with, “This is E.R. Tremaine, writing to you from my Soap Box, atop my High Horse; and I have my pet, Peeves, with me today.” In addition to the criticism, Em occasionally received death threats, which she reported to the police. Not that it did much good to inform the authorities, but it did serve to keep her on her guard.

She had decided to take the trip because she felt distracted lately, like she had too much going on and needed to get away from it all; and she was very much looking forward to being out of pocket for a bit. Nothing disturbed her at the cabin, especially with Zapor staying close by; and she loved being surrounded by nature, which was very inspiring, even if she didn’t often write about nature except occasionally in her poetry.

Packing two sweaters into a duffel bag, Em’s mind was on what she planned to write about next, probably something about terrorist attacks. In this day and age, most of the attacks were by Muslim extremist groups who fully claimed responsibility for them. However, no Muslims outside of these groups ever denounced the activities of the extremists, at least not publically. And of the Muslim people Em was acquainted with, none would ever come out and say they thought the violence was wrong, though they did claim to be peaceful people. Also, whenever an attack occurred, often killing thousands at once, governments everywhere were quick to blame Christians, since Christians were most often the primary targets of the violence. But in an instance of retaliation, where a man claiming to be Christian killed two Muslims, the world became outraged, even after it was exposed that the two who were killed had helped fund an extremist group claiming responsibility so far for over fourteen thousand deaths.

So when thousands of Christians are killed, the world barely blinks; but when two Muslims are killed, the world becomes outraged. To Em’s mind, this didn’t make any sense, even with the Loud Voice of the atheists proclaiming Christian hypocrisy in committing the retaliation killing. Retaliation of any sort was, of course, wrong; and many Christians would be the first to say so because vengeance belongs

wholly to the Lord. But to use the actions of a single extremist Christian to distract from the horror of killing thousands was more of a crime than hypocrisy, at least by Em's standard.

As far as the issue of Muslims not speaking out against the violence, the excuse she had heard was that Muslims were too afraid to speak out. However, not speaking out had the effect of many people assuming that all Muslims were in support of the violence, even if they were not directly participating in it. *If there are truly peaceful Muslims*, Em thought, *how sad for them to be too afraid to let people know*. Quietness generally wasn't a problem amongst Christians. While Em might occasionally become unsettled by the death threats, she at least wasn't too afraid to keep writing, and putting it out there.

But she also had Zapor to help protect her, and she was fairly certain that Muslims didn't have personal supernatural protectors. However, she was actually somewhat wrong in this assumption, because Satan and his followers had long held influence over many people belonging to the Muslim faith; in fact, sorcerers had been among Muslims for centuries, guiding their activities. So a supernatural component was definitely present. Em was correct in assuming that it didn't involve protection in the same way that God provided protection for His elect, mainly because Satan couldn't particularly care less about human beings, even those working on his side. Instead, demon possession of Muslims was fairly common, this being responsible for some of the violence. Also, many mimics were operating in positions of authority, having taken the places of people they had disposed of for one reason or another.

As she finished packing, Em pondered the effect an article on the terrorism issue might have on others. She wouldn't want to influence people against Muslims who might be peaceful; she wouldn't want to be responsible for bringing more violence into the world. But would it hurt to ask the question as to whether or not any Muslims were willing to speak out against the violence committed by many people of their religion? Of course, it wasn't just Muslims who were afraid to speak out. Other religions were being driven into submission as well. It seemed the only ones not afraid enough to keep quiet, submit, and comply were Christians. *We all do have to follow the rules*, she reasoned, *but not when being driven into extinction*. *Surely, we're*

allowed to fight back, especially when it comes to holding fast to our beliefs. In the end, Em decided she would pray about the matter, and wait for God to tell her what to do.

Carrying her bag downstairs, she smiled in thinking about the trip, which wouldn't be all work because Zapor was planning to take her on a few outings to see some of the paintings, sculptures, and other whatnots of the Tiny Art League, in places where the works hadn't yet been destroyed. While she was going to enjoy the entire getaway, seeing these treasures would likely be the highlight of her trip.

Coincidentally, Charlie was packing the car for a trip she would be leaving on the next morning as well; and she would probably end up seeing a bit of tiny art along the way too. Unlike Em's trip, Charlie's didn't have to do with work, but with certain visions she had been having recently, ones caused by Etowa (in the form of several strawberry seeds), though his involvement was, of course, unknown to her.

Tobin was going too, while Frank and Mira were staying behind to mind the farm, café, restaurant, and soup kitchen, this being a tall order, and the reason why the family rarely went anywhere all four together. With his incredible speed, Lydu was planning not only to watch over Charlie, but the farm as well, by flying back and forth, which was something the thunderbird did whenever his mistress traveled. Charlie was taking Rang-Rang, mainly because the trip might take a month or so, and she didn't want to be without her beloved pet for that long.

Though being led to Kentucky by her visions, Charlie would be taking a detour to Missouri first, to spend a couple of weeks with her aging Uncle Walter, who had been depressed and lonely ever since his daughter, Dana, had committed suicide in prison, twelve years ago now, after serving five years of a life sentence. Dana had ended up in prison after murdering two people. With the violent nature of the crime leaving very little chance of parole within her lifetime, Dana had decided to hang herself by a bedsheet, rather than live in prison for the rest of her life.

Charlie had once spent a good deal of time with her cousin (the early grade-school years) because they were the same age and lived close to one another. But they had taken much different paths in life after that. Sadly, Dana had died unsaved, never having accepted Christ;

and Charlie was left wishing she had done more to try to save her. Only seeing Dana a handful of times during their adult years, and only paying one visit to her in prison, Charlie very much regretted not making more of an effort. If she had put aside some of her busyness, and at least written to Dana, she might have at least let her cousin know that someone did care, at least cared enough to try to lead her to eternal life. In thinking back, Charlie felt she had simply made the excuse to herself of counting Dana as a lost cause, a person whose heart was hardened beyond the hope of turning to the golden path, rather than the one to hell. Prayer had helped relieve Charlie of the guilt of not making more of an effort with Dana, but it was also what was telling her not to make the same mistake with her uncle. She definitely wanted to try to bring him to Christ, if she could, and part of her plan was bringing an offer to him of coming to live on the farm with them. Charlie's father currently lived on the farm, and she hoped the idea of her uncle spending his golden years with his brother might help to influence him.

Upon leaving on their trip and passing through Arkansas, Charlie and Tobin were greatly saddened to miss seeing two tiny artworks in the state, a mural and a wood carving, both of which had been torched just before their arrival, along with a lot of other art. In roughly two years' time, many people would become so outraged at the obliteration of art that the sorcerers and those doing their bidding would be forced to subdue their frenzy slightly by limiting their destruction to only overtly Christian pieces. But in the meantime, their evil efforts were in full force, which meant they were burning as much unlicensed art as possible, even among private collections when they could gain access to these works. The Torch Squads, as they became known, especially delighted in destroying tiny art, which was never licensed, since puck trolls were not stupid enough to present themselves to their adversaries by applying for licenses. In remotely connecting a lot of art to various aspects of the Christian faith (such as stating that any painting featuring water was representative of baptism, or that any sculpture of a dove was symbolic of Christ), the Torch Squads were able to justify destroying just about anything they wished.

Puck trolls were occasionally able to thwart the burnings by bringing certain artworks to life, ones in which the subjects were capable of mounting a defense, or fighting on behalf of others. Those

fortunate enough to witness one of these events often delighted in the results, such as when a statue of Paul Bunyan managed to smash twenty blowtorches, while also doling out just about as many bruises, before running off into the woods to hide. On another occasion, six angels from a painting ended up binding and gagging a dozen members of a Torch Squad. Sadly, with more and more Puck Troll Hunters on the job, these instances were becoming rarer as the pucks were basically forced into hiding.

Puck Troll Hunters had recently infiltrated many police forces, in the hopes of finding and killing pucks while seeking out and destroying as much tiny art as possible. The week after Em left for her trip, Pizzo and Heike were taking the twins on a picnic to a park not too far from Doyle Mansion. After the picnic, the family made their way to the alley behind the flower shop on Grosbeak Avenue to see a new painting by one of their favorite artists, a puck troll named Gatu. They had barely entered the alley when the four found themselves pursued by a Puck Troll Hunter. No animals or birds were around to whisk the pucks away, or help them to fight the hunter, who wasn't at all fazed when Pizzo and Heike threw stones at him because the only stones available in the alley were fairly small. Since they couldn't run as fast as the hunter to get away, and they couldn't find a place in the alley to hide except in Gatu's painting, the family ended up having to do just that, even though Pizzo and Heike knew it wasn't particularly safe since their pursuer was armed with a blowtorch.

Sure enough, no sooner had they entered the painting than the hunter torched it, for a full four minutes, until his torch ran out of fuel. A gargoyle on top of a church some seven miles away had witnessed the event, but had been too far away to render aid. (While gargoyles had super-excellent eyesight, they weren't anywhere near as fast in flight as creatures like wind horses, thunderbirds, and gryphons.) Though unable to stop the destruction, the gargoyle did seek out and tell Folto what had happened. Kip was visiting Doyle Mansion for the afternoon, which was why Folto was in the area, because even though he was very capable of looking after himself, she still took her protection duties incredibly seriously.

Louetta was actually spending a couple of weeks at the mansion. Though she had her own apartment, her lifestyle was often nomadic.

With such happy memories of times in her youth spent at Doyle Mansion, she tended to come back as often as possible—to paint, visit, and help with housework and gardening. She also sometimes stayed at the farm in order to spend time with Charlie, and take advantage of the serene and bucolic setting, which she found ideal for artistic inspiration.

Finding Dave, Violet, Kip, and Louetta having hot cocoa on the back porch of the mansion, Folto somberly reported the news to them. Louetta immediately broke into uncontrollable tears and was difficult to console, though she did calm down after about an hour of crying, basically because she had exhausted herself.

Kip stayed with her at the house while Dave and Violet took a drive to the alley to view the scene. With the painting completely burned away, and the concrete wall damaged to the point that blackened crumbles of it were falling to the ground, there seemed little chance the puck family had survived to escape the painting after the hunter left. They weren't anywhere in the area, hiding, even though Dave and Violet searched for some time, in a grief-stricken and numb state in pretty much knowing their efforts were in vain.

Doyle Mansion seemed oddly empty when they returned home, even though Jenny was there with Kip and Louetta. Having known Heike and Pizzo since childhood, and having grown very much attached to the twins, Jenny was also grief stricken. But instead of weeping, she simply sat quietly, very still, the whole thing seeming very surreal to her, as though she was in a nightmare and just needed to wake up for the whole thing to be over.

Wandering home about an hour later, Jenny did end up crying, as she was telling the topiaries what had happened. The ones Pizzo and Heike and brought to life over the years came alive (from Memory Magic) to comfort her, and they too wept.

Back at the mansion, while Violet was putting Louetta to bed, Dave and Kip discussed what to do, particularly about Em. They could reach her by phone, but were reluctant to because they thought the news would likely devastate her, which was a correct assumption. While Pizzo had very much remained attached to Louetta, he had grown to love Em over the years, and vice versa; in fact, she considered the whole puck family to be a part of her family. Since she was currently away from home, and specifically in a setting that held strong emotional

memories, in fearing an unpredictable reaction, Kip and Dave decided not to call her. They also didn't want to just show up at the cabin with bad news. No, it would be better to wait until she came home to tell her. This would likely be in about two weeks, as she rarely took trips lasting longer than three or four weeks at the most.

Violet concurred when Dave and Kip explained their reasoning; and so that Em wouldn't get the information from someone else, they asked Folto to keep it under wraps for the time being. They would talk to Jenny again this evening, to ask her to keep it quiet as well. This wouldn't be a problem, as she was in no hurry to tell the rest of her family in knowing they also were going to be very upset over the news. At the schools, they would simply tell Heike's students that she was away for a couple of weeks. Dave, Violet, Kip, and Louetta ended up deciding the truth would also keep as far as others such as Vini and Preston. A memorial service would be planned as soon as Em returned, which would be soon enough for everyone to know.

Chapter Six

Erdém and Antica

With the current state of the world, Kip had decided it was time to put a certain plan into action—that of rallying more support from allies in other realms. He, Preston, and Weatherly already had the support of all six regions in Kivetel, thanks to the friends they had made and kept over many years of training and visiting there. But all twelve doorways in the mezzanine at Netherwind led to other realms; and Weatherly had agreed with Kip that it was time to focus on two more of them, namely, Erdém and Antica. If she hadn't agreed, he wouldn't have gone forward with his plan because he always followed her orders, without exception; not only was she a proven leader, Kip also knew that she heard God's voice more clearly than most other people. Kip had decided that Merri and Dell should accompany him, which Weatherly also agreed with.

Currently, access to the mezzanine was limited, and any students wishing to enter any of the doorways had to have an adult accompanying them. The exception to this was the Weapons Room in which classes were often held and into which students could enter without an accompanying adult. However, they could not begin training unless one of the trainers was already present. Before entering any of the other magical doorways, even adults such teachers, magicians, and plantation workers knew they needed to consult Kip, Preston, Weatherly, or Vini who were in charge because they were the ones who had spent the most time on the mezzanine over the years. One reason access was limited was to decrease the possibility of having a negative impact on those living in the various realms. Another reason was because too much was still unknown about these other worlds. Plus, sorcerers were known to frequent places like Kivetel and Antica, so the possibility of danger was always present.

Four days after the incident with the Puck Troll Hunter, Kip led Merri and Dell through the doorway to Erdém, making sure to prop the door because none of the doors could be opened from the inside.

Indeed, they weren't even visible when shut. Merri had already tied a ribbon on the door handle indicating that someone was inside, in case the door were to get closed accidentally somehow. Another common safety practice was for those entering the various realms to draw the attention of the magical portraits of sisters Edna and Lizzie Dwyer, hanging across from one another in the hall. Then, if a door in use was ever closed, or if a person was delayed in returning for some reason, the sisters could tell someone. On this day, Kip and his crew had made a point of saying hello to Edna and Lizzie just before entering the door.

The genies of Erdém were fairly well known to Kip; in fact, he had done some trading with them over the years, mainly in the form of giving them pots of Bigfoot Honey and bottles of Bigfoot Grenadine in exchange for the many gifts the genies liked to send, as well as certain services the tiny godly creatures evidently liked to perform on the plantations such as curing diseased trees and helping to clean up after storms.

Kip had originally been led to the genies some twenty years back by Pizzo and Heike, who had discovered clues in several of the Genie Diaries found in the Labyrinth Library.

On his first visit to Erdém, Kip had asked the genies if they wanted their books from the tiny library found at Netherwind, which had become known as the Genie Library because it was obvious that genie bookwrights had made most of the books in it. Heike and Pizzo had accompanied Kip on that particular trip, and were holding their breath in waiting for the answer because they were very much hoping they wouldn't lose access to the books. They regularly used the Genie Library, as did many other puck trolls in the area, the books being the perfect size for pucks who were roughly the same sizes as genies, generally five to seven inches in range.

The visiting pucks breathed a sigh of relief a few moments later to discover that the genies didn't want the books or even use of the library because they had their own libraries. However, later in the visit, the genies did offer to repair a couple of the tiny books, which had led to finding out that they could repair people-sized books too, this being something genies evidently loved to do. In fact, several pairs of them could regularly be seen flitting about the Labyrinth Library toting satchel-style repair kits in order to do just that. Adept at flying, even

though genies didn't have wings, they were a treat to watch, sailing about all graceful and floaty, but at the same time fairly swiftly.

On a second visit to the desert world, this time by himself, Kip had discovered another surprise—that Erdém was where most of the gnomes that had originally lived in our world were hiding. But while genies were easy to connect with, and converse with, particularly because their speech was very like that of human beings, gnomes evidently didn't want anything to do with people, not even short conversations, though their language was pretty much identical to that of genies. The gnomes also didn't want much to do with puck trolls, as Kip discovered on a later visit, because puck trolls and gnomes had never gotten along very well, with pucks being too mischievous and artsy for the gnomes' liking, and gnomes being too business-like and stoic for the liking of most puck trolls.

Neither genies nor gnomes particularly wanted to permanently leave Erdém, where they had taken refuge many decades past from the evils of the world, from the mess humans were making of the earth, and of each other. A genie spokesperson (called a Bezell) did not hesitate to tell Kip, "The world was already an evil place, from its earliest days, when Satan fell; and humans have made it worse and worse with each passing century." There was also the safety issue, as the Bezell explained. "Genies are hiding in Erdém largely because of Genie Hunters and sorcerers. Plus, we just don't trust most humans; hunters and sorcerers are, after all, humans."

Managing to exchange a few words with gnomes, Kip found they pretty much felt the same way. While they hadn't heard of any Gnome Hunters, it wouldn't surprise them. They were basically just disgusted with people in general, and especially with the mess human beings had made of the beautiful earth God had created.

Kip remembered to consult Vini about gnomes before visiting Erdém again. While she had never seen any herself, she had found a good deal of information on them from her library research over the years.

Real gnomes by appearance were quite unlike the colorful statues featured in many gardens. According to Kip, those living in Erdém were sandy in coloring—skin tones, hair, and even clothing. "They like to blend in with their environments," Vini said. "Those living in other

places might have mossy, muddy, or even snowy appearances, whatever is common to the area. They can magically hide too, making themselves look exactly like things like buckets and rocks.”

Subsequent visits to Erdém proved Vini’s research on gnomes to be true on other accounts as well, such as that most gnomes were focused on gardening, with some being highly scientific and experimental with plants, seeds, soils, pruning techniques, and development of extremely efficient moisture-collection systems. They had also invented sleek wind devices to run various pieces of farming equipment and generate power for their homes. Gnomes were masters of recycling and reusing things too. Their homes reminded Kip of those in many earthship communities, using readily-available materials to build with like clays and muds, and incorporating things like glass bottles and old tires. “They were probably some of the earliest pioneers of that type of community,” Kip told Vini.

Also in keeping with Vini’s research, gnomes often rode on certain animals to travel—both magical and non-magical—like enormice, wooly crotons, and jack rabbits, all of which seemed fairly common in Erdém. However, while gnomes liked to travel, they didn’t much like to socialize, at least not with creatures who were not gnomes, and especially not with human beings.

“Throughout history,” Vini said, “they haven’t liked people, mainly because so many people are wasteful with things like energy, water, and even plants—like we don’t always make good use of plants, such as using all of celery, not just the stalks. And when we peel apples, we often throw out the peels, instead of eating them, or feeding them to animals, or putting them on compost piles. They especially don’t like swimming pools and water parks because they believe both are a horrible waste of water.”

“It’s just a little unsettling,” Kip said, “the dirty looks I keep getting.”

Smiling, Vini told him, “Even though they aren’t often sociable, and are often grumpy, gnomes wholly serve God, just like genies and puck trolls. And they can be very helpful to gardeners, in doing chores like weeding and pruning. They even help birth livestock on occasion. But if they ever get found out, and if people compliment them, or try to

reward them, they move on. They like doing stuff, but they don't want any recognition at all."

Vini had, many years past, warned Charlie about this. "If gnomes ever end up on the farm, don't reward them or make a big deal out of what they do because they hate that. No compliments, no putting out gifts, not even little blankets when it's cold. If possible, don't do or say anything. Just ignore them because that's what they want. They'll leave if you take notice of them, or make a fuss over their help."

Heeding Vini's advice had been no problem for Charlie so far because no one on the farm had ever seen a gnome, or any evidence of them. But this was not surprising because there were only a handful living outside of Erdém. Those currently in our world lived mostly in Europe, though they tended to move around the European countries quite a bit because people couldn't seem to help themselves when it came to paying compliments.

Piszo, Heike, and other puck trolls had tried to do their part in fostering relations with both the genies and gnomes of Erdém over the past couple of decades, often gifting them with tiny artworks. Ms. Ophar had sent twenty of her famous glass hummingbird feeders for the gnomes to hang in their gardens. One of Heike's sculptures and two of Gatu's paintings adorned a genie meeting hall. Ekas had given the gnomes many pieces of pottery, mostly of the useful kind because it was well known that gnomes preferred useful things to simply decorative ones. While puck trolls and gnomes still didn't like each other much, they did have respect for and were most often civil to one another.

Throughout the years, the visitors to Erdém had seen quite a few amazing sights, such as huge sand whirlpools and sand spouts in the vast desert landscapes. The whirlpools looked a lot like those in sea waters, except featuring swirling sand instead of water. The spouts resembled geyser activity, but with sand and stones being spewed, instead of water and gases.

Kip, Dell, and Merri on this trip were being treated to a little tour of a gnome farming operation; and while they greatly admired the water catchment system and the strategically-placed cliff gardens (taking advantage of the shade the cliffs provided), the visitors were careful not to pay compliments. The food grown in Erdém was mostly for a couple of settlements of humans living there. The gnomes had also taught

some of their farming and building techniques to these people. Though gnomes didn't care much for contact with others, they didn't want to see anyone starve, or die from exposure, which the people might well have done early on, in not being nearly as clever or industrious as gnomes. The people in Erdém evidently didn't want anything to do with visitors, especially other humans. According to the genies and gnomes, they simply wanted to be left alone; therefore, those visiting from the mezzanine were careful never to bother them.

Immediately following the tour, the visitors met with a Bezell and two Gnome Elders, one rather short for a gnome at about eight inches in height, and the other fairly tall at about fifteen inches.

When Kip expressed that he hoped some genies and gnomes might consider coming out of hiding, basically coming home to live, both again expressed reluctance to leave Erdém in any sort of permanent fashion; and the gnomes were more outspoken about it this time.

"We tried living there before," the taller one said. "There's not enough food."

Without taking any time to think, Dell replied, "I would think it would be easier to grow food there than here, because there are lots of places that aren't desert."

"Not that kind of food; real food!" the tall Elder answered, rather scornfully and huffily.

Dell immediately knew what he had said wrong, even without Merri elbowing him and whispering, "Human goodness, not people food."

"I understand," Dell said quietly, "sorry, my mistake."

"What sustains you here?" Kip asked.

"The humans here are good ones," the shorter Elder answered. "They provide just enough food for us. If they stay, we'll be okay."

The genie spokesperson didn't say anything new, but simply repeated what Kip had heard before, about staying clear of Genie Hunters and sorcerers. However, this wasn't exactly correct. In truth, the genies weren't as much afraid to live in our world, as they were more waiting for divine direction. Genies got their direction from God, just like many other magical creatures such as gryphons and wind horses. And if God were to tell them to return home, to help the humans, they would. So far, He hadn't done so. So for now, they were

content simply paying visits to the home of their ancestors, helping when they could, but remaining, for the most part, in hiding.

Kip hadn't come completely unprepared to this meeting. He had consulted Vini; and she had suggested a little plan relating to the gnomes—that of appealing to their expertise.

“Most human beings are fairly useless when it comes to things like gardening and farming,” Kip explained to the Elders, with an extreme note of sorrow in his voice. “We’re just about helpless and pretty much incompetent. We badly need advice and direction. It’s such a challenge, and it’s hard for us to figure out what to do because we’re not as good at this stuff as you are.” In a rather lengthy spiel, he proceeded to describe how badly things were going on his friends’ farm, and how Charlie and Frank were constantly messing things up.

This was anything but the truth because the farm was actually wildly successful; but Kip felt it was okay to exaggerate a bit, to hopefully gain the gnomes’ sympathy. However, what he was saying was partly truthful because Charlie and Frank did occasionally meet with trials such as when digging a new pond a couple of years back.

“They dug the pond in the wrong place and hit a spring,” Kip said, his voice filled with desperation for the hapless farmers. “So they couldn’t dig deeper to get a good pond that would fill up in the rainy season and hold a fair amount of water. It’s basically just like a big puddle now; and in the hot times, the spring mostly dries up, so they’re left with just a mud pit.” After a short pause, in an exasperated tone, he added, “Plus, the boll weevils are as bad as ever, just ruining everything. We have trouble with them on the plantations too.”

Kip next proceeded to describe how his friend, Jenny, needed extreme help with topiaries. This also wasn't exactly true; but he didn't think Jenny would mind being part of this story, especially because he knew she longed for help from gnomes, in keeping up her late grandfather's garden. Plus, she was currently engaged in a project that she would shortly need a great deal of help with—that of adding topiaries to both Netherwind and Laurelstone. Jenny was actually continuing work her grandfather had started in conjunction with Mr. Michaels. Over the past twenty years, certain shrubs and trees had been planted on the properties, over eight hundred so far, with the anticipation of making them into topiaries so that puck trolls could bring

them to life to help guard the plantations. Also, in just the past four years or so, in a manner much like the Tiny Art League, Jenny had started her own underground network of artistic gardeners and estate owners across many states who were anxious to establish magical topiary gardens. And all of the networking and planning relating to this was keeping her very busy.

As far as the twin plantations, having learned from her grandfather, Jenny was a master of sculpting topiaries. But she couldn't sculpt and keep up with over eight hundred on her own, even with the assistance of the bigfoots, who didn't mind helping, but who preferred focusing on the regular operations of the plantations.

"She's making a botch of things so far," Merri emphasized to the Elders, "beautiful yew trees just hacked to pieces." To this, the gnomes' eyes grew very wide because yews were highly favored by gnomes, (this being a fact from Vini's research which Merri was clever enough to work into the conversation.)

"True; the yews are suffering," Dell agreed. "But even with the other shrubs and trees, the bigfoots don't seem to have the finesse needed to get the details right. They could sure use some help from a few experts, at least some pointers."

During this conversation, in perfect understanding as to what the humans were up to, the Bezell was trying to keep a straight face.

The Elders might also have known, but weren't planning to stop the visitors from singing the praises of gnomes, while pretty accurately (at least to the Elders' viewpoints) describing their own ineptness at managing such things as siting ponds and sculpting topiaries.

After hearing what the humans had to say, the two Elders had to admit that some of the younger gnomes in Erdém had, in recent years, expressed some interest in returning to the world of their ancestors, if not to live, then at least to do some exploring.

"Could you return for another meeting tomorrow?" the tall Elder asked Kip. "That would give us time to round up a few of our Youngers, to find out if they are still interested."

Kip wholeheartedly agreed; and since the passing of time in Erdém was exactly the same as in their own world, the meeting would actually be the next day. However, with Dell and Merri busy preparing for a time-travel trip, Kip would end up going alone.

Along with the same two Elders, eight Gnome Youngers attended the meeting. Having never seen any worlds other than Erdém in their lifetimes, the eight agreed to come, more out of curiosity than anything else. The Youngers were designated as Gnome Scouts by the Elders, who told them to explore, then report back as to their findings.

The Scouts were slightly less serious than the Elders, joking with one another at least; though, in keeping with gnome characteristics, they weren't particularly friendly with Kip, even occasionally shooting him scowling glances as they gathered their travel packs and made their plans, which included all eight of the gnomes coming back with Kip this very day.

So this was the beginning of the gnomes returning to our world because the Scouts would end up reporting back somewhat favorable conditions in which to live, as far as having enough to eat and being able to find suitable work and home sites. Some would choose to go back and forth for a while; but many would eventually decide to settle permanently in the world of their ancestors, particularly in the future when more food would be available. In truth, the time was not too far off when the person with the gift of overproducing goodness would be born. And although gnomes had loved the challenge of living exclusively in a desert world, most did prefer a little variety as far as scenery.

Many genies would return to live in our world in the future as well, because they basically couldn't stand to see God's children struggling, and wanted to help whenever they could. Plus, quite a few ended up receiving divine direction to do so.

Kip soon discovered that the doorway on the mezzanine was not the only one between our world and Erdém. In fact, several actually existed, with two being particularly well known and used—one in a sandbox in the back yard of an estate in New Zealand and the other in the side of a beach cliff in Mexico. The genies had used the doorways for years. Now, the gnomes began to, and far more often than the one at Netherwind Manor. This was a good thing, not only because it might have been a little disruptive at the manor to have genies and gnomes constantly streaming in and out of the mezzanine, but also because in about twenty years, a fairly large gnome migration to our world would

begin, one that would be recorded in gnome history books as an important event called Returning Home.

But slightly earlier on than that, in about six years' time, when Jenny was in the middle of her topiary project at the plantation, she would often feign needing help (along with a bit of incompetence) in order to keep the gnomes interested. What they seemed most interested in was finishing partially-shaped topiaries, and basically putting their own artistic touches on them, which Jenny didn't mind because the shapes always turned out better with a gnome's touch. The gnomes then seemed to delight in maintaining the topiaries, which was the most help of all, as it could be incredibly labor-intensive to keep the trees and shrubs trimmed up smart year round. Jenny ended up training others of her underground group, simply called Leaf Lovers, in how to keep gnomes around, basically, by not complimenting them and not giving them anything to reward their efforts. "Just ignore them and let them do their work," she often counseled. The gnomes were very content when people followed this advice because they got so much done when people weren't involved. It was so much better when the humans refrained from constantly looking, touching, trying to help, and complimenting.

On same morning Kip was meeting with the Gnome Scouts in Erdém, Vini was also on the mezzanine, visiting the Clock of the Universe. The talking peacock that had frequented her dreams since her youth had told her to go, because there was something she was supposed to notice or learn while there.

Like many of the realms on the mezzanine, the one containing the clock had multiple doorways, another being located very near Doyle Mansion, and situated within the triangle formed by the tunnels connecting the mansion with Wharton Farm and the Galloway Estate. Most doorways to other realms were located inside of triangles, of various sorts, because triangles were part of the magic needed for the doors to function properly. The Laurelstone and Netherwind properties together formed an enormous triangle, inside which many magical doorways were located.

The clock looked much as it had on her other visits, wonderfully and mysteriously complex as to both its workings and the materials from which it was made. To Vini, all of the many gears and symbols of

the clock always looked otherworldly, even without the soft rays of slanting morning sunshine giving the various metallic components an almost ghostly glow, and setting the gem parts alive with surreal and almost slow-motion glints, as though mechanical creatures with jeweled eyes might be deliberately winking at her.

Yes, I'm definitely supposed to notice something, Vini thought, but I'm just not seeing whatever it is at this time.

It was the same as it had always been for her. God was pretty much going to have to beat her on the head with whatever it was. How patient He had been with her over the years, giving her so many repeats as far as messages and prompts to get her attention. And often, when it finally dawned on her what He was trying to tell her, she felt so stupid for not having noticed sooner.

After studying the clock for a half-hour without seeing what she was supposed to see, Vini returned through the door to the mezzanine, which she had remembered to prop. Removing the ribbon from the door handle, she said a silent prayer. *Dear Lord, thank You for being so patient with me. Whatever I was supposed to see, please let me notice it the next time I visit the clock. I ask this in Jesus' name, Amen.*

Upon returning from Erdém, as Kip was showing the Gnome Scouts the way through the house to the outside, one told him rather grumpily, “We can find our own way.”

However, as soon as the gnomes made it outside, they were fairly astounded by the lovely gardens and other greenery, especially the tall trees. They had heard of such things from their gumpahs and gumrahs (as they liked to call their grandfathers and grandmothers), but they never imagined the stories put to real life could be so lovely.

Seeing the gnomes dumbstruck and standing stock-still, Kip reasoned that they were slightly overwhelmed by the sight. “God made all of this,” he said.

“Yes...yes...He did,” the previously-grumpy Scout rather thoughtfully and somewhat pleasantly agreed, as he moved forward with the rest of his crew to spread out over the grounds, where they eventually all wandered off in different directions.

Kip felt he had done all he could do at this time with regards to Erdém; now, he would just have to wait and let things take their natural course.

Anxious to move on to Antica—a sister world to Kivetel, based on various similarities and numerous magical doorways existing between the two realms—two days after bringing the Gnome Scouts home, Kip led Merri and Dell through the doorway to this world, the surface of which was ninety-four percent water. About eighteen years previous, the people of Antica had built a platform in order to safely receive visitors from this doorway, which was situated in the side of a steep cliff overlooking a wide and swift river. A set of stairs led down from the platform to a path along the riverbank leading to a large dock that was part of Antica’s public transportation system, comprised entirely of various watercrafts, as no land vehicles were ever used in this realm. People traveling around on land always either walked or ran places they needed to go. They didn’t even have things like bicycles and skateboards in Antica.

From the dock, it was only a quick journey of about fifteen miles in a catamaran-style boat to the largest city in Antica’s Central Region, where they would be meeting with the regent of that region, a man named Joval Dur. Kip had already sent Joval a kite message, a means of magical messaging also used in Kivetel, so the man was expecting them.

The people living in Antica were similar to those of Kivetel in that they were very friendly, helpful, and welcoming, presenting much less of a challenge than the residents of Erdém as far as developing friendships. Indeed, visits to Antica had been very productive over the years, so this was more about maintaining contacts than gaining allies.

Antica was separated into eight regions, the central being their main hub for industry and politics; and Joval was always interested in hearing about such things from other worlds. However, on this day, he quickly became much more interested in the six large jars of Bigfoot Honey that Merri and Dell were lugging. And the regent said the same thing he always said when presented with this recurring gift. “The honey our bees make here has a slightly bitter note to it, and it’s just not as sweet as yours.”

Kip responded much as he always did. “Well, the bigfoots are masters of charming bees, so their honey can’t help but turn out excellently sweet.”

“I don’t suppose any of the bigfoots might consider paying us a visit,” Joval said. (This, too, had been mentioned before.)

“I have asked them,” Kip replied. “At this time, they’re not interested in traveling.”

After this usual round of introductory pleasantries, as the visitors were being treated to a fancy tea, the discussion turned to some of the recent turmoil in the U.S. (and other places), most specifically, the terrorist attacks and the fact that more and more Christians were being denied any open expression of their faith.

Joval almost couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “You mean they are actually enforcing those insane laws relating to bibles in nursing homes and hospitals. And they are destroying art?” Everyone in Antica was absolutely free to practice their religious beliefs, and art was absolutely treasured.

Upon hearing the news update, Joval immediately offered to hide people in Antica. “Anyone at all that General Dawson wants us to protect,” he said. (Although the regent was on more informal terms with Preston and Kip, calling them by their first names, he always addressed and referred to Weatherly by her military title, mainly out of respect, but also because anytime he had met her, she was always more serious and business-like than her subordinates.)

Like Kivetel, Antica had a small sorcerer presence among its visitors, because the residents didn’t deny visitors access to their world. Also similar to its sister world, Antica had a strong military, perhaps even stronger than Kivetel, and thus could protect itself. Also like Kivetel, Antica had a *Book of Wisdom* very similar to the *Holy Bible*; and most residents of this watery world were good people, wishing to help others, especially those suffering injustices, whenever they could.

Over the years, the people of Antica had shared some of their secrets with Kip, Preston, and Weatherly, such as the existence of a natural phenomenon that was the equivalent of a magical water spout connected to Antica from some mysterious outside source. Whenever water was drained from a particular lake in Antica’s Northeastern Region, the waterspout replenished it, basically like someone turning on a faucet to refill a tub. In witnessing the sight and describing it to those at home, Weatherly had likened the phenomenon to a huge broken fire hydrant or an enormous whale spewing water. In another region,

whenever the level of the sea dropped to a certain point, rain automatically started, like someone flipping on a switch to restore the sea level to normal.

Antica had helped Netherwind and Laurelstone during two particularly horrible droughts by supplying water, enabling the plantations to grow food to sustain many thousands during that time. When Joval first made the offer to help, Kip had naively assumed the assistance would be provided in the form of a waterline (like a large hose) rigged through the doorway on the mezzanine, then out the window at the end of the hall. While it wouldn't have been very practical, it would have served its purpose. However, with magic assisting science (much as it did the magicians of both Kivetel and earth), water engineers from Antica had provided a much better solution by somehow splitting the mezzanine doorway into several parts, then shifting these splits to add doorways to the floors of the four largest ponds on Netherwind and Laurelstone. These were water channels that were permanently open, and that would fill the ponds automatically—or automagically, as the students of the schools liked to call the pond fillings—in times of drought.

The pond doorways could also be used as escape routes during emergencies, such as if demons or megahobs ever attacked. While protectors like gargoyles and wind horses were constantly on guard, it was hard to fully protect the sizeable properties against large-scale assaults, one of which had occurred about five years previous. At that time, Vini had called a unicorn, which had dispatched in less than seven seconds the nearly five hundred demons that had descended on the schools, intent on killing as many children, teachers, and others as possible.

But these doorways to Antica could, of course, be used even in smaller-scale emergency situations, for those who could swim and hold their breath under water for about ninety seconds, possibly a little more or less depending on individual swimming abilities. To assist people who couldn't swim under water, or who might panic in emergencies, small mouth-tank breathing devices were secreted at certain places around the four ponds. All four of the pond doorways connected to the same lake in Antica, though they came out at different shallow places along the shoreline.

The people of Antica had not only provided refuge and shared resources with their new friends of earth, they had also offered to teach some of their building techniques. This included both watercrafts and habitable underwater structures, of which Antica's residents were truly masters of building, since many lived in large underwater colonies. Louetta's brother, Albert, was in the Navy; and he certainly saw the advantage in learning ship building from these experts. Indeed, he and several of his fellow seamen had spent a great deal of time in Antica over the past twenty or so years. In thinking that the people of earth might someday need to find a way to live under water—accessible to many people, not just to the wealthy as was the case currently—Weatherly over the years had sent several teams of engineers to Antica to learn all they could about the building of underwater structures.

Swim instructors from Antica had taught many of the students of the Netherwind-Laurelstone Schools to swim, which was a great benefit. Several times a year, large batches of children were taken to Antica to learn various water skills, one of which was swimming back and forth through the pond doorways without use of the mouth-tank devices. It was also helpful for the students to learn swimming in different water conditions, like in rivers and seas. Some even learned sailing skills while there. It was like going to a camp, with everyone having a blast; and it was all perfectly safe because most Antica residents were experts at life-saving procedures involving water.

Though they mostly preferred to stay home, people from Antica and Kivetel did occasionally visit our world. The safety of this had at one time been of great concern due to time passing faster in the sister realms than in our world, with thirty minutes here being equal to about nine hours in either Antica or Kivetel. The residents of both places also aged more slowly and lived much longer lives than those of earth. Even receiving various visitors from Erdém might have been a concern at first, just out of basic caution, though the issue wouldn't have applied to genies and gnomes because they were originally from our world.

But the safety issue relating to Antica and Kivetel had been determined about eighteen years back when Linna, Weatherly's best friend and training partner from Kivetel, had bravely decided on an impromptu visit, through the doorway in Heritage Oak on the grounds of Netherwind. She had chosen this route not only because it was a

continuously-open doorway, but also because she wouldn't have wanted to just show up unexpectedly in someone else's house, not even one with a magical mezzanine frequented by all sorts of visitors from other realms. Though she hadn't told anyone her plans, Linna had left her brother, Lelek, a note (in case anything were to go wrong) before climbing through the doorway, the starting point of which was a hollow in a gigantic oak very near her home in Kivetel.

After climbing up through a similar hollow in Heritage Oak and arriving on the natural platform at the start of the tree's crown, Linna noticed no adverse effects such as premature aging, or anything else weird like shortness of breath or rapid heartbeat.

Taking in the views of the rolling hills, tree groves, ponds, distant manor houses, barns, and other such sights, Linna sat for a few minutes in the tree before deciding to climb down and make her way to Laurelstone to visit Weatherly. Having long heard descriptions of the two manor houses from her friends, Linna could easily tell the difference between Netherwind and Laurelstone, so she knew exactly where to look for her best friend.

The day after Kip, Merri, and Dell made the trip to deliver honey and news to Antica, Em returned home to Doyle Mansion. This happened to be a Thursday, the last week in January, and she arrived at breakfast time, with Zapor dropping her off in the back yard. As she was taking her bags up to her room and making her way downstairs to have breakfast with her parents, Em could sense something missing from the mansion, but she never imagined it might be the puck trolls.

In finding out what had happened a few moments later from her father, she immediately fell to her knees in shock in the kitchen.

This couldn't be right. They were all supposed to outlive her. Pizzo was only thirty-eight when she first met him. While his parents had died young, in some sort of freak accident, Pizzo was supposed to live another hundred years, at least; Heike too, and the twins even longer. As it had with Jenny, the whole thing to Em seemed very surreal, like it couldn't have really happened, the horror and evil of it being almost incomprehensible.

Em cried very hard for nearly an hour, her mother holding her tightly the whole time as they sat on the window bench in the kitchen

together. When she finally stopped crying, she couldn't eat anything, not even when her parents coaxed her.

After taking two obligatory sips of apple juice, she slowly climbed the stairs to her room, clinging to the banister for support the whole way up.

Sitting down on her bed, she suddenly felt extremely fatigued. She hadn't slept well the night before anyway, with packing on her mind, and in anticipation of getting up early to make the journey home. Also, she hadn't managed to get even halfway through the article asking the question as to whether or not any Muslims were willing to speak out to condemn the terrorist violence. She had found the issue to be just too confusing at this time, and she didn't feel she had enough information to properly put it into words. Plus, she hadn't yet gotten clear direction from God. So instead of the article, she had spent most of her time at the cabin writing the first draft of a play, one somewhat similar to *Graham Rumpole* in that it would probably take most people some time and thought to recognize the theme—that of a warning of the realness of hellfire which, in the play, was represented by a large man-eating flower.

Across her room, Em could see on her desk the first sculpture Heike had ever given her, a bronze of a gryphon in mid-pounce. The statue was sitting right next to one of Pizzo's sketches, of an enormous gnarled oak tree draped with moss.

Crying again, this time more softly, Em curled up on her bed, very soon falling asleep.

Out of fatigue, she managed to sleep deeply for six hours.

Waking in the afternoon, she briefly hoped she had simply had a bad dream, which she sadly reasoned very quickly wasn't the case. However, despite still feeling very sad, she was able to think more clearly than she had before the extremely-long nap, as though thick cobwebs had been brushed from her brain.

Feeling thirsty, she drank a glass of water as she sat on her bed thinking, about Pizzo and Heike, about art, about hunters.

Em was halfway through a second glass of water when she started to feel very angry, and she found herself fantasizing about going after that Puck Troll Hunter. She didn't get many chances to use her dagger. *Here's a good chance to*, she thought hotly. But even if she went after

the hunter, she might not get to use her dagger because she could sense that Zapor was outraged as well; and he might well rip the evil man to shreds before Em even managed to get close to him.

As she had trained herself to do when feeling angry, Em calmed down quickly by grabbing her bible in order to read certain bible quotes, this time pertaining to wanting to take revenge, Proverbs 20:22, for one. “Do not say, ‘I will repay evil’; wait for the LORD, and he will help you.”

Although she felt better instantly, less angry and quieter in spirit, she went on to read another of her favorites, Romans 12:19. “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’”

Next, just flipping pages randomly, she chanced to read Jeremiah 18:2-3. “‘Arise, and go down to the potter’s house, and there I will let you hear my words.’ So I went down to the potter’s house, and there he was working at his wheel.”

Again flipping, she ended up landing on 1 Kings 6:18. “The cedar within the house was carved in the form of gourds and open flowers; all was cedar, no stone was seen.”

This is odd, she thought. Both quotes have to do with art.

Letting the Holy Spirit guide her as she continued turning pages, her fingers led her to the front of the bible where her eyes were drawn to Exodus 35:25. “And all women who had ability spun with their hands, and brought what they had spun in blue and purple and scarlet stuff and fine twined linen....”

Next she read Exodus 35:35, “He has filled them with ability to do every sort of work done by a craftsman or by a designer or by an embroiderer in blue and purple and scarlet stuff and fine twined linen, or by a weaver—by any sort of workman or skilled designer.”

Finally, in turning pages once more, she read the last part of Jeremiah 22:14. “‘...paneling it with cedar, and painting it with vermilion.’”

These were all scriptures about painting, weaving, carving, and throwing pots, basically, artistic things mentioned in the bible.

God was trying to tell her something. All of the passages had to do with art. But what did it mean?

Come on, brain, work! she thought. *What is He trying to tell me?*

Because of the way Em's brain processed things, she often recognized and worked out messages from God more quickly than Vini did, which would turn out to be a wonderful thing on this day.

Art and puck trolls...a natural connection. Art was involved in that alley....

While Em hadn't seen the painting that was destroyed, according to her parents—who had gotten the description from the gargoyle by way of Folto—the painting was a barn scene; but the inside of the barn was set up like a house, with a little bedroom and bathroom in the loft, and kitchen and living spaces in the lower part of the barn. The work was quirky in that a family of rabbits was living inside, instead of people. The tiny painting was obliterated; but she could see a copy of it if she wanted to, in the Art Gallery on the mezzanine because the magical Realm of Septessence held a copy of every work of art ever created.

They were inside the painting when it was destroyed, but what if....

Jumping up from the bed and heading out onto her balcony, Em was already silently calling to Zapor, who landed at the same time his mistress was closing the balcony door behind her.

Zapor could sense the urgency even without Em telling him to hurry; and he flew very fast, getting her to Netherwind in less than four minutes flat.

Even as they flew, Em's brain had continued to work, in thinking of how each work of art on the mezzanine was always in reverse, a mirror image of its original. What if the works were not just mirror images, but doorways of some sort? She had actually thought of this once before, when first discovering the Art Gallery as a teenager, but had forgotten those long-ago ponderings; so it was as if these were all new thoughts she was having.

Praying very hard that her assumption was correct, Em was chiding herself for not spending more time on the mezzanine over the years. If she had, she might already have worked out some of its mysteries. Though several students were training in Kivetel, and a few people visited the Garden of Stars when directed by God to do so, Em knew that hardly anyone ever visited either the Peacock Garden or the Art Gallery. As busy as everyone tended to stay, it was sometimes hard to fit beauty and art into tight schedules. Even persons like Kip and Preston, who had basically devoted themselves to the mezzanine over

the years, tended to overlook the Art Gallery, in not viewing it as important enough to put time and energy into, mainly because the gallery was thought of as a realm of pleasure, rather than work.

But part of the reason why Em didn't spend much time on the mezzanine was because several of the doors still remained locked to her, unopenable even by a magic key. She knew this because she had tried several times to use her key, the one that could unlock any door; except the locked ones of the mezzanine, it seemed. She had always assumed the timing wasn't right for her to explore these realms, or that only certain individuals were allowed access, as was the case of the door leading to the Realm of Sextessence, where only magicians were allowed to enter.

As Zapor set her down on the front lawn at Netherwind, Em fairly flew up the steps and through the front door, barely managing to say hi to Merri who was on her way up to her room to do homework.

Zippering through the first-floor hallway then up the side stairs, she burst onto the mezzanine, fairly startling Edna and Lizzie in her haste to enter the Art Gallery.

In such a hurry, she didn't use a ribbon on the door; but she did remember to leave it propped, with one of the doorstops in the drawer of the hall table. She also bumped into the large bin of hand mirrors sitting just inside the door to the gallery. These were generally used to view the art over the shoulder, so visitors could see the pieces as they were originally created.

Being a jogger since grade school certainly came in handy as Em set off on a run down the long corridor of the gallery, which basically had no end; at least, no one had ever found one. Like the Weapons Room, the Realm of Septessence had the ability to expand itself, going on for miles and miles, which it basically needed to do to accommodate all of the new art being created in the world, as well as the old.

Calling to her friends the whole way, Em ran a full three miles before finding Pizzo, Heike, and the twins, all sitting together on the plinth of a statue and gazing hungrily at a painting of a bowl of fruit. So she had been right. The paintings were magical doorways, possibly only acting as such if brought to life by magic; but whatever the specifics, Em was overjoyed to see her tiny family members, now all running headlong towards her.

Piszo reached her first. Dropping to her knees, Em picked him up, kissing the top of her head, which he ordinarily wouldn't have liked but he barely noticed because he was so happy to see her, and anxious to hug her neck tightly. Em next picked up Heike who was hugging her left knee. The twins, climbing up the back of her shirt, reached her right shoulder in only a few seconds, where they pulled on her earlobe while giving her kisses on the cheek.

Even though she had just run a fair distance, the jog back to the doorway was no problem, the puck trolls enjoying the bouncing ride on her shoulders the whole way.

After removing the prop and closing the door, Em raced downstairs to the front lawn to the waiting Zapor, who was as overjoyed as his mistress to see the pucks, all safe and sound.

The sound part was debatable, at least to Piszo's way of thinking, not because of the ordeal with the hunter, but because of the food thing. Though puck trolls didn't need to eat people food, almost all of them did, and with gusto, so it had been very difficult to do without while trapped for nearly two weeks in the Art Gallery. The art had basically sustained them, though human goodness had been present too.

Piszo and Heike had recognized where they were. However, since the painting they had entered through didn't exist anymore, they knew they couldn't leave by the same route. In being reluctant to perform any magic inside the Realm of Septessence, because they knew it was not simply filled with art, but also with the mysterious magic that often surrounds art, they decided not to bring any of the other art to life as a means of trying to escape. Since they were safe, they were determined to wait until someone opened the door to the hall of the mezzanine. But they had prayed every day, several times a day, which was a kind of magic in and of itself, the best kind in fact because talking with God was always magical. Through prayer, Piszo had known in his heart that Em would be the one to eventually come for them. And the puck family hadn't been entirely alone because the family of rabbits from Gatu's painting had escaped too, and were now wandering the Art Gallery.

Zapor made it to Doyle Mansion in a flash, less than five minutes after leaving Netherwind.

In trying to explain to her astounded parents (who were in the middle of receiving a bunch of puck hugs and kisses) what had

happened, Em said, “The works in the Art Gallery are not just duplicates, but doorways too. I always assumed the art was in reverse because it was a reflection of what had been created in our realm. But each piece is also a doorway. Of course, they are probably not doorways unless brought to life by magic, like that of a puck troll; but I think the concept is probably true that anyone wandering far enough into art will end up in the Realm of Septessence, metaphorically, and I guess maybe literally too.”

Jenny was immediately informed and basically came flying across the street. What a joyous reunion for all!

While the pucks weren't noticeably any thinner, they ended up eating for about a week straight, just because they missed it so much. Em basically had to call in reinforcements because Doyle Mansion's garden and greenhouse came under terrific strain from this. Blessedly, Frank sent food from the farm, and Weatherly from the gardens at Laurelstone.

A party was held in Jenny's garden a week after the pucks' return, mainly because the topiaries wanted to celebrate. But it had to be a midnight party and kept kind of quiet so that the neighbors wouldn't notice, except that many neighbors already knew that magical things tended to happen on the grounds of both Doyle Mansion and the Galloway Estate.

Having a picnic on the back lawn of Doyle Mansion the day after the midnight party, Heike and Pizzo happened to notice a gnome surveying the gardens. He took a few notes before leaving, and especially took note of a huge dragonfly topiary, a little wooly looking and in need of a reshaping, but pretty spectacular nonetheless, as his notes would indicate. While none of the Scouts had met Jenny yet, they would the following month, which was when some of the work on the plantation topiaries was set to begin.

At the same time the Scout was admiring the dragonfly topiary, another gnome was visiting Wharton Farm, and taking lots of notes, about the barns, livestock, ponds, crops, greenhouses, and trees. Based on his favorable report, several Youngers would eventually come to live at the farm. And because gnomes could be just as clandestine in their activities as bigfoots, it would be some time before Charlie, Frank, or

anyone else would even notice. When they did finally notice, the humans were careful not to notice too much.

Chapter Seven

The Architect and the Cartographer

In recent years, many people had recognized a great need to find places of safety for God's children to hide from the growing malice directed at them by much of the world, some of it quite deadly in the form of strikes by demons, sorcerers, megahobs, and the like. (While Christians were still supposed to witness to others and model Christian behavior, they needed to be alive in order to do these things.)

Due to the new art laws and the zealots legally wielding blowtorches, paintings in which people were being hidden now needed to be hidden themselves. Some of this was accomplished by siting murals behind things such as large signs and billboards containing advertisements. Many people offered use of their basement walls, screening them off after the art was installed with a variety of things like sheets, boxes, and even other large paintings.

While hiding in art was useful, it generally only worked well on an emergency basis, and short term, which left many more people still in need of places of safety in which to live and work.

Otto, from very early age, had shown an extreme interest and talent in architecture, and was obviously gifted in this area, much in the same way that Em was wordsmith gifted; and he, like his sister, hadn't needed to touch the Gift Key in order to discover this. Growing up having contact with magicians, all of whom were basically scientists (albeit ones using magical gifts from God), he had learned to incorporate many of the magicians' secrets into his practice of architecture.

Triangles were the key to both making and unlocking doorways to other realms. Using the magic and science of triangles, magicians and architects of the past had created Netherwind's mezzanine with its twelve magical doorways. Magicians of old had also created the seven spheres, to which the Time Key and Gift Key belonged, with another of the family being the Realm Key, the sphere with the power to unlock

other realms, even ones containing great evil such as Demon Pockets. Magical doorways were generally located within triangles of some sort such as three roads forming a triangle, or sections of a fence, or even sometimes simply lines drawn on a floor. The Realm Key worked by manipulating energy running along the sides of a triangle, raising the energy from two dimensional (like flat lines drawn on paper) to three dimensional (the flat lines lifted from the paper to become a 3-D version with more lines added), then extending into higher dimensions. The energy raised formed complex lines that acted like the cuts of an elaborate key to unlock the realm to allow entry or exit.

Weatherly, with help from magicians, had managed to capture a sorcerer, who was currently confined in a holding cell based on triangles. While she would have liked to have gotten her hands on one each of the three types of sorcerer—conjurer, necromancer, and sorcerer in general—the one she had, of the general variety and most often called simply a sorcerer, was actually best for her purposes. Using the Mind Key to unlock his thoughts, and the Truth Key to see through deceptions, she had been able to learn some of the plans (past, present, and future) of the enemy, mainly relating to mimics and print doubles, though she had also learned a few things about demons, megahobs, and gremlins. While non-specialty sorcerers like this one were the most useful, because they generally held the most information, Weatherly still planned to try to capture a conjurer, to tap into his expertise in poisons for help in developing antidotes, and for making certain potions to use on the side of good. Likewise, learning some of the secrets of a necromancer, capable of communing with the dead to access knowledge and advice, might prove valuable, though Weatherly did occasionally herself have access to departed souls through use of the Garden of Stars.

The contained man was unlikely to escape his holding cell because the magic and science of triangles, being connected to the Trinity, had long confounded sorcerers. While doorways to the realms the sorcerers frequented and dominated (like Demon Pockets) were generally inside of triangles, access was most often provided to them by Satan and his fellow fallen angels, using magic based on Dark Energy. With Light Energy provided by God being the polar opposite, those on the side of evil were rarely able to make use of anything developed by magicians.

While Otto hadn't helped design the cell, he very much used the same science of magical triangles in his work, which began while he was in college, studying to be an architect. He frequented earthship communities, which were now starting to pop up many places in the U.S., and not just in desert regions as had been most common in the past. Using his gift, he was able to develop whole communities of pod homes built on triangles most often simply formed from stone footers or blocks. The magic of these homes was similar to that of the rooms on Netherwind's mezzanine in that they were capable of holding much more than the dimensions of the actual structures, which were each generally no larger than a squat tool shed that might perhaps hold a single push-type lawnmower. If the pods had been made by ordinary construction methods, the homes would not have even been large enough for a person to fully stand up inside; and many outsiders to the communities simply thought they were roomy doghouses or paddocks in which a couple of goats or sheep might take shelter from a storm. In order to perpetrate this deception, many pods were equipped with what appeared to be pet doors next to the small doors serving as people entrances.

Also similar to the rooms on the mezzanine was the fact that nonbelievers looking in wouldn't be able to see what was actually inside the homes. Expecting to see a small space containing tools, or a pile of straw that might serve as a bed or feed for an animal, this was what their eyes would perceive, instead of furniture and appliances filling large rooms that had hallways leading off to other living spaces. The pet doors served another function besides deception in that they were service entrances triangularly designed to expand in order to accommodate large items like beds and refrigerators. While based on triangles, and sited within triangles, the structures themselves were rarely triangular in shape, and thus were not obvious, as far as their appearance, as being magical pods.

Over the years, in addition to the homes, Otto had put his skills to good use in designing schools, libraries, grocery stores, and medical facilities situated on farms and ranches owned by people wishing to help shelter Christians. These properties often also housed large pod residential communities. Before her death, Aunt Fiona had bought tracts of land in twenty-seven states for the siting of safe communities.

She had also funded the start of a construction company for Otto, so that he might have the resources needed to complete these all-important projects.

Structures were not the only things Otto's skills could be applied to. Working with magicians, he was able to open pockets within the land, so that each acre could hold more, much more, than normal. By outward appearances, one of his earliest ventures, sited on a small farm in Idaho, looked like nothing more than forty-three acres about thirty of which held corn and oats, along with a handful of shed-like structures. Magical doorways on this farm allowed access to a pocket, basically a mini-realm that amounted to over five thousand acres of usable land, currently comfortably housing over seventeen thousand people who were growing more than enough food to sustain their community. Smaller endeavors were also thriving, such as one in Pennsylvania on merely five acres that was home to a pocket containing over twenty-two hundred people. Otto was currently building in Ohio, Nebraska, Wyoming, Georgia, and South Carolina, with an eye toward quickly moving on to New Mexico, Illinois, Indiana, West Virginia, and Connecticut. These were places that many thousands of Christians were going to be able to take refuge in. Being only in his mid-twenties, Otto's accomplishments were truly remarkable thus far, this being the result of putting a gift from God to good use.

We might note here that while these were pockets opened up within the land, they weren't actually under ground, being simply different realms, such as those on Netherwind's mezzanine.

The pockets inside basically held the same resources as the land outside—like rain, wildlife, good soil, and such—though much expanded. For example, the inside of the pocket on the five acres in Pennsylvania actually mapped out at just over seven hundred acres.

And speaking of maps, Otto often worked with a gifted sixteen-year-old cartographer to determine the best placement of the pockets, and to plat and survey the land in general. Isaac Downing had always loved drawing, but his gift had been revealed to him when he touched the Gift Key at age six. From that point on, without the use of complex instruments, he began making maps that were accurate to within just a few centimeters, doing so from perfect memory after simply having viewed once a landscape, a city, or even a water expanse.

Thanks to the efforts of Isaac and Otto, the Laurelstone and Netherwind plantations and schools were now much farther along than they would have been otherwise. Pockets were opened and structures were built, allowing many thousands to live on the properties. Unknown to outsiders, enrollment at the schools had recently topped four thousand. Most people living within the pockets held various necessary community jobs such as farming the land, helping to build new homes, manning medical clinics, maintaining structures and roads, running grocery stores, and teaching at the schools.

In addition to their endeavors above ground, Otto and Isaac had begun working under ground, making use of the many caverns in the area, particularly those connected to the Labyrinth Library by numerous networking tunnels, which Isaac had helped to map. Magical pockets opened within the caverns currently held most of Weatherly's military installations, housing training facilities and weapons storage. Otto often didn't need to design and build structures inside of these pockets because the caverns that were opened up were already suitable for military use, though a hospital and a Technology Lab had recently been built.

But getting back to the efforts above ground: Inside one of the pockets opened on the plantation, Otto found a huge surprise—a behemoth! What a lovely creature to find in a mini-realm. Of course, the realm wasn't actually all that mini; if it had been, the behemoth, whose back stood roughly fifty feet high, wouldn't have fit. No, this pocket was over sixty thousand acres in size, a perfect fit for the gentle giant, who seemed to love living there, especially when the people came. Not only did he like the company and the treats he was given, such as bales of hay and bushels of flowers, he also liked helping, mainly in the form of moving heavy things about, a great asset to construction crews, since bull dozers and cranes were somewhat hard to come by. He also had a knack for leveling the earth to get certain sites ready to build on, his gigantic hooves being perfectly suited for digging, scraping, smoothing, and moving boulders around.

Otto's favorite folklore characters growing up were Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox; and the behemoth, whose name was Lóhere, very much reminded him of Babe, except that the behemoth wasn't blue, and wasn't smooth in coat. Gray-hued and extremely wooly, Lóhere was

also likely larger than Babe, as well as stronger. Otto's reasoning for this was based on Lóhere exactly fitting the lengthy description of a behemoth in the bible, found in Job Chapter 40, particularly Verses 16-18. "Behold, his strength in his loins, and his power in the muscles of his belly. He makes his tail stiff like a cedar; the sinews of his thighs are knit together. His bones are tubes of bronze, his limbs like bars of iron." However, the strength assessment wasn't just based on description, but by observation—in watching Lóhere work. While bigfoots were incredibly strong, often individually able to move things weighing several tons, Otto thought a behemoth could likely balance a whole skyscraper on his nose. Not that this would ever be tested, because Otto would never design a skyscraper, based on his own personal belief that super-tall buildings were an affront to God. Nor would he ever go up into a skyscraper, if he could help it, because he believed they were just basically asking for God to strike them down.

Since childhood, Otto had found himself very taken with the parts of the bible describing such magical and majestic creatures as the behemoth. In fact, he dreamed of someday seeing a leviathan, described in Job Chapter 41 as being something like an enormous underwater dragon. And while Lóhere was the only behemoth they had found while opening pockets, Otto was always hopeful they would find more. He never stopped to ask himself why there was only one behemoth. The answer was pretty simple: Like many magical creatures, behemoths were shapeshifting, with most of them preferring to spend time looking exactly like ordinary cottontail rabbits. Since Lóhere shrunk himself on occasion, so that he could travel to help with work in various pockets, Otto should have been able to figure out fairly easily that there were many behemoths, but that most of them were extremely shy. The thought just never occurred to him, despite being good at thinking outside the box with regards to other things, like architecture.

Otto was also very taken with a wormlike creature called an oodu that he hadn't yet found a likeness to in the bible. This was a creature that liked to tunnel under ground, and could even tunnel through solid rock. Unlike the behemoth—who was singular to human awareness, for time being—there were many oodus, ranging in size when lying flat from as small as about waist-high on a person to about eight feet high for the largest of specimens. Like Lóhere, the oodus very much enjoyed

helping people, and liked the social contact with them, especially people who carried chunky crystals of rock salt in their pockets, the favorite treat of the oodus, who also enjoyed consuming some of the earth and rocks from their tunneling efforts. Also like the behemoth, the oodus were fairly wooly creatures with fur markings resembling the caterpillar of the monarch butterfly, but each different in pattern, since oodus were each unique creatures. Human beings couldn't distinguish eyes on the oodus; but they did have them, tiny ones, perched on top of two antennae.

The oodus had not only helped to expand the library and widen caverns to hold military facilities, their expert tunneling so far had connected a large network of caves under three states—Alabama, Mississippi, and Tennessee. While they hadn't yet reached Kentucky, Weatherly was sure they eventually would, to probably connect in some way with Mammoth Cave.

The smaller oodus liked to carry people, which was often how those needing to travel long distances between facilities reached their destinations; and their speed was quite remarkable at around 45mph tops. Several also worked in the Labyrinth Library, itself spanning many miles, giving people rides to find books they were looking for. One particular oodu, named Lyuk, had befriended Isaac; and this was how much of the mapping of the library, caverns, and tunnels had been done—from Lyuk's back.

Like Otto, Professor Fulhausen was also very taken with the behemoth and the oodus. He had lived and taught at the schools for nearly a decade, wanting to stay close to the plantations for several reasons, one being that he liked teaching in a Christian atmosphere. Another reason had to do with his lifelong love of firebirds. With both Sam and Ben making the plantations their home, Beme and Jelzey were frequently around. But perhaps the most important reason was to stay close to Vini, Ben, and Samantha. Professor Fulhausen, as Protector of Dragons, knew something no other human beings currently knew—that Samantha in the future would give birth to his replacement. At that time, he would be able to stop taking the elixir that kept him from aging, one he had been taking for many decades while waiting to train the new Protector of Dragons. He was more than ready to start aging again. Having stopped counting birthdays at age one hundred and five,

he was rather anxious to be getting closer to the time he would be with God, rather than staying on earth for so long.

On the same day and right around the same time that Em was bringing Pizzo, Heike, and the twins home from the Art Gallery, an oodu was taking Professor Fulhausen through tunnels and caverns to Mississippi, to a special inn designed by Otto. The professor was carrying a large crate of books with him because the inn had a large underground library of its own, one that the Labyrinth Library often shared books with. The oodu didn't mind heavy loads; in fact, he was kind of wondering why he wasn't carrying six more crates of books, since he could travel just as fast with that many lined up on his back. But, whatever; it wasn't up to him to judge what things humans wanted to cart around.

From the outside, the Inn at Magnolia Hills looked like a small bed and breakfast, and was advertised as having six rooms for let, with a maximum capacity of twenty-two people, based on numbers of beds and square footage. However, inside, the inn actually housed some eight hundred people, and quite a few pets. Situated on three acres, the grounds of the inn held a pocket of ninety-seven acres in which food was grown for the residents of the Inn at Magnolia Hills. Otto had designed the inn not just as a place of refuge for persons being persecuted, but for some very special other occupants, which we'll get to a little later in our story.

Coincidentally, Charlie and Tobin—along with the very squirmy and yappy Rang-Rang who didn't travel well in a car—were heading for the inn at the same time as Professor Fulhausen. They had left Uncle Walter's house in Missouri that morning. Based on a vision Charlie had had at her uncle's house, they were backtracking to Mississippi before heading up to Kentucky because they needed to meet up with someone staying at the inn.

Rang-Rang ceased squirming and yapping upon receiving a sharp reprimand from Charlie who, in addition to being annoyed at her beloved pet's antics, was a little more somber than normal based on the lack of success of her visit to her uncle. They had stayed slightly longer than intended, nearly three weeks, to help with a few home repairs and in order to take Uncle Walter to a couple of doctor's appointments. This gave Charlie many opportunities to witness to her uncle. Sadly, he

hadn't wanted anything to do with God's offer of Salvation. Bitter and resentful, he expressed that he felt cheated by life, particularly at the long struggle he'd had with Dana, and by her death. While Charlie hadn't brought up anything about Dana's upbringing, it was obvious from conversation that her uncle was unable to look at all objectively at his parenting—at how he hadn't taught Dana anything morally good, and how he had basically let her get away with murder, in a figurative sense, from an early age, which was probably why she thought she could get away with literal murder too later on.

What ended the intermittent discussion was her uncle saying loudly and with finality, "Enough already! I'm not interested at all in God, or in this Jesus character! You can just keep all of that!"

"Well," Charlie responded, with a sorrowful sigh, "if you want to talk, remember I'm available."

"I would like to talk sometimes," Uncle Walter replied, softening his tone slightly, "but I don't want to hear any more about God and Jesus, or about getting saved, or eternal life. Or about how the rest of my life can be better if I just invite Jesus into my heart."

"I'm sorry, but I won't be able to help bringing all of that it up, and more," Charlie answered. "It's who I am. It's a part of me that I can't deny or ignore or keep to myself. It's all real. Jesus saved me, and He can save you too, if you'll let Him. I am very sorry that Dana didn't make it, that she ended up lost, but it doesn't have to happen to you."

Tobin hadn't much been a part of any of the discussions during the visit, instead concentrating on doing schoolwork to stay caught up with his classes, and leaving the witnessing and persuading to his mother. But while giving his great-uncle a parting hug, he did say, "Uncle Walter, Jesus is the answer to everything. I'm sure of it. If you'd just give Him a chance, I know you won't regret it."

Charlie often chose backroads when traveling. The traffic was less, sometimes nonexistent, and the peacefulness made her feel safe, as though the way might be less traversed by demons, sorcerers, and such. However, she was about to discover that the road less traveled isn't necessarily any safer than busier routes.

They had stopped at a roadside picnic spot in one of the sections of the Mark Twain National Forest to have lunch, and were just cleaning up after. While putting Rang-Rang back into the car, Charlie heard loud

noises of crashing about and branches snapping, along with the rushing and stomping of heavy footsteps. As her eyes flew to the picnic spot about thirty yards from the car, where Tobin had been packing up the hamper, she saw two megahobs emerging from the trees just beyond the picnic tables, and closing fast on her son's position. They were enormous, lumpy, grayish-green beasts with orange spectral eyes, great claws and fangs, and bristly hair growing in splotches over their bodies and coming out of their pointy ears in gnarled tufts.

Quickly upturning the picnic table to slow the advance of the beasts, as he grabbed the flute on his belt, Tobin yelled, "Just stay down, Mom!"

Charlie had been scrambling with the blue rope she was wearing crossways from shoulder to waist (like how some people carry long-handled purses); but she stopped scrambling and ducked down as directed, in knowing Tobin's skills in battle were far superior to hers.

Crouching behind the car was not necessarily protection from the megahobs, if they happened to get past Tobin, but more from the danger of the blasts of energy from the flute, which weren't long in coming.

While the instrument held only a small amount of charge (because it was not safe to store up too much), with only a few sweeping balletic arm movements and one small leap, Tobin was very quickly able to capture enough wind to do battle. And although flutes didn't emit the intense light and heat that mirror weapons tended to produce, or the sparks and flames the color ropes often gave off, music weapons were nonetheless incredibly powerful, like something akin to a windstorm, but controlled, and with energy generated from music added to the wind, as though an intensely reverberating concert might be going on in the background of the storm.

Sneaking peeks over the hood of the car, Charlie could see that Tobin had things well in hand. Indeed, both megahobs had already suffered crippling injuries, the smaller of the two to the point of falling over from deep gashes to his legs that might have been made from an enormous bayonet. Charlie couldn't help but admire the graceful, twirler-like movements her son was performing with the flute. If she had had to briefly describe the fight—which might have been easily confused for a dance if it hadn't been obvious that Tobin was facing-off with two monsters—she would have simply said, "A warrior's ballet."

In addition to his limbs and torso, Tobin's fingers were doing a dance of their own on the flute to produce the various musical blasts he was expertly directing at his opponents.

Charlie was very thankful she had ducked down because several of the discharges were forceful enough to actually rock the car in which Rang-Rang was going absolutely berserk. Charlie was also very glad she had already gotten the dog into the car. What a distraction she would have been in the midst of the fray; in trying to protect Tobin, Rang-Rang's well-meaning efforts would have been practically useless against two megahobs.

Tobin suffered no strikes from the beasts' claws during the fight because the pair never managed to get close enough to reach him, though he did end up with a bruised arm and hip, and a scratched-up cheek, from branches thrown at him by the creatures that made contact.

What seemed like about twenty minutes to Charlie was actually only a little over three until the battle was over, and all that was left of the megahobs was two small piles of slimy-looking sludge. Like many unearthly creatures, they weren't made of much substance, just a lot of evil energy mixed with a few other foul components that their creators—namely Satan, his fellow fallen angels, and sorcerers—had seen fit to endow them with.

Charlie was shaking slightly from the intensity of the experience, but she actually hadn't been all that worried. While she and Frank had never done much weapons training, both of their kids were highly skilled, Tobin in flutes and Mira with ropes.

Other than slightly out of breath from the exertion, Tobin was unfazed; he had been trained for this type of encounter, so it was no big deal. After receiving a hug from his relieved mother, he quickly righted the picnic table and helped to gather the hamper and its contents that had been scattered in the fray.

Charlie calmed fairly quickly as they drove away from the picnic spot. In truth, it was no big deal for her either; she had, after all, survived a great many attacks over the years, largely due to Lyydu saving her.

He hadn't been around during the megahob incident for a very good reason. With his protection duties spread over all of Charlie's family and the farm, his attentions were often split; and on this day, at the exact

moment of the megahob attack, a carefully-timed move by Boko using a poppy seed was taking place on the farm—that of a sorcerer setting fire to one of the barns. (In an earlier move involving two cantaloupe seeds, Boko had also set up the placement of the megahobs.) For over twenty years, the farm had been doing much good in the area, not only in the form of donations to food banks in several communities, and supplying the soup kitchen, but also in providing jobs both on the farm and in the café and restaurant; and the sorcerers, even aside from Boko's influences, were always trying to do away with anything good in the world that might give people hope.

As a countermove, in the form of a dill seed which Lyydu inhaled, Etowa had determined the thunderbird's location as that of the farm. Although Lyydu might have wanted to check on Charlie, Tobin, and Mischief (his private nickname for Rang-Rang), he had felt very strongly a need to stay near the farm during the midday. He had also felt a craving for dill pickles, which he had chosen to ignore, since certain other matters were pressing.

Producing a small cloudburst and adding wind to direct the water, which was the equivalent of using a super-powered fire hose, the barn fire had been easy for Lyydu to put out before it got out of control. Indeed, only about twenty bales of hay were burned, along with a mere four bags of feed.

Steady, beneficial rain was also easy for Lyydu to produce; and he occasionally did so, with God's approval, during times of drought in order to supply water not only to the farm, but also to Netherwind, Laurelstone, Doyle Mansion, and the Galloway Estate, all of which had long grown food for local food banks, currently set up in churches because the sorcerers had taken over most of the other ones in an attempt to deny Christians in need access to food. They had even taken to forcing many people to renounce Christ in order to receive help.

The church food banks, farm, and Charlie's soup kitchen never denied food to anyone, non-believers being more than welcome. However, anyone receiving help was told that God had provided the food for them, which served to bring many people to Christ over the years.

Beme happened to be in the area during the time of the barn fire. Always incensed at people who dared to misuse fire, he basically

couldn't resist setting fire to the empty car the sorcerer had been riding in. All it took was a tiny fireball to make the car burst into flames just before the sorcerer reached it in his attempt to escape the scene quickly. This forced the evil man to walk about seven miles before he was able to catch a ride with one of the hunters under his direction.

Otto and Isaac had recently been working with church organizations, opening up pockets and building various structures, in order to help churches make the best use of their properties. On the drive to the inn, Charlie actually passed a greenhouse on the grounds of a church that was a duplicate of one constructed at Netherwind. Seemingly small on the outside, the greenhouse spanned over a thousand acres inside, and held a large safe house underneath it in which people could hide.

Charlie could sense Lydu overhead for the last hour of the trip, which allowed her to relax, though her mind was still on her mission. What she was meant to find in Kentucky was still fuzzy as far as her visions—involving a river and an odd-looking bridge, one unlike any she had ever seen before. But the mystery of the bridge would keep because she needed to go to the inn in Mississippi first. And the vision relating to the inn was clearer, in the form of a very strong picture in her head of the girl she was supposed to meet. *So even though I don't yet know her name, Charlie thought, I'll recognize her when I see her.*

Chapter Eight

Then Beggars Would Ride

While the magicians living on the plantations sometimes traveled, they did so sparingly, preferring for the most part to spend time doing research in the Magicians' Lab. And while it was plenty large enough, as of late, Mr. P had been spending a good deal of time in the recently-constructed underground Technology Lab, where something quite exciting had just happened.

With help from Mr. P, a scientist named Jeff Bugle, most often called Jitterbug, had just managed to duplicate the motorized air bike Kip had acquired as a youth while time traveling. Foldable to the size and shape of a small cube, the bike could easily be held in one hand, or fit into a largish jacket pocket.

Jeff had been called Jitterbug since his youth, but he might as well have been called Ladybug for as red as his hair and beard were. Though not a magician, he was a master of machinery, mostly vehicles, but also weapons; and he had been instrumental in making improvements to music and mirror weapons in recent years, particularly in the area of energy storage.

Also present in the lab was seven-year-old Marlon Hornbuckle, Mr. P's most recent protégé who had also helped in duplicating the bike. The three were now celebrating by consuming a large box of peppermint bark while having root beer floats.

"Weird," Mr. P remarked, of Marlon requesting his float be made with chocolate ice cream and cola instead of vanilla ice cream and root beer. (What most people would have considered even weirder was that it was only seven-thirty in the morning, a time much too early for either peppermint bark or any kind of ice cream floats.)

"Yep, weird," Marlon answered, "just like you putting mayonnaise on your French fries."

"That's a lot more common than having a cola float with chocolate ice cream," Mr. P responded with a large smile.

“To each his own,” Marlon said, smiling back.

Even aside from quirks like food preferences, the older magicians generally thought Marlon pretty well batty, as his methods were very often unusual. But since his ideas were so fresh and innovative, they quite enjoyed working with him, particularly because they hadn’t found very many youngsters lately destined by God to become magicians. Plus, he had good energy, which was a quality needed for success as a magician.

Jitterbug was shaking his head while laughing as he said, “So the bikes were not based on triangles at all, but circles.”

“But still with three sides,” Mr. P responded.

“Well...duh,” Jitterbug said, as though there was never any doubt about this. “There has to be three sides; anything with a magical component still has to be connected to the Trinity.”

Mr. P was also shaking his head. “Circles...who would have thought?”

“I would have,” Marlon grumbled, “if you had let me get involved sooner.”

This was true, and very exciting to Mr. P in particular, mainly Marlon’s ways of thinking, in the form of specific brain calculations that often led him in odd directions, but ones proven to produce success. The youngster was definitely using more of his brain than most humans.

“We’d better set two hundred as a safety guideline for speed,” Jitterbug recommended.

“Yes...that sounds good,” Mr. P, contemplating, answered.

A few moments later, after crunching and swallowing a huge hunk of peppermint bark, Marlon was still inclined to complain. “I should be more than just an errand boy.” While making faces to imitate his mentors, he added rather sarcastically, “Marlon, fetch me some pretzels...wash out that tub...pick up that rag....”

“You’re right,” Mr. P good-naturedly agreed. “From now on, we’ll let you be more involved, as long as you don’t neglect your schoolwork.”

“Speaking of which,” Jitterbug interjected, “get that chocolate ice cream washed off of your face and get yourself up to your English Class. I’ve already had enough scolding from Ms. Lopez about you being late to her class to last me a lifetime.”

Soon after Marlon left, Mr. P, still contemplating, said, “Make it two-twenty for the speed. We need to be able to outrace flying demons. They can fly much faster than they can run.”

“True, and not everyone has access to creatures like wind horses,” Jitterbug answered.

“Not right now...” Mr. P slowly mused, “...but maybe in the future. If we can turn more people to good, there should be plenty of food, and more magical creatures.”

“Let’s get back down to earth, and back to the present,” Jitterbug halfway scolded. “There’s important work to be done in the here and now.”

Jitterbug had lately been working on better designs for wheelchairs. In having had a lot to do with the hippotherapy program over the years—since taking up residence in one of the pocket communities at Laurelstone about ten years previous—he very much wanted to help people with disabilities. The breakthrough with the air bike was just what was needed, a missing piece of the puzzle. With it, he was confident he could now design wheelchairs that were floating and foldable, just like the bike. “They might not be called wheelchairs anymore,” he speculated, “without traditional wheels.”

“Oh, they’ll still call them that,” Mr. P countered. “The wind wheels are still wheels, even if they aren’t made of rubber and don’t touch the ground.”

Aside from working on improving designs of wheelchairs, Jitterbug was excited about making more bikes. Since many traditional mechanical things weren’t likely going to work in the future, he was fairly certain that something like this—having very few moving parts and made of very little earthly material—probably would. But before getting back to work, he made a slight adjustment to the controls of one of the heliostats responsible for bringing sunlight into the underground chambers. The automation of the one supplying the Technology Lab with light had been sluggish of late. The adjustment helped, but not as much as he might have liked. *Bother*, he thought. *I’ll have to go above ground to see to it.*

But, in fact, it actually wasn’t a bother because, for as much as he liked being a lab hermit, Jitterbug had to admit he enjoyed going up once in a while, mainly to visit the horses on the plantation...and the

peafowl, if they happened to be around. Though the flocks weren't friendly like the horses were, he enjoyed watching them, particularly in knowing they were godly creatures.

To outsiders, the heliostats were magically camouflaged to look like squat trees, so that sorcerers and other unfriendlies wouldn't suspect underground operations. In the afternoon, making an adjustment to the one serving the lab, Jitterbug not only took the time to watch a flock of peafowl stroll and strut around, he also visited the stables where Vini was conducting her hippotherapy program, which ran a full six days each week.

Hippotherapy was called equine therapy in a lot of places; but Vini preferred the term, hippotherapy, since she had basically grown up with it. Her program was simply called Laurelstone Hippotherapy; and she had received much help in setting it up from her former mentor, May Burberry, who still ran her own program and summer camp, though not in competition with Vini because the area badly needed the extra services. With Camp Burberry Wiffle often having to turn away people, May was thrilled to have a place to send the overflow, especially folks living closer to Laurelstone, which was nearly sixty miles from the camp.

In addition to the program, Vini was also focused on a problem pertaining to the future—that of transportation since she, like Jitterbug, was fairly certain that things like cars, trains, and planes were not going to work. However, her efforts had nothing to do with air bikes; instead, she was spearheading a large project to raise horses, currently over two thousand, with an eye toward doubling the number in the next ten years or so.

Otto had helped with getting things set up by opening a pocket within a pocket. While he was undoubtedly talented, in order to see through the maze of triangles needed to access the deeper pocket, Otto had needed the help of Mr. P using the Mage Key, a tool often used by magicians for complex magical processes, to ensure clarity of vision, and success. The project ended up being called Double P, short for Pocket-in-Pocket, though Mr. P ended up jokingly telling a few people that the P stood for his name, and that two of them together meant he had been doubly helpful. Vini was about to start working with Otto on similar projects in Kentucky and Wyoming.

At the same time Jitterbug was making the heliostat adjustment, Vini and Samantha were heading out to visit Double P. Tulko and Dara accompanied the pair through the double doorway, which, from the outside, looked like nothing more than a large manger situated on the edge of a pear orchard on the plantation. Even though the wind horses spent a great deal of time with the forty-five horses involved in the hippotherapy program, they were thrilled to get to visit with even greater numbers of regular horses. Frolicking about with a herd of Appaloosas, Dara and Tulko looked like colorful wind ribbons, scrolling and winding themselves around the spotted horses, as though they might be wrapping then unwrapping presents.

Samantha was coming with her mother not just to see the horses, but also to give Chelsea a bag of clothing. (The girls were about the same size, and Samantha loved to share.) After staying a couple of weeks at Laurelstone, Chelsea and Gavin had decided they would go to Kivetel for a time, as a safe haven and to receive weapons training. But before doing so, because they both liked horses, they had asked to spend some time in Double P. They were living in an apartment building that basically served as a bunkhouse for those caring for the horses. Among the residents was a retired teacher, a widow named Mrs. Dearing who, in addition to sharing her apartment with the Diamond Girl and Sapphire Boy, was acting as a governess to them.

Vini and Samantha didn't stay as long in the pocket as they might have on other days because they were expected for dinner at Vini's mom's house. Samantha was anxious to see her grandmother, who still lived down the street from Doyle Mansion, though Mrs. Aberdeen was thinking of coming to live at the plantations, due to her house feeling quite empty since Mr. Aberdeen had passed away. Ben was going too, as well as his uncle who lived and worked in one of the pockets on the plantation.

Double P had another visitor on this day, one the humans in the pocket were unaware of. And while Dara and Tulko could sense the watchman, they couldn't see him, because angels generally chose to operate clandestinely, masking their true brilliance and splendor when in the presence of other creatures.

While angels often acted as protectors, the visit to the pocket on this day was more for fun than business, to see the horses and gauge the

progress of the project; though this particular watchman had several times over the years acted as protector for Vini when Tulko was not around, particularly before she learned to call unicorns, which she did sparingly (as she ought and as God knew she would) in having the correct understanding that they wouldn't have enough to eat if she called them too often. But that was all about to change. In fact, the entire Heavenly Host was set to celebrate because the person who would be able to overproduce human goodness would very shortly be born, in just under a decade's time; the term "very shortly" being correct because a decade, after all, is but a mere blink to an angel.

The angels were ready for a celebration. In truth, they tended to keep very busy, watching over many of God's children, though they never intervened unless absolutely necessary. One had kept watch over Em on her trip to Sweden and Canada, and had chosen not to act in any regard; though if Weatherly hadn't shown up to help Em, the watchman certainly would have taken steps to protect her because it was not yet her time to go. She still had things to complete before meeting the Father. Another angel had been nearby when the megahobs attacked Tobin and Charlie. He too hadn't needed to take action, but he kept watch because he might someday.

Jitterbug worked late into the night, grumbling a bit because it was his firm opinion that gifted people should have already made great progress in designing things like better wheelchairs. Sadly, people over the years had put their talents, time, and resources into designing and building faster racecars, boats, and other toys, rather than working on something for the greater good. *What a waste.*

Aside from wheelchairs, which Jitterbug had firmly decided he would call airchairs, he was working on duplicating some of Kivetel's message kites for use here. Weatherly had already expressed that she needed a better way to send messages, since the current phone systems were easily monitored by sorcerers and their followers, and because the time and energies of gryphons, wind horses, and such needed to be put to better use than as message couriers.

Mr. P had suggested putting Marlon on the kite project, which was probably a good idea. *He might be just the ticket*, Jitterbug thought.

This would turn out to be so; Marlon would be just the ticket to the courier issue; and in a mere four years' time, he would not only design

fabulous message kites, but also discover a magical bird that liked to carry messages, a creature previously unknown to human beings. The dawn pigeon would be named so for two reasons: one because they often timed their journeys to arrive at their destinations exactly at dawn, and the other because of their coloring, which resembled the lovely orange, pink, gold, and soft purple hues of many gorgeous sunrises. Marlon first encountered a dawn pigeon while testing a message kite, the tail of which the bird seemed to want to chase. In truth, the pigeon thought the human wanted to play with him, so he had simply been obliging the young magician.

Roughly the size of a largish mourning dove, dawn pigeons flew constantly, never needing to rest; and their speed was roughly five times as fast as any kestrel, which made them ideal to carry messages over long distances. Subsisting entirely on human goodness, and scorning things like bugs and seeds, the only time the birds ever stopped flying was to take a bath, something they generally did immediately after making a delivery, and before taking to the skies again to hover and await the next message they were meant to carry. Though message kites ended up being much more plentiful than dawn pigeons, and nearly as fast, many people preferred using pigeons because they were more reliable. One reason for this was because the birds could think their way out of difficult situations, such as when encountering obstacles or getting caught in storms; another reason being that, like thunderbirds, they could become invisible if they needed to.

On the subject of creatures unknown to humans, roughly six months before the air bike was successfully duplicated, the sorcerers completed work on a beast that would end up being the answer to their own transportation problem in the future. An animalistic version of a demon, the nyreg was nearly as large as a horse, and much faster, being partly based on the genes of the albino puma. Also, being part demon and part rhazin bat, the creature could both shapeshift and fly. Already, thousands of nyregs were in production, with many more planned.

But back to the subject of kites, Marlon taking over the project allowed Jitterbug and Mr. P to concentrate on making weapons of greater varieties, mainly with regard to shapes and sizes. As they had been in Kivetel, color weapons were expanded to more than just ropes, with some resembling and being worn as headscarves and men's ties.

Mirrors that looked exactly like make-up compacts were developed so that women could easily carry them in pockets or purses. Flutes were designed to be worn as belt buckles, brooches, and even hair barrettes.

While he made the weapons out of necessity, Jitterbug preferred to work on the air bikes, which he did, making whole fleets of them. Oddly enough, the person who invented the first air bike (a woman) also had red hair, and lots of it. But she had figured out the original design not by her wits or skills, but because a genie had granted her a wish. Though genies rarely granted wishes, one gifted with a vision of the future had decided to do so in this case.

As far as Jitterbug perfecting the duplication, while the consuming of trash as fuel was easy to work out, the speed was not. Early prototypes were slower than expected, one-eighty tops, probably due to atmospheric properties here being slightly different than wherever the bike had originated from, which wasn't exactly clear, since the Time Key Travelers on that day hadn't asked or been told exactly where they had traveled to, likely another realm, by Jitterbug's estimation. With another ten years of work, he did eventually work out the speed thing, with the max being two-twenty, as he had hoped.

Chapter Nine

The Inn at Magnolia Hills

Professor Fulhausen was playing with Rang-Rang to keep her out of trouble while Charlie somewhat hastily packed up the car. The poodle had made quite an impression while at the inn for the past week and a half, mostly by getting into a good deal of mischief in the kitchens and the rose garden.

Oddly enough, Charlie was heading back to her uncle's home in Missouri before continuing on to Kentucky, this being due to a vision, and also having to do with the girl she had come to the inn to meet, a gifted fifteen-year-old named Trista Feldman who possessed the ability to prevent nearly anyone from committing suicide. Trista was one who hadn't needed to touch the Gift Key in order to recognize her gift, at age six, which was about two years before she came to live at the inn owned by her Aunt Leona who became her guardian. Trista's parents, who had never been able to look after her properly, both died a year later in a car accident caused by her father's drunk driving.

Charlie's vision had revealed to her that her Uncle Walter was about to attempt suicide, in two days' time, and Trista was going with her back to Missouri to help prevent this. Since the drive to his house would only take a day, Charlie didn't ask Lydy to take them. In addition to having a full day of leeway, Charlie felt the time in the car would give her a chance to get to know Trista better.

Trista's aunt, Leona Hempstead, was herself gifted; and she specifically ran the Inn at Magnolia Hills as a gathering spot and safe haven for other gifted people, mostly ones having the same gift as she—that of possessing perfect memory, which was often called eidetic. This was a gift very like that of Isaac's, but with regards to words as opposed to geographic details; and while the perfect memory mainly pertained to the written word, some eidetic people did have exact recall simply from hearing the words.

The library built into the maze of caverns and tunnels underneath the inn was called the Magnolia Archive, and was nearly as large as the Labyrinth Library. Although situated in different states, being connected by underground tunnels made it easy for the two libraries to share books. Mr. Michaels, not quite three years previous, had helped to arrange the exchange program. Though the Labyrinth Library contained enough books to satisfy him for the remainder of his lifetime, he definitely saw the advantage of the schools having access to more materials, which would also be valuable to magicians and others, such as Vini, who still regularly did research on magical creatures, objects, events, etc.

As Charlie was checking out of the inn, Em was checking in, and planning to stay probably a week or so to reference some of the Magnolia Archive's books. Instead of driving or having Zapor bring her, she had come through the tunnel system riding on an oodu, much as Professor Fulhausen had. In addition to researching, she was planning to work on another draft of the play she had started while at the cabin, called *Crimson Damsel*. In addition to the "hellfire is real" theme, the play had been expanded to include the story of Christ worked into it, though in a hidden way. (The crimson damsel itself represented the blood of Christ.) There was even a camouflaged altar call woven into the play, in the form of an audience-participation segment, so that people could officially and publically surrender their lives to Christ and be saved, although most would do so unknowingly. The deception was fine with Em; the more people she could save from hellfire, the better. God's children were, after all, in a time of war, and needed to use whatever strategies they could to both survive and save others. While people might ordinarily be given the conscious choice to either accept or reject Christ, in times as desperate as these, most Christians felt it was okay to force the issue. Since this basically converted people against their will, some might have wanted to cry, "Underhanded and unfair!" But in truth, this was basically only unfair to Satan and his followers; and since they were the cause of a lot of the unfairness in the world, Em and many others felt justified in trying to even things out somewhat.

During the third act of each show, eight audience members were chosen to come onto the stage and take seats for a train ride, during

which, the impromptu participants delivered two lines each. Based on the power of the words, and the ride, which took place on a very narrow path, all people boarding the train would come to know Christ within their lifetimes. The show would also help quite a few other audience members turn away from the path to hell during the course of their lives. And it would be twenty-two years before the sorcerers would put two and two together and stop the play. By that time, *Crimson Damsel* had already helped over sixty thousand people to take the narrow path, the one to heaven and not to hell.

“The sorcerers are so amazingly dense, like a lot of Satan’s servants,” Em would tell Zapor at the time the play was officially banned. It seemed a little strange to her that it took twenty-two years for the sorcerers to work out what was hidden in the play. After all, the very first time *Crimson Damsel* was performed, the program included a copy of one of her poems, one that should have given the whole show away, but didn’t for some reason.

The Narrow Path

Alone on a narrow footpath winding through a great wood,
Why no others were there I never fully understood.
But the trail was rather rough, leaving some hikers shaken;
For certain, the wider path was easier when taken.
I had picked this way because my soul was ever yearning
To take the path away from the pit endlessly burning.
My progress was slow from the burdens I chose to carry;
Holding on to certain things was causing me to tarry.
So I finally shed my pack of selfishness and pride,
The one that was causing me to list greatly to one side.
While the weight was much better, my way was still rather slow;
The heavy purse of greed and guilt would also have to go.
Through tangles of ivy, sharp thorns, and a prickly bramble,
With many trips and slips and scrapes, along I did ramble.
Farther on the trail, over a chasm I had to leap,
I shed a sack of envy because the landing was steep.
Over a creek on a suspension bridge the wind made sway,
I decided to toss my big bag of anger away.
On the next part of the path, I was greatly helped along
By the soft sound of rustling leaves and sweet lilting birdsong.
I lastly shed the burden of dependence on myself,

Setting the huge suitcase down on an empty forest shelf.
With the bag gone, I was able to walk a path most straight,
Toward a radiant and tall, though somewhat narrow, gate.
But having just shed so much bulk, I easily fit through,
And was happy to have made it, feeling quite fresh and new.
Inside, I discovered a place in which great hope surrounds,
And found what I was looking for where endless love abounds.
Taking the narrow path was the only sane way to go,
To avoid the lake of fire ever burning far below.
Inside the gate, everyone was wealthy, famous, and free.
This was no surprise; it was simply the way all should be.
Looking back at the deserted path, I felt some despair
Until I saw a lone figure toss a pack through the air.
As I sent a small measure of the hope and love his way,
He quickly reached the gate and told me that I made his day.
I wished to help more, but we must each on our own decide,
To take the narrow footpath, or the one that's smooth and wide.

A quote from the bible was also listed in the program, Matthew 7:13-14. “Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few.”

While the banning of *Crimson Damsel* was still over two decades away, *Graham Rumpole* had just been outlawed, mainly due to well-circulated propaganda from sorcerers that it “promoted terrorism” and was “detrimental to a peaceful society” based on certain things hidden in it.

But we needn't worry because the prize-winning book was already being memorized at the inn by several of the gifted residents, a fact Leona made sure to tell Em about. However, the innkeeper didn't share that others around the world were doing the exact same thing, at a few other places where eidetic people liked to hang out, such as in an old abbey in England, and at a lodge situated near a certain large lake in Central America. Leona didn't share this information because she didn't want to give away the whereabouts of gifted people, especially those collecting themselves into groups. No, it wouldn't be good to advertise this because it might make them easy targets for Satan and his followers.

At the inn, there was safety in the caverns and tunnels, especially because the oodus were unlikely to stand for any shenanigans from evil invaders. It wouldn't be easy to damage a creature that liked to eat rocks for pleasure as well as work. With regard to additional safety, genies frequented the library tunnels; and they also were not likely to stand for anything cooked up by the likes of sorcerers or demons. Genies possessed a secret magic that was very powerful, so much so that they often chose to limit their use of it; hence, their granting of wishes either infrequently or not at all. However, they didn't feel using their lesser magic was a problem, especially for good causes and under specific direction from God. Under His orders, they were reproducing a good many books, particularly banned ones, so that there would be plenty of copies for future generations, who would still very much need traditionally-printed paper books, since most hi-tech devices were not going to work closer to the Endtimes, no matter how improved. Ones not damaged or destroyed by gremlins would succumb to high-powered devices called magnetism mixers, developed by the sorcerers to disrupt even the most heavily shielded of electronics. Genie bookwrights were teaching their craft to certain people, who were using bamboo paper to print the books. The schools and plantations were also making use of bamboo—grown in vast quantities inside several large pockets—not only for paper, but also for furniture, flooring, and even for making things like bicycle frames, kitchenware, tool handles, blankets, pillows, toothbrushes, and all sorts of other useful items.

In addition to memorizing books, some of the eidetic people worked as librarians, their perfect memories being a great help with so many books to manage. But many of the inn's gifted residents chose to travel, some to collect more books for the Magnolia Archive, and others to visit places such as nursing homes and hospitals in order to act as living books, to recite parts of the bible and other banned books to the residents of these facilities. And while they didn't force anything down anyone's throat in these places, they did witness, being under orders to do so, not only in following the Great Commission, but also in often hearing from God directly or being led by the Holy Spirit. Some of the gifted also chose to spend time witnessing on college campuses, specifically ones that had banned bibles entirely.

Rookhs had recently developed an interest in helping eidetic people with their travels, carrying them quite speedily to various locations, as well as whisking them away from the danger that sometimes presented itself, such as on college campuses, currently dominated by atheists, as well as mimics and other demons. Demon-possessed people thrived at colleges and universities because students, along with a good number of professors, were more susceptible to possession than average human beings. The reason for this was rooted in their opinions of themselves as compared to others. While believing themselves to be liberated in their thinking, they were actually incredibly limited in this regard, the exact opposite of the completely unlimited nature of Christian thinking. There are no limits to God, and what He is capable of achieving in us and through us.

As far as the rookhs, these magnificent magical blackbirds had once only lived in Kivetel. But several came to our world on a visit one day, using a doorway that was larger than the one on Netherwind's mezzanine or the one in Heritage Oak. Situated deep in an Oregon forest, the doorway was one of four large enough to accommodate something roughly the size of a school bus, the other three being in South Dakota, Russia, and Australia. Deciding they quite liked this place, the rookhs spread out, befriending many creatures, especially bigfoots, whom the rookhs decided they liked to give rides to. Through the vast bigfoot community, the rookhs had then learned to befriend certain human beings, specifically those working to battle the growing evil in our world, which was why a whole flock of rookhs was at the disposal of those living at the inn and at the twin plantations. While rookhs couldn't become invisible like thunderbirds, they did possess excellent camouflage skills, very like those of bigfoots. On the ground, they often resembled large stones or leafy shrubs. In the air, the birds might look like simply patches of clouds or blue sky. Also, like some of the oldest people of Kivetel, rookhs had almost no shadow, which meant that even flights in broad daylight could be incredibly clandestine. Their natural appearance presented an enigma as far as why they were so dark, though some speculated that the birds might somehow be able to absorb their own shadows.

Like many magical creatures, rookhs fed on human goodness, which was why some had to return to Kivetel occasionally, when food

in our realm was running low. But going back and forth was little problem, and the issue of the scarcity of food was about to be no problem at all. Yes, the heavenly celebration was set to begin very soon, and would be a lengthy one (by our standards), lasting a full decade, starting five years before the birth of the gifted boy, Chase Linn, and continuing on to his fifth birthday. Blessedly, Chase's gift would not be one that would need discovering or take any time to develop; in fact, from the moment of his birth, unmistakable goodness would begin seeping from every facet of his being—his skin and bones, his hopes and dreams, his thoughts and words, his very heart and soul—and in such abundance as to provide enough sustenance for millions upon millions of magical creatures. This was truly amazing, especially given the fact that his mother had almost aborted him on advice of and pressure from doctors because he was disabled and would be confined all of his life to a wheelchair (but really an airchair thanks to the work Jitterbug). People in company with Chase would often liken the feeling of being in his presence to that of a deep breath of spring air injected into the midst of hell; but instead of fanning flames, he was capable of extinguishing them.

While the Inn at Magnolia Hills held the most eidetic people as a collective, around eight hundred at any given time, another large group of about six hundred lived at a bed and breakfast in Connecticut, a place housing an underground library as well, and one nearly as large as the Magnolia Archive. Oodus and genies had helped build this facility, and a small flock of rookhs was available to help the residents of the bed and breakfast travel. In truth, though generally smaller in scale, quite a few underground libraries were being established all over the world. The answer as to how and why was pretty simple: There were other people like Otto and Leona, and Christians were refusing to lie down and be defeated. If God gives us the means to fight, we must make use of the means.

Having maintained from adolescence contact with pen pals in Chile, Italy, Egypt, Russia, China, and South Africa, Vini knew that events mirroring those in the U.S. were taking place in many parts of the world. Em had a wide range of literary contacts in various countries, and through them had learned the same. Christians were being openly persecuted everywhere, almost as though being hunted.

Specifically in the U.S., true free speech was becoming nonexistent. With the ease of passing laws prohibiting the reading of certain things, people very shortly were not going to be allowed to say certain things.

For instance, a law had just passed that anyone voicing a biblical viewpoint of the gay issue could be found guilty of a hate crime because their words could incite ugly and hateful actions against members of the gay community. (At this time, because history held so many terms and ever-changing acronyms relating to the much-varied members of this group, most people had decided to return to using the less-confusing and general name of “gay community” when referring to those who were lesbian, gay, morphed, questioning, etc.)

Quite a few people in the world had long considered anything contrary to the politically-correct view of being gay (that it is perfectly okay and to be celebrated) to be hateful. For decades, slogans and propaganda had abounded, such as, “A member of your family is gay, so think before you speak in hate.” People seemed to have no problem calling words “hate” when, in truth, there was nothing hateful about someone expounding biblical morality, most often done out of love, rather than condemnation, anger, or something else ugly and unhealthy with regards to manner or motive. In actuality, speaking against those who were defending God’s truth was what was truly hateful, though members and supporters of the gay community were generally not able to see how much hate they were spreading and promoting against Christians.

Supporters of the new law started cornering Christians outside of churches on Sundays to confront them on the issue, often having law enforcement officials standing by to make arrests. From the point of arrest, no trial was held, and only the smallest amount of evidence, such as one witness, was needed for a judge to throw a person into prison, and keep them there for a lengthy sentence, most often three to four years; at which time, the person could only be released by swearing an oath that they would never speak out against being gay again, and sign a public statement of record agreeing that they were wrong in their original thinking, that it was perfectly okay to be gay, and that the bible was outdated and full of hate. Since many Christians refused to swear the oath and sign the agreement, prisons stayed pretty full. The unchangeable Word of God is never outdated, and certain things are

never going to be “okay” with God. However, most people were able to recognize that it was much more of an issue for a person to be unsaved than to be gay; and many Christians took the opportunity while incarcerated to save people, including members of the gay community, many of whom didn’t realize they could be part of God’s family and still be gay.

As the law was enforced, gay people began turning in family members who wouldn’t openly support their beliefs and behaviors. Of course, this was foretold in the bible as something that would happen leading up to the Endtimes—that brother would be pitted against brother, father against son, and daughter against mother.

This ended up having something of a strange effect on many Christians who had originally thought the issue of being gay not to be any big deal with regards to Christianity because, of course, many gays were also Christians. But with the way bible-based Christians were being treated over the issue, not allowed to voice God’s Word and not allowed to defend their beliefs without being thrown into prison, it definitely became a big deal. However, in the future, when gay people began being mistreated as badly by the sorcerers and their followers as everyone else (sometimes even more so, horrendously tortured, for amusement and in honor of Satan), Christians ended up being the ones to provide safe havens, the result of which ended up bringing many unsaved to Christ. God loves everyone, and His love absolutely never wavers, so anyone accepting the offer of Salvation becomes part of His family, no exceptions. The offer never included any ifs, ands, or buts, and nothing related to particular behaviors or sins. It has always been and always will be plain and straightforward, applying to all, every human being, all of whom are sinners.

Many Christians put into prison as a result of this law were able to forgive their accusers and oppressors, particularly when they saw the benefit of their incarceration—that of being able to witness to others in prison. And when sharing, they often studied Romans 11, a beautiful chapter (even flowery with its metaphor of the olive tree) largely about Universal Salvation, God’s gift to all. Quite a few incarcerated believers tended to cling to Romans 12:14. “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.” And bless they did, by sharing the truth—that all can be saved, and that He wants everyone to be part of

His family. In telling it like it is, those witnessing were able to expound another truth—that anyone rejecting God’s offer of Salvation must be pretty insane, to prefer an eternity of torment in hell over spending forever in the paradise of heaven. Stressing that all human beings are sinners needing to be saved, and that Jesus does the saving, Isaiah 53:6 ended up as a favored quote in prison bible studies. “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”

The sorcerers never foresaw the good that might come from putting a lot of Christians in jail—that they would end up saving quite a few murderers, thieves, and other sinners. However, they did eventually become aware as to what their actions had caused, when Satan made known his displeasure over the matter.

Certain activists working with sorcerers and print doubles had brought about the passing of this law, just one in a long line of many that were not only unjust, but also incredibly silly and a huge waste of resources. For instance, about twenty years previous, activists had heavily lobbied for separate public restrooms for gender neutral people who felt “uncomfortable” using restrooms designated for men or women. This was not just applied to college campuses, where the movement began, but to all buildings that had any sort of dealings with the public. When the law passed, the cost for these facilities, some of which were never used, ran into the billions; and many smaller businesses that simply couldn’t afford to add the restrooms were forced to shut their doors. At the time, many millions of people were still starving in the world, as well as lacking in clean water. Others were dying of diseases for which we already had cures. Yet, this was what money was being spent on, and continues to be spent on, because the restrooms, even the unused ones, by law have to be kept in good repair.

What a crazy, messed-up world we truly live in. Except, many activists actually live in another world, a little one of their very own, in which nothing much matters, at least nothing of true importance. Sadly, Christians usually aren’t able to save these people because their hearts are hardened, and their brains are stubbornly stuck, often to the point that they wouldn’t be able to change their minds even if bonked over the head with actual proof of the existence of Satan, hellfire, or

even God. Plenty of proof does exist in the world; people just need to open their eyes, ears, hearts, and minds.

But we must get back to the inn, and specifically to the underground connected libraries, which were stocked with very few titles of popular fiction. Instead, mostly older books needing to be preserved so that people could learn from them lined the shelves. Inside both the Labyrinth Library and the Magnolia Archive, voice-activated floating stepstools designed by Jitterbug liked to follow people around. Engaged in her research, Em had just called upon the services of one of the stools. “Over here please!” Because the twin libraries were so large, visitors didn’t need to be as quiet as in traditional ones, unless of course another person was nearby, either making use of one of the tables dotting the halls, or in one of the many study rooms.

Also providing services were zipakola water lizards. Much smaller than oodus, at only around knee high and generally between three and seven feet long, the lizards didn’t carry people (except for fun, such as giving a toddler a ride on occasion); but they did like to shuttle books around on their broad backs, often doing so under the direction of both librarians and visiting genies, who summoned the lizards using small music triangles. Occasionally found in ponds and rivers, most zipakolas preferred living in aquifers, quite a few of which were easily accessible from the library tunnels. As a reward for their work, they enjoyed having their noses scratched. They also liked the warmth of human bodies (since under ground they didn’t have access to stones warmed by the sun to curl up next to or stretch out upon) and could often be found snuggling up to people’s shins.

Taking a seat at one of the tables in order to pore over a book, Em did indeed feel a lizard snuggling her shins. Nearby, in one of the study rooms, Leona was memorizing two versions of the bible at once, as a kind of challenge in going back and forth. Both Em and Leona were startled out of their studies when an oodu a couple hundred yards from their location belched loudly. Though a frequent occurrence, particularly after the consumption of a meal of rock chunks or a snack of gravel bits, the loud blubbery horn-like sound was nonetheless jarring.

Meanwhile, on the road to Missouri, Charlie was finding the trip very interesting. Tobin and Trista, being the same age, had both started

off being rather nervous around each other. After a couple of hours in the car, they ended up flirting a little. Another hour or so after that, during a lively discussion involving politics and education, they ended up having a couple of friendly arguments, in seeing one another as allies who could disagree about certain things but still remain friends.

Stopping for a picnic lunch in the forest, very near where the megahobs had attacked, the group prayed and read a couple of psalms together before unpacking the hamper. Sensing Lyydu nearby, Charlie felt very relaxed. He was on the ground, instead of in the air, and currently invisible. In truth, being connected more to earth than to air, thunderbirds often chose to hang out on the ground, their favored spots being beside large trees and on grassy riverbanks. Tobin, Trista, and Rang-Rang could also sense Lyydu in the area.

As they were just finishing their meal, a hummingbird suddenly became very attracted to Trista's bright pink shirt and Rang-Rang's red collar, to the point of buzzing about the pair for nearly ten minutes as the group was cleaning up and packing up the car. The picnickers had never seen a hummingbird quite so friendly and inquisitive before.

"What a strange little creature," Charlie remarked, as she didn't think the visit had to do with Lyydu, some forty feet away in the trees, though it was well known that hummingbirds did very much like thunderbirds. The oddness wasn't just in the bird's friendliness, but in his coloring. Most hummingbirds in this part of the country were of green and blue hues, with accents of red, such as the patches on the ruby-throated variety, visible when the birds were displaying. This hummingbird was mostly green and blue, but also seemed to have the rest of the gamut of the rainbow mixed in, in the form of bright gold and orange streaking on his back, vibrant purples and pinks speckling his chest, and a crown of bright red adorning his tiny head.

Slowly flying forwards and backwards about three feet in each direction as he hovered over the hood of the car, the hummingbird reminded Charlie of a little mechanical toy on a string. As they were just pulling away from the picnic spot, the hummingbird began a dive display, in a swinging u-shaped motion that looked as though he might be stringing garland on a Christmas tree, but in the same spot over and over again. This also reminded Charlie of something, though she

couldn't figure out what until they were some forty miles down the road.

Of course, her brain told her, *the suspension bridge in my vision*. She was expressly going to Kentucky (if she could ever manage to get there) in search of an old wooden pedestrian-only-style suspension bridge strung over a river. The hummingbird's movements very much resembled the u-shaped dip of the bridge, and its sway in the wind, which was how Charlie had seen it in her vision, swinging back and forth from the catch of stiff spring breezes. Trees were budding out along the banks of the river, dogwoods and redbuds mostly, and the scene was very beautiful.

When they were still a couple of miles from Uncle Walter's house, Charlie checked them into a motel. On Trista's advice, they shouldn't arrive too early because this might give Uncle Walter time to make another plan. Since he wasn't going to attempt suicide until the next afternoon, they should wait to intervene.

The next day, they arrived at the house about three hours before Uncle Walter was planning to kill himself. He was sitting in his easy chair holding a loaded shotgun in his lap when Charlie and her crew entered. Rang-Rang could sense something serious was happening and didn't run up to the man as she had on their arrival during their previous visit.

"I might have known you'd show back up," Uncle Walter rasped, while coughing to clear a wad of phlegm from his throat. "But I'm still not interested in listening to any more of your supernatural crap."

"You won't have to," Charlie calmly replied. "I just brought a visitor...someone I want you to meet." In the manner of a somewhat formal introduction, Charlie added, "Uncle Walter, this is Trista. Trista, this is Walter Orr, my uncle."

Tobin, Charlie, and Rang-Rang left the house and waited on the front porch while Trista stayed with Uncle Walter.

Since the house remained fairly quiet inside, with no unusual sounds such as Trista calling for help or wrestling Uncle Walter for the shotgun, they didn't reenter until Trista called them in roughly two hours later.

The shotgun was now sitting on the floor propped in one corner of the room and had been unloaded. Uncle Walter, looking fine, was in the kitchen getting glasses of tea for his visitors.

Charlie gasped in noticing a daisy chain sitting on the table beside her uncle's easy chair. While Trista and Tobin were helping to get the tea—and Rang-Rang, after taking a short sniff of the flowers was trotting across the room to lie on the rug by the fireplace—Charlie fingered the ring of daisies, marveling.

“So the daisy chain is not just a myth,” she murmured, before closing her eyes and saying a silent prayer of thanks to God for saving her uncle. She and Tobin had been praying on the front porch too, but that wasn't what had saved Uncle Walter because God had already determined it was not yet his time to go.

For some reason, this didn't seem the right time to talk to Trista about the daisy chain, which few people had ever heard of. The only reason Charlie knew about it was because it was something that had turned up in Vini's research, as a mysterious magical object somehow connected to suicide in that daisy chains were occasionally found in settings where suicide attempts had been unsuccessful; thus, the assumption was that the chains had somehow prevented these suicides. Most often, the person who had made a plan to kill themselves had no memory of what had happened to make them change their mind or fail during the attempt; and they had no idea as to how or why the ring of flowers had come onto the scene. While most traditional daisy chains were made with Shasta daisies (white in color), the one sitting on Uncle Walter's table was mostly a mix of Gerbera daisies in colors of bright pink, burnt orange, and deep yellow.

I never imagined the myth of the daisy chain could be real, Charlie thought, or connected in some way to a gifted fifteen-year-old.

Charlie would not have the opportunity to talk to Trista about the chain anytime soon. For one thing, Uncle Walter was now receptive to hearing about Jesus; therefore, sharing the Good News with him definitely needed to take precedence over questions out of curiosity. For another thing, Trista was rather anxious to be getting back to the inn, in order to talk to Em. As a writer herself, mainly speeches and essays, Trista felt she might never again have the chance to consult a

Nobel Prize Winner. After only a few of sips of tea, she was ready to depart, saying her goodbyes rather hastily.

With no rookh handy, Lyydu took Trista home; and they reached the inn in less than twenty minutes. After dropping her off on the back lawns, Lyydu immediately returned to Charlie's uncle's house in order to keep watch over his charge and her family.

"What's this?" Uncle Walter queried, indicating the daisy chain, as he plopped down in his easy chair. "Looks like some hippie thing. Am I supposed to put this on my head while we talk about Jesus?"

"No..." Charlie said slowly, "...I don't know what it is."

"Must have been something your friend brought," Uncle Walter said, taking a sip of tea. "She didn't stay long. Tell her she can stay longer next time. I don't bite."

Rang-Rang gave Uncle Walter a look as he said this because she didn't bite either, and would never do so unless forced to, like maybe if she had to fight a gremlin or a hobgoblin, or some other nasty creature.

Chapter Ten

Down a Rabbit Hole

Meanwhile, back at Netherwind and Laurelstone, Weatherly was busy directing military operations, situated not only in the huge natural caverns, but also inside pockets opened up within the caverns, which provided even more enormous chambers for use by her armies.

Many thousands of military personnel were actually living inside the underground pockets, supplied with plenty of water from aquifers and rainwater collection systems. Water mills provided power, and natural light was channeled in using heliostats. Food for the troops was grown in large greenhouses in the caves. Since transportation was limited—in that the oodus and trams were all busy shuttling military personnel around the facilities, which were rapidly expanding—several schools were located inside the cavern pockets so that the children of military families wouldn't have to make such long treks to attend the Netherwind-Laurelstone Schools. They did visit the above-ground schools occasionally, mainly on field trips and to attend workshops such as to make pottery or learn weaving, and for sporting events like soccer and basketball tournaments.

While not much military-wise was going on above ground right now, Weatherly was preparing, building armies for the time when they would be needed to battle the great evil sweeping over the world. With no idea as to when exactly the Endtimes might happen, God's children had to find ways to survive while waiting. Since Christ's return could still be hundreds or even thousands of years into the future, Weatherly was very much focused on training future generations for survival. However, she wasn't only fixated on survival because she didn't think God expected His children to simply live in the cesspool the world was becoming. No, He wanted much more for them; she was sure of it. *He wants us to prosper, have hope, and know that things can and will get better*, she often thought. In fact, she was very reassured of the truth in this because she was still hearing God's voice as clearly as she had in

her adolescent years, when her endeavors toward the future had officially begun, mainly in the form of time traveling and training in Kivetel.

In truth, by the time Weatherly, Kip, and Preston graduated from High School, they were some of the most lethal human beings on the planet, highly skilled not only in use of the color, music, and light weapons, but also in various forms of martial arts. In addition to stockpiling things like ropes, mirrors, and flutes, the armies were collecting and manufacturing spears, fighting sticks, swords, daggers, bows, and other such equipment. Very few guns were used or stored, as these were going to be too easy for gremlins, demons, sorcerers, and such to break. Plus, those trained in the newer weapons were finding them at least as accurate and effective as many guns, even at long range. With larger mirror and music weapons being developed, some were even as good as the best of a traditional military's missiles.

Members of the army were from many parts of the world. The criteria for enlistment being pretty basic—Christians believing in the bible, the whole bible, and not being willing to compromise, or pick and choose from God's Word, or simply have their "ears tickled" in order to live worldly lives. Many preferred General Dawson's armies to traditional ones. The reasons for this were much varied, but centered on the way Christians in the military were being treated. For instance, sorcerers had just managed to have a law passed in the U.S. forbidding the use of the name Jesus by any military personnel, as it was considered "intolerant and disrespectful of other religions, and might promote acts of terrorism, both from within the Armed Forces and from outside sources." Anyone found guilty of mentioning the name of Jesus Christ—even in varied forms such as Wonderful Counselor, Son of God, and Prince of Peace—would be thrown into the stockade for not less than two years. But this madness hadn't actually started all that recently. For over two decades, chaplains serving the U.S. Armed Forces had been forbidden to use Jesus' name in their services or in voiced prayer, this being put into place and enforced despite the fact that the majority of U.S. military personnel identified themselves as being of the Christian faith. Also, Muslims infiltrating the Armed Forces had gone on many on-base killing sprees over the past thirty years. And although these murders of military personnel numbered into

the thousands, very little had ever been done to address the problem because it was deemed “persecution” to express concern or to put into place any safeguard relating to Muslims serving in the military, even those with proven ties to terrorist groups. No, the insanity was set to continue because Satan’s followers were firmly and fully rooted in the U.S. military.

Those living in the facilities under Netherwind and Laurelstone generally stayed anywhere from two to eight years, depending on the type of training they were receiving, before taking places in society, or leaving to start up satellite operations in wide-reaching locations designed not only for training others but also to stand in military readiness. While many of these were in remote areas such as Peru, Australia, Alaska, Nepal, China, and Portugal, they were still under General Dawson’s overall direction. As far as she was concerned, the whole world needed to be prepared for the future; and, as long as she could still be effective, she was determined to extend her reach over as much of the globe as possible.

Weatherly’s military operations were divided into four divisions—Ants, Badgers, Locusts, and Lizards—based on Proverbs 30: 24-28. “Four things on earth are small, but they are exceedingly wise: the ants are a people not strong, yet they provide their food in the summer; the badgers are a people not mighty, yet they make their homes in the rocks; the locusts have no king, yet all of them march in rank; the lizard you can take in your hands, yet it is in kings’ palaces.” In some versions of the bible, rabbits were substituted for badgers in this proverb. However, Weatherly thought badgers to be more fitting for a military, in being fiercer than rabbits. Well, fiercer than most rabbits anyway, the exception being the boscowatt hare—a rabbit as fierce as a full-grown lion and nearly as large. But since this creature lived only in the tallest of the Himalayan Mountains, most people would never see one in their lifetimes.

Members of the Ant Division were in charge of provisions such as food, weapons, and shelter. Many were also wise counselors and teachers.

Those in the Badger Division were experts at survival, and of course were not simply rock dwellers when in the field. They were capable of surviving, often thriving, in nearly any terrain—desert dunes,

forests, frozen tundra, even heavily-populated cityscapes. Their duties often included hiding others for safety, including in plain sight such as people hidden in art.

The Locusts were mainly infantry whose fighting was often not just physical, but spiritual as well, as every member intently studied God's Word, applying it to everything. At any given time, soldiers in this division did not have to follow orders if said orders directly contradicted the divine instruction of the *Holy Bible*.

The Lizards were infiltration specialists, basically able to access and fit in anywhere, even when it meant doing questionable things to fit in. A good many of Weatherly's task-force members came from this division.

Many gifted people were included amongst the ranks of each division of this Underground Army, currently totaling just over forty-two thousand in number, not counting a recently-formed covert navy under Albert Nolan's command.

As regard to magical help with military operations, not counting protégés like Marlon, there were presently seventy-eight known magicians situated in various parts of the world; and all were at Weatherly's disposal. She also had use not only of the Time Key, but the other spheres as well. In the early years, when Vini discovered that her friend was building an army, she had offered Weatherly use of all six of the spheres in her possession, as well as the Realm Key, currently in the watery Demon Pocket where she had left it, to retrieve at an appropriate time in the future. In already having access to all of the realms God intended, they didn't presently need the Realm Key, which was better left in the safekeeping of a mermaid who was watching over it. In agreement with Weatherly, Vini didn't want to retrieve the key too early, in case sorcerers, who had once had the Realm Key in their possession, might be searching for it, as a means of unlocking doors such as those on the mezzanine.

The Truth Key had recently helped Weatherly capture a print double that she briefly managed to question using the Mind Key before he killed himself by stabbing a leg from the bed in his holding cell into his chest. (The sorcerer in her keeping was most often kept sedated for this very reason, because she was afraid he would commit suicide.)

From questioning the print double, Weatherly had learned that the sorcerers possessed a tool similar to the Truth Key in the form of a ring that was aptly called a Ring of Truth and that could make anyone reveal secrets. Developed by a gifted individual working for the sorcerers, several of these rings currently existed. Before killing himself, the demon had intimated that other such tools of varying functions also existed. While she hadn't managed to get details, Weatherly wasn't too worried about any devices being used by the enemy because, in addition to the spheres, she was in possession of a great array of magical objects, not even counting her arsenal of weapons.

Indeed, she had been collecting items for years, many of which were merely on loan, such as the spheres, which clearly belonged to Vini since God had specifically led her to find them. In Laurelstone's attic, Weatherly and Em had found the resizing trunk, which would eventually be needed to resize the Realm Key because the sphere had been tampered with and the size changed while in the possession of the sorcerers. Em had offered Weatherly, on numerous occasions, use of the magic key that could unlock nearly any door. Several thimbles of the exact size needed to measure dragon tears for healing draughts were in her possession. Vini had a watch capable of three separate magical functions, and a peacock feather whose eye could display certain future events. Ben had a pocketknife capable of performing numerous tricks. Three bagicals were readily available, though Weatherly was smart and cautious enough not to use them frequently, since they were powerful and unpredictable. However, over the years the bags had produced quite a few magical objects of varying uses. She also had a whole slew of items for which she didn't even know the functions of yet, some having been obtained from the collection of relics stored in the subbasement library at Doyle Mansion, others discovered in various hidden rooms at Netherwind and Laurelstone.

The collection equated to plenty of tools for Weatherly's use at present, especially since she was still discovering new functions of certain items she was currently using, such as the Mind Key. Only four years back, she had learned that the sphere was capable of erasing select memories, which was not only helpful in dealing with the enemy and outsiders who might have accidentally discovered certain secrets, but also in cases that hit closer to home, such as when people involved with

the plantations, schools, pocket ventures, libraries, etc. were found to be untrustworthy. In being forced to forget about such things as underground training facilities, topiary armies, Magicians' Laboratories, and horse-raising projects, the individuals would pose less danger to these operations when taking places in normal society. While all of Weatherly's military trained under a strict Code of Secrecy, she occasionally had to deal with traitors, or people simply too weak to continue fighting the Christian fight; so the ability to erase memories in these instances was helpful as well.

On the same day Trista was saving Walter Orr, Weatherly survived an assassination attempt, one of many that had taken place over the years. A mimic had found his way into one of the caverns in which Weatherly was assisting with the weapons training of new recruits. A watchman had been nearby, but hadn't needed to act. Also present and watching from a rock ledge overlooking the training arena was Weatherly's protector, a tree spirit named Tamfa. The spirit also hadn't needed to assist because Weatherly was more than capable of dealing with matters herself. Though knocked off her feet by the initial surprise assault of the mimic, who had been impersonating one of the training instructors, Weatherly successfully dealt with the demon in less than eight seconds using the gold rope she had been holding to demonstrate a training exercise. After killing the mimic, she simply kicked dust from the floor of the cave over the glob of residue left from the demon's disintegration. Even outside of military facilities, Weatherly was always armed, with a dagger and a small flute that were generally concealed. Less concealed, and in the same way that Em liked to wear a rope as a belt, Weatherly often wore a set of ropes on her shoulders, crisscrossed on her back much in the manner as to how cyclists of old used to carry their spare bicycle tires.

After assuring herself of her charge's safety, Tamfa exited the cave to retreat to her favorite laurel tree on the Laurelstone Plantation. Not surprisingly, tree spirits often chose to hide in trees, which was why they were seldom observed. When tree spirits were out and about as Tamfa often was, they tended to look like pale smoke in curly strings floating through the air, most often at a leisurely pace.

The main reason Weatherly never became aware of Tamfa during her lifetime was because the tree spirit had never been called into action

in the same way protectors like Tulko, Lyydu, and Zapor often were. Weatherly had always been able to take care of herself, except for one time when she was a small child when a watchman had prevented her from having an accidental fall from a cliff. But even though Tamfa never charged in to rescue anyone, she did protect in other ways, such as providing a warning when a gaggle of hobgoblins invaded one of the gardens at Laurelstone. At the time, Tamfa had chosen to alert a gargoyle instead of dealing with matters herself because use of her powers would have torn up the garden. The gargoyle had simply bashed all of the hobgoblins into pulp without much disturbing the surroundings, while blasts of energy from a tree spirit would have caused a lot of damage. (Like many spirits derived from nature, such as those from stone and water, Tamfa's powers could cause as much destruction as benefit, so she tended to choose not to exert them unless absolutely necessary.)

Tamfa did provide protection to Weatherly in less-noticeable ways, such as closing a window left open on a cold night and pulling a blanket up over her charge. Another time, when Weatherly was busy and forgetting to eat, the tree spirit wafted enticing aromas of favored foods Weatherly's way, as a reminder that she was hungry and needed to eat. "Somebody's having fried chicken," Weatherly said on a couple of occasions, "I can smell it. And gumbo."

Weatherly's task forces had been busy lately, and the leader of one such force was reporting to her late afternoon, the same day as the assassination attempt. Upon hearing the report, Weatherly barely managed to dismiss Jocelyn Watson, a.k.a. Major Watson, before collapsing to her knees and weeping almost uncontrollably for nearly an hour straight, at which time, she did manage to collect herself, at least enough to pray.

Chapter Eleven

Urchins and Crustaceans

The news Weatherly had just received related to television, of all things. About a month after the movie of the horrific slaughter of the toddlers by teens had aired, the same network had shown a mini-series featuring forty-eight nursing home residents being tortured, mutilated, and killed by a group of men. This was done as a mini-series for the express purpose of drawing out the tortures, to entertain the depraved audiences for as long as possible. The subject matter, while incredibly disturbing, was not the issue, as television had long since stopped having any morals or censors, often featuring brutal home-invasion murders, prolonged tortures, etc. But as far as anyone knew, these programs were all Computer Graphic Filmmaking, CGF for short, which had progressed to the point that most generated images were indistinguishable from real ones. The toddler film had been called *Urchins*, while the nursing home mini-series was named *Crustaceans*; and both were made by the same film company. Based on audience approval and demand, they were scheduled to re-air as a double feature in three weeks. This was a sad testament as to how far society had fallen, that so many had watched the originals, with others who might have missed the airings being anxious to see the repeats.

What had just been brought to Weatherly's attention was that both films were entirely real. They had used live human victims!

While she always obeyed God, Weatherly didn't always understand why He allowed certain evils to exist in the world, especially since He would have been able to stop them with a mere thought, word, blink, flick of a finger, or whatever simple method He might choose.

His ways and thinking are much higher than ours, Weatherly reminded herself, as she was pulling herself up from the floor where she had lain during the crying bout.

In a slightly more-gathered state, though still sobbing occasionally, she sat on the couch in her study and prayed, for a full thirty minutes,

after which, her brain was able to work on the matter in a calmer fashion.

While snuff films had long been made, they had not been abundant. Sadly, they were becoming so. *Urchins* and *Crustaceans* were simply a form of this genre, and the result of certain depraved individuals' narcissism, wickedness, and other evil traits, actually brought about by parents' tendencies to raise children as though the world revolved around them, without limits, catering to every whim, with no discipline, but with a tremendous sense of entitlement. Certain ideas and attitudes tended to abound in these individuals: *The world owes me something, everything must go my way at all times, I must be entertained and happy at all times or someone will pay for my boredom, I must not have any responsibilities, I will not take any responsibility or suffer any consequences for my actions.* The list could go on and on. With parents making the mistake of raising spoiled and entitled kids, the step from narcissist to murderer (even serial killer) was a pretty short one, especially in the teen years, which was when the two people responsible for *Urchins* and *Crustaceans* had begun their killing spree, working together. Being wealthy and having many resources, it had been easy for these two boys to do away with anyone who disappointed them, or challenged them, or just people they didn't like, though the pair had been careful not to get caught. Currently in college, they had progressed from simply killing for pleasure and satisfaction to wanting to make it into something of a business; not for money, because they didn't need any, but for the idea of being able to get away with it, though they did still derive pleasure and satisfaction from their actions, particularly in the thought that millions of people were witnessing their "Important Work" as they liked to call it.

The victims for *Urchins* and *Crustaceans* had been easy to obtain, with money. A lot of toddlers were unwanted and neglected, and it had been a simple thing to buy the ones for the film from single mothers, particularly those addicted to drugs or alcohol. A good many elderly people in nursing homes had no one living following their care; and the choice of a facility specializing in residents who had no one outside involved had made the process of getting these victims easy, by simply paying a nursing home administrator (who was also the owner of the facility) enough money to basically disappear and live off of for the rest

of his life. With staff dismissed, the filmmakers basically had the run of the place, after which, they disposed of the bodies and cleaned up the building before selling it. The torturers and murderers performing in the films were simply like-minded depraved associates of the two in charge, people the pair had gathered into their close-knit circle over the years, and kept there either by rewards or threats.

Weatherly quickly realized why God had brought this to her attention. The killers were not going to stop, and she was being tasked with doing something about it—the ultimate something, in fact, in the form of putting a permanent stop to it. And she would need to stop not only the two in charge, but their entire network as well because the younger brother of one of the killers was fast on the same track as his older brother. And why wouldn't he be, with his parents raising him in the same manner as they had his vicious elder sibling. Both sets of parents of the killers actually suspected what their kids were up to, but never did anything to stop it, and instead continued to provide resources to their degenerate children.

The two college boys were mainly the financial backing and planners; they themselves didn't often get their hands dirty, or bloody. They just enjoyed paying others to do this, people they trusted, many of whom had the same type of evil bloodlust as they. Weatherly sighed in realizing that they would all have to go. Though vengeance always belonged to the Lord, she was certain she was hearing His voice clearly. In this case, He was directing her, as one of His faithful servants, to take matters in hand and stop further bloodshed. She didn't believe He would appoint this task to very many people of the world, since some people might abuse their power if given tools such as those He had provided for her. But God knew she would never turn her operations into something like the Spanish Inquisition, or the Salem Witch Hunts. No, she would always do exactly what He told her. In this case, He had actually had to speak to her more than once, through the voice she often heard in the back of her head. During prayer, Weatherly answered. *I am sorry for delaying, Father. Please forgive me. I just wanted to make sure I heard Your instructions clearly. Please continue to guide me, and help me to follow. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.*

Certainly God was behind Weatherly finding out, and He was definitely giving her instructions. But the awareness of the issue had

actually come about by a particular set of events. One of the toddlers was a member of God's elect, destined to do great things for God's Kingdom during his lifetime. A watchman who was aware of the children being purchased from their mothers hadn't intervened because Etowa was making moves that would bring about the task force becoming aware of these horrors, and the angel knew that Weatherly would then take steps to fix the problem. The task force had actually been investigating a couple of print-double cases to try to help people who had been framed for murder. During the investigation, Weatherly's operatives came across money transactions indicating people had been paid for their unwanted children. Tracking the money to the film company, they were easily able to determine that *Urchins* was a snuff film.

A gifted individual had brought the nursing home massacre to the attention of the task force. This was a man named Fritz Hollingsworth who rarely watched television, so he found it odd that on the day *Crustaceans* premiered, he had the inclination to park himself in front of the TV. His television was an older, projection-style model; but he was saving up for what was known as a helmet (actually more of a neck device, than head), which could be worn and watched anywhere, or used in various stationary positions in homes. But he also thought he might wait until quality no-screens, the ones with really good filters, came down in price because he wasn't all that interested in watching mobile TV, and probably wouldn't make much use of a helmet. In the meantime, his current system was plenty fine to occasionally watch his subscription programming which, in his opinion, was rarely of good quality, other than certain vintage movies he was fond of, ones that hadn't yet been altered (actually mutilated) based on rules set by politicians under pressure from activists.

In less than four minutes of watching *Crustaceans*, he was able to determine that these were real human beings being tortured. After throwing up all over his couch, he had fled the room, just as one of the twentysomething torturers was burning an elderly woman's arm with an iron while saying, "You remind me of my grandmother. She only sent me five hundred dollars for my birthday; she should have sent five thousand!" Fritz's gift had to do with his eyesight. Ever since childhood, he had demonstrated acute abilities in this regard, such as

being able to walk through a large field of clover and, in less than ten minutes, find all eighty-nine of the four-leaf ones growing amongst the many thousands of the ordinary three-leaf variety. His gift in this case had allowed him to easily determine that the mini-series was not computer generated.

After throwing up again, Fritz had resisted the urge to jump into his car and try to find the nursing home in which the horrors were taking place, to try to stop them. He, of course, knew the events of the film had already taken place. But he felt so helpless. So what could he do? He had heard of an inn nearby that weird people seemed to like to frequent; but despite the weirdos that might be staying there, he had heard it was a place where Christians could go for help in times of crisis. So he did jump into his car, to head to the Inn at Magnolia Hills, where he simply blurted the whole thing out to the innkeeper, a good listener named Leona who would eventually become a great friend to him, even helping to hide him at a time when sorcerers were pursuing him for using his sight gift in aid of causes for good, such as to recognize mimics impersonating people. Leona didn't hesitate to introduce Fritz to two members of the task force who had been staying at the inn and traveling by rookhs to do their work.

Relating to rookhs, an odd thing happened around the same time Fritz was blurting to Leona. A rookh that had been captured by sorcerers, with the intent to force the bird to serve them, simply choose to drop dead, rather than serve the enemy. What was odd was that when the bird's carcass was thrown off a cliff into a ditch, the rookh came to life again, and simply flew away, pretty much unharmed, other than feeling upset that he had dropped his guard and allowed himself to be captured. Generally, rookhs were able to fly plenty fast enough to evade predators such as demons and the nyregs that were starting to be used. Flying more slowly was only a safety thing, related to the human beings they were carrying, because people were evidently easy to damage. The trick of playing dead to the extent of actually being dead for an extended period of time was something most creatures didn't know rookhs were capable of. What a nifty talent to possess.

With regard to the moves by Etowa to bring about Weatherly's awareness of the snuff films, Boko had each time called even-through, basically choosing not to counter in any way. He had chosen this

strategy in the hopes that the information would cripple Weatherly to the point that she either wouldn't be able to take action, or would lose faith in God for allowing the massacres, or would perhaps refuse to act. He clearly underestimated her unwavering obedience to the Father.

While the knowledge that *Urchins* and *Crustaceans* were snuff films had severely disturbed her, and she even woke up the next day fiercely hoping and praying that it was all a bad dream, she definitely wasn't crippled to the point that she couldn't or wouldn't act. Still tremendously upset, she did avoid her team for nearly a full day, in not wanting them to see her cry. Weatherly had always been a sensitive person, which was actually an asset in her job because she never lost the ability to have empathy or be moved by certain people or events. But her sensitivity did cause her to feel overwhelmed sometimes. In knowing this, she chose not to watch even one minute of either the movie or the mini-series; having them briefly described to her was more than enough. Her sensitive nature also made her cautious when making tough decisions, such as the ones pertaining to the deaths of the perpetrators of these crimes.

She chose the use of cursed diamonds for part of her plan. Shortly after arriving at the plantations, Chelsea had offered Weatherly any number of diamonds, blessed or cursed, for her operations. Gavin, too, had wanted to help, offering sapphires. While the pair was currently spending some time in Kivetel, they had chosen not to stay there, instead going back and forth for training, while investing their spare time in helping with the horses in Double P and in using the Labyrinth Library. Both had expressed a desire to be useful by going on missions. Based on their backgrounds, Weatherly definitely viewed them as good candidates for certain tasks. Having been on their own for so long, with their survival instincts and a certain amount of battle experience, she thought they would make excellent Time Key Travelers. For this was Weatherly's plan, of course, to send a team back in time to stop the films from being made; and she often chose young people as TKTs because teens especially seemed to have the ability to blend well into just about any time period. In this case, they wouldn't be going back in time far enough to stand out as being from the future anyway, so they wouldn't need any special training or instructions or outfitting as they might for a trip back to pioneer days, or renaissance times.

Killing diamonds were set into a bracelet and a pair of earrings by a genie jewelry maker. Genies were immune to the effects of the cursed diamonds, so this was an easy task. Chelsea was also immune to the effects of the diamonds she produced. She would be wearing the jewelry on the mission. Gavin would accompany her, along with all five members of the task force that had discovered the truth behind *Urchins* and *Crustaceans*, two of which were assassins by specialty.

The team would begin by stopping *Crustaceans* from being made. Though the mini-series happened later in sequence than the toddler massacre, Weatherly's research had revealed more about it to this point than the *Urchins* film, about which a good many details were still a mystery. But while she was waiting for more information from another team she had assembled to investigate further, she would send the original task force back in time to stop the mini-series from happening.

Gavin and Chelsea posed as college students on the mission, in order to get close to the two in charge. Although Chelsea was very young, having only just celebrated her fourteenth birthday, she was tall and so could pass as being four years older than her actual age. Gavin was tall as well, and could have passed for college age probably for about the last three years or so.

Getting close to the murderers was not much of a problem, only taking a little ingenuity and campus flirting on the parts of the Diamond Girl and Sapphire Boy, who managed to infiltrate the inner circle surrounding the two serial killers in less than three weeks.

Using the Mind Key, one of the task-force members managed to plant ideas into the minds of the two targets. While there was plenty of jewelry in the world, and the privileged boys certainly had enough wealth to purchase whatever they wanted from jewelry makers, they somehow got it into their heads that they wanted to buy the particular bracelet and earrings belonging to Chelsea, because these would make lovely gifts, the bracelet for one's girlfriend, and the earrings for the other's mother.

Chelsea feigned reluctance. "These were gifts from my grandparents." But she agreed in the end because she was in a bit of financial difficulty and wanted to make sure she could afford her next semester's tuition.

The murderous pair actually wouldn't have had any problem, morally, just killing Chelsea and taking her jewelry; but they had no time to make a plan. Killings most often required some planning. Plus, that Gavin guy was always with her; and the two seemed to have some family in the area. Gavin and Chelsea had been seen having lunch with an older couple on one occasion, and in a car with them on another. Also, there was something about Gavin. Though lanky, he was definitely not a wimp; in fact, he had a sort of an aura about him that implied defense and protection. (The evil-doers were sensing not only Gavin's gift, but the shield qualities of a sapphire he was carrying.)

In discussion of the possibility of just killing to get what they wanted, the pair agreed the girl, too, was probably not as helpless as she might appear. They had made the mistake once before of underestimating a girl. Though they had managed not only to have their way with her before killing her, one of the boys had received bruised ribs and a gash on his neck from a broken glass, while his partner had suffered several cuts on his chest and a broken finger. Both still had scars as reminders of the encounter.

Chelsea's aunt and uncle (none other than the older couple observed with her and Gavin before) were visiting her apartment when the exchange of jewelry for a DiiP credit took place. DiiP was the most common current form of digital currency; and this one, as previously agreed upon, equated to exactly fourteen thousand dollars.

While people, especially wealthy ones, already knew about cursed diamonds, the pair purchasing Chelsea's diamonds never suspected a thing because she had regularly worn the jewelry. With regard to history, many diamonds of old were thought to be cursed, but actually weren't. It was more the pursuit to acquire wealth and possessions—along with other evil desires and behaviors—that caused certain illnesses and misfortunes to befall the owners of the stones.

Taking the earrings and bracelet off and placing them into a pair of pretty velvet boxes, Chelsea gave a sad but resigned sigh as she handed the boxes over to the purchasers.

Weatherly knew there was a risk that the stones might kill others outside of the range of the intended targets, but she felt the risk was worth taking because this was a means of fixing the problem that could not be traced back to her operations. And indeed the diamonds did kill

three people in addition to the intended targets of the pair, their immediate family members, and closest associates. But while the three unintended victims were not direct perpetrators, they had kept many of the families' secrets, in addition to unscrupulously channeling monies for them throughout the years. Therefore, Weatherly was not overly troubled by their deaths, particularly because she knew that God was in control of everything. If a death was not meant to happen, He would prevent it somehow, by a watchman or other means.

The team managed to stop the nursing home slaughter by three of the task-force members arriving a month before the filming was set to take place, and making arrangements for all of the residents to be moved, either to other facilities or into private homes. Most of this was happening while Chelsea and Gavin were infiltrating the circle of friends the two masterminds belonged to.

The administrator of the nursing home was absolutely livid, and it quickly became obvious to the task-force members that he had already accepted payment for what was about to happen. But he couldn't stop the departures and new placements of the residents because all of this was being done by legitimate means, through the correct processes and paperwork. (Although actual paper wasn't used anymore in situations such as this, the term "paperwork" had survived, being so long used.) And so he decided to run, one week before the date the filming was set to begin, not showing up for work and not even calling in sick. By that time, he had dismissed most of his staff. A skeleton crew was still working; but with the placements happening so quickly, the remaining staff was gone by the time the camera crew—along with others such as a director, make-up artist, and those set to perform the tortures and murders—showed up. This happened the day after the sale of the jewelry; and the filmmakers were much surprised to find only four seniors remaining in the home, all being visited and cared for, it seemed, by long-lost relatives, who were waiting with their loved ones until their new residential placements were carried out.

"Yes, the home let us know it was closing some time ago," one of the task-force members told the director and make-up artist. "Such a pity because I know Aunt Beryl truly loved this country setting."

The arrival of the evil miscreants, numbering eleven in total, was a good opportunity for the assassin task-force members to confirm some

of their targets by sight, to lessen any chance of killing someone not involved in this insanity. The actors committing the tortures and murders had been heavily made up for their performances, so they wouldn't have been recognizable in reviewing a copy of the film. In addition to the rural setting of the nursing home, which had given the filmmakers privacy when making *Crustaceans*, half of the residents had been sedated, to keep them under control and keep them from fighting back, while the other half were tortured and killed. The sedations had worn off just in time to provide the filmmakers with a fresh batch of victims.

Over the next couple of days, the criminals that were unlikely to come into contact with the cursed diamonds were fairly easily dealt with by the two assassins using flutes and mirrors. Oddly enough, security seemed next to nothing, almost to the point of being laughable, at most of the homes being infiltrated. The task-force members found this to be so even at the huge mansions of the two families comprising the center of this depraved network, which made the task of retrieving the cursed jewelry easy as well. The diamonds, of course, had to be retrieved in order to prevent the stones from killing anyone else. Working efficiently, the team had already returned home by the time most of the deaths had been discovered.

In total, thirty-two people died, seventeen from the cursed diamonds and fifteen from flutes and mirrors. While the latter were easily recognizable as murders, those having died from the cursed stones initially presented a great mystery, since diamonds killed without leaving any marks, or anything else that might be noticeable on the victims. With the jewelry gone, even the sorcerers connected to the families took a very long time to correctly surmise what exactly had caused the deaths.

Oddly enough, through no actions taken by Weatherly's team, the nursing home administrator died before he could enjoy any of the ill-gotten money he had received. In his car on the way to the airport to flee the country on the same day Chelsea was selling her diamonds, he had a heart attack behind the wheel and ran off the road and into a tremendous oak tree that actually sustained almost no damage at all. In fact, the scar from the impact served to add even more character to the

gnarls, twists, cavities, and burls the tree already possessed from having lived for over three hundred years.

Because the horror and almost unbearable ache of the knowledge of *Urchins* and *Crustaceans* was all still very fresh to Weatherly, she hadn't been sleeping well of late, even though Tamfa had been singing lullabies to her at night, a lovely sound much like soft breezes filtering through wind chimes muffled by thin wrappings of velvety tree bark. The issue of the television viewership was especially troubling, the ratings being an indicator of how incredibly evil the world had become in what seemed, to Weatherly at least, like such a short amount of time, since her youth anyway, when this sort of thing wasn't so publically accepted, or craved, as it was today. *So there evidently hadn't been enough single and double murders to watch lately*, she decided, *or beheadings*. The torture and killing of animals had been popular for a long time too. Now, Weatherly wondered how many of these things had been real. In truth, many wealthy subscribers had commissioned a good many snuff films over the past decade or so, including rape murders and home-invasion murders of whole families.

While most of them had been kept in private circles as far as viewership, the progression to *Urchins* and *Crustaceans* was inevitable. They had to be made public because Satan's followers were taking pride and pleasure in what they were purchasing, and they wanted others to see what they were capable of purchasing. In earlier years, they might have been satisfied with having the largest houses, the best cars, the finest marble and granite for their countertops, and the most elaborate and expensive jewelry. But no more, because these things were hollow in comparison to the spectacle of human suffering and death that their wealth could bring about. And these evil people often felt they were doing others a favor, in ridding the world of useless human beings such as the urchins and crustaceans, who were a definite drain on the resources of society, since many did receive some sort of government funding for their care. The wicked wouldn't be blamed for their actions because Satan was the Great Deceiver. Plus, these people were wealthy enough to buy their way out of problems. By this time, sorcerers were connected to most wealthy families, so if the perpetrators were ever found out, the use of print doubles would make sure others were blamed, instead of them. The sorcerers actually fully intended to

eventually expose *Urchins* and *Crustaceans* as being real, and to frame certain Christians for the crimes. The public outrage would then be directed at God's children, who would be thought of as hypocrites, in being just as depraved and wicked as the rest of society.

When reflecting on why the world was so full of bloodshed, Weatherly had to consider that the whole of the bible was basically a bloodbath, all the way from Genesis to Revelation, full of sacrifices, wars, murders. Many of the most significant events involved shed blood—Passover, the crucifixion, etc. We could not have Salvation without shed blood. Since there was no reason to think events within her lifetime should be free from bloodshed, none of this should be surprising to her. No, what was more surprising was how seemingly ordinary human beings (albeit wealthy ones) could find committing such extraordinary evils to be so easy. But, again, this was due to parents giving in, letting children have their own way, with never a thought or care to the fact that they were breeding monsters to unleash onto the world.

Stopping *Urchins* from being made turned out to be much easier than the steps taken with regard to *Crustaceans*. Going back a full year in time, Weatherly's team managed to divert most of the monetary resources of the two wealthy families to local churches. This was done carefully, in such a way as to prevent the money trail from being followed. Without funds, the toddlers could not be purchased. The team also focused on getting help for the families of these children. In some cases, this meant getting the mothers into addiction-treatment programs. For others, permanent placement of the children into foster care was the best solution. This served to prevent any other drastic actions being taken by the mothers with regard to their children. Weatherly took nothing moneywise to support her own operations, mainly because she didn't need it. Laurelstone had always been profitable, and became even more so when Pizzo and Heike found a treasure room similar to the one found at Netherwind, this having occurred roughly one year after the one at Netherwind was discovered.

Since time travel took no time at all, the entire project was finished exactly ten days from when it was first brought to Weatherly's attention. But she felt as though it had taken a year or more. That was the toll she felt on her mind and body anyway. Since Weatherly and her

team had dealt with the issue in the here and now, even recording information so that they wouldn't forget when changing events of the past, they retained the memories of the horrors of *Urchins* and *Crustaceans*. To the rest of the world, the films hadn't happened.

Setting a permanent task force to the issue of snuff films, Weatherly was able to stop many of these atrocities from occurring over the years. The main reason God had arranged for her intervention was because it was not quite time for all of the horrors set to befall the human race. Evil must suffer some setbacks; otherwise, people might lose hope. These were not vengeance killings, as Weatherly often reminded herself when taking action; she was simply following orders.

After the mission, Chelsea and Gavin decided not to go back to Kivetel for more training, mainly because physical fighting wasn't particularly their thing; and they felt they had gotten enough of the basics to be able to handle the rope Chelsea was now regularly carrying, as well as the flute Gavin had chosen as his favorite weapon. The pair definitely did not want to live in Kivetel, or Antica, as Weatherly had originally suggested because they didn't want to just hide. They wanted to be more a part of the world, and do some good, if possible.

Weatherly couldn't blame them; she herself would have been incapable of hiding, no matter how many hunters (or assassins) might be after her. However, she did suggest that Gavin and Chelsea go to the Inn at Magnolia Hills for a while. Since both loved libraries, they could make use of the Magnolia Archive.

This sounded very appealing to the pair, who did decide to go, particularly in guessing Weatherly's motive for sending them—that of moving them around because it actually wasn't safe for them to spend too much time in any one spot, even a spot as protected as the Netherwind-Laurelstone Plantations.

After bidding farewell to the Diamond Girl and Sapphire Boy as they were boarding oodus to travel to the inn, Weatherly retreated to her study in order to read her bible. As she let the book fall open in her hands, the first passage that met her eyes was Psalm 72: 12-14. "For he delivers the needy when he calls, the poor and him who has no helper. He has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy. From oppression and violence he redeems their life; and precious is their blood in his sight."

Chapter Twelve

Historic Homes

Em had just returned home to Doyle Mansion, having stayed a week longer than intended at the inn, not only because she was getting so much done, but also because Trista wasn't the only one who had wanted to consult with her. But she had spent a fair amount of time with Trista, a sweet girl, by Em's estimation, and obviously gifted, but in a much different and more mysterious way than her Aunt Leona. In knowing that all gifts were not super obvious, and none were meant to be advertised, Em hadn't been too inquisitive, instead deciding that if Trista wanted her to know details, she would tell her.

Though Em had jogged daily while staying at the inn, she hadn't trained for a while, so she came to the plantations for a day with Heike, this being one of Heike's days to teach sculpture. In the regular above-ground gym at Laurelstone, Em was pleased to find a stick-fighting partner available, a boy who was a senior at the high school. Though not quite at her skill level, he was actually pretty good, and managed to give her enough of a challenge, so this turned out to be a productive session for both of them.

This happened to be a day when the FBI and Homeland Security were conducting a joint raid on the Netherwind-Laurelstone Plantations, in particular, the school facilities, which were rumored to be "terrorist training camps."

Ben calmly stayed with the two men in charge as they directed the thirty or so heavily-armed agents they had brought with them to spread out and conduct a search. "I'd be happy to show you around," Ben offered the pair in a friendly manner. "What would you like to see first—the cafeteria, classrooms, the gymnasium, biology lab, greenhouse, stables, or maybe the chapel? Or we could take a stroll through the houses."

They chose the chapel first, in order to see the lovely stained glass, following up with the stables, where Ben introduced the agents to his

wife, hard at work in her hippotherapy program. A palomino mare named Chantilly Lace, Lacey for short, nuzzled up to the agent from Homeland Security, who laughed when the breath and velvety nose of the horse tickled his neck. “She reminds me of a horse I used to ride growing up,” the man declared. While Lacey was often friendly, this was of course an act, because most horses are incredibly smart and know exactly when to friendly-up to certain people who might not be so friendly themselves.

Ben next led the men through a couple of classrooms in a building situated behind Laurelstone Manor, before heading across fields to the gymnasium, where Em was just finishing her practice session. On the tour so far, the agents hadn’t seen anything out of the ordinary, just the normal goings on for schools and plantations. The flock of peafowl was interesting, and the large bee operation, which the group was steering well clear of because the FBI agent was evidently allergic to bees. Passing a good distance from the clusters of boxes, the visitors didn’t notice the beekeepers hard at work tending to the bees because the bigfoots looked exactly like trees.

A PE class was being held in the gym, in the form of third-graders practicing martial arts. “So these are the terrorists we’ve heard about,” the Homeland Security agent joked, indicating a tiny freckled girl named Lu-Lu practicing judo. In truth, Lu-Lu could have probably easily thrown both men, but she wasn’t planning to demonstrate. Instead, she gave the visitors a toothy and beguiling smile before heading off with her training partner to skip rope for a bit. (Heading to the ropes was part of the ingrained training of these kids—they were never to be too far from their weapons.)

The FBI agent actually recognized Em as being a renowned writer and Nobel Prize Winner, and he wondered why she might be at the schools.

“Well, I am part owner of Netherwind,” Em explained, as Ben and the other agent headed off to see the main greenhouse. “I inherited it, along with my two brothers, Otto and Kip, from my great-aunt, Fiona Campbell. And my cousins, John and Weatherly Dawson, own Laurelstone.”

“I actually loved *Graham Rumpole*,” the agent told her. “I read the whole thing in two days. That’s good for me for a long novel because

I'm not a fast reader, but I had a free weekend and couldn't put it down."

"Well, I'd offer you a signed copy," Em replied, "but the government confiscated all of mine. Plus, they'd just make you burn it anyway."

"My e-copy was deleted last week," the man said. "What a shame, the banning I mean. But, these things happen."

"Yes, they do," Em answered pleasantly, before offering to spar with the man. "We have plenty of extra sticks."

Laughing, the agent said, "No, from what I saw when we came in, I think you'd best me in about six seconds. So to preserve face with my fellow agents, I'd better decline."

This was a wise decision on his part, as six of his subordinates had just entered the gym to make a report of their unfruitful search to him. All they had seen so far was a bunch of normal stuff, and nothing suspicious at all. Even the group traveling through the mezzanine saw nothing unusual. In opening doors, they saw rooms filled with regular furnishings. A couple of the doors were locked, but they didn't bother trying to track down keys because the other rooms on the floor seemed perfectly normal; and in the end, how many terrorists could actually hide or train in a bedroom, or a sewing room?

However, one of the mezzanine searchers did feel slightly unsettled when he thought he saw a girl in one of the wall portraits wink at him. He quickly decided he must have imagined it. Another agent thought it odd that the fourteen students in a sculpting class were so well-behaved and working diligently, when evidently left alone by their teacher. For Heike's part, while staying hidden behind a block of marble, she had to resist the urge to throw a chisel at the intruders.

Over forty of Weatherly's Locusts were standing by while all of this was going on, staged in various spots around the plantations, looking as though they were teaching classes, tending to the apple orchards and chicken coops, painting a chair on Netherwind's porch, etc. Preston and Ignacio were also keeping an eye on things, though under the guise of helping the gardener prune bushes. Though none of the people conducting the raid were mimics, they did unknowingly work with several, as well as a sorcerer, who was the supervisor of the local FBI

office. The supervisor had been the one to instigate the raid, so the caution was well warranted.

Before boarding the two trucks in which they had arrived, the agents who had conducted the searches were treated to refreshments on Netherwind's front lawns as their two leaders were given quick tours through the houses, where they admired Laurelstone's stained glass windows and many of the antique furnishings. At Netherwind, the pair spent most of their time in the solarium in the company of Kip, Jane, and a couple of students who were tending to Jane's prize-winning orchids. The entire raiding party left a short while later, each member laden with a bag of freshly-made snickerdoodles and a jar of honey. The two leaders, each with a potted orchid in addition to their bags of cookies and jars of honey, followed the two trucks by car. As they were just pulling away from the house, the Homeland Security agent, through a mouthful of cookie, remarked, "At least it wasn't a wasted trip. My wife is going to love the orchid."

The FBI agent had to agree that it hadn't been a wasted trip, in fact, anything but, particularly because he didn't have a wife, or a girlfriend, which meant that he could contact Em, perhaps to ask her to dinner.

While Em and the agent didn't end up as a couple, they did become friends, part of this being due to the fact that reading her book had saved him. In later years, they would become even greater friends, with the agent providing inside information to Em, for Weatherly, which served to help a great many persecuted Christians.

Supplemental information was provided to those at the plantations for several decades from the orchids, which were a special variety known as ear orchids. These long-lived plants, with lifespans in general of over eighty years, were capable of listening to conversations and picking up on secrets, which were then recorded in flower petals that were subsequently shed. The petals containing information were then conveyed to Weatherly, generally by means of rookhs because the blackbirds had a great love for orchids and often found themselves checking on ear orchids that had left the plantations. Jane Tremaine was truly a gifted botanist, and had worked with a magician to develop these unique flowers.

No pockets were discovered during the raid because the searchers didn't know to look for them. Plus, the people looking inside doorways

and even inside pod buildings weren't ones prone to believing in seemingly-impossible things, or magic, or the supernatural. And believing was certainly the proven key, which was why most visitors to the mezzanine over the years never found anything usual. For the occasional, accidental discoveries, the Mind Key was used to erase memories so that the information was kept secret.

When the Netherwind-Laurelstone Schools first started, classes were mainly held in the manor houses. As the endeavor progressed over the years, the schools had erected several traditional buildings, such as two that held classrooms, the gym in which Em liked to train, two dorms, and three greenhouses. However, while some school activities were held in these facilities, they were mainly for show, since most of the classroom and other types of training were held in pods, many located in pockets. And a good many of the pod buildings in their various locations contained expandable rooms similar to the mezzanine's Weapons Room, necessary for the ever-growing enrollment of the schools. For instance, a pod that had appeared to the raiding party to be no larger inside than a small artist's studio actually held forty-four classrooms. Most of the pods situated on the grounds of the plantations had secondary entrances located in underground tunnels connected to pockets, so that fifty kids wouldn't be seen streaming all at once out of what appeared to be a small shed or storage building.

The catalyst that had prompted Fiona Campbell to start these schools had been a rather odd one, based on something that happened the very summer that Em, Kip, Preston, Charlie, Vini, and Ben spent at Netherwind. Although she had previously wanted to start a school, having long since been tired of the poor education kids seemed to be getting in public schools, something she heard on the radio was basically what gave her the push needed to actually put her thoughts into action.

On the Saturday following the discovery of the treasure room, Aunt Fiona happened to be in the parlor by herself listening to a half-hour Christian radio program geared to children. This was basically a radio play with several voice actors playing the different parts. It actually took a while after the program ended to fully register what she had heard because it seemed almost unbelievable. To make sure she had

heard correctly, she tuned in to another Christian radio station an hour later to listen to it again.

What it basically boiled down to was that a child had written an essay in school defending the traditional view of marriage—that it should be between one man and one woman. The teacher had given the boy a bad grade, so the child confronted the teacher, asking why. The teacher then proceeded to explain to the impressionable child that his thinking was much like an old computer whose hardware and software were both outdated, and that it all needed to be updated, and that people now have a choice, which was much better, in the same way that newer computers and programs were much better than older ones.

“Oh, I get it now,” the child responded. “My thinking was like old technology that needs to be replaced with new.”

“Exactly,” the teacher replied.

“So I need to update my way of thinking,” the child said.

“You’d better,” the teacher answered, “because your grade depends on it.”

Aunt Fiona *had* heard correctly. The teacher had actually threatened the child if he didn’t change his mindset regarding the issue of traditional marriage. He was not going to be allowed to have a biblical perspective of this issue because, if he did, he would suffer consequences. And this was being aired on a Christian network!

That clinched it. If even Christians were watering down the bible, and telling kids that God’s Word needed to be updated, she would start a school.

This is exactly what was predicted in the Word, she thought with shaking hands as she turned pages in her bible to locate a particular passage, which turned out to be Isaiah 5:20. “Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!”

While Aunt Fiona might have expected this from atheists, it was a little hard to believe that even Christians were calling evil good and good evil, and making out like we need to change our thinking to please society and be politically correct. *They don’t want to make any waves, or stand up for the truth. They just want their “ears tickled or scratched,”* she thought, referring to 2 Timothy 4:3-4. “For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching

ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own likings, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths.”

Aunt Fiona wondered how many Christian families were parking their kids down beside the radio to listen to this kind of thing, or in front of the television to watch programs probably expounding the same teachings. *They are teaching kids that they must water down their beliefs and change, in order to gain acceptance from teachers, peers, and society. It's so sad. And it's time for Christians to find their backbones, so their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren won't end up lost. If Christians are willing to compromise on this, they will on other things too. Then the church will become a joke, nothing more than a popularity contest among pastors who are watering down God's Word in order to please the masses.*

She was still livid over the radio program even months later when the first student enrollments began at the Netherwind-Laurelstone Schools. *Promoting worldly things and threatening children if they don't conform. We'll have none of this at these schools. We will have free speech; and we will teach God's Word, as it is written, as absolute truth, bought and paid for by the precious blood of Jesus Christ.*

While Aunt Fiona was setting up the schools, twenty-six legal cases made the news that solidified her resolve to make the venture successful. With the help of an atheist group, children in various parts of the country were suing their parents for child abuse for making them attend church and for teaching them biblical principles. In all but two of the cases, the child plaintiffs won! Not only were many of the children removed from their “abusive” homes, several of the parents were forced to serve jail time. Eleven years following these court cases, spanking was completely outlawed, along with all other forms of physical discipline such as restraints in cases where children were hurting others. Sadly, prohibiting spanking brought about the death of a two-year-old boy under the care of his elderly grandmother in a big city. While she constantly watched him, she wasn't fast enough to catch him one morning as he laughingly tore out the front door and into the street, where he was hit by a truck. Running into the street was something he was prone to doing, and a swat on the leg on a couple of occasions likely would have done the trick to deter him from this behavior. Sadly,

the grandmother was not allowed to swat the child to get his attention and teach him that there are consequences for disobedience; and his brain at that age was incapable of comprehending that anything he was doing might be life-threatening. Physical discipline had already been outlawed in many other countries of the world, so it was hardly surprising that the United States followed suit. Plus, it had been building to this for quite some time. In fact, Violet, when raising Otto, had run into the same trouble. One time when giving the twenty-two month Otto a smack on the leg for doing exactly the same thing as the city two-year-old, running into the street, a passerby in a car had threatened to call Child Protective Services on Violet for abusing her child. While thinking it was insane at the time, she never imagined that the world would shortly forbid parents from disciplining their children. However, she wouldn't have changed her methods even if a law had been implemented at the time because she would have rather served jail time than risk having a dead child.

The sorcerer who had brought about the raid was not particularly surprised that the searchers hadn't discovered anything, such as a military training facility, though he had been hoping they would find something that could force the shut-down of the schools. He actually wished he could just bomb the plantations, but this wasn't going to be possible because those opposing Satan and his followers still had the ability to use media; and it wouldn't do to kill a bunch of kids, many living year round at the schools. Also, with even some atheists making use of the hippotherapy program for their children, community support ran deep for Netherwind and Laurelstone. Plus, the plantations gave a lot of food to local food banks, this garnering a wide range of support, since so many people were in need of the donated food. No, the public outcry would be too great if the government just bombed the place. So something else would have to be done.

Sadly, there was too much support for private schools to outlaw them; and since they were located on private properties and enrollment was voluntary, current laws wouldn't allow the government to intervene with regard to the religious activities, either in the curriculum or in daily living practices at the schools, though it was incredibly maddening to the sorcerer—the thought of kids praying before mealtimes, reading bibles, and attending church services whenever they liked.

Despite the lack of success of the raid, the sorcerer would not be letting this go. If he couldn't get them on suspected terrorist activities, it would have to be something else. The properties were kept up, so he couldn't have them declared decrepit or abandoned. The curriculum at the schools seemed up to par, so he couldn't get them on that.

The Netherwind-Laurelstone Schools did indeed teach all of the traditional subjects, and well, to the point that the students always excelled at all the standardized tests, with most entering colleges far more prepared than peers who had graduated from public schools. But in addition to traditional classes, the plantation schools taught a good many more useful things, such as the use of the ropes, flutes, and mirrors. Professor Fulhausen taught students about firebirds, demons, enormice, gremlins, dragons, and such. Violet put her nursing skills to good use in teaching first-aid and CPR classes. Many of the teachers and students at the schools also made use of the *Foxfire* books to learn things like leather crafts, woodworking, canning, soap making, basket weaving, and how to tell poisonous mushrooms from edible ones.

Before Mrs. Galloway passed away, she had taught quilting; and now Jenny did on occasion, having learned the skills from her grandmother, whose specialty had been story quilts. In five years' time, Meg Fong, one of Jenny's gifted quilting students, would end up working with Marlon on a project to create a magical quilt that could be used to send messages. The stitching was able to change to form words of messages, but only in the hands of those for which the messages were intended. Thanks to the Great Multipliers (genies), many of these quilts would be made, serving to supplement message kites, as well as the activities of dawn pigeons.

The Netherwind-Laurelstone Schools still taught actual writing by hand, while most other schools simply relied on pocket-sized computers that were voice activated for students to use even when engaged in language exercises such as writing essays and diagramming sentences. In knowing something of what was to take place in the future, the plantations, of course, recognized the benefit of teaching handwriting to children. And there was no shortage of paper, with the bamboo forests thriving, as well as a paper manufacturer and print shop in full operation in one of the pockets.

The sorcerer/FBI supervisor had determined to continue thinking on the matter of the plantations; and his thinking paid off, allowing him to come up with a new angle of attack fairly quickly.

A federal law had been passed about eight months previous that older homes, ones not registered with the appropriate local Historical Society as Historical Homes by a certain cut-off date (some twenty-six years in the past), could be taken over by the Federal Government, to be done with whatever the government pleased. The intent behind the law had been for the sorcerers to get their hands on certain private properties, both large and small, in various parts of the country.

Doyle Mansion had been registered well before the cut-off date. However, while the both Netherwind and Laurelstone were registered, they had missed the date, so their status as Historic Homes was now to be considered null and void.

A mere five days after the raid, official notice was served to Kip and Weatherly that both plantations were to be taken over by the Federal Government in ten days, with any structures on the properties slated to be destroyed at that time. The time limit had been set as short as possible to prevent the use of media to garner public protest over the destruction of things like the stained glass windows, or the stables used for the hippotherapy program. The sorcerer also wanted to lessen the chance of any legal action being taken, a feat that would have been difficult with only a ten-day grace period.

The organization once known as FRASC (Freedom Rings and Speaks Coalition) had become FRISC (Freedom Rings in Speech Coalition.) While the Christian lawyers working for this group had once mainly only dealt with issues of Christian free speech—such as school athletes and coaches not being allowed to pray before games, and Devotional Clubs not being able to meet on campuses—as persecution of Christians had progressed, they had begun taking on all sorts of challenges, such as the destruction of art and people imprisoned for crimes they hadn't committed. However, while the organization was still operating, its efforts were mostly ineffectual because sorcerers had their claws firmly into the U.S. judicial system.

But whether FRISC would have been able to help or not wasn't of particular concern to Weatherly, who would be using a much different means of countering the attempted takeovers. She was actually smiling

as she made her plans. *The ability to time travel certainly has its advantages*, she thought. *Heavenly Father, thank You for giving us such a gift, such a wonderful blessing.* She would simply send a team back in time to change the dates of the homes' registrations.

Since this was a relatively simple operation compared to most, the team was comprised of only two people, Violet and Ben. Violet was going as Aunt Fiona, even wearing some of her vintage clothing to play the part, the articles being easy to obtain because Em still liked to wear her great-aunt's clothes on occasion, more out of nostalgia than preference, though the look tended to suit Em, who often had an air of something eclectic and old-fashioned about her anyway.

Ben would be impersonating Weatherly's father, and wearing some of his clothes to look the part of how Mr. Dawson would have looked not quite twenty-seven years in the past, which was how far the pair needed to go back in time.

Both Violet and Ben felt it unlikely that they would run into younger versions of themselves on this trip. For one thing, at the time in question, Violet had been out of the state, on a lengthy visit to help care for Aunt Eugenia who was recovering from gall bladder surgery. This was the same summer that Vini started working at Doyle Mansion. Ben had been working as a gardener at the mansion, and various other estates. As busy as he had been during that summer, he doubted his younger self would even recognize the older version, even if the two ran right into each other.

After easily completing their task, Violet and Ben decided to visit Paloma Drive, to have a peek at Doyle Mansion, since it was less than ten miles from the Registry Office.

The time travelers had been hoping they might catch a glimpse of Mrs. Doyle on one of her balconies, but they didn't see her. They did, however, see the Vinster (as Mrs. Doyle privately liked to call Vini) walking to work. Violet and Ben crouched down in the car to lessen the chance that she might see Ben. Vini hadn't met Violet yet at this time, but she did know Ben fairly well; and now was definitely not the right time for her to learn about time travel. Ben smiled in seeing his wife as a young girl trudging down the street, and waving to Mr. Galloway who was just coming out of his house. Ben remembered that summer fondly. Though he had at the time been more attracted to Louetta than

Vini, the next year had certainly proven an eye-opener with regard to the girl he would very quickly fall in love with, and who would turn out to be the greatest blessing of his life. Violet drove away fairly quickly after this so that Mr. Galloway wouldn't see them.

Upon returning home, Ben made a visit to the hippotherapy program to give Vini a big hug and kiss, and a bouquet of roses.

Property owners were allowed a means of protest with regard to the government takeovers, in the form of a brief court hearing, during which they could present a petition to try to prevent the action. Most petitions ended up failing due to lack of any evidence that could contradict the law.

The sorcerer was present for the hearing of the petitions for both manor houses, which Weatherly was there to present. In this case, the evidence clearly showed that the applications for both Netherwind and Laurelstone were received and noted on the official Registry List a full three months before the cut-off date. So the ruling was that both homes were clearly covered by the laws governing registration of Historic Homes.

The judge was extremely annoyed at having had the court's time wasted, and he actually scolded the sorcerer and his accompanying attorney. "You should have checked the registry dates, not just the dates the paperwork was complete."

Angry over the ruling and the scolding, the sorcerer actually approached Weatherly, who placidly stared him straight in the eyes. After about twelve seconds of the stare-down, the sorcerer happened to recognize that the blue rope his opponent was wearing on her shoulders was a weapon.

"She's got a rope!" he squawked loudly to the judge and the court security guard. "A rope! Right here!"

"Yes," the judge calmly replied, wondering at the strange outburst of this obviously inept FBI supervisor. "And I have one out in my truck...so what's your point? Just get out of my courtroom, before I have you thrown out."

The sorcerer and his lawyer left in a rather meek fashion after this.

In truth, the judge's niece was a child who had taken advantage of the hippotherapy program at Laurelstone, so he was actually very

pleased that the owners of the plantations had managed to present a compelling petition to prevent the government takeover.

With regard to recognizing the rope, the sorcerers were starting to get the idea that the weapons they had seen in Kivetel were here as well; but they had no idea of the scope, or how many people were being trained to use them.

Not at all happy about being thwarted, the sorcerer next devised an outright attack on the plantations by megahobs and demons.

But the attack ended up being badly timed on the part of the sorcerer due to a flock of rookhs resting in the pecan grove, and a convention of one hundred and twelve gargoyles taking place on the back lawns of Netherwind. Gargoyles generally only gathered in numbers such as this around once a decade, so it was extremely fortuitous (by divine design) for their convention to be happening exactly at the same time that a demon and megahob attack was taking place. Needless to say, the humans on the plantations were hardly troubled by the eighty-five megahobs and ninety-three demons invading the properties. In addition to the rookhs and gargoyles, several bigfoots were forced to get involved when a demon tore up two pomegranate bushes.

Observing from a window on Netherwind's third floor, Kip and Merri cringed in seeing a single bigfoot deal with four demons at once, ripping wings and limbs off of the evil creatures as easily as he might tear apart a grelt fly, a creature no bigger than an ordinary small apricot, but pesky enough when occasionally bothering the bigfoots' bee boxes.

Satan was even less happy than the sorcerer about the failed attack, not necessarily about the plantations staying intact and operational, but because the actions of the sorcerer had allowed four atheists in a car passing the plantations to see one of the groups of megahobs trekking onto the properties, accompanied by about fifteen demons flying above them. These particular observers would very shortly open their eyes and minds, and be saved. Satan hated losing atheists. If he were to lose even one in a thousand, the population of hell would grow much too small for his liking. And lessening the numbers of souls in torment through carelessness was completely unacceptable. This particular sorcerer wouldn't be able to trouble the plantations for quite a while, because Satan was making sure the man felt his wrath.

Chapter Thirteen

Bagicals and Buckets

Vini was taking Marlon and Merri with her on a mission, as a kind of treat for doing so well on their mid-term exams; and they were leaving early morning, just after breakfast. Though this was but the middle of March, spring had come early to the South, and the countryside was really starting to blossom—from trees and shrubs, to flowers and vines—transforming the plantations into colorful and fragrant living works of art.

Merri actually called Vini, Aunt Vini, in knowing her so well and having had her close by for so many years, even at family gatherings such as Easter and Christmas celebrations. Marlon simply knew Mrs. Dellinger as “the lady with the wind horse who could call unicorns.” Having a love for all things magical, including magical creatures, he was very excited to be going along, whatever the task, which Vini revealed to the youngsters was a quest to obtain bagicals. This made Marlon even more excited, as he was very familiar with these magical bags.

As they were getting ready to depart, he enthusiastically told Merri, “There can only be six bagicals in existence at one time. More can be created if any of the six are destroyed, but it takes three magicians drawing power from Sextessence to make one bagical. Each magician will have one piece of the magical puzzle needed to make the bag.”

While Merri was already familiar with bagicals, she listened politely, because she could tell that Marlon was anxious to show both of his traveling companions what he knew. “Bagicals are so cool,” he went on, “and can make so many magical things out of ordinary ones. Like, you could put in a baseball cap, and when it comes out, whoever wears it might be able to predict the weather.”

“They’re unpredictable and odd too,” Merri observed.

“True,” Marlon agreed. “Like someone could put in a stapler and a currycomb and come out with a cracker tin that’s always full of crackers.”

“Or nothing at all could come out, because the bags sometimes keep things to use later,” Merri added.

“We’ve had three of the bags for years,” Vini offered. “Now we’re going after two more of them.”

In addition to the two she and Ben had possessed since their youth, Mrs. Ellis had gifted the one she possessed to Vini and Ben as a wedding present. Having kept a pair of silver candlesticks in the bag for years, she gave those too. The trick of the candlesticks was that they could light without having candles in them. Mrs. Ellis, who had passed away exactly at the age of one hundred, had known the bag was magical, but hadn’t used it much, in knowing it was a powerful and mysterious object.

“What about the sixth one?” Marlon asked.

Vini shook her head as she answered. “No, we won’t be looking for that one. It belongs to someone who needs it.”

As the kids were boarding Dara, Marlon gushed to Merri, “Bagicals can be made out of anything, any kind of material.”

This was true, as evidenced by the three already in Vini’s possession, one made of velvet, another of silk, with the third being simply a flannel pillowcase.

Vini was riding Tulko for the quest, which was really a mini-quest because she felt the task was going to be relatively easy. As soon as she mounted, they were off, to Wisconsin to start with. Vini had learned of the whereabouts of the other bagicals from three separate sources. The talking peacock of her dreams had told her about the one in Wisconsin. According to one of Charlie’s visions, another could be found in Bolivia. The final bag, the one they wouldn’t be seeking, Vini had learned about during an auto-writing session; and it seemed to have a most colorful history.

Some forty years previous, three sorcerers had somehow gotten their hands on this bagical, which was actually an old duffel bag. Being created by magicians, the bag wasn’t prone to catering to evil, of any sort, and actually refused to work for the men, most often spitting out the items put inside unchanged, or making dangerous things like

toasters that could bite and shampoo that could burn. At one point, the sorcerers actually put a baby inside the bag, to see what would happen. This was a child they had kidnapped to raise and train as a hunter. The baby was unaffected because, as a safeguard, bagicals were designed not to work on most living things such as people, animals, and insects. Plants and flowers could generally be used, but not things like birds, snakes, small mammals, etc. Many things designed by magicians included this type of safeguard, the resizing trunk for one, which was a good thing because Pipac had once accidentally fallen into the trunk, giving his parents a good scare until they found him completely unharmed and unchanged.

Angry that the bagical wouldn't work for them, the sorcerers determined to destroy it. One of them tried to cut it into pieces; he ended up dead, smothered by the bag. Another tried to burn it and was strangled by the bag's cinching cord. The third sorcerer, basically terrified that he would meet his end by bagical, took it on a train ride and threw it out of a window at high speed.

The bagical was found beside the train tracks that same day by a hobo who had been looking for just such a thing—a useful bag. Deciding it quite liked the hobo, the bag basically adopted the man, who at first thought he might be dreaming when the duffel bag started to perform tricks, such as turning his old socks into a new pair of boots, and a toothbrush into a picnic lunch wrapped in a handy blanket. And when the man decided to share the lunch with three other hobos, the food somehow became enough for all of them to have a full and satisfying meal. Then, a spool of thread, an old potholder, and two twigs became two more blankets and another pair of boots, so the man could continue to share with his friends.

So this is what I've heard about all my life, the hobo decided. *God truly does look after His children. The meek shall inherit the earth after all. And the faithful poor shall receive riches as reward.* Indeed, for the remainder of his life, the hobo felt like a king with a vast treasure. Put in a crust of bread and a penny and pull out a roasted turkey leg and three apples. A cotton swab and gum wrapper produced a bus ticket to a faraway destination. A tube of toothpaste became everlasting, the tube never running out. Two empty tissue boxes, a button, and a maple leaf provided a whole group of homeless people with a meal of glazed

ham, green beans, and cherry pie. A tennis ball turned into one that could throw itself to entertain stray dogs. A tattered twelve-cent postage stamp became a box of bandages and a bottle of aspirin.

The bag was happy to continue to help the hobo, not only providing things like food and medicine, but also acting like a pillow, or sometimes as a hand warmer on cold nights. And the hobo was happy to continue to share his blessings with others. Once stolen by another hobo, the bag refused to work, until returned to the person it had adopted. Well cared for by the bag, the man lived a long life, as long as most men, dying from natural causes at age eighty-eight; and when he died, the bag adopted another hobo.

The story of the sixth bagical actually had to do with the game of Etowa and Boko. A move by Boko had allowed the sorcerers to take it into their possession. A move by Etowa had ensured that the hobo ended up with it.

But we must get back to the two bagicals of the mini-quest. Because Dara and Tulko were traveling fairly slowly, it took about twenty minutes to reach Wisconsin, where they landed in a secluded patch of trees. Merri, Marlon, and Vini then walked about a quarter of a mile to a small mom-and-pop grocery, selling a variety of things.

After buying a jar of jam from the woman who owned the store, and stashing it in the shoulder pack she was carrying, Vini purchased two toffees from a candy bin for the kids. While paying for the toffees, she casually inquired about the cheesecloth sack made of fairly heavy muslin hanging on the wall beside the check-out counter. “How much?”

“If you buy a box of the toffee,” the woman replied, “I’ll throw it in.”

Merri and Marlon, with their mouths full, were nodding bigly because the toffee was incredibly delicious.

“Okay,” Vini agreed, with a smile.

The woman was about to put the box of candy into the cheesecloth sack when Vini stopped her. “I’ll take the bag separate, if you don’t mind,” she said.

As they were heading back to the treed area to meet Dara and Tulko, with a slight note of disappointment in her voice, Merri said,

“Oh that might have been fun, Aunt Vini, to see what the bag would have done with the toffee.”

“It might have produced endless toffee,” Marlon chimed in.

“Or it might have made toffee that would choke anyone trying to eat it,” Vini answered, “or that could make someone gain twenty pounds in one day.”

The kids could definitely see her point, since no one could ever predict what a bagical might do.

They were off to Bolivia fairly swiftly, and were over the Atlantic Ocean when they came under attack by four demons riding nyregs. While nyregs couldn't fly anywhere near as fast as the full speed of wind horses, Dara and Tulko, surrounded and taken by surprise, couldn't fly as fast as they ordinarily might have to evade and flee because they had to be careful about the humans. Not to worry, because the humans, in this instance, were quite capable of taking care of matters themselves.

Vini didn't even need to reach for the dagger inside her jacket. Nor would she be calling a unicorn because Merri and Marlon had things well in hand, Merri with the blue rope she was carrying concealed in the top of her right boot, and Marlon with the mirror he was wearing as a belt buckle. The rope, in picking up colors from both sky and water became incredibly powerful in Merri's hands, sparking and sizzling as she wielded it with expertise, slashing and lashing at her opponents. So, too, the mirror gained power, drawing its charge from the sun shining upon them through the nearly cloudless expanse of sky.

Armed with a cross, as well as her dagger, Vini burned the eyes of one of the nyregs as it neared Tulko. This caused the winged beast to lurch sideways and actually dump its rider, whom Marlon then dealt with by two blasts of light issued from the mirror. Vini's pewter seven-inch cross was one of Aunt Eugenia's designs, but was a fairly new and foldable model, this being due to the genies getting involved in the manufacture of them. With crosses being outlawed in many places, and all destined to be so within the next couple of decades, the genies had decided to make ones using the same techniques applied to making the mini-bibles that people were now starting to wear as tie pins or carry in their wallets. Vini had been carrying the cross in her jeans pocket, in its

stored state of no larger than a matchbox. With one flick of a fingernail on a handy latch, the cross quickly unfolded to its larger size.

In less than five minutes, Merri and Marlon had killed three of the demons and their nyregs. As the fourth tried to flee, a blast from Marlon's mirror struck the final nyreg. With the beast dissipated under him, the final demon flew away, though in a slightly lopsided manner because Merri's rope had torn his left wing. In his wounded state, the demon just missed being hit again by the rope whizzing through the air. She had thrown it using a technique similar to a lasso move, though one that could make the weapon act more like a spear than a rope. While it missed its mark, it served to keep the demon moving and in fear, so he didn't double back to attack again.

Since the rope didn't have boomerang qualities, they needed to retrieve it; and Dara was so quick to follow that Merri managed to catch it before it even got close to the water.

As Marlon watched, in recognizing that having to retrieve a thrown rope was impractical, not to mention being a safety issue in that its user was left unarmed for a time, he made a mental note as to a project he might want to work on in the future—a rope that could come back when its user called to it. And he did indeed create a rope with this feature in less than ten years' time.

With the danger having passed, Vini took a deep breath to calm down, before fishing in her pack for apples for them each to have as a snack. The horses didn't want any, though Merri and Marlon each offered theirs to them. Vini hadn't offered Dara and Tulko anything because she knew better. Unlike puck trolls and certain other magical creatures, wind horses chose never to eat people food.

In short order, they were once again on their way to Bolivia, to a crowded market in the city of La Paz upon which the afternoon sun was shining brightly. (While some people might have been disoriented in going from morning to afternoon so quickly, the mini-quest party was used to this sort of thing.)

Dara and Tulko dropped their riders off in as quiet a spot as possible, in a market alley too small for most vehicles and currently unoccupied by pedestrians.

One of the market vendors had the bagical, which looked exactly as Charlie had described it to Vini from her vision—made of a heavy

brocade fabric, mostly green but with an orange and gold pattern, and sporting a gold tasseled drawstring.

For the bag, Vini traded a rag doll and a sock animal puppy that she had stashed in her pack. These were some of the items being made by the Netherwind-Laurelstone Schools' sewing classes in preparation for the annual Fall Craft Fair on the plantations. The smiling vendor, an elderly man, was quite happy to trade the brocade bag for these toys, which he later presented to his two grandchildren.

The mini-questers next returned home, without incident, by way of seeing a few sights, including Victoria Falls in Africa, Lake Atitlán in Guatemala, and Redwoods National Park in California. Even with the leisurely trip home, they arrived back at the plantations well before lunchtime.

Stowing the newly-acquired bagicals with the other three in a walk-in safe tucked away deep in the Labyrinth Library, Vini thought about the bags. Even after all these years, it was still amazing to her what they were capable of, such as creating dimes that could serve to protect anyone carrying them from physical harm in acting as a kind of shield or force field, in a manner similar to the way Gavin's sapphires worked.

On the day after the trip to obtain the two bagicals, Marlon and Merri met Vini and Samantha in the Labyrinth Library after school for a special project, that of using the flannel pillowcase bagical to create more dimes, and the resizing trunk to make thimbles capable of measuring dragon tears for use as healing draughts. The pillowcase could easily make almost any dime into one with shield qualities, the exception being dimes from 1947. (These turned into cloth headbands for some reason, and ones that didn't seem to perform any tricks.) The resizing truck somehow knew exactly what size the thimbles needed to be to hold dragon tears; this had to be very exact because too little tears didn't work to heal a person, and too many could kill.

In a special room very near the safe where many magical objects such as the bagicals were stored, the group set to work with gusto. Both dimes and thimbles took some time because they had to go in one at a time. A person couldn't just fill the bag or trunk and then dump them out. But by coming every day after school for a week, they quickly had two enormous buckets of dimes completely filled, along with six buckets of thimbles. These were going to be very useful in the coming

years during battles, when God's children would need the extra help relating to both shielding and healing.

Oddly enough, on one of the days when the group was working on this project, and feeling very hungry, from several of the dimes put in, the bagical turned out hotdogs and oranges for everyone.

As far as the dimes turning into the equivalent of shields, this originally happened to one of Ben's dimes when he first discovered that he had a magical bag. And the reason the dime developed shield-like qualities was because Vini's zippered bible had been in the pillowcase just before the dime went in. Since the Word of God is a shield, the flannel bagical applied this truth and wisdom to the next item placed inside it, and to subsequent dimes because it seemed the proper thing to do.

Yes, bagicals were capable of making some pretty special things, such as twenty-two years into the future when the brocade bag would produce the Fifty-One Medallion for a boy named Ethan Stanley who, as long as he was carrying the medallion, would be given exactly fifty-one chances each year to cheat death.

In the future, the Great Multipliers would help human beings make even more dimes and thimbles, so that many Christians on the planet could have this protection. And dragon tears would be carried in small flasks by many people to be readily available for use.

For the present, the buckets of dimes and thimbles were stored in the safe, next to a small bucket full of blessed diamonds, two filled with cursed diamonds, and one containing sapphires. It had been easy for Chelsea and Gavin to cry during their stay at the plantations, and they had both decided to give Weatherly all of the stones to use for her operations.

Not so very long into the future, diamonds would lose all monetary value, as many people became aware of the existence of cursed stones. Most diamond jewelry, even pieces of fabulous quality once worth millions of dollars, would be treated as trash, discarded out of fear of death, disease, or other misfortunes.

Chapter Fourteen

Daisy Chains

While it might have seemed odd for a six-year-old to even know what suicide was, let alone take an interest in the issue, this was exactly how old Trista was when she started to become aware of her gift. Being around alcoholism and abuse in the early years of her life had brought her into contact with several instances of suicide, and numerous attempts, one of which she prevented at age seven. In somehow knowing that her elderly neighbor, a widow named Bev Riedel, was in some sort of trouble, Trista had calmly walked next door, also somehow knowing to pick two handfuls of daisies from Mrs. Riedel's front flower bed before entering the house. Trista then slowly demonstrated to the woman how to make a daisy chain, even guiding Mrs. Riedel's arthritic fingers on a few occasions until the chain was complete.

While the daisy chains that saved people from suicide were accurately described as magical objects—because when no daisies were readily available, they somehow magically appeared on the scene ready for use, as had been the case at Walter Orr's house—what actually saved people from themselves was the time spent making the chain, during which, the potential victims were most often able to talk themselves out of their plan. As the links of the chain were formed, the suicidal people often found certain past life events playing out in their minds, such as a scene from a birthday party, having a swim in a lake, an argument with a spouse, or even smaller events such as finding a penny on a sidewalk on a hot summer day, or wrestling with the lid of a pickle jar. Though much varied as to content, with some even being not entirely pleasant such as quarrels with loved ones, the images tended to soothe and heal troubled minds and souls, to the point that the person making the chain was able to see clearly that the seriousness and finality of ending his or her life was not at all the best course of action to take.

These mind images actually came through a sort of medium, namely Trista and others like her, who were the real daisy chains, as far as being

magical. In acting as a channel, these gifted people actually had the images running through their minds at the same time as the person in question, with the piecing of the chain merely being something that kept its maker occupied during the time needed for the sequence of mind scenes to be complete.

What Walter Orr had seen during the time he worked on his chain mainly pertained to his daughter, and was more of a way for him to officially grieve for her, rather than blaming himself for how her life had turned out, which was what he had been doing almost constantly for about the past six months straight, largely because a couple of Satan's demons had been nearby, planting thoughts in his mind during that time. Nearing the end of the sequence of images that Mr. Orr's mind saw, he recognized a wooden cross painted white on the lawn of a small church he used to walk by each day as a young boy on his way to and from school. The cross in his vision was lit brightly by the sun shining upon its freshly-painted surface.

Trista hadn't needed to say a word during the whole process, because God did all of the work, although through her. She had simply handed flowers to Walter Orr, methodically, one by one, while occasionally lending a finger or two to help him hold a folded daisy stem in place in readiness for attaching the next flower.

In addition to being a medium, Trista possessed a version of the wordsmith gift that pertained to writing and delivering speeches. Taking a keen interest in certain societal issues such as suicide, teen pregnancy, and alcoholism, she had started giving classroom speeches as early as grade school. Entering her middle and high school years, she quickly progressed to speaking to wider audiences such as church youth groups, summer camp attendees, and even college students. She was regularly asked to speak at colleges because, when she talked about suicide, the numbers of attempted suicides on campuses drastically dropped. When she spoke on the importance of abstinence from premarital sex, instances of teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases decreased. Like Em, Trista always managed to add a biblical component to her work, often quoting scripture, such as when giving a speech on alcoholism when she quoted Proverbs 20:1. "Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler; and whoever is led astray by it is not wise."

While she mainly wrote speeches, and occasionally essays, Trista wanted to learn more about writing poetry, which was one thing she had consulted Em about during their time together at the inn, after which, they jointly wrote a poem inspired by spending an afternoon in the gardens of the inn, admiring the many colorful birds such as finches, buntings, and cardinals, all as busy as could be in the early springtime.

Ode to a Painted Bunting

A painted bunting most bright
Fluttering through clouds on high;
His colors fully alight,
Mirror rainbows in the sky.
He presents a lovely sight,
Exhibiting such great flair,
Our darkest thoughts can turn light,
To dispel any despair.
Like a heavenly flower
That can make our hearts take wing,
Under such divine power
Our very souls learn to sing.

The pair of writers also fine-tuned one of Trista's speeches relating to suicide. This happened to be a speech she had given over twenty times titled, "Imagine a World in Which Everyone Takes the Time...."

The title was, of course, referring to the time it takes to make a daisy chain; but Trista never mentioned this in her speech because she felt it might confuse the audience, or possibly distract from the point of the message, which was the importance of putting time into others. "In fact, a couple of hours spent on someone could save that person's life." She typically began the speech by giving a short list of signs that could identify potentially suicidal people such as constantly talking about death, engaging in risky behavior like running red lights or trying to beat a train, giving away belongings, unexpected mood swings, difficulty sleeping, poor appetite, loss of interest in enjoyable activities, expressions of hopelessness, goodbyes that seem overly-purposeful, making a will, talking about suicide, or discussing a plan for suicide, even jokingly. Em had encouraged Trista to place this information at the end of the speech, so that the audience would stand a better chance

of remembering the warning signs. Plus, having too many technical details at the beginning of a talk often caused listeners to lose interest and tune things out.

Part of the speech had to do with whether or not suicide was an unforgivable sin according to Christian beliefs. Many audience members, being worried for the souls of loved ones who had committed suicide, were intensely interested in this subject.

Some Christians believed suicide was unforgivable, with one concept being that people killing themselves couldn't ask for forgiveness for it afterwards, as they could for other sins like theft, pride, selfishness, slander, deceitfulness, etc. However, many Christians didn't believe it was unforgivable, though all agreed it was a sin, and an especially grievous one because it usurped God's authority, His will and plan for a person's life. This made more sense to Trista than the "unforgivable" idea because a person could die unexpectedly, without having asked forgiveness for any number of sins. Plus, nothing in the bible supported the supposition that it was unforgivable. But she made sure to stress in her speech that suicide definitely was a sin, murder in fact, a clear violation of one of the Ten Commandments. "Thou shall not kill." This included murder of one's self, and for sure a person committing suicide would suffer terrible consequences when facing judgement from God. Plus, the act not only had a horrible effect on a person's soul in the hereafter, but on his or her loved ones still living. Life is such a precious gift, which is why we should take the issue of suicide so seriously, and especially if a person exhibits any of the warning signs.

As far as Trista's daisy-chain gift, while she hadn't kept count of the persons she'd saved, several watchmen had, along with Etowa and Boko. So far the total was exactly six hundred and four, spanning a wide range of peoples as far as their ages and backgrounds, as well as the situations that had distressed them to the point of wanting to attempt suicide. While she couldn't stop everyone, especially because some people acted in an impromptu manner, her gift basically acted like a magnet, drawing her to the individuals. Some who could remember certain things that had happened during Trista's intervention thought they had been visited by an angel, and this served to save quite a few unbelievers.

Often, a good deal of what happened on her trips was mysterious even to Trista, especially the hummingbird thing. While she hadn't said anything to Charlie or Tobin, Trista was often visited by the very same hummingbird that had taken such an interest in her shirt when they stopped for lunch on their way to Missouri. According to folklore, hummingbirds had something to do with time, though exactly what was a mystery. The presence of the hummingbird made perfect sense with regard to the daisy chains, since it was time that was saving people, a true gift from God, though time as people measured it was nothing to Him, with "a thousand years being as one day, and one day being as a thousand years." But time was pretty important for human beings to pay attention to, as far as how much we can fit into our earthly lives, which are incredibly short compared to our eternal lives, barely a blink in comparison, in fact.

Em had still been at the inn and decided to go along when Trista gave a speech at a local community center on the subject of Teen Alcoholism. Dell Brinker also showed up to support Trista, his good friend of six years. They had first met when his family came to the inn on vacation, and to use the library, Dell's mother being an historian. Now, Dell and Trista corresponded regularly, mainly by zipakola water lizard, because the lizards never minded carrying a letter or two along with the books they were toting anyway between libraries.

Trista and Dell were not boyfriend and girlfriend; they were just good friends, in part because this was just meant to be, with the other part being because Trista knew that Dell secretly admired Samantha. In truth, Trista was more attracted to Tobin, but would end up shying away from him in the future when she saw him drinking at a college party. While he was only slightly drunk, it was a huge turn-off for Trista, not only because of her beliefs and the causes she supported, but also because of her parents, both of whom were alcoholic and destructive, the two terms always going hand-in-hand with each other as far as she could tell.

A couple of days after the party, Trista took the opportunity to talk to Tobin, even quoting Ephesians 5:18 to him. "And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit..." Frequently rebuking drunkenness, she also liked to use Proverbs 23:31-32. "Do not look at wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup and

goes down smoothly. At the last it bites like a serpent, and stings like an adder.”

Whether or not Tobin was at risk for addiction, she simply didn't want that type of complication in her life. He never did become alcohol dependent; but he did regularly drink, like a lot of people. And Trista had very strong feelings about this, like a lot of things. She felt any drinking “to get a buzz” was sinful, whether or not people did sinful things while in their drunken states. Having seen families torn apart, abuse of family members and others, health damage such as failing kidneys and brains lessened in function, and innocent people killed by drunk drivers, she wanted no part of anyone who liked to drink. Plus, she saw many people hiding behind the disease of alcohol addiction, claiming their destructive behaviors to be beyond their control. While it was well proven that certain people had a predisposition to certain addictions, it was still their choice to take the first drink, or smoke the first cigarette, or go to a casino for the first time. “If someone knew that eating red velvet cupcakes was going to give them cancer, wouldn't they avoid eating red velvet cupcakes?” (This was something she offered during her speech; and she was surprised to receive applause for the comment.)

As far as statistics, in the United States alone, the problem of addiction had reached epic proportions, with one in four people ending up addicted to something such as alcohol, gambling, or porn. And, of course, many people couldn't afford to support their addictions, which led to people buying cigarettes or beer, instead of shoes and food for their kids. Tobin saw this all the time at the soup kitchen and food banks, people reeking of alcohol and cigarettes coming in to get food, which was why Trista had been somewhat surprised to see him drinking.

Parents were a huge contributing factor to the problem, starting decades past when many began hosting parties so that their teens could drink, carouse, and even have sex in a “safe environment.” These parents were not being “responsible” as they claimed, but were simply more interested in pleasing their children, and being their friends, rather than being parents to them. There is nothing good and loving about encouraging, allowing, condoning, or whatever, these types of behaviors.

Other problems stemmed from alcohol too, such as when a man working on the plantations got drunk and spilled the beans about one of the pockets to a stranger who happened to be a mimic. This mimic immediately reported the secret to a sorcerer who swiftly staged an assault.

But, of course, those living in the pockets were far from helpless, so the damage ended up being minimal. This happened to be the pocket in which Lóhere resided; and during the assault by a legion of demons under the command of the mimic and sorcerer, many children climbed up his fur like ropes to safety. Then, it was a simple task for the behemoth to stomp most of the demons. The sorcerer tried using a spell on the enormous beast; but this only served to make Lóhere's nose tickle, after which, he sneezed, completely covering the sorcerer in great globs of greenish snot.

Over a hundred megahobs followed the demons into the pocket, which Lóhere also stomped; and when several of them started biting his ankles, his stomping turned into something resembling a fast tap dance, during which, his gigantic hooves completely squashed eighty-six of the nasty creatures in less than thirty seconds flat. Any remaining demons and megahobs were taken care of by a couple of women wielding flutes. The sorcerer and mimic had already perished during the tap dance.

We might remind ourselves here that these pockets, opened up as places of refuge and resources for God's children, were a completely different type of pocket than Demon Pockets. As traps set by sorcerers and demons for human beings, Demon Pockets were most often opened up by Dark Energy, not at all related to the triangular sciences and Light Energy used by Otto and the magicians.

Back at the inn, Dell was staying the night, his parents having approved since this was a Friday and no school was scheduled the next day.

Early the next morning, he accompanied Trista on one of her daisy-chain trips to West Virginia. His parents approved this as well because, by Trista's assurance, the trip was just for the day, so he would be home by evening as expected.

A pair of rookhs took Dell and Trista to the home of a man in a small mountain town in West Virginia.

Less than two hours later, the chain was made and the man was safe. Done well before noon, the pair decided to look for arrowheads stuck in trees in the woods. These had been left by Native American hunters when the arrows landed high up (too high to reach) in trees too small to climb. Then when the trees grew up and could be climbed, people often found the arrowheads; but not the wooden shafts of the arrows, these having long since deteriorated. Since early childhood, Trista had loved to climb trees, anywhere she went; and when she found her first arrowhead at age seven, she was hooked. They were difficult to find, and she had only a small collection of them thus far, eight in total. But the fact that she didn't find them very often didn't make searching for them any less fun. While rookhs often helped her travel, Trista always climbed the trees herself to look for and obtain the arrowheads because she felt it would be something like cheating, to just easily sidle up to trees to have a look or get one loose. If the tree had made the effort to grow all those years—often living through adverse conditions like storm and drought while keeping the arrowhead safe—she felt she should make something of an effort too. She generally carried a small pocketknife in order to pry the head from the wood.

They didn't find an arrowhead on this day, but had great fun looking.

Coincidentally, Fritz Hollingsworth had engaged in the exact same hobby since his youth. His collection was larger than Trista's, at thirty-four; but this was not due to his being older, or having traveled more, in fact, he traveled less than she. No, it was more that his sight gift gave him an advantage in seeing the arrowheads from the ground, so he knew exactly which trees to climb.

Climbing trees often helped Trista unwind after a daisy-chain encounter. Learning certain intimate details of people's lives during her time spent with them often troubled Trista, especially when the mind images playing out had to do with the very events that had led to the person's current desperate state such as a betrayal by a family member, the loss of a job, or someone discovering he or she has cancer. Often, guilt over sins was a factor, or anger over circumstances, or simply that a person had been unable to forgive either themselves or someone else for certain things. Jealousy and bitterness also played their parts on occasion, as did the desire to get even. The West Virginia person had

been wracked with guilt over having committed all seven of the abomination sins listed in Proverbs 6:16-19. “There are six things which the LORD hates, seven which are an abomination to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that make haste to run to evil, a false witness who breathes out lies, and a man who sows discord among brothers.”

Trista tried not to be judgmental; but it was a little overwhelming at times to discover exactly how people had led their lives—cheating and lying, out for what they could get, and often never bothered by whom they might have trampled on to get what they wanted.

Though many of these things were distressing, what seemed to be troubling Trista the most recently was the fact that she had, just two months previous, barely managed to arrive in time to save a close friend, a boy her age that she had known since grade school. He was gay, and this was at the root of why he had wanted to kill himself. In doing some research, she discovered that instances of suicide were much higher in the gay community as compared to straight. (The term “straight” to describe heterosexuals was currently being used, and accepted, though it had several times over the years fallen out of favor when it caused offense to certain members of the gay community who took straight to mean upright and respectable, and objected on the grounds that it implied gay people were not.)

Because she had been thinking about writing a speech on this issue, this was another thing Trista had consulted Em on during her stay; and their discussion centered more on the possible consequences of giving the speech, rather than the exact content. While Trista wanted to work on this mainly because of the connection to suicide numbers, since the issue was incredibly complex, she knew that her speech would have to include the Christian perspective on the issue of being gay. Em had actually written several articles over the years relating to gay issues that gave a traditionally Christian view, one article even recently, after the law was passed relating to speaking out. Her focus had been on defending the right for people on both sides to be able to voice their beliefs. While she had risked going to prison in doing this, she felt the risk was worth it. “Look at how much writing the apostle Paul was able to get done in prison,” she told Trista, “all those books of the bible.”

However, Em felt the risk of Trista speaking out would be much greater than the risk she herself had taken. “They might not want to imprison a prize-winning writer over a matter that basically boils down to free speech,” she said to both Trista and her aunt, “but they might want to make an example of a high school girl going around giving speeches that express a Christian view of being gay.”

Chapter Fifteen

The Speech

Despite the possible consequences, Trista did decide to go forward. However, in doing so, she found herself needing to do quite a lot of research, much more so than, say, on the subject of alcoholism. But this was probably because the way alcohol was connected to suicide was pretty obvious, whereas, it wasn't with being gay. From her daisy-chain encounters, she had discovered that the reasons people tried to commit suicide were incredibly varied. One person she saved had lost a pet. Another couldn't handle the stress of going through a divorce. The best friend of one had committed suicide, and this seemed like an easy way out to that person too. In the case of Trista's close friend, he felt conflicted about being gay, and was deeply unhappy. Did other people feel conflicted about being gay, based on religion or upbringing maybe; or were there other factors involved, like alcohol or depression? From research, she discovered that instances of divorce were higher among gay marriages than traditional ones. Also, cases of spousal abuse were incredibly high in the gay community, both men and woman, as compared to instances in traditional marriages; and while she knew that a lot of incidents didn't get reported, she thought the numbers of unreported cases would be similar among both groups.

In thinking of these things, she worried for a cousin of hers who was gay, as well as an older stepbrother. She had never had much contact with her stepbrother because he was already a teenager and living in another state by the time Trista was born. But she certainly cared about him, especially now in learning some of these statistics. She knew he was married. *What if he is being abused?* She also thought he was a believer. *What if he feels conflicted and tries to kill himself?* She prayed earnestly that if this was ever the case, someone with the daisy-chain gift would be able to help, or someone else just by noticing warning signs and taking the time to intervene.

Setting aside the abuse and divorce issues for now, she decided to focus on the suicide angle for her speech because this was a subject she was more familiar with. Though she didn't understand why, the numbers were speaking very clearly—being gay put someone at a much higher risk for committing suicide (not even counting attempts that weren't successful), at eight times more likely, according to the current statistics. While she didn't personally believe that living a gay lifestyle was what God intended, she felt it was even less what He intended for anyone to kill themselves, gay or otherwise. In feeling like she wanted to do something to help, she felt more helpless than anything else, which was why she felt compelled to write the speech, because it was something she could do to help her feel more in control, and like she might be able to help in some way. But she needed to understand what she was writing about in order to do a good job; and, in fact, she didn't have the first idea what it meant to be gay, or why many people were so adamant that they were born this way.

In doing research, she discovered more confusion than anything else, as well as a lot of high tempers, so she resorted to prayer. *Heavenly Father, please help me to understand things. Please guide me, and help me learn the truth.*

And He did guide her, to just the right web information, from which He also helped her discern truth. There were many valid opinions on both sides as to why people were gay. Many felt it was genetic. Some felt it was early influences—what people were exposed to even as early as their toddler years that stimulated them, this being similar as to how certain fetishes were formed. Others equated being gay to younger siblings wanting to develop different identities than their older brothers and sisters; and this was supported by statistics in that gay people were more likely to have older brothers and sisters that were straight, rather than the other way around.

A chat site for people who had once thought they were gay, but no longer believed this, gave Trista a great deal of insight. One woman in her late forties said she had been pushed in that direction by her parents. This was at a time when being gay was becoming very socially acceptable and applauded, this being prominent in various sorts of media, particularly entertainment, social, and news. The parents already had a straight daughter, and they wanted their family to be as diverse as

possible. They also wanted to be thought of as being politically correct with regard to the issue. Another woman also in her forties stated she had simply followed a trend because it gained her social acceptance. “I was in drama in high school,” she said. “At the time, the theater was a good place to meet gay people. And it was less awkward for me to connect with other girls, rather than boys. Then, you have this whole big social support group on your side, even lobbyists, telling you to celebrate yourself and your lifestyle.” On the same chat site, a woman in her fifties said she was treated badly by men, and so found more acceptance and love among women.

Several men of ages ranging from thirties to fifties reported an experience similar to one another. They had been effeminate and/or weedy in their youth and had parents and other adults like teachers or aunts and uncles, and sometimes older siblings, pushing them in the direction of being gay. “It’s okay to be gay, we’ll support you, we want you to be happy, let’s get you signed up with a support group, etc.” Trista found these testimonies particularly sad. Of course people can’t judge the interior of a person by the exterior, so how sad that the parents and other influential people hadn’t seen what damage they were doing. This was similar, in her opinion, to the issue of beauty pageants. She had given a few speeches on that subject as well. No matter how much was written or said about the good involved, such as the charity work or attention and monies brought to worthy causes, it still boiled down to the issue of beauty. No matter what “talents” were involved, only “pretty” people were allowed into these inner circles, which were ultimately about what the participants could get out of life, and not what they might be able to contribute to the fallen world.

And it was hard to determine which was worse, beauty pageants for children or those for adults. For every hundred child contestants, thousands were left wishing they could be involved; but of course they couldn’t, often lacking both “looks” and resources to afford such things as piano or dance lessons. With regards to adults, the ideal standard of beauty put forth in pageants left most of the female population of the world basically out in the cold, often causing many to spend a fortune on beauty products and weight-loss programs. Still others craved plastic surgery, with many who couldn’t afford these “enhancements and corrections” left unhappy with their appearances their whole lives.

Sadly, since many of the procedures were unhealthy, those who could afford to have them done were often left with lifelong medical problems. Persons who approved of beauty pageants were all being deceived, Trista felt, by none other than the Great Deceiver himself. What a snake Satan truly was.

And this connected to what was ringing most true to her of all of her research information—that Satan had corrupted the whole world, including human sexuality. Before Adam and Eve were cast out of the garden, things were much different, and were the way God intended the earth to be. There was no disease, no hunger, no abuse, no murder, and no death of any kind as we know it. The original people were probably much different creatures, possibly more like beings of light, perhaps incapable of incurring injury; or if injured, they might have been able to heal themselves. Animals were different too, such as that lions were not meant to be vicious man-eating creatures.

Satan was the one who brought disease, corruption, hate, and other ills into the world. And this was exactly where things like alcoholism and depression came from. If we consider that it is proven that some people are predisposed to these things, then it is completely likely that someone could be predisposed to be gay. If so, the genetic angle might be correct.

As much emotional heatedness was involved in discussions of gay matters, Trista pretty much knew that equating homosexuality to a disease like alcoholism was bound to make some people pretty angry. However, this was what was ringing true to her; and she couldn't deny truth, no matter what the feelings involved.

God may have saved mankind from eternal death by sending His Son, but He can't change human will. The earth is still fully the territory of Satan, the creature responsible for corrupting everything here, such as ideas about money and relationships, even science. Scholars had long since proven the theory of evolution to be seriously flawed, and unworthy even of study. Yet, it was still being taught in schools.

Plus, science was often wrong, even aside from corruption, such as the idea of the blue whale being the largest mammal on earth. Clearly, the behemoth was the largest one now known to mankind, perhaps not in length, but in total mass, at about a third larger than the largest blue

whale ever seen. It was also currently known that leviathans could match the size of the blue whale, though it was not clear if any were particularly larger. Of course, with magical things such as these being secret, Trista couldn't add them to her speech. But she did feel it was safe to say that many things in the world were still a mystery, and that we often don't know as much as we think we do, about anything.

People often look to the sciences for answers. And look at where we are now, in more trouble than we've ever been in because bombs are killing us and many medicines actually make us sick. So if we can't look to science for fixes, we must look to miracles, magic, and the supernatural.

In truth, all of mankind has a terminal sickness, brought about by the fall of Adam and Eve. We can't deny that something is clearly wrong with human nature—we're selfish, prideful, hateful, envious, unforgiving, and on and on—and this isn't what God intended. So we definitely can't look to human nature for fixes. Feelings can't be trusted. Often, our consciences are conditioned, or seared, and no longer functioning as they were meant to. Even concepts of love are skewed, as evidenced by how some people stay in abusive relationships. We can't know the kind of love God actually intended for us here on earth because our feelings and fleshly nature cloud our judgement. Satan caused all of this; and God provides the only cure in the form of a relationship with Him, one that is miraculous, magical, and supernatural.

On the subject of science, the genetics factor relating to being gay was completely confusing to Trista. If people were genetically predisposed, why hadn't scientists found conclusive evidence by now? Satan, being supernatural, could easily fabricate evidence for people to discover. He had obviously been doing this through scientists for many years. But in this case, if evidence did exist, she reasoned he'd probably be more interested in continuing the controversy. Though aware that some might scoff at her mention of magical and supernatural things, Trista couldn't help herself. People couldn't deny that supernatural things were occurring every day in our world. Those denying were wearing blinders, in her opinion, and this was very dangerous, particularly in a world where demons and sorcerers clearly were known to exist.

In her research, Trista discovered that many people responded to homosexuality being likened to an illness by claiming that being gay was perfectly natural. The main counterpoint to this was that Christianity has never been about conforming to nature, but rather, fighting the flesh and other worldly things. And as far as the predisposition angle, we choose to fight other things we're predisposed to such as depression, cancer, and alcoholism. With regard to being born this way and not having a choice, the behaviors are choices, such as the choice to take the first drink when someone's parents or grandparents are alcoholics. It's also a choice to have that first cigarette when cancer runs in the family, or to not watch one's weight when heart disease is prevalent. In response to the claim of homosexuality being perfectly natural, most people actually believed it was not, because no matter how powerful the desire or inclination, natural sex would be between male and female, based on how human beings are designed. Feelings were given as a counterpoint, with the Christian response to that being that we're not supposed to conform to our feelings. Human beings fall in and out of love based on feelings. We might feel like killing people sometimes, but we don't. People often change their minds about a lot of things based on feelings.

Trista's research yielded some debate over gay people losing their Salvation. But of course we can't lose being saved because God didn't make Salvation conditional. He loves and forgives all sinners. Of course, many people object to members of the gay community being called sinners. But everyone sins. There are no perfect people. There has only ever been one perfect person, and He was killed by other people; but this was according to God's plan. And perhaps the full truth about the gay issue has never come to light by God's choice, not by Satan's; and this might be a test in that we aren't supposed to judge one another because we all have sinned.

Christians not being permitted to express their views on this issue was particularly upsetting to Trista. If we're not allowed to talk about certain things, how can we help someone who might be suicidal? And she couldn't believe people would call Christians hateful for trying to help people. But this had all been foretold in prophecy—that people would start to call evil good and good evil. Also foretold was that even

many Christians would buy into this, again, being deceived by the Great Deceiver.

Another troubling discovery of her research was that children raised by gay couples had higher instances of suicide than those raised in traditional settings. One of the chat sites included testimonies from children raised by gay couples that described some of the unhealthy things that had happened during their upbringing, such as witnessing abuse and affairs. Also described were frequent visitors to the homes that were, quite frankly, not safe to be around children. So the issue of traditional marriage versus gay marriage with regard to raising children was having a long-reaching and generational impact; and clearly, in many instances, a traditional-marriage setting was better for children.

Feeling a little downcast and pressured, because this was such a serious subject, Trista decided to take a break from research and speech writing. After praying and reading the bible for a bit, she spent some time in the inn gardens, where she happened to see a whole slew of monarch butterflies passing through on their yearly migration, heading north to Canada. Observing their floating and flitting, she already felt lighter, less weighted. Sometimes she felt like the weight of the whole world was on her shoulders. Whenever she felt like that, she would pray and ask God for help. He never meant for her to go it alone, and she knew that. And anytime she asked for help, He always provided a lift for her such as leading her out to the gardens so that she could see the butterflies.

It felt almost as though she was among them, lifted out of her circumstances, even herself. Trista had always been a serious person, often with a somewhat sad demeanor about her, probably because she had never had much time in her youth to be carefree, to actually be a young girl and act like one with regards to things like playing with dolls, having tea parties, skipping rope, or going to sleepovers. From such an early age, she had been forced to deal with the bad situation at home, though this had vastly improved when she came to live with her Aunt Leona, who basically became her mother. That very event was such a blessing, and a turning point. And from that time on, Trista always had hope and confidence in God, that He would guide her, hold her, and even rescue her whenever she needed rescuing, because that's exactly what He had done.

Watching the monarchs, she decided to count them. Five...eleven...seventeen...twenty-six...

...thirty-three...thirty-five...thirty-seven so far, in only about twenty-five minutes. They were taking a definite path over the inn property—between the privet hedge and the tulip beds and over the pergola covered in lush wisteria that was just starting to show some purple drapes of blossoms. She was losing sight of them just beyond the stone fence covered with various climbing roses that bordered the neighboring property.

“Taking the time” (in this case to watch butterflies) was the same theme she often worked into her speeches. *If we each only took the time*, she thought, *the world would become a better place.*

Out of a window, Aunt Leona happened to be watching her niece sitting on a bench in the garden. Smiling and reminiscing, she recalled having a dream shortly before Trista came to live with her. The dream basically involved getting a huge box tied with a big bow as a present. She wasn’t allowed to open the box until a certain time, marked on the calendar of that year as the last day in June, which was the exact date she had received the biggest blessing of her life, the day Trista was handed over to her. Leona had never married and didn’t think she would ever have kids; but she had been given the best kid in the world, as far as she was concerned. She hadn’t married because she had always been busy with one project or another, even before the venture of setting up the inn, then getting the library going and organizing the gifted coming to work there to memorize the books. But the best labor of love, of course, had been in raising her niece as her daughter.

Trista decided write a poem about the monarch butterflies, which she later shared with her aunt.

The Monarchs Passing Through

On a busy day with still much to do,
I paused to watch the monarchs passing through.
Though deeds and demands were pressing anew,
Of the day’s minutes, I could spare a few,
To watch the grand sight so treasured and dear;
After all, it happens but twice each year.
Soft whispers of wings I thought I could hear,

A pleasing sound, like a *whoosh* by the ear.
Such a wonder, their yearly migration
From top to bottom of our large nation;
And then back again, what an elation,
The sight, such a marvelous sensation.
Watching as more drifted leisurely by,
Slowly vanishing into the blue sky,
I suddenly began to wonder why
I couldn't just slow down, to breathe, and sigh.
Always in such a gigantic hurry,
Here and there I did every day scurry,
To the extent things often looked blurry.
What's even the point of all my flurry?
When running each hour as I would a race,
I don't even take the time to say grace;
And I miss many things at this fast pace,
A quiet word, a smile on a shy face.
I should take a lesson from my bright friend,
Steady can still be a means to an end.
If I stop rushing around every bend,
I might have time to write letters to send.
But could I be more like the butterfly?
I thought, and sighed, looking up at the sky.
Could I possibly, if I really try?
I wondered, as another floated by.
If I slowed down, I could enjoy much more,
A window, a porch, an old purple door.
I might even hear a waterfall roar,
And see a heron or an eagle soar.
Of flowers, I could take a good long look,
Solve a mystery, write a lengthy book,
Take time to fish in a sparkling brook,
Curl up for a nap in a favored nook.
I could take a great deal more time to pray
About important events of each day.
I know He would guide me along the Way,
As I hear more of what He has to say.
And it might be something I need to hear,
To remind me there's nothing far or near,
To prevent me watching the sight so dear,
Of the monarchs passing through twice each year.

After two full weeks of research and writing, Trista delivered her latest speech to an audience of about seventy people at a local youth center on a Thursday evening. Having given over two hundred speeches so far, she was surprised to find herself slightly nervous. Speaking for nearly forty minutes in total, she began by explaining that a good friend of hers who was gay had recently tried to commit suicide; and she ended the speech by stressing the warning signs of potential suicide victims. Finally, she told the audience, “There’s a lot I don’t understand about the issue of being gay in relation to higher rates of suicide, but I want to understand. So instead of getting angry at each other, maybe we could help each other understand these things better. It’s a huge issue, I know, too long for any one speech or even a single debate. But I firmly believe God is the answer, the only answer; and His love has no bounds.”

Trista did receive healthy applause from the audience; but it would only take one person to report her, which is exactly what happened. Oddly enough, this was someone she had saved from suicide two years previous; and the girl actually came up to Trista after the speech to tell her she would be turning her in, and right away. “You’re just speaking hate against gays,” the girl said, “and breaking the law.”

Since Trista had been truly hoping to do some good, this was a little surprising to her. But she had known the risks.

Praying at home later in the evening and asking for God’s guidance, she read and reread Psalm 109:1-5. “Be not silent, O God of my praise! For wicked and deceitful mouths are opened against me, speaking against me with lying tongues. They beset me with words of hate, and attack me without cause. In return for my love they accuse me, even as I make prayer for them. So they reward me evil for good, and hatred for my love.”

Since the law pertained to juveniles as well as adults, a warrant for Trista’s arrest was issued the next day. The warning from the girl had actually been a blessing in that it had given her time to pray, hear from God, and act. Because she needed to be able to continue to do her daisy-chain work, rather than going to jail, she was going to run. Trista was sure she was hearing His voice clearly. This was what He was telling her to do. She could basically do her work from anywhere; and

since she had been on her own a lot as a young child, she could look after herself.

At the same time the warrant was being issued, Trista's aunt was reporting her to the police as a runaway. But this was just a ruse because Aunt Leona would pretty much always know where Trista was. In fact, they would be keeping in close touch through rookhs carrying messages, and eventually by kites and dawn pigeons too.

Aunt Leona was well aware that the authorities might think she was hiding her niece, so she freely and in a very friendly manner opened the Inn at Magnolia Hills for the police to search. To the six officers conducting the search, the inside of the inn looked exactly as they imagined it would from its outward appearance—small, quaint, and capable of housing twenty-two guests fairly comfortably, though some of the people staying there had to share bathrooms.

The searchers left roughly an hour after their arrival, with jars of bread and butter pickles, and small boxes of fudge, which were gifts Leona usually gave her patrons upon their departure.

Trista had already left before the police arrived. Though she might not stay in any one place too long, she would first be going to live in an earthship community in New Mexico, at the home of one of the people she had saved who had long ago offered a refuge to her. From this spot, Trista would continue to travel by rookh to do her work.

Surprisingly, Chelsea and Gavin decided to go with her. During their time at the inn so far, the three had become fast friends. And as the Diamond Girl and Sapphire Boy explained to Leona (the same as they had to Weatherly), “We don't want to just hide somewhere; we want to be out in the world, doing some good if we can.” Like Trista, Gavin and Chelsea were capable of looking after themselves, though they very much recognized their total reliance on God as well, which was something all people should learn to develop. In similar situations all over the world, many of the gifted were teaming up to help support and protect one another.

Though she was only able to deliver it one time, Trista's speech did have certain effects which she had intended and hoped for. Several individuals were saved from suicide in the coming years by people recognizing the warning signs and taking time to intervene. Additionally, a fifteen-year-old boy discovered he wasn't gay, but was

being misled by a group of peers. A fourteen-year-old girl figured out that she wasn't gay; rather, she had in her grade school years been exposed to certain influences and stimulations that had made her think she might be. A woman in her late thirties prayed about her own situation, and afterwards decided that she believed that Satan had corrupted her, possibly genetically, which led her to leave her abusive wife and seek help. In doing so, the woman led a much longer and happier life, mainly because she didn't end up committing suicide, as she had several times seriously contemplated, but also because she recognized that God loved her, and valued her, no matter what.

Chapter Sixteen

Realms and Dimensions

A good bit of the magic of the mezzanine was still a mystery, mainly because only certain people had access to particular doors. But over the years, Vini had figured out that the twelve doors all led to other realms. These were not to be confused with dimensions, of which, based on her research and automatic writing, she reasoned there were sixteen, only six of which God allowed people to have access to while in their present state of living on earth inside physical bodies.

Of the Twelve Realms, Quintessence might have been the most familiar to human beings, except that few people knew much about what had long been described simply as the mysterious and heavenly missing fifth element, the one corresponding to the four elements of Greek philosophy—earth, air, fire, and water.

With her early estimation of Quintessence being a realm in which hope, joy, and peace abound, and in which unicorns were known to frequent, Vini herself had only scratched the surface of unraveling the mystery because Quintessence was actually so much more.

But we must backtrack from Quintessence in order to keep what we know about the Twelve Realms straight. Em had once numbered the mezzanine doors, down one side of the hallway and up the other. And while Vini had used the numbers in making her original list and brief descriptions of the doors, she didn't pay much attention to the numbers after that because they weren't in order as far as their true numbering of Un, Bi, Tri, Quad, Quint, Sext, Sept, Oct, Non, Dec, Undec, and Duodec. With these numeric prefixes corresponding to the names of the realms, as far as Em's original list, the doorways of the mezzanine contained the following realms: 1. Biessence 2. Quintessence 3. Octessence 4. Duodecessence 5. Unessence 6. Quadressence 7. Nonessence 8. Sextessence 9. Triessence 10. Decessence 11. Undecessence 12. Septessence.

When making summaries about what each realm contained, Vini found it easier to list them in their true order based on their numeric names. She obtained some of her information exploring the various doorways; other details were given to her from God in the form of auto-writing sessions and dreams. The following summaries of the Twelve Realms were recorded in one of her journals.

The Twelve Realms of Netherwind's Mezzanine

Unessence contains the desert world of Erdém. This is a realm of Testing and Endurance in which Hope is dominant. One of the desert grottos houses a magic mirror in which a person can see themselves as God sees them. In all of time, only four human beings have looked into this mirror; and only one shared what he saw. His reflection was taller and fairer than he imagined, and in the background, he saw an empty cross, empty (he reasoned) because Christ has risen. This would connect well with Hope, since Jesus is our only hope. We are "prisoners of hope" as the bible says. Unessence is very windy. Some of the gnomes use little gliders and airships to travel about Erdém. The element of Air is heavily represented in this realm.

Biessence is simply a room filled with Joy featuring a pair of hummingbirds (that seem to like to fly backwards more than forwards) living inside a large glass Biosphere filled with plants and flowers. The fragrance of the flowers can be smelled outside of the sphere; the scent actually fills the room. Biessence is a realm of Renewal.

Triessence holds the world of Antica; obviously Water is a prominent element. This is a realm of Peace. Though the residents of Antica have known conflict, their history has certainly been more peaceful than any other known worlds. In a small cave located behind a certain cliff waterfall, a table made of natural stone holds a jigsaw puzzle made of blue crystal. The pieces can form either a circle or a triangle. A person completing the puzzle, either shape, is said to achieve a perfect state of peace, very hard to shake. Of the Twelve Realms, time passes differently from earth only here and in Kivetel, more quickly than time on earth. A minute in our world equals about eighteen in Antica and Kivetel. It is sometimes helpful to think of it in terms of thirty minutes at home equals about nine hours in either place.

Quadressence contains the expandable Weapons Room and is related to Trust. I believe this mainly relates to trust in God's provision; He will always provide. This could also probably be applied to the trust needed to train with and use weapons. While the Weapons Room varies in size (depending on the quantity of equipment being stored and the types of training going on), it is always perfectly square in shape, the four walls being equal in length, though the room doesn't always appear to be perfectly square. It's like a trick of the eye, probably due to the positions of the training mats, dividers, etc. The Weapons Room is currently divided into four sections, corresponding to the four types of training taking place inside, the first involving Traditional Weapons such as daggers, spears, throwing stars, maces, etc. The other three categories are those of Light, Music, and Color. Light Weapons are most often called mirrors, though lantern-style and flashlight-like devices are being developed. Music Weapons (a.k.a. Wind Weapons) are generally called flutes, which is accurate, even though a few other instruments (drums, trumpets, triangles, etc.) are also in use. Color Weapons (a.k.a. Art Weapons) are most often called ropes, even though this is the most varied category, with the technology applying to such things as blankets, shoe strings, scarves, neckties, even hairnets.

Quintessence. I might know the most about this realm, but I feel it might also still hold the most Mystery. (While mystery is one of the Sixteen Dimensions, I believe it is a component that can also dominate a realm.) If the first four realms hold hope, joy, peace, and trust respectively, do they combine to form Quintessence, which I am calling the Realm of Unicorns, even though I know that unicorns can and do visit other realms? I can look into the doorway to this realm but not enter. Through the doorway, I see a great mist shrouding distant greenery and terrain both tall and dipped. Maybe these are mountains watching over valleys? I can hear soft watery sounds that remind me of gentle waterfalls and afar-off ocean waves. Light is also very much present, everywhere, filling every corner and bouncing off of the mist. And I can see movement, a great deal of it, which I might be tempted to liken to moving shadows, except that what I see is too bright to be shadows, unless there are such things as bright shadows. There are multiple doorways to the various realms and, of course, many more realms than just these twelve. Quintessence is a realm that I can see

into, and call unicorns from, but I can't physically access it because it is in one of the dimensions that human beings in their earthly state (inhabiting physical bodies) don't have access to. I'm still the only person I know who can see into Quintessence, through this doorway anyway. Most people find the door locked. The few others over the years that have been able to open the door and look in, describe seeing only what appears to be a guest room containing a twin bed, a dresser, and a desk-and-chair set. Other doorways to Quintessence are located in the unused part of the brain; using more of my brain is how I am able to attain the perfect state of hope, joy, and peace needed to summon unicorns. Trust is also a key component—trust in God, His Plan, His Son, and His Word. Unicorns do live in Quintessence, and are connected to our souls, but are so much more than our limited brains can comprehend. God is taking His time in revealing things to me, as He knows my brain can only handle so much. But I definitely know that the Realm of Quintessence is related to what human beings are meant to become, both here on earth, and in following His Golden Path to eternal life.

Sextessence is a realm of Magic, filled with Ingenuity. This is where magicians get much of their knowledge and some of their materials needed to forward the productiveness of their gift. Only magicians may enter Sextessence, not only because the door is generally locked, but also due to some sort of divine force field. I have had one peek into the doorway, as a magician was leaving one day. I only saw what appeared to be masses of Clouds filling some sort of expanse; whether this is a landscape setting or an enclosure such as a large room or warehouse is unknown. Magicians keep this information secret.

Septessence contains the Art Gallery, which holds replicas of all art ever created, but mirror images of each piece. Mirrors from the bin inside the door allow us to see the art as it was actually created. Inspiration and Reflection (of the contemplative sort) dominate this realm. Each piece of true art in the world has a doorway into this realm. As far as using the art as doorways, as exits from the realm, this is not recommended. For one thing, some of the art no longer exists in our world. Also, with art being so subjective and mysterious, the magic surrounding many of the works is liable to be unpredictable, presenting too big of a risk to try to use any of the art as actual doorways. Seven

works of art in Septessence are not in reverse because they have never existed elsewhere. In other words, being original to the gallery, they are not reflections and are presented as they were created, though who created them is a mystery. These seven pieces (one bronze sculpture, three paintings, one tapestry, and two marble sculptures) represent the Seven Heavenly Virtues of Faith, Hope, Charity, Fortitude, Justice, Temperance, and Prudence.

Octessence holds the Peacock Garden. (While the colorful shapeshifting creature residing in the garden most often takes the form of a turtle, he is showiest as a peacock; hence, the name.) The sprawling garden is octagonal in its overall shape, and features the five elements of Chinese philosophy—water, wood, fire, metal, and earth. Octessence is a realm of Balance. Anyone who feels off-kilter, distracted, overly stressed, or scattered, need only spend a short amount of time in the garden to become more centered, focused, and refreshed. This is more of a Physical realm than a spiritual one.

Nonessence houses the Garden of Stars, a Celestial realm filled with stars and other heavenly bodies. Nonessence acts as something of a bridge between heaven and earth in that through the Garden of Stars, the departed can sometimes visit their loved ones still on earth. This is a place of mental Reconciliation, Healing, and Comforting. Like many of the realms, the Garden of Stars has multiple doorways leading to our world. Cats are said to frequent this realm. I remember reading somewhere that nine is a heavenly number. I wonder if there is a connection between Nonessence and cats having nine lives. This is more of a Spiritual realm than a physical one.

Decessence holds Kivetel, a realm of Growth and Wisdom. Kivetel's *Book of Wisdom* contains Pillars of Wisdom similar to those mentioned in our *Holy Bible*, the difference being that Kivetel's pillars total ten, instead of our seven. The list includes purity, peacefulness, helpfulness, gentleness, reasonableness, sincerity, humility, understanding, mercy, and productiveness. These are represented in this realm as actual stone pillars located in a park in the Southern Region of Kivetel. Each person of Kivetel makes a pilgrimage at least once in his or her lifetime to visit the ten pillars, which are situated along a ten-kilometer path in the park. Taking this path is symbolic of achieving a life full of wisdom. [Note: In looking up information about

the Seven Pillars of Wisdom in various books, I found several different interpretations as to what the seven pillars are, so I read the bible for myself and asked God to help me understand. From reading the passages in Proverbs 8 just preceding the mention of Wisdom's Seven Pillars in Proverbs 9, this is my interpretation of the seven: truth, knowledge, understanding, prudence, honor, righteousness, and justice.] Kivetel corresponds to the Earth element, and time passes the same as it does in Antica in that thirty minutes in our world equals roughly nine hours in Kivetel.

Undecessence contains the Clock of the Universe. Harmony dominates this realm, much as the gears and other components of the clock work in harmony with each other. We are all part of the Clock of the Universe in body, mind, and spirit. Our actions and thoughts are all part of its workings. The clock is how all things work together in progression according to God's Plan. Everything in existence is connected to everything else in the world, as part of the progression; and even the smallest of thoughts and actions can be of great importance to His Plan. In addition to being part of the clock, God's children help to wind it. We are Clock Winders on a great Journey.

Duodecessence is located in a dimension human beings on earth do not have access to. The door on the mezzanine is locked, but God has allowed me one look inside by way of a dream. The Tree of Life grows in this realm where Love and Fire dominate. Twelve types of fruit unlike any found elsewhere in the universe grow on this enormous tree, which has a river running through the base of it. The tree basically straddles the river, whose water is bright and sparkling like clear crystals. [Note from reading Revelation: The leaves of the Tree of Life will be for the healing of the nations.] Rolling meadows and patches of lush forest bank the river, and are filled with exotic plants, flowers, and frolicking creatures, including unicorns. The unicorns actually appear brighter than those that occasionally visit earth. During my brief look, I could see situated upriver a great mountain, its top ablaze with crimson flames. Upon the side of the mountain, a fiery bronze human figure sat upon a deep blue crystalline throne sparkling like sapphire in sunshine. Light emanating from the figure formed a shimmering rainbow of a spikey shape. Floating above the throne, the bow held the appearance of a crown waiting to be fitted to the King, residing in our Destination.

In trying to sum up the Twelve Realms in one or two words each, this is what I feel they boil down to in their numeric order: hope, joy, peace, trust, mystery, magic, virtues, balance/physical, healing/spiritual, wisdom, the journey, the destination.

Vini had recorded all of this information not only in one of her journals, which were kept in a locked library room of her cottage, but also in another book stored in the safe in the Labyrinth Library. Keeping this information both safe and secret from a good many people was important because the doors were not labeled, nor would they ever be, for safety reasons, so that outsiders would not have access to the secrets of the mezzanine. The doors were not left propped for long periods of time either, also for safety, so that undesirables such as sorcerers and mimics wouldn't be able to find easy ways into the various realms.

Notes relating to the Sixteen Dimensions followed her entries relating to the Twelve Realms.

The Sixteen Dimensions

While there are lots of realms, possibly thousands upon thousands if we include ones such as Demon Pockets, Sixteen Dimensions exist. God created them all. Human beings in their earthly state have access only to the first six. The First, Second, and Third are very familiar to us, as they make up the Three-Dimensional world in which we live.

The Fourth Dimension is the Dimension of Time.

The Fifth is the Dimension of Comprehension comprised of things we are capable of discovering and understanding such as gravity, magnetism, chemistry, diseases, mineral properties, kinetics, human physiology, photosynthesis, weather patterns, horse behaviors, and many other disciplines both known and unknown to us—the list could basically go on and on of things we are able to comprehend. Certain things in this dimension only brainy people can understand, and some things human beings might never understand. But perhaps if we find the ability to tap into the unused parts of our brains, we might someday see things more clearly. (How does Otto do what he does? A lot of it isn't magic; it's brain power!)

The Sixth is the Dimension of Mystery, which includes things like inspiration, imagination, wonder, humor, philosophy, astrology, emotions, many things metaphysical, dreams, love, etc.

There are, of course, some crossovers within the dimensions, such as how the Fourth Dimension affects the other five. The various realms can exist within multiple of the Sixteen Dimensions. (The Clock of the Universe exists in multiple.) But, again, we can access only six, which I like to call the Accessible Dimensions. The other ten are God's; but when we pass into the spiritual world, He allows us access to certain ones of the ten, such as Heaven. For those who might think they have had an experience in a dimension outside of the six, it is only their spirit connecting to that dimension. Our physical forms cannot, unless our bodies have either expired, or our beings have transformed to the point they are no longer traditionally human. It is speculated that a person who is fully sanctified, having achieved this near-perfect state of Christ-likeness during his or her lifetime, might have access to the other dimensions. (I say "near-perfect" because Jesus was the only perfect human being ever to exist.) Since so few people will achieve this state during their lifetimes, I believe proof of crossing into extra dimensions would be hard to discover. 1 Corinthians 15: 42-58 basically says the physical form has to come before the spiritual form, the perishable before the imperishable. However, when we do change, I believe it will be "in the twinkling of an eye."

The Clock of the Universe acts as something of an engine in the Accessible Dimensions. All living organisms make up the engine and help to drive it. The dimensions are not particularly numbered; the first six only have numbers by human reckoning.

As far as the other ten, which I am calling the Godly Dimensions, words in human languages are limiting in exactly naming them because they are more complex and broader than words can accurately describe. So we must simply liken them to things we can comprehend. Perhaps believers should ask God, as I did, for this information. In doing so, He might provide explanations better than those I can provide. But here goes my attempt at a one-word description for each. The remaining dimensions exist in pairs that juxtapose one another. These include Light and Darkness, Life and Death, Heaven and Hell, Creation and Destruction, Fixed and Transforming.

Of the ten, Fixed and Transforming present the most difficulty in assigning one-word names, so to expand slightly, these are “things that are fixed” and “things that are transforming.” They also present the most mystery, to my brain at least. While the Godly Dimensions definitely touch and affect us—such as how we are alive, we were created, we exist in light, we can destroy things (especially ourselves)—we are not in the dimensions because we have no access to their workings. They are God’s domain. As far as their effects on us, to my estimation, most things are transforming. Even the hardest of rocks are subject to erosion and are changing. The brightest of stars cannot burn forever. Human beings in physical form are ever-changing (growing, aging, etc.) and are supposed to transform to be more like God’s Son. Science sometimes seems to solve mysteries and create them in almost the same breath, so even things we might have thought to be fixed actually aren’t. But perhaps fixed simply means predetermined, in which case all things are fixed because God has predetermined all things. Relating to Creation and Destruction, we might be creative, but only God can create something out of nothing. And while we can destroy, only God has ultimate power over what we are allowed to destroy. He can stop our destructiveness if He chooses.

I am sure whole books could be written about each of these ten dimensions and barely scratch the surfaces. Plus, the information in the books likely wouldn’t be fully accurate since we don’t have physical access to the ten during our lifetimes.

As far as their workings, the Godly Dimensions contain an unknown mechanism or some other designed dynamic creation that is far more elaborate than the Clock of the Universe, which is already a machine so fabulously complex that even the brainiest of human beings, while able to comprehend its function, could never figure out all of the details of its workings.

There were originally fifteen dimensions until God was forced to create Hell for Satan and his followers, so although I have arranged the ten into couplets, Heaven was supposed to be singular.

Heaven is practically endless in size because God made it expandable, whereas, all of Hell can literally fit into a thimble, so our human understanding of size with regard to the Godly Dimensions is very limited. (I say “practically” endless in size because only God is

truly endless.) By human understanding of size, the largest dimensions would be Heaven and Light.

God is outside of every dimension and in control of everything. He is also everywhere; so He's definitely in the dimensions as well, including Heaven, which is where many believers imagine Him to be most of the time. God can never be confined to any of the dimensions, not even the largest ones because He is limitless; and each of the dimensions has limits such as that souls in Hell can never reach Heaven, and that Darkness cannot overcome Light.

[Additional Note: In pondering Order and Chaos possibly being something like mini dimensions, it seems they more fit into other dimensions, rather than being separate. Plus, God can and does bring order to anything He wishes; and chaos mainly belongs to Satan.]

Vini was paying another visit to the Clock of the Universe around the same time as Trista, Chelsea, and Gavin were reaching New Mexico by rookh.

Though she still was sure she was supposed to notice something important, she again didn't pick up on whatever it was. It was an enjoyable visit nonetheless, listening to the lovely and somewhat musical sounds of gears clicking, whirring, and spinning, while the afternoon sun spectacularly set the various jewel and metal components of the clock aglow with shimmers, glints, and winks.

Piszo happened to be on the mezzanine that afternoon too, with Pipac and Kisi, to visit the Art Gallery. Like Vini, he made sure to prop the door and tie a ribbon on the handle, a feat a little trickier for him than her in that he had to lasso the handle; but, then, throwing things was never much a problem for a puck troll. Piszo and the twins had come to the plantations for the day with Heike who was teaching her class. Inside the gallery, in meandering around to see some of the newer art (because more was always constantly and thrillingly being added), the trolls came across their friends, the rabbits. The puck family also discovered something else in the gallery, a zipakola water lizard; and at first, Piszo couldn't imagine how the creature might have gotten there.

The lizard had lived in a pond in a park in a big city in Iowa, but he liked to explore the city. Having camouflage abilities similar to

enormice, some of whom also liked to live in cities, the zipakola could be out and about a good deal and not be noticed. However, a couple of hunters torching art had noticed him strolling about. Despising all godly creatures, and especially magical ones, the hunters came after him, prompting him to escape into a tiny art mural that had already been brought to life by a local puck troll. And it didn't matter that the hunters destroyed the mural because the zipakola had traveled far enough into it to reach the mezzanine gallery. Deciding he quite liked the long hall filled with lovely art, the lizard planned to stay for a while. On this day, he gave the trolls and rabbits a nice long ride to view some of his favorite new works. The lizard was also staying because he liked the rabbits; they had become friends. They were even occasionally holding races; and while zipakolas could always win races against rabbits, this one politely let the rabbits win at least half of the time.

Heike, after her class, looked in on a quilting class to learn a few quilting tips before heading out to see the progress of the topiaries, and bring a couple of them to life to amuse a few of the school children. After this, while waiting for Pizzo and the twins, she sat atop a garden wall, throwing currants at people passing by; but not too many because she wanted to eat most of the currants.

Having just finished taking Preston and Ignacio on an errand, Eleta was also visiting the gardens; and she shifted down to her normal tiny size in order to sit beside Heike on the wall, where she declined her friend's offer of a currant. Like most vritsees, Eleta chose not to eat people food.

Chapter Seventeen

The Suspension Bridge

Backtracking a little in our story, to the day Em was stick training and the plantations were being raided, at Uncle Walter's house in Missouri, Charlie was very excited because her uncle was going with them to Kentucky; and not only that, he was coming to live at the farm afterwards. The trip to Kentucky had been delayed again by nearly three weeks so that Uncle Walter could settle things by putting a few items into storage, packing up others, and getting the house ready to be put up for sale. He, too, was excited, but mostly about coming to live at the farm, less so about the trip to Kentucky. But he was going along because he was truly enjoying spending time with his family, though Rang-Rang was proving herself to be a pretty big rascal, in chewing up his shoes, knocking into tables containing breakables, and stirring up the house too early in the mornings for his liking.

Even more exciting than trips and new living arrangements was the fact that Walter Orr was saved; and with his new assurance of eternal life came a new perspective on everything. In addition to being able to better bear things like his arthritis and slight hearing loss, he was making plans for the future. Having been a cabinet maker at one time, he was thinking of starting up a shop on the farm to make both cabinets and furniture. He had always wanted to make things like rocking chairs and dining tables, but hadn't really had the time when he was working, or the energy since. Now, he felt full of energy for some reason, which he guessed was from God, or perhaps from the Holy Spirit filling him. (Uncle Walter was still learning about these sorts of things.) Whatever the case, he was truly enlivened, even happy, this in part due to finding some acceptance over what had happened with Dana. He recognized that he couldn't take responsibility for her after a certain point because she had made her own choices. Help had been offered to her many times, and she had refused it. He definitely took responsibility for lacking in certain aspects of her upbringing; but he also knew that God

forgave him for these things, though it was still sometimes hard to believe that God's grace could extend to him, because of some of his past mistakes and sins. But he could feel in his bones and in the very core of his being that this was all real and true. He was fully forgiven.

Charlie hadn't worried over the extended delay in heading to Kentucky because helping Uncle Walter was what God had been telling her to do. But now it was time to go, and she was excited because something amazing (though she wasn't sure what yet) definitely lay on the horizon of this adventure. In addition to feeling this in her bones and in the very core of her being, God was telling her this. In a recent vision, she had not only seen the bridge, but something just beyond it that was full of light, movement, life, and even fire, surprisingly. But it was more than something that could be sensed by our traditional senses because there was also hope, safety, and magic somehow intertwined.

Getting the car packed up after an early-morning breakfast made Rang-Rang excited, too excited actually. *Honestly*, Charlie thought shaking her head, *she still acts like a complete puppy*.

"I've never known a poodle to be so yappy and full of mischief," Uncle Walter said good-naturedly while putting his bag into the trunk.

"Me neither," Charlie replied, a little less good-naturedly, having just had to apologize to the neighbors for Rang-Rang's exuberance in coming over to greet the two cats on their front porch. In living with plenty of cats on the farm, the poodle wasn't in any way dangerous to them, just a little overly friendly. But, of course, Uncle Walter's neighbors didn't know this, so it was a great relief to all to have her safely stowed into the car in readiness for the journey.

They had decided to do a bit of sightseeing along the way. After stopping for lunch at a small diner, they made it to Mammoth Cave by mid-afternoon. Oddly enough, Charlie had traveled this way once before, with Frank when they went on their honeymoon; but they hadn't stopped to see Mammoth Cave because she was in a hurry to see the Smoky Mountains. "No, I don't want to see Niagara Falls or Lake Tahoe," she told him when they were making their honeymoon plans, "just the Smoky Mountains." There was something about Tennessee that drew her; she had wanted to see it ever since she was a kid, but never got to because her dad's business didn't allow for many

vacations. Then, she started her catering business in high school and didn't have much time for trips from that point on.

After checking into a bed and breakfast, and leaving Rang-Rang with a local sitter service, they took one of the guided tours into Mammoth Cave, afterwards enjoying a nice meal together at a local steakhouse before collecting Rang-Rang and retiring for the night.

Back on the road the next morning, as they passed an old concrete water tower, Charlie got a very funny feeling about it, a creepy-crawly feeling that started with a tingling at the base of her neck but that quickly crept down her back and around to her front to settle in her middle and give her a very uneasy stomach. This was the same feeling she tended to get at home when something evil was near, like when a hobgoblin had snuck into one of the barns, or when a fire slug had taken up residence in one of the corn fields, or when a mimic had come to the farmhouse pretending to be a door-to-door salesman. Given the visible cracks in the concrete and the overgrown state of the area surrounding the water tower, she could tell it wasn't used for water anymore. But there was definitely something about the structure that she could sense. It wasn't entirely abandoned, and what was inside was evil. She knew some people made homes and businesses out of old silos, but this didn't seem like that.

Most cars these days were solar powered, like Charlie's, though some wind and hydro models existed. For lengthy trips, solar cars needed extra charging. Stopping mid-morning to quick-charge the car, Charlie saw a vision in the side view mirror that answered the question about the water tower. Inside, sorcerers were using it as something of a gathering spot, and a stronghold in that the tower held much more than it appeared from the outside. Unlike magicians, sorcerers didn't have the ability to expand structures; but they could easily create doorways into Demon Pockets. One such doorway existed within the tower, leading to a realm holding thousands of megahobs, gremlins, demons, and nyregs, all just waiting for the sorcerers to call them into action. And all of them were plenty well-fed because, available in such abundance, the evils of humankind were easily saturating the nearly three thousand Demon Pockets currently existing in the world.

Shivering at the sight of these hordes of evil creatures, Charlie was very glad to feel Lydy's presence nearby, as she had for most of the past two days.

Since leaving the bed and breakfast, Charlie hadn't known exactly where to go, except that she could feel God leading her, so all she had to do was continue to trust and follow. The direction and roads felt right, as though definitely leading to the rural suspension bridge (basically only wide enough for single-file pedestrian traffic) strung over a fairly small river, probably not more than two hundred feet wide at the bridge by Charlie's guesstimate from her visions. The bridge wasn't too high, this being a very good thing because, while her fear of heights was much better than when she was a kid, she was still bothered sometimes by things like cliffs and bridges. The river itself was lovely, tranquil and a good bit shady due to healthy trees, shrubs, and other such lush vegetation hugging the banks.

Stopping for a picnic lunch, Charlie called home to check in. She was, frankly, a little worried about business. Though Mira and Frank were both competent, this trip was turning into a very long one. The soup kitchen had plenty of volunteers, so she was mainly worried about the restaurants—The Thunderbird Café and The Treehouse. Charlie had established the café and the soup kitchen first, immediately upon graduating from culinary school. The Treehouse was started six years later.

Frank and Mira hadn't wanted to worry Charlie, but there was some troubling news on the home front in that the soup kitchen had been robbed the night before. Blessedly, the restaurants had plenty of pots, pans, dishes, and food to make up for what was lost; and a truck was already on its way to replenish supplies so that people could still get their evening meal from the kitchen that they so relied on for sustenance.

What a state the world was in—that people would stoop so low as to rob a soup kitchen! Charlie almost couldn't believe it...except that, sadly, she could. How fast things had changed in the world. If we had told people fifty years ago (or even twenty-five) what the world would turn into, they wouldn't have believed it...so much persecution, so many laws; and yet, so much lawlessness. Satan, of course, was trying to break Christians, and making a good job of it, by outward

appearances anyway. Except that those on side of good had no intention of giving up the good fight.

Reflecting, Charlie realized she shouldn't at all have been surprised by this, or by the worsening state of things. Only three years past, the farm had been accused of using pesticides, most of which had long since been outlawed. The authorities had closed the restaurants and the soup kitchen during the investigation under the charge that the food was likely contaminated. This hadn't been a huge problem because it was easy to hand out bag lunches to the hungry. Also, Charlie had used the time to make a few changes to the restaurants and soup kitchen, replacing some tables and appliances, as well as updating the older wiring and lighting of the café. The charges, of course, were completely bogus because the farm always used natural means to control bugs, growing masses of citronella, marigold, and pennyroyal plants for this exact purpose. In the future, the farm would have even less problems with pests because the gnomes in residence would employ various magical means of keeping insects and rodents in check.

But even earlier than the pesticide investigation, nearly twenty years back, the Thunderbird Café had been boycotted and picketed. Using social media, activists touted that the café was unfriendly toward gay people, this having come about because Charlie wouldn't display a rainbow sign and give money to support a local pride march. In truth, the restaurant was anything but unfriendly toward the gay community, as evidenced by the fact that several gay people were actually working at the Thunderbird Café at the time of the protests. In addition to not wanting to display community signs of any kind in the restaurant, she had a problem with the "pride" aspect of the march because she knew how much God hated pride of any kind. She also felt she had a right not to give money to things she personally knew to be biblically wrong. (She wouldn't give money to a local abortion clinic either.) She did, however, think it funny that the rainbow had become a symbol of gay rights over the years, since it was so clearly related to God, as mentioned many places in the bible.

At the time of the boycotting and picketing, Em had written an article in support of Charlie's right not to support certain causes, and accusing the organizations involved of targeting Christian businesses. Her article had included a rainbow-themed poem.

Each Rainbow is a Promise

Every time a lovely rainbow we see,
Assured of God's promises we can be;
Caring for us, He does most endlessly.

His grace and love know no earthly restraint,
Reaching out to all, both sinner and saint,
Answering each prayer without a complaint.

In His Word, His children can fully trust,
Not only today, forever we must
Believe in His ways, all of which are just.

Only those having faith can truly know
What it means to bask in His fiery glow.
In His blessings we revel, as they flow.

So much to rejoice of, each day anew,
All the tender mercies the whole world through.
Praise Him heartily, for all that is due.

Regardless of wealth or power or worth,
Offer Him worship of song with great mirth.
Make noise from every corner of the earth.

In every dark cloud, a great promise lies—
Shining on us, our Father's loving eyes,
Evidenced by all the rainbow-filled skies.

The protests had lost steam quickly, not just because of Em's article, but because Charlie was adamant that she would never celebrate or promote any particular group of people over any other group. This was one of the few times she had been outspoken to the media about anything; and she very flatly and firmly told news reporters, "The café is open to all, friendly to all, and helpful to all." The same was true of the soup kitchen, which was already serving over a hundred patrons per day. While the whole situation was stressful, Charlie found great strength in God's promise of Isaiah 54:17 "...no weapon that is fashioned against you shall prosper, and you shall confute every tongue

that rises against you in judgment. This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD and their vindication from me, says the LORD.”

What a way to focus on all the wrong things, Charlie thought at the time. And she felt the same way today—that people were constantly putting their energies and resources into some really silly things, especially activists, many of whom spent their whole lives campaigning for certain things, but ended up leaving the world just as crappy of a place (if not even crappier) than when they entered it.

It was actually hard for Charlie to understand why the gay issue should still be so much of a big deal. Persecution against gays was almost nonexistent because gay people worldwide currently had the same legal rights as everyone else. So except for a few possible isolated incidents, safety and overall respect for rights was well assured for members of the gay community, which couldn't be said of many other peoples. Not only that, but quite a few gay people currently had extra rights and benefits, not afforded the population in general, such as free education, housing, and medical services. But Charlie never spoke out on this issue because she didn't understand everything involved (few people did), and she didn't feel comfortable either supporting or denying a cause that she didn't fully understand. Plus, she simply wasn't qualified to make judgments; no human beings were, in her opinion. Only God was qualified to make judgements.

As far as the biblical view, Charlie had always interpreted 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 as referring to the unsaved, those unreconciled to God with regard to their sins. In addition to homosexuals, plenty of others mentioned in that passage—adulterers, greedy people, thieves, alcoholics—were definitely going to heaven, as long as they were saved which, in a nutshell, meant accepting Christ as Savior, accepting the amazing Gift given to us freely from God. But, of course, this mainly boiled down to the fact that a lot of people did not believe that homosexuality was a sin, while many others believed that it was. Charlie's overall opinion was that this Great Debate was brought about through clever maneuverings by none other than the Great Deceiver.

Packing up the car after lunch, Tobin happened to notice what appeared to be the same hummingbird that had visited with them in the Mark Twain National Forest when Trista was with them. The tiny bird was hovering over the road, almost as though he was waiting for them.

“I wonder if he’s been traveling along with us the whole time,” Tobin voiced.

Charlie was super excited because she instantly knew that this was a gift from God—the hummingbird was going to lead them the rest of the way. Quickly putting Rang-Rang into the car, she also hurriedly ushered in Tobin and Uncle Walter, who called directions to her as they kept an eye on the movements of the hummingbird as she drove. They were actually nearer to the bridge than Charlie imagined, and reached it within fifteen minutes of twists and turns on the winding country roads, the last of which was merely gravel.

A small motel was located less than a mile from the bridge; and Charlie checked them in for a full two weeks, based on what God was telling her to do. They hadn’t just needed to find the bridge; something else exciting and slightly time-consuming was going to happen.

As she was paying the deposit, Charlie told the proprietor that they wouldn’t be around the motel much because they were planning a lot of hikes, as well as shopping for antiques and visiting a few family members in the area. “So don’t worry if you don’t see us much,” she added.

The proprietor wasn’t worried. They were paying for two rooms for two weeks, so they could do whatever they liked as far as he was concerned. With business being so slow lately, he was thrilled to have guests paying for multiple rooms and nights.

After unpacking, with Rang-Rang on a leash, they headed on foot to the bridge, Tobin and Charlie both carrying small packs containing food, water, and a few other necessities such as weapons. Uncle Walter was simply armed with a walking stick.

The hummingbird was at the bridge, hovering over the center, as though beckoning to them to cross. However, they delayed as a man walking along the gravel road stopped to say hello. Carrying a fishing rod and tackle box, and lifting the rod, the man asked Uncle Walter, “Know any good spots nearby?”

“No,” Uncle Walter replied. “We’re visitors here, just doing a little exploring.”

“Well, if you’re a little fearful, and looking for another way to cross the river,” the man said, indicating the bridge, “you’ll have to go downstream about eleven miles.”

Rang-Rang obviously didn't like this man and was tugging hard on her leash while alternately yipping and growling, which was very unusual for her. Having a difficult time holding onto her, Charlie passed the leash to Tobin, to give her arm a break.

"I think we'll take the risk," Uncle Walter said, "I've loved suspension bridges ever since I was a kid."

After bidding the visitors farewell, while eyeing the still-fretting and obviously-unfriendly poodle, the man headed off down the road.

Charlie had been keeping an eye on the hummingbird and had noticed something quite extraordinary. While facing them and keeping a hovering position above the middle of the bridge, the tiny creature had started flying backwards and forwards, in a very deliberate fashion. Each time the bird flew backwards, he disappeared for a moment, before reappearing again when once more in forward motion. To Charlie's brain, this could only mean one thing—the bridge held some sort of doorway, which the bird was passing back and forth through.

The fisherman had given all of the visitors a bad feeling, and not just from Rang-Rang's behavior, so they chose to cross quickly. The hummingbird had continued his disappearing-reappearing act, which made Charlie, in the lead, smile. Like most people she could never get tired of watching the antics of hummingbirds—the only bird that could fly backwards. As far as Charlie knew, even Lyydu couldn't fly backwards.

In truth, the fisherman was of a bad sort, and had set off to collect two of his friends from a nearby cabin. In heading down the road, and glancing back at the visitors crossing the bridge, he actually saw them disappear in the middle of the bridge. But since the sun had been in his eyes and he had been in the process of looking away, he talked himself out of this fairly quickly. *Probably just a trick of the eye from the sun's glare*, he decided, quickening his pace to reach his friends. These three men were local hoodlums who specialized in robbing area houses and sometimes businesses, as well as travelers; and their intent was to follow the people with the dog in order to steal their packs, wallets, watches, and anything else of value.

Though it took nearly fifteen minutes to reach the bridge from the cabin, the miscreants felt sure they could catch up to their prey, mainly because they felt the elderly man with the walking stick likely wouldn't

be traveling all that quickly. If they couldn't just kick the poodle into the river from a high bank, they had a gun. They would simply shoot her, then take what they wanted from the people.

However, even after crossing the bridge and searching for well over an hour, the evil men found nothing, which then led the one who had seen the crossing visitors disappear to wonder if there was something special about the suspension bridge. Maybe the sun's glare hadn't tricked his eye after all; maybe they really had vanished. With odd things like this being more prominent in the world than they used to be, he couldn't rule out the bridge being magical. But he never mentioned this to his friends because he didn't think they would believe him, and he didn't want to lose credibility with them. They were already perturbed at having expended energy in pursuit and searching without having anything to show for it.

And speaking of something odd, a freak thunderstorm blew up at the exact moment the three were crossing back over the suspension bridge. Being caught in the middle was terrifying, not only the swinging and thrashing of the bridge, which they were sure was going to break at any moment, but also the wind whipping about them, lightning crashing nearby, and the noise and vibrations of great claps of thunder basically pounding their whole bodies. One of the men actually peed in his pants during this experience; and they were all extremely humbled as they made their way home fifteen minutes later when the storm subsided and they were able to crawl their way across the rest of the bridge.

The suspension bridge was definitely magical, and the fact that most of it was not connected to the earth made it especially so. Things not tied to the earth (like our thoughts) are often much more free and magical than things centered on and connected to the earth. However, the bridge did have something of an earthly connection to the plantations, in that some of the bridge was made of wood salvaged from the wing of Laurelstone that had burned many decades past. Also, it was constructed by two magicians that had stayed at Netherwind and Laurelstone for several years.

Only God's children could actually enter the magical doorway on this bridge. And they needed to be looking for the door, as well as having the expectation of finding it, because the bridge worked on the

same concept as the doors of the mezzanine and the ones leading into safety pockets—people needed to believe in order to access them.

Sure enough, as Charlie’s visions had predicted, the bridge led to a place of hope, safety, and magic. They could very much sense these things, though the magic part wasn’t perfectly obvious at first because the group ended up simply standing on an ordinary-looking footbridge crossing a wide ravine in a forested area near the base of what appeared to be an unpopulated mountain; that is, seemingly unpopulated by people, but not wildlife because as the hummingbird buzzed slowly off into the blue, sounding much like a tiny motorboat, the visitors to the mountain could see and hear other birds. Also, the undergrowth of the ravine was well alive with sounds of the scratching and scurrying of various small creatures. So too, the wind seemed alive, in whistling softly through the trees, and playing a serene melody on the leaves and twigs, as though the trees were its private instruments. While the mountain wasn’t obvious as being magical at first, it was perfectly lovely, and Charlie’s heart fairly leapt in that she was almost certain they were in the Smoky Mountains, one of her favorite spots on earth.

Continuing in the direction they were already heading, they crossed the bridge to end up standing on the leaf-strewn ground overlooking the ravine. Only seconds after their feet met the earth, an old woman appeared through a spot amongst the trees that held what appeared to be a trailhead.

Rang-Rang quickly decided that she liked this new person much better than the last one she had met, this being obvious because the tugging on the leash this time was of a much less-frenzied nature, as was the whining and wiggling shown in her eagerness to greet the woman, who politely bent down to pet the poodle as the visitors approached her.

The old woman’s name was Astrid. “No last name,” she told them during introductions, “just Astrid.” She had evidently been expecting them, from having had a vision. Charlie was able to instantly tell that Astrid was a kindred spirit, and felt completely free in talking to her.

“Yes, this is Tennessee,” Astrid answered to Charlie’s query, “one of the peaks of the Smoky Mountains.”

The woman obviously knew exactly where they had come from because, as the rambunctious Rang-Rang started back over the

footbridge from Tobin having let go of her leash to let her roam, Astrid called a warning. “Oh, be careful! She’ll end up back on the bridge in Kentucky.”

Tobin did manage to catch Rang-Rang before she reached the mid-bridge doorway.

“So the doorway works from this side too,” Charlie said, marveling, though she had already suspected this.

“Yes,” Astrid confirmed, before inviting them to visit her home on the mountain. Since Charlie was completely sure this was why God had brought them here, she gladly accepted.

Starting at the trailhead, they hiked for about three hours, mostly uphill, stopping several times for Uncle Walter to rest. Astrid had a walking stick too, but didn’t seem to need it much, nor did she ever appear tired on the climb, despite being probably twenty years Walter Orr’s senior, by Charlie’s reckoning anyway. Uncle Walter himself imagined Astrid to be probably in her mid-to-late eighties, though she certainly didn’t seem that old by her movements and energy.

About forty minutes after arriving on the mountain, Charlie felt Lyydu’s presence in the skies above, but only briefly. He had found her location, and was able to tell she was okay; but since he knew her to be safe on the mountain, he set off quickly to take care of other business—on the suspension bridge, for one thing. Then he was off to check on the farm. Over the next couple weeks, he would spend his time traveling back and forth between the farm and the motel to check on Charlie’s car. And it was a good thing he did because the very same hoodlums that had looked for trouble by the bridge decided to try to steal the car on the third night of it being parked in front of the motel. However, the theft didn’t come off because another freak storm blew up, this time leaving the men even more shaken because they were each pelted with flying tree limbs and other sorts of debris. Plus, their truck that they had left nearby was struck by lightning, and was completely inoperable afterwards. The three men—in addition to being humbled, bruised, and shaken from the incident—were left seriously thinking they might have made a terrible mistake in their choice of “criminal” as a career. The one who believed in supernatural things thought he was being punished directly by God, which was a guess not far off the mark since all thunderbirds were wholly godly creatures.

Lyydu was correct to assume Charlie, Tobin, Uncle Walter, and Rang-Rang would be completely safe on the mountain, as guests of the forty-two people living there in a small community of spread-out cabins, plus a church and a lodge used to house guests.

This was basically like a little village that somewhat reminded Charlie of several earthship communities she had visited out West, but one in a forested mountain setting instead of a desert. Though not large, the passive-solar homes were very comfortable, and completely self-sustaining by extremely well-designed wind and water catchment systems. Garden designs were clever as well. In just a brief tour, the visitors saw hanging cliff gardens, a hydroponics greenhouse operation, and several sky-high versions of keyhole gardens that looked a lot like smokestacks. They were actually called “stacks” and each held several levels for planting, and had lush vegetation fairly bursting from each level. “The plants that need more light go higher up,” Astrid explained. “Mushrooms go in the very bottom.” Nifty stone ledges and handrails were built into the outer sides of the stacks to act as something of a stair system for the activities of planting, tending, and harvesting. As fuel for the cold winters, a special tree had been provided to the mountain residents by God. Growing in numerous groves, the Liget Tree grew as fast as bamboo, but was as hard as oak. Wood from the Liget Tree was also used for construction projects and in making furniture, baskets, etc.

The members of the community hunted for some of their meat, also keeping pens of chickens, hogs, and rabbits. Dairy items were provided by a small farming operation in a valley about ten miles from the village, with the farmers raising cows, sheep, and goats.

The visitors spent twelve days on the mountain, during which they discovered it to be a complete realm of safety, but unlike what they were used to as far as protection provided by creatures such as wind horses, firebirds, and gryphons. What was protecting the mountain was in the form of nature spirits, this being quite a surprise to the guests, none of which knew about Weatherly’s protector. (Only a couple of the bigfoots at the plantations knew about Tamfa; and they also knew to stay well clear of her, and the particular laurel trees she liked to inhabit.)

Indeed, many tree spirits inhabited the mountain, along with water, stone, and fire spirits. Dryads, sylphs, and water nymphs also frequented the mountain. But it was easy to see how one might at first

not notice. When Tobin first saw a stone spirit, he thought it was a small dust devil in that the strings of rock dust were simply swirling about in a seemingly aimless and fairly gentle fashion. It wasn't until the dust organized itself and grew into the form of what looked like a man made of semi-transparent boulders that Tobin knew he was meeting a stone spirit. For Uncle Walter's first glimpse of a dryad, he saw nothing more than a small tree in a clearing, until the tree started to move, walking with the grace of a prima ballerina across the clearing to enter the tree fringe and disappear. Water spirits often lay as heavy mist across meadows and in valleys, until deciding to move, after which they looked like rain caught in a windstorm that was sculpting the droplets into people shapes. Fire spirits most often stayed in the form of little wisps, embers, and curls of fire, floating about through the trees of the forest, occasionally alighting on rocks for a rest. These weren't particularly noticeable by day; but at night, with a quick eye, one could see them flitting about, often helping to light campfires for those slightly challenged in that regard. (It did take some skill to build a good fire.) Of course, when called upon to protect, the fire spirit could take a much different form—basically resembling a giant made of fire.

In addition to these magical beings, the residents of the mountain clearly knew about things like demons, megahobs, gremlins, Dragon Hunters, and even mimics, though none of these creatures had ever set foot on the mountain because the spirits wouldn't let them. Even the skies above were clear of demons and nyregs because most of the mountain spirits were not bound to the earth. This was especially true of the sylphs, who often took entirely to the skies, not only to protect, but also because they were always hoping to catch glimpses of the watchmen who were constantly zipping about, to and fro in the air, while keeping watch on God's children. The members of the mountain village were also familiar with magicians and sorcerers, though they had had little contact with them over the years.

Speaking of familiar, Charlie was certain there was something familiar about their elderly host, as though she had seen the woman before; but no matter how long she pondered, she couldn't quite place her. Astrid had a distinctive scar on one cheek, about two inches long. While Charlie never remembered meeting anyone with a scar exactly like that, she couldn't tell how old the scar might be, so she might have

met Astrid before the injury. Her brain in a muddle over this, Charlie finally decided she was probably just being reminded of a restaurant patron, or someone who had come to the soup kitchen.

Astrid was familiar to Rang-Rang too, because they had definitely met before; but, of course, the poodle couldn't tell Charlie this.

Since the mountain people were sharing so much with the visitors, Charlie and Tobin decided to show them the blue rope and flute they were carrying. Tobin also had a small mirror stowed in his pack. Since he favored the flute, he only used the mirror for emergencies, such as if his flute wouldn't hold a charge.

In having carried her rope in her pack for several days, Charlie discovered it had lost most of its charge. But this was an easy thing to fix by simply tossing it several times into the air, where it picked up colors from the sky. After the fourth toss, the rope had obviously turned a deeper and brighter shade of blue; it was also crackling and sizzling with energy, which Charlie used to give a demonstration, splitting a log in several places. Tobin followed by using the flute and the mirror on the same log.

Astrid was fascinated by the weapons, and told the guests she had had visions of these sorts of things, but had yet to see them in person...or so she said. Charlie, while not getting any deceptive or evil vibes from the woman (quite the reverse actually) could tell there was much more to Astrid than what she was telling. It wasn't just that there was something familiar about her, it was more like Charlie could picture the woman picking up the rope and easily showing up everyone who knew how to use one, possibly even Weatherly, except that this likely wasn't possible since Weatherly was currently the most proficient rope wielder in existence, her skills having long surpassed even those of Linna.

While the guests met all of the people living in the village during their stay, they spent most of their time with Astrid and Bear Hammermill, a man in his mid-twenties, and aptly named Bear because he had both the bulk and strength of one. He was obviously gifted in this regard, and even shared his story as to how he had discovered his gift, which was by quite a different method than someone touching the Gift Key or having their talents revealed naturally through activities of day-to-day living. Bear had once been Cal Hammermill, a somewhat

scrawny man living in Washington State. When hiking in the woods one day, he had been struck by lightning when an odd storm blew up. A bear nearby was also struck and died. Cal lived, and from that point on had the strength and bulk of the bear that had died, these things having somehow been transferred to him. Cal felt this had likely happened because he had been praying—not in a scared fashion, but almost serenely in fact—during the storm as he crouched in an open clearing to avoid lightning strikes and falling trees. If it was his time to be called home, so be it. But he hadn't been called home, obviously. In descending the mountain after the storm, Cal had felt a calling to Tennessee, which he packed and left for immediately, finding himself in the Smoky Mountains a mere month later. Six years later, as Bear, he was now in charge of building on the mountain. He had constructed the lodge, and told the visitors he was getting instructions from God to build a great many cabins and other structures, in expectation of a lot of people moving to the mountain in the future, as a place of refuge. "We're definitely expanding," he said happily. "We have to because a lot of people will be coming."

"We're not exactly sure how soon they will arrive," Astrid said in agreement, "but they are definitely coming."

Uncle Walter was especially interested in the construction of the cabins; and during his time on the mountain, he got in on the building action a number of times.

During one of their sharing sessions, Charlie and Tobin told Astrid and Bear about Otto and Isaac, and their efforts in conjunction with the magicians. "Maybe they should come and see if the mountain can hold pockets," Tobin suggested.

Charlie agreed. "If a lot of people are going to live here in refuge, this might be the way it was meant to happen."

"Maybe," Astrid responded. "But I'm not sure we'll need pockets because I have been told by God that the mountain already has the ability to accommodate any number of people, perhaps even millions."

"But maybe this is what God meant," Bear suggested, "that pockets could be opened to accommodate."

"That could be part of it," Astrid admitted, "but I don't want to overlook or rule out other things because I'm pretty sure God has something else in mind too. In other words, I think the mountain might

have something else up her sleeve, something we're just not aware of yet."

Charlie thought this was an apt thing for Astrid to say during a discussion of magicians, the gifted, and their various skills because these people often did have unexpected things up their sleeves, as well as under their hats and in their coattails.

"We would definitely welcome a visit by your architect, cartographer, and any magicians," Astrid said, "but they needn't hurry because we're progressing nicely at this point."

"When they do come," Bear offered, "we'll show you another way onto the mountain besides the bridge in Kentucky. There's access in Tennessee too, a certain passage near Gatlinburg that most people seem to bypass, as though it isn't even here. But you can find it by looking for it."

Tobin would be staying a while longer on the mountain, a week or so, during which time Bear would show him the mountain pass. Then Lydu could bring Tobin home at the end of his stay, or a rookh. Charlie actually saw a rookh on the last day of their visit, and was surprised. "Oh yes," Astrid said. "He's here a lot; his name is Westerwing."

Charlie had never known rookhs to have names before.

"Oh we just call him that," Bear said, "because he goes faster when traveling west than in any other direction."

Uncle Walter, after getting settled on the farm, was planning to come back for a visit to the mountain, which pleased Bear greatly, as he always liked having folks interested in construction around. Charlie thought her father might also like to come.

In discussing rookhs, the subject of other magical creatures came up. While Astrid had once seen a firebird on the mountain, she said she had never seen gryphons, wind horses, or thunderbirds, and certainly never any puck trolls. Again, Charlie got an odd feeling from this discussion, as though Astrid might know a lot more than what she was letting on, and like she was maybe just humoring them in letting them rattle on about certain things. But maybe this was just characteristic of an older person. Charlie remembered Vini telling her once that Mrs. Doyle had originally denied knowing about wind horses, when it was obvious from her journals that she had known all about them for many

years. Vini had reasoned that if Mrs. Doyle had given away that she knew about wind horses, Vini might have asked too many questions about things she was supposed to discover for herself. So perhaps this was something similar with Astrid, unless she was just being cautious about giving too much away to fairly new acquaintances.

As they were hiking down the mountain to the ravine on the morning they were leaving, Charlie noticed a scar on Astrid's leg. This reminded Charlie of Weatherly, who had a scar in nearly the exact same spot. She hadn't noticed Astrid's leg scar before because the weather had just now turned warm enough for the wearing of shorter pants on the mountain. *What an odd coincidence*, Charlie thought, while also realizing she was going to have a lot to tell Weatherly upon returning home.

With the footbridge working exactly like the suspension bridge, as soon as they reached the center of it, the crossing party found themselves instantly in Kentucky. And Charlie could immediately sense Lyydu in the area, secreted amongst the trees along the riverbank. He had been waiting for them, in readiness to escort them back to the motel, and from there back to the farm.

Driving pretty much nonstop, they reached home that same evening, though fairly late.

The next day, which was the day after the group filling buckets with magical dimes and thimbles finished their project, Charlie took a trip to Laurelstone to see Weatherly and tell her about the bridge, the mountain, the nature spirits, the village residents, and everything else she could remember about the trip.

After listening for a good long while, Weatherly said smiling, "I had a cat named Astrid when I was little. She was already a good age when I was born, and died around the time I turned seven or so, but I remember her well—playful, with a sweet nature. And I always thought the name, Astrid, was absolutely beautiful."

Charlie often discussed her visions with Vini, comparing them to her prophetic dreams. Vini hadn't said anything about a mountain. But this was because she hadn't had any dreams about one until the very night Charlie and company reached the mountain by way of the suspension bridge. So they definitely had something to discuss when Charlie made a visit to her best friend at the barns later in the day.

As far as the suspension bridge, in the future, a pocket would be opened up on a church property not too far from the motel where Charlie's car had been parked. About twenty thousand people would live there in relative safety, particularly in having access to the mountain by way of the bridge as an additional place of refuge. The bridge would eventually also be used by many fleeing the Northern Supercities under control of the sorcerers.

While the bridge in Kentucky would provide a shortcut for these people, ones from the Western Supercities would end up coming by a similar doorway in Arizona that would shortly be discovered, not by Charlie, but by Trista, Chelsea, and Gavin during some of their travels.

At the same time Charlie, Uncle Walter, and Rang-Rang were crossing back over the suspension bridge, Vini had been paying another visit to the Clock of the Universe, and musing to herself in trying to figure out what she was supposed to notice. *Everything going on in our world, both good and bad, is connected to the workings of this clock. Is something amiss? Dragons make adjustments to the clock and unicorns sometimes wind it. If Dragon Hunters have captured too many dragons, are there too few now to work on the clock?*

Vini knew from Charlie's visions that hunters hadn't yet gotten their hands on a unicorn, but the time was coming when they would. From the same visions, she also knew not to mount a rescue for the dragons until the time of the first unicorn capture.

So what am I supposed to see here? At the very moment this thought entered her head, Vini spied a hummingbird, of mostly blue and green hues, hovering next to the face of the clock. As she watched, the tiny bird began to fly backwards, around the entire clock, making three loops before changing course, upwards (while still flying backwards), to disappear into the cloud-filled skies.

While it was no surprise to see a hummingbird flying backwards, Vini did find it a little odd that the creature didn't go forwards at all because the ones she was familiar with tended to fly forwards more often than backwards. She was smart enough to surmise the bird was trying to show her something; but at this time, her brain simply couldn't work out what.

Chapter Eighteen

Population Control

Charlie had arrived home to something of a shocker as far as national news. A law had just passed limiting the number of children women were allowed to have to exactly one. This was called the Single-Birth Law. Women who had already given birth to multiple children were given an exemption. Twins, triplets, and so on could qualify for an exemption, as long as the correct medical documentation was filed proving that “no fertility enhancements were involved and that the multiples were a perfectly natural occurrence,” and this paperwork had to be completed and officially registered with the government no later than the eighteenth week of pregnancy.

The penalty was actually more of a shocker than the limit of one child per mother. Rather than a monetary fine, which most people would have expected, anyone pregnant for a second, third, etc. time would be forced to endure abortion. Since this wasn't a day and age when people could hide a pregnancy or themselves very well, many women would be subject to this procedure when defying the law. And the abortions would be performed up to the exact time of a woman going into labor, which resulted in many caesarians, followed by the murders of the children.

For women who did manage to hide and give birth, any baby found without proper “single-birth” documentation was taken from its mother and supposedly “redistributed” by the government to women unable to conceive. In truth, most of the children taken were either murdered or raised as slaves, with some of these in their teen years eventually being slaughtered to have their organs harvested for donation to the wealthy and privileged. In addition to no information given to the mother about the redistribution, and no contact with the child during her lifetime, the penalty for the multiple-birth was forced sterilization. While many people thought a more sensible solution would be to simply sterilize women after their single-birth, the government couldn't do this because

if a child six years old or younger were to die, the mother would be allowed to have another child.

The farm and plantation residents were abuzz with the news. They had all heard rumors of this legislation several months ago, but never imagined it would pass. Since Charlie and Uncle Walter had been chatting with one another on the journey home from Kentucky, they hadn't listened to any news, music, or other broadcasts in the car. Naturally, they were both flabbergasted by this.

The fact that contraceptives were forbidden as part of some people's faith didn't matter, nor did it matter that many still believed abortion to be murder; and it was actually written into the law that "outdated matters of faith cannot have a place in our modern world." Many pro-abortionists were absolutely thrilled, as this had been part of their plan all along, to find a way limit the numbers of people being born.

This had all supposedly come about because the United States lacked resources to support so many people. Activists had, for years, been pushing that the world was overpopulated, while ignoring the fact that the population was actually decreasing, for various reasons such as that the murder rate was higher than ever. Also, a lack of quality healthcare for anyone not wealthy meant that many people were dying of diseases, even ones easily cured. In actuality, by this time, activists and other supporters of abortion were having little impact because sorcerers were well in control of the U.S. Government. But in this case, the law had passed easily even without the use of print doubles because most people considered the world to be overpopulated. Sadly, many other countries would shortly follow suit with similar legislation.

Seven years after the Single-Birth Law passed, a woman living in Utah named Maggie Linn became pregnant with a male child who her doctors determined would have muscular dystrophy. With this being her first child, she wasn't going to be forced to abort him; but the doctors were certainly pushing toward this, as many had been doing for years with regard to unborn children diagnosed with disabilities because the sorcerers, as well as many other evil people, didn't want government funds expended on the care of these individuals. And this wasn't just applied to the unborn. Being threatened, or enticed by wealth, doctors and other medical personnel were doing away with many disabled and infirm people by means such as deliberately making mistakes with

medications, infecting them with deadly diseases, causing equipment to malfunction, having accidents during surgeries, and even sometimes by methods such as suffocation while sleeping or drowning while bathing. Also threatened, or convincing themselves these were mercy killings, many others simply looked the other way.

Maggie Linn did not want to abort her child, but was feeling pressure. She knew from hearing many recent testimonies that doctors were finding ways to force abortions on unwilling women such as by stating the mother's health was in danger and threatening legal action to court-force a woman to abort to save herself. Despite the smiling face, and the soothing manner of speech, Maggie could see the evil and the threat behind the eyes of the doctor as he told her his recommendation was termination of the pregnancy, and that she should make an appointment for this procedure with his receptionist on her way out.

Ordinarily being a somewhat meek person, not at all the type to stand up to authority, she might have gone through with it, except for one thing. A couple of mysterious twenty-somethings had paid a visit to her home the day before her very first appointment with the obstetrician. This was before anyone could have known that her child was destined to have muscular dystrophy. At the time, she was grieving for the loss of her husband (the man Merri and Dell saved from the terrorist train attack), who had died in a plane crash just two weeks before. But despite her grief, she remembered clearly what the visitors said because they repeated it three times. They told her of a certain place she could go to if she ever needed help, of any kind, and especially help regarding matters of safety and faith.

These twenty-somethings were none other than Merri and Dell. Actually, Merri was only nineteen at the time, but was tall, and carried the air of a mature young woman, which led Maggie to assume she was a little older. While Time Key Travelers had been going back in time for years on God's command to stop certain abortions, Merri and Dell were simply there to deliver the message about safety to Ms. Linn.

Knowing that real danger was involved, Maggie had wisely made the appointment for termination of the pregnancy; but she had no intention of keeping it. Instead, she packed a small bag and left her home and job without telling anyone that she was leaving.

She hopped a tram, then another, then a bus to reach a small town in Alabama where she walked the final four and a half miles of her journey to a plantation called Netherwind. As she made her way down the oak-lined drive, Maggie was met by a very nice man named Kip who immediately gave her shelter. Feeling very safe and at peace, and in awe of the magic surrounding the place, the mother of Chase Linn very much knew this was meant to be—a true blessing from God. She had been praying nearly nonstop since leaving her house, in both faith and pleas for guidance, and He had more than answered her prayers.

But returning to the present day (when Merri was her twelve-year-old self), the plantations were just in the process of building a small hospital—well, seemingly small anyway—located right on the grounds. While several were already in operation inside the pockets, Weatherly knew they were eventually going to need one out in the open too. But while Chase would indeed be born in this new facility, shortly after his birth, he and his mother would end up living for a while in Antica, which had fabulous doctors. Although they couldn't cure muscular dystrophy, he would receive excellent medical care in his formative years, which would make him as healthy as possible. He would also be extremely mobile because airchairs were readily available by the time Chase was able to make use of one.

Part of the reason why the government wanted to limit the numbers of children was because so many people were on welfare, even many capable of working, and for which jobs were available. But this had been the design of the sorcerers too—to encourage capable people not to work because this was yet another thing against God's command. People are supposed to work to support themselves and their families. The government was still forcing the middle class, actually reduced to poverty-level living standards for well over a decade, to support the welfare programs, which had been upgraded as far as level of food, shelter, education programs, and discretionary spending allowances, so as not to demean participants, and to give them a “hope of a strong future of happiness and provision for both themselves and their children.” There was no time limit on benefits, so very few people on welfare ever decided to go to work.

This had begun with free cell phones being provided to people on welfare, for adults and children, though many middle-class families

couldn't afford them. Free premium internet and television services followed, along with the devices needed to fully use the services. It didn't matter that many tax-payers couldn't afford these things; they had to be provided to those on welfare, as part of the Equal Standard of Living Act. Free transportation was provided next, everywhere; and this was expensive because, as it had been since the founding of the United States, unless someone lived in a big city, very little public transportation was available. Housing was then upgraded to all welfare recipients, who were given free single-family homes equal to those of what was considered the working class, now often working overtime and two jobs just to get enough money to feed their families and keep a basic roof over their heads. Sadly, these roofs often equated to cheap apartments, trailers, and run-down houses that were not even close to being as nice as the dwellings of welfare recipients, not to mention being located in high-crime areas. Also sadly, many of the criminals targeting these areas were bored individuals living on welfare. Without jobs, or anything else productive to occupy their days, they simply decided to take even more from the people actually making their life-of-ease possible. Nothing was really in the hands of individual states anymore, so the federal government had full control pretty much everywhere.

Although breakfast, lunch, and dinner were being provided in schools for the children of welfare recipients, food allowances were never decreased because the school programs were optional and no documentation existed as to which children actually ate the meals provided. The No-Documentation Rule was a government mandate to protect people in the programs, as it was determined to be demeaning to in any way record receipt of the free meals, which were not available to children whose parents were not on welfare. Extra food allowances could be spent on anything such as alcohol and cigarettes. For all of the things being outlawed, these things had not; and with the sorcerers wanting to foster as many addicts as possible, free cigarettes and alcohol were often actually given to welfare recipients.

Since they didn't have to pay for their basic support, welfare recipients spent their money on things like high-priced tickets to sporting events; and not just the tickets, but also sixty-dollar t-shirts, and twenty-dollar hotdogs and cups of beer. With such enticements,

they could easily overspend with credit and get into debt, which could then be excused by Special Petition.

College was free for all welfare recipients and their children for up to eight years. However, few people taking advantage of this ever became employed; and those who did, generally became lobbyists and lawyers rallying for more welfare.

Taxes on most working families were around sixty percent of their income, and they still had to pay for healthcare, though this was a joke because almost no care was provided. This left most people living in desperate circumstances. Wealthy people, as usual, found ways not to have to pay very many taxes; and the disparity of wealth continued to grow. Outcry over any of these issues became as ineffectual as voting.

Many people who considered just quitting their jobs and going on welfare were prevented from doing so because anyone quitting gainful employment would not be eligible for welfare for four years, and at that time, would had to medically prove disability that would prevent employment. So the working were basically stuck, which was exactly what the sorcerers wanted and planned for when they first started to upgrade the welfare programs. They intended for people to be trapped and lose hope in the unfairness of it all.

At around the same time many of these welfare-upgrade laws were being passed, the government began denying Social Security payments to anyone with other resources. Persons with any type of pension, or who had saved for their retirement through IRAs, 401Ks, and such, were denied both Social Security and Medicare benefits. So those who had denied themselves vacations, large houses, fancy cars, eating out, and other spending in order to contribute to their futures were now being penalized. Evidently, this couldn't be helped because government funds, so stretched to cover so many welfare programs, couldn't possibly afford to also cover Social Security and Medicare for people with other resources, no matter how small. This was of course a means of breaking the spirits of the elderly, who were quickly reduced to living in extreme poverty.

The mess involving things like welfare programs and Social Security was all planned in conjunction with mimics and print doubles taking over many corporations and large businesses. With the takeovers, centralizations began, to make operations more cost

effective. Whether making autos or shoes, or canning vegetables or baking bread, these things could all be done much more efficiently in huge centralized facilities, as opposed to being spread out amongst the states. Thus began the formation of the Supercities, which had been the main plan of the sorcerers all along.

Takeovers of smaller businesses followed the larger ones, with the businesses shut down, again in the interest of consolidating and making things more efficient. When manufacturing facilities, banks, construction companies, energy plants, universities, grocery chains, and medical facilities were shut down, people wishing to remain employed, as well as have access to basic necessities and comforts, were forced to move. Smaller cities were forced to shut down first, followed by larger ones, as residents were herded into the Supercities for jobs, housing, food, and other necessities. Even some of the largest cities in the U.S. didn't survive because things continued to be combined under the guise of "cost effectiveness." Eventually, fourteen Supercities would emerge, leaving all other cities in the dust.

But before that actually happened, several rather shocking things occurred. All welfare programs ended because plenty of jobs became available as the Supercities came under construction, and as the manufacturing and packing plants in the cities began operations. Also, many work camps were established outlying the cities to provide much-needed supplies. The outlying supports included things like solar and wind farms, as well as traditional farms growing food and raising livestock. Fish farms were also established, as well as bamboo-growing operations. Quarries and concrete operations were also much needed, as well as steel manufacturing. Mobile camps were established to build a rail system connecting the Supercities and various permanent work camps.

The welfare programs had simply been a means to an end; and when all benefits came to a screeching halt for what basically amounted to half of the population of the United States, the recipients had to work, especially because the police (called the ESS, which was short for Enforcement Services Squads) under command of the sorcerers finally cracked down on thieving in order to force those who had grown accustomed to entitlements to work to provide for their families. They had all been deceived, by none other than the Great Deceiver. And so

obvious was Satan's hand in all of this, that the general public actually began calling the ESS, Snakes, the name not only being a perfect fit in connection to Satan, but also because the acronym sounded much like a snake's hiss.

Only the extremely elderly and infirm were exempt from working twelve-hour days. Persons in these categories who had no family to look after them didn't last long; they simply died or disappeared because the government wasn't going to look after them, and other people were too busy to.

Most people didn't have much choice as far as their jobs, but were assigned whatever was available by the government's Workforce Department. So this resulted in a lot of people unhappy and ill-suited for what they were being forced to do. Teachers had to take jobs in factories, auto-workers were made into carpenters, bankers were working in daycares, grocers had to learn to be electricians, and so on.

People could still live other places besides the Supercities, but only if those places were completely self-sustaining because no support was provided to them—no supplies, no infrastructure maintenance, no anything. Blessedly, there were still some places like this such as the earthship communities of the deserts, the mothership settlements in the mountains, and certain large private properties like plantations, ranches, and farms that had evidently planned well enough to become self-sustaining. These were all subject to taxation, but were somehow managing each year to cough up what the government required of them. This maddened the sorcerers; but private property owners still had some rights, so there wasn't much they could do. Also irritating was the fact that the residents of these self-sustaining communities also seemed to have a knack for surviving megahob and demon attacks, which absolutely infuriated the sorcerers, who pretty well guessed magical protectors were involved, as well as certain weapons created by magicians. What the sorcerers didn't know was the extent of the protection, or the weapons.

Huge chunks of rural America and what had once been thriving cities were deserted. This was all a way of controlling the masses; though an odd thing was happening to the masses in that their numbers seemed to be dwindling.

In addition to the forced abortions, for years, prison authorities had been forcing prisoners to fight one another to the death to make more room in prisons. Others of the general population had been dying from lack of medical care. The homeless often died from starvation and exposure. Plus, a lot of people were deciding not to have a child because they didn't want to bring a baby into a world gone as horribly wrong as this one. Suicide levels were also at an all-time high. At the time all of this was happening, Trista was regularly going through bouts of depression because she couldn't be in so many places at once to save more people. Illegal drugs were another huge problem, killing people who were seeking escapism. The worst of these were Sunshine Daydream and Nightwatch, street names Shream and Nitch. These were easy to accidentally OD on because their makers were often careless as to the quality and dosing of what they were providing.

But aside from these things, the sorcerers were extremely puzzled because it seemed almost as if the earth had magically opened to swallow up a lot of people. They couldn't figure out where else they might have disappeared to, unless under the seas. They didn't yet know about pockets because any mimics, hunters, megahobs, etc. that had found their way into pockets hadn't made it out alive in order to disclose the secret. When pondering the mystery of masses of people simply vanishing, a certain passage from the bible always popped into the sorcerers' minds, which made them definitely think whatever was happening was related to God. This was John 3:8. "The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with every one who is born of the Spirit."

In considering the decreasing population, the sorcerers quickly realized they might eventually run out of slaves. Therefore, a mere twelve years after the Single-Birth Law passed, came a huge surprise in the form of a complete reversal. By a new law called the Law of Three, women were now going to be forced to have a minimum of three children. Those who didn't comply were imprisoned and forcibly impregnated. For those complying, but who couldn't afford to raise their kids, the children were taken from them. For the good of society, these children were raised to serve society. As young as toddler age,

they were tested and placed in training facilities best suited to their aptitudes.

The ideal age to start childbearing was deemed to be eighteen. Each woman of this age had to begin producing. If a woman was unmarried, she was given to age twenty-one to begin producing children. If not pregnant by age twenty-two, she was institutionalized and impregnated.

The cloning of human beings had long since been banned. Also, science still couldn't grow whole children outside of their mothers in maturation tanks with any great success and without great cost, a fact that absolutely infuriated sorcerers who were basically Kings of Science. But, then, they recognized that the creation of children was much more in the magical and spiritual domain, an area in which sorcerers were seriously lacking. So they had to be grown in a natural womb. Even older women were forced to have children, in unhealthy facilities, and many died. The government didn't care about the mothers because they wanted the children, basically as slaves to work in the Supercities and camps.

The Law of Three came as more of a shock to long-time abortion supporters than to anyone else; and, of course, they protested, and loudly. "You can't tell women what to do with their own bodies!"

The response of the government was, "That's exactly what we did in forcing abortions."

This completely dumbfounded the protestors, who never thought the Single-Birth Law that they had pushed for could be used against them. But this was exactly what had happened, and the sorcerers even pointed out that the original legislation included a "Good for Society" clause which they were applying again here. While it was once "Good for Society" to limit the numbers of children born, it was now "Good for Society" to increase the numbers so that the United States wouldn't run out of workers. And this of course wasn't just limited to the U.S. As they had with the Single-Birth Law, many other countries of the world followed suit, in particular, those who were trending toward Supercities, a logical progression because consolidation was definitely proving to be more efficient.

The U.S. Military was controlled by the government, as it always had been; but by this time, most in the ranks were less than honorable, in fact, downright unsavory because the people drawn to enlist were

mainly of the dishonest and power-hungry sort, basically greedy bullies. Well before the population-control legislation was passed and the Supercities started coming into being, the sorcerers had noticed mass exits of military personnel. It was almost as though they were leaving to join some secret Underground Army, except that no evidence of an operation of this sort could be found. The function of the U.S. Military was much as it had always been, but of an extremely watered-down nature. Military personnel aided the ESS with their duties, looked after government officials, and put on a show of countering terrorism, which was still a huge problem worldwide. However, the sorcerers, fully among the ranks of Islam, and fully in control, actually used attacks to further their plans for the Supercities in many countries. Through destruction of this sort, they could more easily justify beginning certain construction projects; and a few thousand deaths here and there didn't matter much because the Human Producing Laws (as they were known in general) were well in effect and being enforced. "Unwillings" were warehoused, watched, forced, and then had their children taken away from them to be trained and begin productive lives. (While they didn't actually use the word, slaves, they might as well have.)

One thing the sorcerers hadn't counted on was the fact that this actually served to create more believers, when people recognized the evils they were being subjected to. And while it might seem harsh for God to allow this (because He of course was still fully in control, as He always has been and always will be) how else was He supposed to get through to the hard-headed atheists, activists, and such? Indeed, none could now deny the existence of Satan, sorcerers, demons, and the like, who began operating fully out in the open around the same time the Law of Three was passed.

After three births, the women were either thrown out onto the streets, or put back into the breeding program. Many in this situation ended up having more than three children. Since it was hard to prove they had produced three already, it was easy for the government to force them to produce more. Some even went along with this willingly because it was better than being out on the streets. Even women nearing their menopausal years were forced to produce. As long as a woman's ovaries were still popping out eggs, she had to comply with

the law. No upper age limit had ever been set since women even in their mid-fifties could and still did have children.

By way of countering, the out-in-the-open hospital on the plantations had started providing a lot of birth certificates for children women never had. When government investigators were checking up on this, the plantations easily produced borrowed children from the thousands living within the pockets. It was also easy for Weatherly's operatives to manipulate things like prints and DNA in the fairly unsophisticated computer systems of the day, unsophisticated by terms of what the magicians were helping to create. For each fake birth certificate, prints and DNA were produced; then it was easy to use yet more trickery when presenting the borrowed children for identification to the fairly inept investigators.

The twin plantations were still fully operating, but were experiencing raids several times a year, especially the schools due to the changes to education systems. All schools, including private ones, had been standardized as far as curriculum and teaching methods. Exceptions applied only to the children of the wealthy and famous because, as history had proven, they never had to follow any rules. The Netherwind-Laurelstone Schools on the surface were still putting on a good show for the raids and inspections, but were still educating the same way they always had within the pods and pockets.

Weatherly considered this to be a kind of game, to stay one step ahead of the various laws. One time, she was directly confronted inside Laurelstone by a sorcerer who came with a raiding party.

"Just wait until we have control of all private lands," he said threateningly.

"Yes, I *am* waiting for that," Weatherly calmly replied, with an equal note of threat to her tone.

Mistaking the threat for defiance, the sorcerer stated, "Then you'll be forced into the cities."

"I highly doubt you would want *me* inside one of your cities," Weatherly replied, her eyes ablaze with the fire of the Holy Spirit inside her as she stared evenly at the man.

Suddenly struck with fear, to his very core, the sorcerer fled the house. As he was hastening at a trot across the lawns to the armored personnel carrier in which he had arrived, a branch from a tree suddenly

whipped out to slap him hard in the face. Reeling backwards, he tripped over a tree root springing out of the earth at just the right moment to catch his ankle and make him land squarely on his back. (This was Tamfa's doing. Having heard the man threaten her charge, the spirit was doling out a small measure of retaliation in commanding the tree to do her bidding.) Rising from the ground, the sorcerer's trot became a run as he sought the safety of both his troops and the armored vehicle.

As far as staying one step ahead of the Law of Three, which basically meant keeping in compliance, those running the plantations could easily show that each family could support its three children produced, so none were forcibly taken from their families for this reason. Also, doctors from the hospital were able to provide solid medical proof for women unable to have the three required. (Many of these women could have safely had children but were choosing not to.) In addition to resident doctors, Time Key Travelers managed to get outside doctors' signatures for many women who had failed to begin producing children by the required age deadlines. One such doctor on the payroll of the sorcerers couldn't understand how his signature had ended up on a stack of medical documents excusing over two hundred women from their legal obligations of producing, for various health reasons. He couldn't remember anything having to do with strange visitors, and he certainly had no knowledge of the Mind Key being used on him. But being fully aware that he was in pretty big trouble with the sorcerers, he fled the country and ended up living as a poverty-stricken hermit in Canada for his remaining days.

What confused and confounded the sorcerers, and why they couldn't figure out how to place blame on the plantations, was because the women being helped were from all over the U.S. This was happening because an underground network through places like the Inn at Magnolia Hills had been established to get women to the safety of the twin plantations, and no one was excluded from help. Many who had pushed for the original Single-Birth Law arrived sheepishly, even reluctantly, but were met with open arms and without judgment. It wasn't up to human beings to judge; but rather, to help one another. The Great Deceiver had the power to pretty much deceive anyone, even good people, so it was no wonder how so many had been misled. Blessedly, the Light of Jesus had the power to counter evil and was

shining brightly as a beacon from many parts of the earth, such as from Netherwind and Laurelstone.

Occasionally, women from other countries made their way to the plantations for help, which was mainly in the form of hiding them because Weatherly had to work within the current laws, which varied country by country, and over which she had no control because medical documentation from the U.S. often didn't fly in other parts of the world. No one arriving was ever turned away; however, she couldn't launch an all-out offensive to help women from Greece, Iceland, Zimbabwe, Brazil, New Zealand, or any other places where the Human Producing Laws had taken root. While she might have wished to help more, she simply couldn't, though she did regularly pray for those in other countries to receive like help.

This continued to be true six years after the Law of Three was passed, as Weatherly helped to set up underground churches when the practice of Christianity was outlawed in the United States and seventeen other countries.

Chapter Nineteen

Unicorn Whistles

Putting aside the horrors of the Supercities, the Law of Three, and the outlawing of Christianity for the moment, we must get back to the present day. Samantha, who was not yet old enough to be directly affected by the Single-Birth Law, had put it out of her mind while attending a training session in the Weapons Room on the last Wednesday in March.

While practicing with a red rope, she found her mind on unicorns, as it often was. She had seen her first unicorn at the age of four when her mother called the creature to save the family and several other people nearby from a pack of demons. Samantha couldn't call unicorns herself, and didn't think that was going to be her gift. She hadn't exactly figured out her gift yet, but she definitely didn't think it was going to be calling unicorns. She couldn't even figure out the mystery of the unicorn whistle, which she had been pondering for years. Her mother, also, didn't know how to make it work, but hadn't expended much energy on finding the answer to the puzzle because she didn't need to, in having the ability to call the creatures without the aid of any special device.

The only unicorn whistle known to exist—which Vini discovered in her college years in one of the glass display cases holding various artifacts in the subbasement library at Doyle Mansion—had been found by Mrs. Doyle and Mrs. Ellis on one of their adventures as teenagers. From reading Mrs. Doyle's journals, and from conversations with Mrs. Ellis, Vini discovered that both women believed for certain that it was a whistle capable of calling a unicorn; but neither had ever figured out how to use it. Violet had freely given the whistle to Vini who, after fiddling with it for a time and not being able to get it to work, had simply tucked it away into a small home safe, only subsequently taking it out a couple of times when Samantha was around ages five and six to show it to her and let her play with it. Being wise enough to know that

the minds of children worked differently than adults, often more creatively, Vini had hoped Samantha would be able to get the whistle to work. But, alas, that hadn't been the case. Soft blowing, strong blowing, intermittent blowing, blowing it under water, trying to play a song—nothing seemed to work.

Asking to see the whistle several more times over the years, Samantha began to take the puzzle as something of a personal challenge. And while she was a little frustrated in not being able to make it work so far, she was patient, particularly because she knew that some things were not meant to happen quickly. Often, human beings needed to have great patience while waiting on God's perfect timing.

Taking a break from rope practice, Samantha watched a girl training with a flute, capturing the air into the instrument through a series of graceful spins, bends, and arm movements. In thinking about the musical weapon, Samantha had a sudden idea. It was movement that filled the flute with air, basically charging it. Movement also played the instrument, to get it to emit its musical energy blasts. As compared to a traditional flute, the method to use the weapon was somewhat unexpected in that it started with what equated to an inhale through the instrument. Then the exhale to play the flute was also not of the sort one might imagine because no blowing was involved. (Flute users seldom put their mouths to the instruments when fingering the holes because it was too dangerous to have their faces close to the weapon.) So what if the unicorn whistle worked on the same principles? What if a person wasn't supposed to blow the whistle, but inhale through it and use certain movements to get it to work?

With this idea spinning around in her brain, Samantha asked her instructor if she could be excused from practice a little early.

Receiving permission, and having no more classes scheduled for the day, she fairly skipped home, very excited to have another go at the whistle. Her mom was working at the hippotherapy program, and Samantha didn't want to disturb her; but she thought her dad would probably be at home in order to open the safe for her.

She had guessed correctly; he was at the cottage, sitting at the kitchen table with books spread out in the process of writing one of his sermons.

"That's the spirit!" he said as he opened the safe. "Never give up."

“Thanks, Dad,” Samantha said, kissing him on the cheek before taking the whistle outside so as not to disturb him.

Loping out to one of her favorite oak trees, she sat on a bench beneath the tree and proceeded to examine the whistle. Right at three inches long, it was slim and silver, and not at all like a coaches’ whistle, but very much like a tiny flute, which is why Samantha couldn’t believe she hadn’t thought of it in comparison to a flute weapon before now. (She didn’t know that the thought came from having inhaled a dandelion seed, one of Etowa’s best designs, on her way to rope practice.)

Saying a little prayer beforehand, she brought the whistle to her lips and inhaled. She had planned to follow this up with a few movements like those she had seen flute users do in training. However, as she removed the whistle from her lips and exhaled, a whistle unexpectedly came out of her mouth. She hadn’t whistled (as in a pucker), but her breath had, very softly, resulting in a musical but also watery sound, like driblets from a waterfall gently playing notes on the strings of a harp. Instantly, a unicorn appeared in front of Samantha, who barely had time to notice that it had eyes like her late grandfather (her mother’s dad) before it disappeared a mere five seconds later.

After skipping around the plantation, unseen of course, since he was traveling so fast, the golden creature entered the pocket in which Lóhere lived, in order to say a quick hello to the behemoth before departing for places unknown a mere ninety seconds after first arriving in front of Samantha on the bench.

As usual, the unicorn visit meant that certain people were able to see the good in bad situations, basically, seeing a blessing in disguise. One was a man in the hospital with a hurt back. The unicorn allowed him to see that being laid up meant he missed having a deadly run-in with a mimic. A young girl whose cat had been killed by a driverless car (malfunctioning because a gremlin had gotten into its workings) saw that the slight delay from the car hitting the cat had kept the vehicle from plowing into a group of people. Instead, the car hit a pile of hay bales, and the two people inside at the time were okay.

Samantha was practically dumbfounded. She had never doubted that the whistle could work, but she hadn’t expected the answer as to

how to be so simple. Having her journal with her, she scratched out a few notes to try to make sense of this.

“The whistle is not a whistle in the traditional sense, but it makes air turn into a unique whistle inside a person’s mouth. The mouth becomes the whistle after using the device. This is probably something like how the flutes work; when they capture air, they change it into something more powerful that can be used for a special purpose. The air captured in the mouth from having passed through the unicorn whistle evidently becomes powerful and special enough to call a unicorn.”

Of course, exactly how it worked was still a mystery; but whatever the details, it was pretty spectacular. Though it wasn’t quite time for her mom to be finished working for the day, Samantha basically couldn’t wait to tell her about the whistle; so, rising from the bench, she set off at a run toward the hippotherapy corral.

Vini marveled that the answer was so simple. “Well, human beings often overcomplicate things,” she said. “This is just another example. No matter how many times I blew into it, and in different ways, I never thought of inhaling. If I did ever inhale through it, I imagine I just blew it back through, which would have changed the sound of it.”

Samantha had known not to use the whistle again right away because the person who would be able to overproduce human goodness was not yet born. According to her mom’s prophetic dreams and auto-writing, they still had over seven years to wait for this. (The angels weren’t even rejoicing yet, though they were preparing for the celebration.)

Vini was also wise in this regard and so didn’t ask for a demonstration of the whistle. After complimenting her daughter on not calling unicorns frivolously, she said, “Even though we can’t use this much right now, it could be a very useful tool for the future, so we should get the magicians working on making others, if they can.”

Samantha agreed this was a good idea, and went with her mother to seek out Mr. P who happened to be in the Magicians’ Laboratory, hard at work on a project with Marlon. Very interested in the unicorn whistle, both magician and protégé quickly decided to take a break from their current project to begin to study the whistle.

Etowa's dandelion-seed move resulted in another even-through call by Boko, who definitely wanted the secret of the unicorn whistle revealed, so that more of them could be made and used.

If we flash-forward roughly four years, we find that the magicians were indeed able to make nine additional whistles.

Vini and Samantha were thrilled. By their thinking, this was going to be a tremendous asset in performing God's work. In addition to being able to time travel, unicorns were powerful creatures of light, capable of battling great evils.

Intent on doing something good, no one involved ever conceived of any danger, or suspected that the venture could backfire, to the point of having the power to actually bring about the downfall of God's children.

Upon discovering how the whistle worked, had Samantha and Vini prayed about the situation, and listened to God's response and direction, they would have known to simply keep the whistle locked up, and out of the hands of magicians. No matter what our good intentions, God always knows best. Vini and Samantha of course knew this; they simply forgot to ask. Plus, in being so excited about getting the whistle to work, they forgot to heed their gut feelings from the Holy Spirit's guidance. If they had, they certainly would have known to be more cautious. Etowa had also made a mistake, which he occasionally did in his game moves, though not very often.

With the whistle's function being based on music, they should have known to be wary. Having once basically been God's Director of Heavenly Musical Worship, Satan was actually partly composed of heavenly musical instruments. Music on earth was his domain now, corrupted of course (at the very least by deception), like most everything else in our world.

Not long after the whistle was duplicated, one of the ten in existence was stolen by a mimic. Though it would take the sorcerers nearly twenty years to learn to use it, the stolen whistle would lead to the capture of the first unicorn, one extremely prized by the sorcerers in being connected to the soul of none other than Chase Linn.

While the sorcerers wouldn't be able to kill the unicorn directly, such as by using flashfire to burn or a sonic whirlpool to drown, they would be able to imprison the creature in such a way as to cut off its

food supply. With a personal unicorn connected to each human being as a Soul Shadow, if the unicorn were to die, the person connected to it would also perish. And if Chase Linn were to die, this would, of course, tragically equate to a giant leap backwards as far as having enough food for magical creatures to eat, not to mention the loss of a person destined to be amazing in quite a few other ways as well, aside from being supernaturally gifted.

Chapter Twenty

The White Dragon

Two days after making the discovery of how to use the unicorn whistle, Samantha was sitting on her bed in the afternoon, her journal open in her lap. However, instead of writing, she was pondering, mainly the issue of gifts such as Isaac's ability to make maps and Trista being able to save people from suicide. Some people even had multiple gifts, like her mother with calling unicorns, auto-writing, and working with horses. Her mother also had heightened discernment and prophetic dreams.

Though Samantha wasn't impatient, she did frequently wonder what her gift or gifts might turn out to be, and she looked forward to the day when this would be revealed. It was tempting to wish for certain gifts. If she had eidetic memory, school would surely be a lot easier. Being a magician would likely be an adventure, but Samantha had never been much good at the sciences, which she knew were fully connected to magic and Sextessence. She did sometimes have what she thought were prophetic dreams like her mother, but so far she hadn't been able to make much out of them as far as interpretation. To her, they were simply a jumble of images, conversations, and occasionally emotional feelings.

Feeling drowsy as she scratched out a few notes, she ended up taking a short nap, during which she had a dream that she was able to interpret, at least, partway.

In the dream, she saw herself marrying Dell Brinker, which seemed odd because she had never thought of him in that way, as like a boyfriend or a future husband. Yet, here they were, getting married; but not by her father because he had wanted to be the one to walk her down the aisle, and it would have been a little awkward to do both—walk the bride and officiate. So a pastor from one of the pockets was marrying them in the lovely setting of Laurelstone's chapel, with sunlight streaming through the stained glass windows, setting aglow the

multitudes of flowers decorating each pew, along with the many bright and happy faces of those attending the ceremony. Heike, Pizzo, and the twins were very much present at the wedding in that they were throwing both flower petals and whole flowers at people from huge baskets they had filled expressly for this purpose. Indeed, by the time the ceremony wrapped up, each person attending had been hit at least twelve times.

Merri was the maid of honor, and afterwards caught the bouquet. Samantha was laughing because Merri had sworn never to marry. She instead wanted to be exactly like her Aunt Weatherly, a warrior, great military leader, and independent in not being tied to a husband and possibly children, or rather, one child by the Single-Birth Law which was still in effect at the time Samantha married.

After the reception, Samantha returned to the cottage to get changed to leave for a short honeymoon, which would involve a one-night stay at the Inn at Magnolia Hills before a fairly speedy jaunt to Washington State and into a pocket to take a few mountain hikes. They only had five days in total for the trip because Dell needed to return to lead a team of Time Key Travelers on an important mission. While the couple was gone, Samantha's parents would be moving most of her belongings into Dell's apartment in the pocket on the plantation containing the largest horse operation where Samantha was currently working.

Sitting on a small bench at her dressing table and putting on her shoes, Samantha's gaze was on her wedding dress lying across her bed. This being a dream, she was only mildly surprised when her dress slowly started to change shape, at the exact moment that her bedroom and most of its contents fell away, leaving simply a cloud-filled but bright blue expanse in which only the bench upon which she was still seated and her dress were floating, as though on their own in the sky with the sun shining upon and embracing them.

As she watched, the dress took on the form a large white peacock, but only for a few seconds before changing shape, shrinking to become a white hummingbird, which Samantha knew was a creature able to stop time under certain circumstances. Then the hummingbird shifted to the form of an enormous white lion capable of taking on an albino puma, or maybe two. This was a slightly funny sight because the lion, while bold and ferocious looking, also had a bit of lace and ribbon to him, intertwined here and there, because the wedding dress never lost its

entire essence with the shape changes. The white hummingbird and the white lion had been created by the white peacock for special purposes in the battle against evil. Within a few seconds, the lion began to shrink, to take on the form of a white burnished dove, before ultimately turning into a large white dragon, his scales and feathers glinting and taking on an overall smooth platinum sheen with the sun shining upon them; though again, a bit of lace and ribbon adorned him here and there.

The dragon was telling her something, by thought; and as he did so, her dream gaze shifted into her own womb in which she saw a child, a girl named Quinlyn who would be born exactly one year to the day following the wedding. Samantha also knew that Quinlyn was destined to ride the white dragon, whose name was Cuoré. Samantha had never heard of dragons having names like certain other magical creatures; but she didn't see why they wouldn't, especially one as appropriate as Cuoré, which meant healing. (Dragons actually did have names, but these were often kept secret just amongst themselves.) Quinlyn herself was destined to be a healer, even aside from the use of dragon tears, in that she would have the gift of healing by touch.

Samantha woke up exactly then, a little disoriented to find herself and some of her thoughts back in the present. Rising from her bed and looking out of her bedroom window, she happened to see Dell passing one of the horse barns. Suddenly feeling somewhat shy, she ducked down before realizing that, not only was he not looking her way, but he also probably wouldn't have been able to see her through the window from this distance if he happened to glance in the direction of the Dellingers' cottage.

Now fairly well convinced that one of her gifts was that of prophetic dreams, Samantha had no reason to doubt that what she had just envisioned would all come true, except that the white creatures wouldn't be made partly of her future wedding dress, of course. As she took a seat on her bed, a series of images came into her brain about something relating to her wedding that actually hadn't been in her dream. The beautiful dress had been made by Em Tremaine, who had taken a break from her busy writing schedule and the making of clothes for puck trolls in order to design and sew the dress, though Samantha's grandmother had helped to add some of the ribbon and lace details.

With this information popping into her brain, Samantha suddenly thought that another of her gifts might be prophetic daydreaming.

Taking up her journal, she was still making notes about the dream and daydream a half-hour later when her father called her to dinner.

Meanwhile, at right around the same time the Dellinger family was sitting down to dinner, Professor Fulhausen was looking at the real white dragon, though Cuoré was in dove form.

It had taken the professor exactly a year to find this particular dragon, all the while leading astray a persistent Dragon Hunter. He hadn't killed this particular hunter because Professor Fulhausen had always been able to direct the man away from the locations of burnished doves, including Cuoré. But the professor had killed three hunters in the past decade, at times when it had been the only way to save the dragons he was protecting. He had used a mirror to kill two of them. For the third, the professor managed to get the hunter's equipment away from him, leaving him vulnerable; then, the dragon the hunter had been preying upon had taken care of matters.

In addition to redirecting and sometimes killing Dragon Hunters, Professor Fulhausen relocated many dragons. This was generally in the form of moving the sleeping burnished doves from various caves and caverns to others in order to better hide them. However, despite his efforts, dragons were disappearing from some of even the remotest of hiding spots. In a few of these instances, the doves themselves had decided to move. Sadly, more often, hunters were successful in capturing them using their small silvery sorcerer-designed bags that prevented the doves from shifting into dragon form. In truth, many more Dragon Hunters had been trained in the past two decades because the sorcerers were anxious to add dragons to the arsenal of creatures working for them. It wasn't easy to convert dragons to evil; but it could be done, and was being done.

Watching Cuoré sleep, the professor smiled in knowing that he was looking at Quinlyn's future protector. Both Cuoré and Quinlyn would end up thinking this very funny—that God had assigned a dragon to protect the Protector of Dragons. Professor Fulhausen, as the current Protector of Dragons, didn't have a protector assigned to him. (This actually wasn't correct because, like Weatherly, he had one assigned

that he didn't know about, in the form of a stone spirit. The professor would never learn about Golyó during his lifetime.)

But as far as Quinlyn and Cuoré, the white dragon would often giggle about being assigned to protect his own protector. When he was awake and giggled, Quinlyn would find that his giggles tickled her brain, much as many of the softer thoughts he directed towards her did. When giggling while dreaming, Cuoré's giggles caused the steam from his mouth to rise up to meet the sun's rays, which resulted in rainbows. So this wasn't just a long-held myth—that a sleeping dragon's dream giggles would turn into rainbows—it was actually true.

Within dragon circles, Cuoré was often known as the Eighth Dragon. Not long after a magical peacock created the original seven dragons, in seven colors corresponding to those of the rainbow, another magical peacock, a white one, had created Cuoré.

Cuoré was made white in order to be more clandestine, a trait that would be needed to be an effective protector for Quinlyn. Sky Serpents, in both dove and dragon forms, tended to be somewhat flashy; and dragons couldn't become invisible like thunderbirds. But Cuoré, being pure white, could blend in with clouds, snow, pear blossoms, steam, ashes, pale stones, and other such things for camouflage purposes.

As the professor was gazing at Cuoré, a little snore and a tiny puff of smoke came out of one nostril of the dove.

Leaving the cavern in which the white dragon was sleeping a short while later, Professor Fulhausen was very excited. It was nearly time for his replacement to be born. He just needed to be a little patient, as he had been for many decades.

Unknown to the professor, he was being observed on this day by a tiny fairylike being known as a spreesprite, who was sitting astride a white hummingbird hovering above the entrance to the cavern.

We might note here that both boy and girl spreesprites have wings and can fly; but they sometimes chose to ride on other creatures such as beetles, hummingbirds, and bumblebees. Spreesprites also tend to be less than an inch high with few exceptions. As far as a white hummingbird being able to stop time on certain occasions, in truth, the creature couldn't do this on his own, but only if a spreesprite was present and helping, and then, only for a total of one minute. And the spreesprite would have to be a girl because boy spreesprites could not

stop time. The boys could, however, become invisible (which the girls could not) and often did this when playing pranks on girl spreesprites, human beings, and many other creatures.

The only other time a white hummingbird would be capable of stopping time would be in conjunction with use of a certain magical object, Vini's pin-on watch, to be exact. Quinlyn would eventually inherit the watch from her grandmother, and would frequently work with a white hummingbird in order to make use of it. However, in these instances, time could only be stopped for a total of five seconds because the power of the watch was not nearly equal to the power of a spreesprite.

The spreesprite watching Professor Fulhausen was a girl, and she held a slightly scornful attitude about the current Protector of Dragons. But, then, many spreesprites had this concept about many human beings, feeling they were just not nearly as smart and clever as they should be, as far as how their brains were actually designed. Human beings should be nearly brilliant, and intuitive, with good common sense. Sadly, this wasn't the case, particularly with things like emotions and circumstances clouding their reasoning and judgement.

This particular spreesprite had been observing the professor for some time, and had even helped to save a dragon on one occasion by stopping time, though this was unknown to Professor Fulhausen. On this day, she was shaking her tiny head.

The Protector of Dragons shouldn't need to travel all over the place, in such a willy-nilly fashion, as this one often did. It was odd in general how no one seemed to be able to discern exactly where most dragons were hiding. And so, people ran hither and thither in search of them. If human beings would actually put their minds to it, they could figure out where most sky serpents were sleeping, in several places, but great conglomerates of them in each of the locations, with over nine hundred in total at present. The secret, like that of opening pockets and creating pods, was based on triangles and threes, along with fire, of course, since dragons were very much connected to fire.

As the professor set off, the spreesprite continued to discreetly follow.

Chapter Twenty-One

Hidden in Plain Sight

God's children were preparing for war.

As the Supercities came into being over the next two decades, numerous topiary armies were built all over the United States as well as many other countries. Mostly under the direction of Jenny, many volunteers (mainly human beings and bigfoots) helped to create the topiaries, which were then refined and tended to by gnomes. Putting aside their differences, puck trolls often traveled with gnomes to bring the shrubs and trees to life. Done once, there was no need for a puck troll to be involved again because the topiaries held Memory Magic that allowed them to come to life again anytime they wanted to.

Frank often helped Jenny with her endeavors. With the farm under the good care of his wife, children, and father-in-law, he was able to put some time into travel. Uncle Walter wasn't around the farm much because he had basically moved to the mountain, to help Bear with various construction projects, both buildings and furniture.

When sculpting bushes and trees, Frank occasionally had flashbacks to being a vandal in his youth and actually mutilating a topiary cross on Mr. Galloway's front lawn. What a beginning Frank had had, as a horrible sinner, but blessedly saved by God's grace, and helped onto this path by the very man he had victimized. Frank now couldn't even imagine a life any different than that of a believer, except as a horror, if he had continued on a destructive path.

Charlie herself occasionally thought back to her own early beginnings, and marveled. She had been a bully and a cheat. Blessedly, her father had taken a firm hand with her, so she hadn't turned out like Dana. Charlie held no guilt relating to her childhood at this time because she knew she was forgiven, even by Vini, a victim of her bullying in third grade. While free from feelings of guilt, Charlie did have good deal of gratitude, towards God especially, but to certain

people as well, such as Vini and Mrs. Doyle, wonderful human beings who had guided her, and helped her stay on the path.

Sam occasionally traveled with Frank to help with the topiaries, Tope Projects, as the pair liked to call them. Sculpting topiaries had been one of Sam's earliest hobbies, before he took up pottery. The travel gave him the opportunity to distribute some of his pots, many of which were very clever in being specially designed to secretly hold things like bibles and crosses.

Many of the topiary gardens were on old estates that were deserted, even crumbling, as well as having been looted by criminals, generally in small groups, but sometimes in bands. But the gardens were kept up by the gnomes, who were also helping to grow food for people in the earthship and mothership communities. The people in these settlements learned very quickly not to thank the gnomes. If people ever needed to converse with a gnome, short words and phrases (said in a surly manner) were the best approach. "Okay." "Good to know." "I'll get right to that." "Not today." "Tomorrow."

After such brief conversations, a gnome would often wait to see if a human would add on a thank-you, or give a look of appreciation, which gnomes also hated. Unexpressed admiration was okay; but indicated appreciation, no. People generally had to be trained not to be grateful, so as not to risk losing the gnomes, who tended to quickly move on, there one day gone the next, if they thought they were going to get compliments or gifts. The gnomes could excuse some of this behavior from children, but not from adults. So people trained themselves to direct their gratefulness to God, which was as it should be. Most gnomes had a fairly brusque demeanor; and if anyone approached, a rarity because gnomes were generally excellently camouflaged to look like their surroundings, the gnome would often shoot a glare of warning to remind people not to express any gratitude or pay compliments.

When the Supercities were in full swing, topiary armies were built in cemeteries outlying the cities. Smaller numbers were placed inside the cities, in parks, and on the grounds surrounding government buildings. As long as the bushes and trees resembled nothing religious such as angels or crosses, the sorcerers didn't much care. Even if they had recognized the threat, the numbers of topiaries were small inside the cities; except that there were actually more than most people would

have imagined because the topiaries could and did often camouflage themselves to look like regular, unshaped bushes and trees. They did this by fluffing out, flattening down, curling into balls, bending, twisting, and such, in order not to be particularly recognizable as an elephant, a butterfly, a dragon, a honeybee, a cougar, or whatever.

As far as people being hidden, Otto and his teams of architects and magicians were able to do some of their work inside the Supercities, mainly creating pods and pockets as safe havens for clandestine church worship, underground schools, medical clinics, or just hiding places in general for women escaping the human breeding programs, and for others who, for various reasons, were not in favor with the sorcerers, Snakes, mimics, etc. What looked like a closet in an apartment opened up into a huge meeting hall. A storage bin in a basement actually led to a large dorm facility. What appeared to be an ordinary pay kiosk afforded access to a school and a cafeteria.

Gardens were also established. What looked like a large window box actually held a growing plot roughly the size of a racquetball court. What appeared to be a child's sandbox held a garden equal to an Olympic swimming pool in size. In order to be healthier, people needed to supplement the meager food rations they were being allotted. The gardens were especially important to those helping provide for the elderly, disabled, and homeless who received no support at all from the government. (Programs like Social Security and Medicare no longer existed.)

As far as other things hidden within the cities, genie-created foldable bibles were actually available all over the place—stuck on refrigerators like magnets, worn as lapel pins, hanging from charm bracelets, etc. Some were designed to look like seashells, and were often found sitting in rows on windowsills, just waiting for someone to borrow them. And these little sill libraries didn't only hold bibles, but other banned books as well, such as copies of *Graham Rumpole* and many works by writers like C.S. Lewis and Rudyard Kipling. Crosses were worked into hair barrettes, shoes, kitchen wares, and even doorframes and lighting fixtures. Other genie creations included candles that burned for hundreds of hours, even large-sized ones that could be used for cooking. Supernaturally illuminated reading glasses were made that could be used in the pitch black of the darkest nights.

Although a lot of art had been destroyed and was banned, some still existed within the cities, often hidden in pods as small as, and looking like, shoeboxes. Larger creations were similarly cleverly hidden, and people were trained to recognize them so that they could make use of them because art did still afford good places to hide. Stained glass, though there wasn't much inside the Supercities, could be used as hiding places. People were also sometimes hidden in quilts. Plenty of puck trolls lived in the cities, traveling around to bring artistic creations to life for people to use in these ways.

With regard to hiding places away from the Supercities, many pods and pockets were still in full operation, and growing. Also, the sorcerers' speculation that people might be hidden in the seas was partly correct, as two secret naval facilities were located in the oceans, one in the Pacific and one in the Atlantic. With the cost of building underwater facilities being prohibitive, many more naval bases were situated on islands on which pockets had been opened.

In conjunction with the Supercities coming into being, those on the side of evil were also preparing for war. Thus, the sorcerers developed many strongholds and hiding places of their own like the water tower that Charlie's vision had allowed her to see into. This included places such as a gate house on an abandoned estate in Ohio, an old grain silo in Idaho, a deserted meat-packing plant in Maryland, and a high school no longer in operation in Nevada. With the development of the Supercities, a great many of these options existed. Several thousand Demon Pockets were also in existence. Once mainly used as traps for human beings, they were now being used as storage depositories for foul creatures, as well as to hold labs in which things like the unicorn paddock was designed. Genetic facilities geared to developing more creatures like the nyregs were also situated inside Demon Pockets. At around the same time the Law of Three was passed, the sorcerers developed a first version of a stealth hob, a cross between a megahob and a gremlin, the idea being to take advantage of the size and ferocity of the megahob while adding the invisibility factor of a gremlin. While the stealth hob wasn't invisible all the time like a gremlin, and couldn't hold invisibility for long periods of time, it could become invisible for roughly forty-five seconds at a stretch. A good many creatures like hobgoblins and demons stayed outside the Demon Pockets too, just as

they had for centuries. Some of their favorite places to hang out included the trunks of old cars and inside broken-down appliances in junkyards. They also liked hiding in caves, though they had to be careful because bigfoots, oodus, and dragons also favored caves. Demons also liked to hide within people, possessing them.

But getting back to the here and now, roughly four weeks after the Single-Birth Law was passed, we find Charlie delivering some pastries and candies to her friends on the plantations.

Visiting with Weatherly in the library on Laurelstone's second floor, something about one of the stained glass windows in the library suddenly struck Charlie. This was a window she had seen many times before; but she had never particularly noticed the subject matter, which was that of a yellowy-green tree situated on a mountainside. A short stretch of meadow occupied the foreground of the tree. In the background, a small stream wound its way down the mountain to curl around the base of the tree before heading off to one side of the meadow. While the whole scene was lovely, the tree was what had caught Charlie's attention because it was obviously a Liget Tree, exactly like those on the mountain in Tennessee, identifiable by the shape and markings of its leaves, which looked a lot like three toes on a rather short foot, albeit a yellowy-green foot.

When this was pointed out to her, Weatherly immediately thought of the portal window in her study. "This is probably a doorway too," she told Charlie excitedly.

Passing her hand easily through the window, Weatherly discovered her assumption to be correct, though this was obviously different than the arbor window in her study in that it didn't need any sort of device to activate it.

As far as destination, sure enough, in a quick step through, Weatherly and Charlie did indeed find themselves on the very mountain in Tennessee that the suspension bridge in Kentucky also led to. Not only were the trees recognizable, a short ways up the mountain, Charlie spotted a cluster of stack gardens beside a cabin that she remembered seeing on her visit.

With regard to getting home to the manor, a distinctive boulder next to the stream marked the spot to step back through the doorway, which was invisible from the mountain side. And if someone wasn't looking

for and expecting it, the passage wouldn't have worked, being designed like many other magical doorways, this being a very good thing since the upstairs library at Laurelstone didn't particularly need visits from rabbits, foxes, and other such mountain inhabitants.

"All these years I can't believe I never discovered this before," Weatherly marveled.

"You probably weren't meant to until now," Charlie remarked. "Just like I wasn't meant to find the bridge too early; in fact, I'm pretty sure I was meant to have Uncle Walter with me on the discovery. And that couldn't have happened until this very year."

As Weatherly nodded, Charlie added, "Speaking of my uncle, he's really been itching to go back."

With Weatherly anxious to visit the mountain settlement, and Charlie too busy with work at present to go with her to make introductions, it was quickly decided that Uncle Walter would accompany Weatherly. And so eager was he to return to the mountain, they decided to go the very next morning, which worked out well for Weatherly's schedule.

On the very same day the pair stepped through the window to Tennessee, Kip and Jane were making important plans. Jane had just discovered that she was pregnant with her second child, so she was going to need to be hidden. They decided she would go to Antica for a while, since both Merri and Kip had easy access to this realm, and because the doctors there were so proficient.

Less than a week later, Jane found herself comfortably situated in Antica.

At around the same time Jane was unpacking, Vini was paying another visit to the Clock of the Universe. The same hummingbird was there. After about ten minutes of watching the tiny creature fly backwards in circles around the clock, Vini finally noticed what she was supposed to. The movement of the clock—in its many dials, gears, and other whatnots—was now exactly opposite that of what she had noticed on other visits throughout the years. The clock was now moving backwards, instead of forwards.

Vini already thought she knew what this meant; but to confirm, she tried auto-writing. "The Clock of the Universe is now counting down, which means we are getting closer to the Endtimes. The clock was only

designed to control things up to the point the earth will be remade by fire. It will no longer be needed after that time. Of course, since the clock doesn't measure time as human beings do, we still have no way of knowing when the Endtimes will occur."

Having her bible with her, Vini looked up 2 Peter 3:8. "But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day."

After reading the passage, she finished her journal note. "Jesus could come back tomorrow, or a thousand years from now, or ten thousand. Only God knows when the Endtimes will be. But the Clock of the Universe has definitely started counting down."

At same time Vini was visiting the clock, Weatherly was in her study. Having just given directions to Dell and Merri for a time-travel trip, she pondered the trip she had taken with Walter Orr to the mountain. She had been able to meet Bear and many others of the settlement, but not Astrid, who had been off on some important business.

Even in the brief visit, Weatherly saw the mountain as a wonderful place of refuge, perhaps even safer than the plantations, though it was not yet as well set up as Netherwind and Laurelstone. But it was Weatherly's understanding from what Bear had related that schools and hospitals and such were planned.

Overall, God's children in the United States were in pretty good shape for the coming times.

But what about the rest of the world?

Weatherly's brow furrowed in worry as she sensed that slight helpless feeling, the one that often crept into her core when she recognized that she couldn't help the whole world, no matter how much she might wish to.

The helpless feeling was quickly replaced with relief as she heard the familiar voice in the back of her head telling her not to worry, because there were other places like Netherwind and Laurelstone. To name just a few: one in Japan, two in Canada, one in Austria, three in Russia, one in Argentina, one in South Africa, and two in China. The knowledge of this actually made Weatherly smile, which was something that hadn't happened in her study for a very long time.

“There are those who rebel against the light, who are not acquainted with its ways, and do not stay in its paths. The murderer rises in the dark, that he may kill the poor and needy; and in the night he is as a thief. The eye of the adulterer also waits for the twilight, saying, “No eye will see me”; and he disguises his face. In the dark they dig through houses; by day they shut themselves up; they do not know the light. For deep darkness is morning to all of them; for they are friends with the terrors of deep darkness.”

However, most blessedly...

“The LORD is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; he knows those who take refuge in him. But with an overflowing flood he will make a full end of his adversaries, and will pursue his enemies into darkness.”

—Job 24:13-17, Nahum 1:7-8



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