

Chapter One The Urgency

Turning off the depressing news of the latest numbers killed by the tornadoes ravaging Ohio and Texas, Aaron Wallace reflected on a time sixty-seven years before, when he and his siblings, twins Patrick and Christine, had discovered the frightening truth about the future of mankind—that the human race would only be able to survive the wrath of nature by taking refuge in a protected place called EKKOCEILO, also known as Heaven's Jewel.

The result of close to three hundred years of careless pollution and overuse of resources had caused the forces of nature to rebel in a drastic manner. Over the past fifty years in particular, natural disasters had increased tenfold each decade in both numbers and intensity, leaving the inhabitants of the planet in pretty bad shape. In addition to the plague of terrifying weather events, usable water had become incredibly scarce. Most rivers, lakes, aquifers, and reservoirs had become polluted to the point that they were toxic to both people and wildlife. Stronger and extremely expensive filtration measures were constantly needed to make the water fit for human use. The water issues had made growing food more and more difficult as well.

Aaron, Christine, and Patrick had figured out pretty early that they were the ones who were going to have to deliver the prophecy about the protected place. As the years rolled on, this was confirmed by the fact that they never met any others who had time-traveled to EKKOCEILO. They had waited as patiently as possible over the years, out of fear that no one would believe. Now, the time was right to let the world's religious leaders know. People would start to believe because it would offer some hope amidst the constant crisis.

The year was 2077. According to the holographic Historian they had met in EKKOCEILO, the migration to the island had begun in 2089, so they couldn't wait much longer to deliver the prophecy. Not only would the news take some time to spread,

people would have to believe in it enough to actually make the decision to go, and take action. Carrying through with relocation plans often took many people a significant amount of time, which was not a luxury at hand in the current state of the world.

Unfortunately, delivery of the prophecy was going to have to wait awhile longer because the exact location of the island was as yet unknown. Despite having spent thousands of hours looking for it during the years since they had returned home from their time-travel journey, they had not been able to find it. Aaron, a geology professor, now retired at age seventy-seven, had spent nearly every moment of his free time over the past six decades researching and traveling the world to try to find Heaven's Jewel. He had had no luck.

Patrick, a retired computer programmer, had spent most of his vacations in that endeavor, and had stepped up his efforts since retirement. Christine, who still worked part time as a psychic counselor, had joined her brothers whenever possible in the search. However, none of them had been able to locate the island.

Sighing deeply, Aaron rose from his desk and crossed the room to retrieve a small box from a bookshelf. Gently rifling through the contents, he pulled out an old necklace made of zigzag-shaped seashells. The shells had come from the island they were searching for. But even after many hours of comparing the shells with samples and fossils, Aaron had never been able to come up with a match to any geographic region of the world.

However, since the shells were from a time long before the island became Heaven's Jewel, the fossil comparison might not have been the best use of his time. A being known as the Time Entity had spun the island backwards in time in an effort to slow the aging of his terminally ill son, Ruin Foster. Aaron thought it likely that when the island was put back to its proper time, many of the tiny shells had not fossilized as they might have in a normal time-progression situation. It was also possible that these particular shells were extremely rare; therefore, trying to find their geographic location was like looking for a needle in a haystack the size of a gigantic warehouse.

When their plane had crashed on the island, and during the adventures that followed, they hadn't kept journals. They also never brought back any samples of rocks, soil, or plants. Along

with the shell necklaces, they had only the food and water compression devices given to them by Ruin Foster. The weapons they brought home from their travels had been acquired in another place, and could therefore offer no clues as to the location of Heaven's Jewel.

Pondering the compression devices, Aaron was still convinced, as he had been as a child, that they were from a far future time. Even with all of the technological developments that had added efficiency and comfort to certain people's lives, mainly wealthy individuals able to afford them, nothing as sophisticated as this had as yet been developed. Most scientists still thought water compression to be impossible. Aaron kept the compression devices in his firesafe and rarely used them. However, he had studied them intensely over the years, even seeking the opinions of select and trustworthy experts, as to where they might have come from and who might have developed them. Unfortunately, the devices could offer no clues as to the location of the island because Ruin Foster had told them his father had brought them from someplace else. And despite a few good guesses, the experts had been unable to decide who might have made them, or when.

Again rifling through the contents of the box, Aaron withdrew a Swiss Army knife his father had given to him on his eighth birthday. He smiled as he thought about his parents. The smile faded with the painful memories of how he and his siblings had been given a chance to go back in time to prevent the plane crash that had killed their parents. However, they had been unable to do this because it likely would have meant that the protected place for mankind would not come to exist. They had also been warned that anyone who managed to cheat Death was doomed to die a more horrible death. Since Aaron, Patrick, and Christine certainly didn't want their parents to have to go through anything worse than a plane crash, they had reasoned that the events that had taken place must have been meant to be. Accepting fate had been difficult for them, but they finally had to, which enabled them to move on.

After making the decision not to go back in time and change things, they had determined to again visit Heaven's Jewel, to find out the exact location of the island so they could be prepared when the time came to deliver the prophecy of the protected place to the world's religious leaders. An easy means of return to

EKKOCEILO was available to them in the form of an arch time-travel portal, one of many such portals that included a passage leading to their aunt and uncle's house, which they planned to use when time at home had progressed to a point after the death of their parents.

On the morning of their intended return to Heaven's Jewel, they had awakened to discover that several of the portals had been destroyed during the night. This was shocking not only because it ruined their plans to return to EKKOCEILO; but also, they had not heard any type of disturbance, or any sound at all that might have corresponded to the destruction that now lay before them. The sleek metal arches had been shattered and lay in pieces strewn over the ground. Thankfully, the one leading to their home had not been destroyed.

However, since they were still several days from being able to return home, while waiting, they decided to explore another portal. Aaron smiled again as he recalled the next adventure they had experienced. It had taken the travelers over a month to make it back to the row of portals, by which time they were more than ready to go home.

Upon returning through the portal leading to their Aunt Jordan and Uncle Tom's back yard, they carefully hid the weapons and compression devices in the bushes before presenting themselves to their astonished aunt and uncle. Aaron, Christine, and Patrick provided the authorities with some information, but feigned memory loss for most of the time they had been gone. They simply said that while on their way to Kauai, their plane had crashed in the ocean near a very small island. After swimming ashore, they were never able to find their parents' bodies, though they continued to look for them among the plane debris washing ashore over the next few weeks. A small fishing boat had picked them up about a month after the crash. They had then traveled on four, or maybe five, other fishing boats to again reach the Oregon coast where their returning memories had allowed them to find their aunt and uncle's house. Unfortunately, they didn't remember the names of the boats or fishermen who had helped them.

Since the shock and stress of experiencing a plane crash, losing both parents, and being marooned on an island could very well have caused memory loss and confusion, their stories sounded fairly reasonable, and the matter was quickly dropped,

as were the expensive efforts to search for the plane wreckage and bodies. After this amount of time, the authorities certainly would have no better luck locating the wreckage than they had during the search when the aircraft initially went missing. Obviously, something had happened to the plane's black box during the crash that rendered it unable to emit the beacon signal. Since further search efforts likely would have caused additional stress for the children, the entire matter was dropped shortly after memorial services for their parents were held. By that time, Aunt Jordan and Uncle Tom had already welcomed Aaron, Patrick, and Christine into their home, to raise as their own children.

In reflection, Aaron thought it might have been better for them to have explored more of the portals before returning home. They might have found another way back to Ekkoceilo, or at least have found more clues as to the island's whereabouts. But at the time, they had decided it was best to return to home to get back to family and finish school. Shaking his head, Aaron thought, *It's hard to believe we haven't found Heaven's Jewel in sixty years of searching. Why has it eluded us?*

Chapter Two

A Familiar Face

As he came across an archery pin in his keepsake box, Aaron gazed across the room at his bow hung next to the bookshelf. He smiled as he again reflected on the past, this time to a date twenty-five years after their return to home. They had already started their diligent search for Ekkocelio. Having no luck, they decided to visit Ruin Foster's mother in Ohio because they thought she might know the location of the island. Of course, they knew Ruin Foster himself would have passed away because he had been given less than two years to live when they first met him. But they were anxious to meet his mother, in case she had information that might help them in their search.

Sitting down to coffee in her living room, Mrs. Foster looked at the visitors curiously, having had only the brief explanation that they were once friends of her son. Patrick was about to begin giving a more detailed explanation when Ruin Foster himself entered the living room from the door leading to the back porch. Not only was it a huge surprise to see someone they thought to be dead alive and well, it was also a shock to see him looking no older than he had on the island.

Ruin Foster recognized his three island friends as their older selves and was shocked to see them as well. Fully three minutes passed before any of them could speak.

Christine was the first to find her voice. "So your father found some way to keep you from aging here too?" she asked.

"No," Ruin Foster slowly answered. "I'm six months older than when I saw you last on the island."

In the flurry of confusion and hugs that followed, they all quickly came to the realization that Ruin Foster had been from their future, which explained why they thought his clothing had looked funny—because there was a twenty-five year time difference. Having assumed they were all from the same time, they had never discussed any exact year while on the island.

"I was out looking for the straw man," Ruin Foster told them, as he plopped down on the couch next to his mother. (The straw

man was Ohio's version of a bigfoot.) With a big smile, he added, "I think he might be one of Noppi's descendants, so I'd like to meet him before I pass on." The visitors smiled as they remembered their gigantic sasquatch friend from the island.

After a few moments of chatting, Ruin Foster excused himself to take an antibiotic injection and breathing treatment in the kitchen. He was currently sick with an infection and was very congested, so he couldn't neglect his regimen.

Mrs. Foster did not know the location of the island her son had lived on; however, she did have something important to share with Christine, Patrick, and Aaron. "Ruin's father, the being you know as the Time Entity, didn't just fall in love with me," she began, "he fell in love with all of humanity. Knowing mankind's bleak future, in which human beings become extinct, nearly drove him insane. So he hatched a plan, the details of which I am only partially aware, in order to change the course of events. Placing his son on the island," she continued, "was something of a show. In fact, he was using Ruin as a diversion in order to get away with something else, which was of course the creation of the garden, which has expanded to form the haven for mankind, so that people will have a place to escape the devastation that is to come."

This is something Patrick, Aaron, and Christine had already suspected. However, they were now sick at the thought that they could have gone back in time after all to prevent the deaths of their parents, and Heaven's Jewel still would have existed. At the time they were faced with the decision, there was no way to be sure. They had had only an inkling of what the Time Entity had been up to.

"So, he was planning all along to put the island back to its own time," Christine said, with an ache in her heart. "We could have gone back and changed things so our parents could live, and a future for mankind in the protected place still would have happened."

"Why didn't he tell us his plan?" asked Aaron. "If he had, we could have made a better decision."

"I know it must have been very traumatic for you to lose your parents so young," Mrs. Foster replied, "but I fully believe every event in the universe, even tragic events, have some purpose in the grand scheme of things. Supposedly, no one can cheat Death for long. It might be hard to understand, but the

death of your parents occurred separately from the Time Entity's plans, even though his actions contributed to it. It's my belief that they would have died anyway around the same time. And if you had gone back in time to prevent it, they might have suffered an even worse sort of death."

The reminder that many people believed the concept that cheating Death could lead to worse consequences for those who had escaped their fate at a particular time didn't help much to soothe the hurt Christine, Aaron, and Patrick were currently feeling.

"I think when the Time Entity gave you a chance to go back and change things," Mrs. Foster added thoughtfully, "in only giving you partial information, he forced you to look at the big picture, and he hoped you would understand that some things are inevitable and meant to be. You might not have become so determined, so invested in the future of mankind, if your parents had lived. It is my belief that you are probably still as important to the future as you were during the months of trial you endured right after the death of your parents.

"Many things about the Time Entity's plan to change the future are a great mystery to me," Mrs. Foster went on. "However, I do know that it began long ago, with a bargain of some sort made with the Overseer, who is known to many as the Higher Power. The Fate Entity was also involved in some capacity, though I don't know the details."

Ruin Foster reentered the room at this point to again sit beside his mother. "But even longer ago than the bargain," Mrs. Foster continued, "the Overseer brought the Time Entity into being, and gave him the task of creating time and managing it. From what I understand, the Higher Power has a big plan, or big picture, but all aspects of the plan are not set in stone, which is why time travel is possible and allowed, and why certain things end up changed. The future, though it has happened already, is not set in stone. With his great love for humanity, the Time Entity wants mankind to have a brighter future than extinction. And it is his belief that the future will be brighter when mankind takes some of his current knowledge with him, and applies it to building a better civilization, not starting over, but starting again to hopefully do things right this time."

"I think I'm starting to understand things better," Ruin Foster interjected. "If my father hadn't brought me to the island, which

gave him an excuse to create the garden of perfect balance, the future version of the island would never have existed as a protected place. I really admire what he's doing. But I worry for him too," he added. "Death is already starting to figure out what my father is up to, and it has made him very upset that he is about to be cheated out of the deaths of the people who will take refuge in the protected place."

Mrs. Foster was nodding. "Yes," she said, "Death has many agents working for him, one of which destroyed several of the portals on the island in an effort to hinder the plans of Ruin's father."

"That's why we couldn't go back to Ekkocelio to get the location of the island," said Patrick, "and why we're still looking for it."

"Can the Time Entity tell us the location of the island?" Christine asked.

Mrs. Foster shook her head. "He cannot. Unfortunately, when he made the bargain to use the island for his own purposes, he agreed never to reveal the location to anyone."

"Actually, that's probably a good thing," said Aaron, "because the fewer people who know about it, the less chance something could go wrong with its development."

"I never thought of it like that," replied Mrs. Foster. "You're probably right."

Ruin Foster had been thinking about something very hard. "I might know of something that can help you," he said. "My father once told me about an object that can stop time. It's called the Eternity Stone."

Mrs. Foster was nodding. "He mentioned it to me once too," she said. "According to Ruin's father, the Eternity Stone is the only thing powerful enough to stop time planet-wide."

"I don't know how you can find the stone," Ruin Foster added. "I don't think my father knows where it is either. But if the time of the prophecy and migration draws near, and you still haven't found out where Heaven's Jewel is, you might be able to find the Eternity Stone so you can stop time while you continue to look for the island."

Christine, Patrick, and Aaron were grateful for this information; however, they hoped such a quest would be unnecessary. They still had about forty years before the

prophecy would need to be delivered. Surely, they could manage to discover the location of Heaven's Jewel in that time.

Chapter Six

Home to a New Problem

At dawn on the third morning following the awakenings, the double twins said their goodbyes to the flame oracle and headed down the mountain towards home. They passed the sleeping dragon, who was breathing evenly and sighing contently at some pleasant dream-thought, in his usual spot in front of the cave.

As instructed by the Time Entity, the travelers rounded the mountain and easily found the twin carved stone pillars, which were indeed distinctive and very impressive at approximately five meters high and two meters wide each.

Passing between the massive monuments, the travelers wound their way through mountain passes on a path towards the Great Rift Valley. Due to heat and exertion, they were forced to stop frequently for breaks. Elmara Lodés was hotter than they thought it would be, even from the descriptions of the original three travelers, and the double twins wondered if they were perhaps visiting in a different season than their ancestors had.

Hiking out of the Ruwenzori Range took nearly a week. Upon reaching civilization, they were happy to pick up a ground bus and end their foot travel. By the time they finally reached the transport station in Mozambique, they were tired and more than ready to get home. However, even with their Anytime Return Tickets, they had to wait two days to get four seats together so they wouldn't have to split up and take separate transport ships on the journey home. There wasn't any question of splitting up—they had been absolutely forbidden to do so by their grandparents' strict travel instructions. They had to stay together when traveling, no matter what; so they waited.

In an effort to condense, Sean carefully poured the contents from the vial given to them by the Time Entity into the travel shampoo bottle with the rest of the liquid from the Pool of Death. The bottle made it through security and customs checks with no problem. It was really too small of an amount to be questioned, no matter what it was; plus, the transport personnel thought the bottle contained shampoo.

Though the wait in Mozambique had been tedious, and they were all cranky, they were too exhausted to fuss at one another, and the trip home was rather peaceful, particularly since Jordan, Lily, and Daniel napped a good part of the time. Sean had trouble relaxing enough to sleep because he had a weird feeling that they had forgotten something in Elmara Lodés. Either they left something behind, or they forgot to do something. As hard as he tried, he couldn't shake the feeling. Unfortunately, he could never figure out what was bothering him, so he passed his time on the sea jet and airrail rather fitfully in stressing over this.

They were all relieved to make it safely home twelve hours after leaving Africa.

Two days later, they had a family barbecue to celebrate their successful mission and safe return. They even energy-splurged to cook outside on a real outdoor grill, instead of using the convection domes most households used to prepare foods.

"I'm so proud of you," Aaron told his great nieces and nephews. "You rose to the challenge and performed beautifully."

"Who would have thought you would have to do the exact same things we had to do in Elmara Lodés," Christine said, shaking her head. "This is certainly surprising."

"And a great mystery," said Patrick, also shaking his head. "Something must have happened somewhere along the line to change our course of events, since we never arrived."

"It's not certain we never arrived," said Aaron, "in fact, I pretty sure we did. But we were evidently late for some reason."

"So it was a good thing someone else could step up and perform the tasks so well," said Christine, with a huge smile. "However," she added with a puzzled look a few moments later, "if someone else unwrapped the Time Entity and went after the Horn of Spidersong, why are we still remembering doing these things?"

That was definitely the Question of the Day. Aaron and Patrick had already been pondering this; however, neither had an answer as yet.

Daniel had also been thinking about this. As he helped his mother adjust her plate of food on her lap, he suggested, "Since you three hadn't arrived yet when we were there, your futures haven't had a chance to change yet."

"But they probably will soon," said Jordan, who agreed with her cousin's hypothesis. "If that timeline is running alongside

this one, in history," she said, "then your futures will probably change once a little more time has passed in both timelines."

"Either that," suggested Lily, "or something else is manipulating this."

"That could be," responded Aaron. "Both time and fate are very mysterious. And time travel will probably always be a great mystery."

Nodding, Christine added, "Over the years, we have figured out that powerful forces, well beyond our understanding, are definitely at work in the world."

After the barbecue, Sean remembered to ask his grandmother about his color wheel merry-go-round dream. However, she wasn't able to make much more out of it than he had. "The colors might be important somehow," she suggested, "but I don't know in what capacity."

A little while later, as Christine was thinking things through, something started to bother her. She passed a restless night fretting over the ugly feeling that something was wrong. Mid-morning the next day, when she finally put her finger on what was troubling her, Christine drove to Patrick's house where the double twins were in homeschool. She phoned Aaron on the way to request that he meet her there.

Taking a break from a French lesson with Elaina, the double twins sat with their grandparents on the back porch. Great-Uncle Aaron arrived just as they were beginning their discussions.

Having received praise the previous day for the cleverness of their shortcut in Elmara Lodés, the double twins were now scolded by Christine. "You left Iglae imprisoned in Mirrorseed." (Iglae was the tiny ice spirit the original three travelers had freed from a tower in the elf fortress.)

"That's what's been bothering me," said Sean, in revelation. "That's what we forgot to do."

"Oh..." Jordan said slowly, as she started to get an inkling of why that might be important.

Daniel and Lily were very confused until Jordan added, "That might have a significant impact on the future."

"Exactly," said Christine. "You said Elmara Lodés was hotter than you thought it should be when you left; that's probably why."

Patrick and Aaron both agreed with Christine that this was a big problem.

"In addition to more intense heat," Aaron said, "Grump was left all alone. Since Iglace and Grump were probably meant to be together, who knows what impact that might have on the future as well."

"You'll need to go back," Christine told her grandsons and great nieces.

After a brief discussion to weigh the need to get started looking for the Eternity Stone versus solving the Iglace problem, Aaron and Patrick again deferred to Christine's advice to have the double twins return to Elmara Lodés first so that they could free the tiny ice spirit from her prison in Mirrorseed.

Though reluctant to leave home again so soon, and on another errand unrelated to the Eternity Stone, the double twins agreed to go.

Later, while helping her grandsons pack and fretting about the cost of four more transport tickets, Christine scolded again. "Money doesn't grow on trees." This was particularly true since printed paper money no longer was used, or even existed outside of museums.

However, Christine had already devised a plan to make up the financial difference. She could take on a few extra psychic readings. Her plan was to head to California and Nuevo Vegas for a month or so, to hobnob with celebrities. At one time, she had had a large clientele in that arena, but had given up most of them because she was reluctant to travel. Of course, rich people had to have everything brought to them, instead of the other way around, so she had lost a lot of her clients. However, needs must. Perhaps it was time to build some of that back up again. The connections might prove useful once the prophecy was given and resources were needed to help get people to Heaven's Jewel who wanted to go. While working, Christine would simply need to make sure Aaron, Patrick, and Elaina could check on Alexandra regularly. They usually didn't mind, and this would enable Christine to contribute more to their future.

Chapter Seven

The U-Turn

According to the hurriedly devised plan, the double twins left again for Africa three days later. This time, the transport trip took twenty-six hours because they had to wait out a storm in an undersea bunker in the Pacific Ocean for eight hours. Eight hours in a cramped tube. However, looking on the bright side, they got to see a lot of interesting sea creatures who also got to see them through the plexiform walls of the bunker. Those in the shelter were like zoo creatures on display for the abundant undersea life surrounding them.

Annoyed at their cramped situation, the travelers fussed at one another, though their arguments were less intense than they had been during their first trip to Africa. It was slightly odd that Lily and Daniel now seemed to have a lot of trouble getting along, when they used to tolerate each other rather well. Also in contrast to past trend, Lily and Sean seemed almost friendly to one another, while Sean and Jordan ended up getting into fairly frequent heated discussions.

Daniel and Lily listened to, but wisely stayed out of, the latest Sean-Jordan debate as to which of the three women presidents had done a better job as far as foreign policy. However, they did join in the discussion related to earth's lack of either a moon colony or a large space station. Both of these plans had been curtailed because recovery from the natural disasters had taken precedence. The debate involved whether or not they should have used resources to do this, instead of reserving them for recovery efforts.

"A moon colony or large space station would have provided another place of refuge, so human beings could survive," said Daniel, "even though only a limited number could go."

"But who would have decided who got to go?" Jordan asked. "The wealthy, the politicians—it wouldn't have been fair."

"They would do something like a lottery," Daniel said, "to make it more fair."

"A super-huge station or off-world colony might have been built if the prophecy could have been delivered about fifty years ago," Lily speculated, "if people believed it."

"They probably wouldn't have believed it," said Sean.

"A huge island, protected from an over-abundance of natural disasters, is a much better option," said Jordan.

"But not everyone is going to want to go," Daniel argued, "even if they believe."

"And some people might not be able to," said Sean, "if they don't have resources, or are sick or disabled." Though they had been making plans for Alexandra to travel to Heaven's Jewel, Sean was worried as to how the strain of travel, and life with limited resources, might affect his mother's health.

"Which is why," Daniel said, "other options of getting people out of harm's way would have been appropriate."

"But in the last thirty years," Lily countered, "there were never enough resources to spend on anything related to outer space. Everything had to go to the needs at hand—shelters, water, food, and medical treatment for the displaced and injured people."

Since there didn't seem to be any good or right answer to all of this, the debate only served to further strain their cramped conditions.

The travelers were all happy to reach Africa to stretch their legs and gain some small distances from one another. After a long and sweltering six-day hike through the mountains, they found their way back to the flame oracle's cave, and in the same time period in which they had recently visited, but three weeks farther along, according to the oracle.

Also according to the oracle, the original three travelers still had not arrived, though the guardians were keeping close watch for them.

As part of their plan, the double twins had brought Starcoil's pebbles with them. A gift to their ancestors, the glowing pebbles were enchanted to carry a small part of the star spirit's essence so that travelers would always have her guidance.

The pebbles had aroused slight suspicion at one of the transport security checks; however, Lily managed to convince the transport staff that they were simply quartz stones of the sort that people used to set into jewelry that changed colors with the wearer's moods.

“Moods related to temperature and humidity,” said the Security Captain, with a smile. She was familiar with mood jewelry, having had a mood ring as a child.

“Exactly,” said Lily, returning the smile. “I hope to get my stone put into a necklace someday.”

Having arrived at the flame oracle’s cave well before noon, they decided to begin their journey right away. Changing clothing and borrowing weapons, they set off quickly. Early afternoon found the travelers introducing themselves to the wood nymph, Zilfa, at a tiny bungalow on the outskirts of Underfalls.

“I know you don’t know us—” began Jordan.

“—but some of our ancestors know you,” finished Sean.

With help from Daniel and Lily, Jordan and Sean related their rather confusing and unusual circumstances to Zilfa who, strangely enough, didn’t think their story at all odd; in fact, she believed all of it.

“We are heading to Mirrorseed on an important errand,” said Daniel. “Could you possibly escort us partway, to the settlement in Stone Hollow? We would like you to introduce us to Starcoil because we will need her help.”

“My pleasure,” responded the nymph.

They set off right away on a speedy trek through the heart of Underfalls, and beyond, where they made camp late evening in the same deserted barn in which their ancestors had taken shelter. They did not have a run-in with goblins as the original three travelers had, which was a very good thing because the banshee, Siras, was not with them. They also did not see a firebird as their ancestors had.

Their trip the next day through Stone Hollow went smoothly. After introducing the travelers to Starcoil, Zilfa departed to return to home.

As per their plan, the double twins showed Starcoil the three pebbles she had given the original travelers, which helped her to believe their story.

“We’d like to leave for Mirrorseed right away,” Sean told the star spirit. “Could you help convince Grump and Snowdrop to go with us?”

Though surprised that the visitors knew of the tiny tree and flower spirits, Starcoil smiled as she answered, “Of course.”

"Also," said Jordan, "could you send a message to the air spirit, Ardela, so she can help us with the mimic and the phantasm, as she did our ancestors?"

"That can definitely be arranged," Starcoil assured them. "But it doesn't seem as though you need as much help as your ancestors may have. You seem well prepared."

"We have been trained," responded Jordan, "but we definitely want to make use of any resources at hand."

"Better safe than sorry," said Daniel.

"Good planning is always best," agreed Starcoil.

Early the next morning, the group made a visit to the meadow in Stone Hollow. With help from the tiny seer spirit, Telltale, Starcoil easily convinced Snowdrop and Grump to accompany the double twins on a mission to Mirorseed set to begin the next day.

Thankfully, they didn't have to wait for a fog to cross the bridge unnoticed by the gooleegung because one rolled in that very night.

The next morning found the travelers following the tiny spirits along the stepping-stone path to the evil castle of elf enchantments and experiments.

Barely an hour along the path, the double twins found themselves imprisoned inside the castle, much as their ancestors had been. However, since this was exactly where they intended to be, and because they knew exactly what to expect, they were able to avoid the elf traps laid for them.

Resisting the urge to touch four beautiful leis of fragrant roses hanging from hooks, that seemed to beckon bewitchingly to them as they entered one of the stairwells, Jordan cut all four garlands with one swipe of her sword. The leis promptly turned into venomous snakes, now harmless in their slashed state.

Since the castle was unnaturally warm, the travelers were also tempted to wash their faces in a basin of cool water sitting on a pedestal in a wide passage. When Sean upturned the basin, the liquid immediately changed into a bubbling green acid that scorched the rug beneath the pedestal.

Snowdrop and Grump were impressed with their new friends' ability to see through elf deceptions.

"If you happen to meet any other travelers that are about our ages," said Sean, "you might need to help them a little."

"Yes," agreed Daniel, "you might need to pinch their ears, really hard, to get them to see things for what they are."

Avoiding several other traps on their climb to the highest tower in Mirrorseed was a cinch for the double twins.

Upon finding Iglace imprisoned in her glass sphere, and upon smashing the sphere to release her, the group made their way back down to a large chamber in the lower level to await Ardela's arrival. However, the sylph was late. This troubled the travelers because their ancestors had needed help from the air spirit in order to escape the castle.

Iglace unlocked a window in the chamber with magical ice crystals flicked from the tips of her toes. However, the travelers were reluctant to flee through the window because they were anticipating the arrival of the fiery phantasm that had attacked the original travelers. In the open area outside the castle, there would be no sturdy table under which to take refuge from the fierce, whirling madness if the sylph again called upon the winds to battle the phantasm.

As they waited, on their guard, the mimic arrived earlier than expected. As before, the shapeshifting elf assassin had taken on the form of Zilfa. However, since the double twins were aware of exactly what they were dealing with, the evil creature was not going to have an easy time carrying out his job.

Jordan quickly warned the mimic to stay back. However, the creature did not heed the command, which forced the travelers to draw their weapons and prepare for battle.

The shapeshifter was very quick. After tossing a series of daggers at his prey, which thankfully missed the targets due to *Misdirection Spells* cast by Grump and Snowdrop, the mimic drew double swords and swiftly attacked.

Even with their training, nothing could have prepared Sean, Daniel, and Jordan for the inhumanly fast assault of the mimic. In less than a minute, the three were forced to retreat into a corner of the chamber from which there was no escape. Thank goodness Lily had well separated herself from the group the moment the swords began slashing about. In another corner of the cave, she drew her bow and waited patiently for a clear shot. The moment her line of fire was completely free of her sister and cousins, she took her shot and felled the mimic, who thrashed about in unnatural gyrations while losing the form of Zilfa to turn into a mass of stagnant mud lumps oozing blood.

Ardela entered through the unlocked window exactly at that moment, which was a good thing because the phantasm had also arrived in the castle and was in the process of squeezing under the door to the chamber.

“Quick!” the sylph shouted. “Under the table!”

With the tiny spirits clinging tightly to their cloaks, the travelers took refuge as Ardela called upon the winds, which slashed about the chamber like a set of razor-sharp knives, effectively splitting the phantasm into hundreds of pieces. Forcing the evil entity out of the window, the winds next drove the pieces away from the castle.

Upon emerging from under the table, the travelers exited through the window, in relief to have escaped both the mimic and the phantasm. However, their worries weren’t over yet because they ran into Dal Enek in the forest just outside the castle. An agent of the elves, Dal Enek had the ability to lure others to sleep by means of an enchanted melody derived from captured songbird spirits. However, the evil being wasn’t going to have a chance to sing his sleepy-time tune because the double twins knew exactly what to do. No sooner had the man smiled and said hello, and started to hum, than Sean grabbed his arms while Daniel stuffed a handkerchief into his mouth.

As Lily quickly gave an explanation, Iglace put the freeze on Dal Enek using a spell that would keep him frozen in place for six hours. It was as if time was standing still once again, but only for Dal Enek.

Grump greatly admired this take-action attitude of his new spirit friend, and he found himself flying close to Iglace on the trip home. As expected, the two warmed up to each other rather quickly.

Ardela accompanied the group back to the Stone Hollow settlement before bidding them farewell in order to return to her home in the forest.

The journey back through Underfalls was a smooth one, and the travelers stopped to give Zilfa an update before making their way back to the flame oracle’s cave.

The double twins were still troubled as to why their ancestors had not yet arrived on Elmara Lodés, and they hoped that fact wouldn’t change the course of future events too much. If the original travelers did arrive, the oracle and guardians were planning to make sure they had some of the same experiences,

and met as many of the same beings, as they had the first time, before receiving the important prophetic message from the ruby tree.

Set to leave Elmara Lodés the next morning, the double twins were taking a peaceful stroll through the forest of the Jewel Trees when they actually saw Christine, Patrick, and Aaron arrive in their hot air balloon.

Hiding amongst the trees, they watched in fascination as their very young grandparents and great uncle climbed down from the tree in which the balloon had crashed. However, they couldn't continue to watch because they recognized the need to swiftly leave the mountain in order not to drastically change the future course of events by running into the original three travelers. Since they had no idea what the consequences might be if that were to happen, they decided to err on the side of extreme caution by fleeing as quickly as possible.

After a high-speed run back to the flame oracle's cave, the double twins hastily gathered their gear as they explained their hurried departure and made their brief farewells.

Keeping to shrubs and shadows as much as possible, so as not to be seen, the four travelers rushed down the mountain path toward the cave guarded by the sleeping dragon. They slowed to catch their breath only upon rounding the mountain toward their departure point between the two pillars.

As they were passing between the stones to return to their own time, Sean again had an odd feeling, much as he had the first time they left Elmara Lodés. However, this was different than before because he didn't feel as though they had forgotten something; it was more a feeling that they hadn't seen the last of Elmara Lodés.

Chapter Fourteen

The Trap

Greeted by a dense fog the next morning, the travelers began a slow and cautious trek through Stone Hollow, wary not only of the limited visibility, but also of something oppressive in the air surrounding them. The humidity made it difficult to breathe, and without even the slightest whisper of a breeze, the clinging fog soon soaked their gear and clothing, making their movements heavy and uncomfortable.

Less than an hour along the path, their progress suddenly halted when Jordan, in the lead, ran into a stone wall. Turning to make their way around the structure, the group was surprised to discover that they were contained in a kind of courtyard made of crumbling turrets, arches, and tall pillars. As a sudden blast of cold air cleared some of the fog, the travelers found they were standing high atop a castle with mounds of brilliant white snow billowing about their feet and ankles. It seemed as though the fortress had swallowed them up, and they wondered if they had somehow gotten caught in Mirrorseed. As to how they ended up high in the battlements was another mystery, since they hadn't done any climbing.

Wrapping their cloaks more tightly about them, the travelers cautiously explored their surroundings. Under a wide arch, they discovered a glass sphere, about the size of a soccer ball, sitting atop a stone pedestal. A tiny spirit who somewhat resembled Iglace was imprisoned in the sphere. "Break the glass!" she squeaked.

Lily didn't hesitate in taking up the sphere and hurling it into the arched wall on the far side of the pedestal.

With the shattering of the glass, the freed spirit rose hovering before them to cry, "Thank you! I'm Niwa!"

"You're welcome," replied Jordan, before giving their names.

"Are you an ice spirit?" Daniel asked.

Shaking her head, Niwa answered, “Cloud.” With her brow slightly furrowed, she added, “There’s only one ice spirit in these parts, but I haven’t seen her lately.”

Having been to the future of Elmara Lodés, and being somewhat worried about changing it with their current actions, the travelers were reluctant to mention specifics, such as their association with Iglaice and their knowledge of her imprisonment in Mirrorseed. Deciding to keep the conversation vague, Lily simply asked, “Where are we?”

“In a trap,” answered Niwa. “I’m so glad you found me. I’ve been here for five years.” With a sigh, she added, “This whole castle was set up as a trap by a pluie. He wears a blue jewel that is as cold as ice; that’s how you can recognize him. And he works for the elves—those nasty creatures!” Niwa spat. Next, pointing to a tiny glass sphere, about the size of an apricot, sitting in a niche in the arched wall, she said, “A viewing globe. That’s how the pluie keeps an eye on things here. He sometimes appears in the glass and talks to me. But I just ignore him.”

“Can you help us find a way out of here?” Jordan asked.

“Maybe,” said Niwa, somewhat doubtfully. “I can try!” she answered more hopefully upon seeing their worried expressions.

Leaving the protection of the wide arch, the cloud spirit led them to the center of the castle-top courtyard. Before following the others, Daniel, on impulse, took the viewing globe from the niche and slipped it into his pocket.

Looking around the foggy courtyard, still billowing with snow, Niwa said, “There are no stairs down from here, and no way to scale the outside walls. But don’t worry,” she added firmly, “I will stay with you for as long as it takes, and we’ll find a way out somehow.” After thinking for a few moments, the cloud spirit said, “We might be able to use the snow chute.”

“The snow chute?” Sean questioned.

Nodding as she led them to a spot behind one of the taller pillars, Niwa said, “When people lived here, a long time ago, they used it to send snow down in the winter when they wanted to clear the castle top.”

The chute was a steep and shadowy tunnel built into the side of the castle. “Unfortunately,” Niwa said, “it’s not a straight shot down. The pluie magically converted the chute into another trap, so it’s like a maze in there. But I don’t think we have a choice,”

she added, “because there’s no other way down from here, unless you can fly.”

“Nope,” answered Lily, “no wings.”

Niwa nodded, as she said with resignation, “Then, it’s the chute.”

“At least it’s big enough for us to stand up in,” said Jordan, peering into the narrow tunnel, which was conveniently lit by hundreds of tiny creatures resembling glowworms that were clinging to the ceiling of the chute. She tightened the straps of her travel pack and repositioned her sword to get ready to descend.

The cloud spirit entered first, leading a cautious Sean into the tunnel. The others followed and soon found themselves grappling for handholds in the sides of the ice-packed slide so they wouldn’t lose their footing.

Sure enough, the tunnel forked after only a few meters. Niwa selected their route carefully, her tiny face scrunched up in concentration. When the downward path again split into two, with Niwa taking the left, she said, “I’m just going on instinct here, and I hope I’m correct. If not, it’s going to be a hard climb back up to catch the other tunnels.” A few meters later, the cloud spirit smiled and told her new friends, “I can feel a small breeze, so I think we’re on the right track.”

The double twins could feel nothing but complete stillness in the cold tunnel; however, it made sense that a cloud spirit would be able to feel the slightest air draft, so they followed trustingly.

After about fifteen more tunnel choices, the travelers exited the icy chute into a huge chamber filled with flowers, vines, and budding trees growing right out of its stone surfaces. With no doors or windows, the room contained no visible way out, other than the entrance to the snow chute. Since it was very odd to find such lush vegetation growing in an area lit only by more of the glowworms, they moved about the chamber with caution.

Pieces of what looked like a huge jigsaw puzzle were piled in the center of the room. Each piece was about the size of a couch seat cushion.

After examining the pile, Niwa told them, “It’s a face puzzle. Face puzzles usually enact some sort of magic once they are pieced. This is probably the way out, so we’ll have to put it together.”

They began right away, looking for corners and edges, and sorting the pieces by colors.

The face of the puzzle turned out to be that of a creature resembling a hairy pig. "It's a boutonk," said Niwa, who was hovering above them in supervision of their work. "That's his mouth," she added. As it turns out, the mouth and nose of the boutonk were positioned reverse of those of a normal pig, so there was some confusion in trying to piece those sections of the puzzle correctly. "And the ears go on lower," Niwa scolded. "Haven't you ever seen a boutonk?"

"No," said Daniel, slightly out of breath from the exertion. Lily and Sean laughed as Daniel and Jordan moved the ears.

When the last piece was correctly placed, the puzzle suddenly began to change shape; and the travelers stood back to watch the face of the boutonk sink into the floor as the entire puzzle turned into a downward staircase.

Gathering their gear, they slowly descended the stairs, which led to a dusty and stifling-hot chamber. Approximately twenty metal slides, similar to those found in playgrounds, were positioned along the edges of the chamber. The tops of the slides stood about three feet above the stone floor, while the bottoms disappeared into shadowy tunnels below. Since no other way out of the chamber was visible, the travelers reasoned they were going to have to choose a slide. However, which one to pick was certainly a dilemma.

Niwa didn't know which one might lead out of the castle. "I could fly down each one to investigate," she offered, "but that would take some time."

Meanwhile, Sean had been walking the edges of the chamber while running his hand along the polished surfaces of the tops of the slides. As he made contact with the twelfth slide, he was suddenly overcome by a strong feeling that this was the one they needed to take. "It's this one," he said firmly.

"How do you know?" asked Jordan, approaching to also run her hand along the top of the slide.

"I just do," said Sean, again with conviction. The feeling was so strong, he couldn't draw his eyes away from the beckoning slide.

Daniel immediately trusted his brother's instinct. "You first, or me?" he asked.

"I'll go," Sean said, quickly swinging his legs over the slide. Gripping the rim with one hand, he held his sword out in front of him with the other so it wouldn't get caught, before taking a deep breath and letting go.

The others watched, holding their breath, as Sean's head disappeared into the dark tunnel. Mere moments later, they heard him calling up to them, but they couldn't understand what he was saying.

"What?" called Daniel.

Though Sean responded, they again couldn't understand his words.

"He doesn't sound hurt," said Lily.

Jordan bravely mounted the slide next and quickly let go, landing about three seconds later in a soft pile of something with dust flying everywhere.

After sneezing violently for a few seconds, she understood what Sean was saying as he helped her to her feet. "It's grain. We landed in a pile of grain."

Clambering down from the pile and looking up as the dust began to settle, they could just see the bottom of the slide hanging down about three feet from the ceiling.

Daniel landed next, then Lily, with Niwa following last and struggling to find her way through the cloud of dust raised by the others.

They barely had time to catch their breath and take in their surroundings when the section of floor upon which they were standing suddenly gave way. The scary drop gave way to relief when they landed in another soft pile, this time of crunchy autumn leaves. Other than Sean's elbow connecting sharply with Daniel's side, the fall was painless. Niwa had quickly followed her friends. "Everyone okay?" she squeaked.

Standing up to survey their surroundings, the travelers found themselves in yet another enormous stone chamber; but this time, surrounded by tall trees dropping colorful leaves. The air was noticeably cooler and much more comfortable than it had been in the grain chamber.

A two-sided mirror, taller than a person, occupied the direct center of the chamber. However, they soon discovered this was no ordinary mirror because it only displayed their reflections very faintly. Instead of reflecting in a traditional manner, both sides of

the mirror contained exactly the same scene of the flatlands of Stone Hollow.

Suddenly feeling the glass sphere in his pocket become very warm, Daniel fished it out. As they gazed into the viewing globe, the image of a tiny man appeared to them. With the exception of wearing an armband set with a blue jewel, the man looked exactly like the pluie they had met in the Jewel Forest. This new pluie was very angry. "I can't believe you made it so far so fast," he spat. "That must be because Niwa helped you." After growling to himself under his breath for a few moments, Pluie added, "Since you made it as far as the Time Mirror, in all fairness, I must tell you that the sides of the mirror lead either one day into the future, or one day into the past. You will have to decide which is which. To escape, you must pick the path to the future because if you pick the past, you will once again end up on top of the fortress and you will not remember what happened inside. And now that I know you freed Niwa, and that she's helping you, I'll use the mirror to go back too, and I'll move her sphere so you can't find her."

"Oh, I hope we pick the right one," Niwa said, in fear.

They couldn't tell a difference in the two identical scenes by looking at them. However, after studying both, Sean had another strong feeling, this time even more intense than the one he had had in the chamber of slides. "It's this one," he said confidently. "Trust me," he added, holding out his hand for Lily to take. He then led her through the mirror.

"How did you do that?" Lily asked a moment later when they found themselves standing on a smooth natural rock slab in Stone Hollow.

"I don't know," Sean answered. "I guess I can tell the future from the past even when they look alike."

Jordan, with Niwa perched upon her shoulder, appeared beside them a mere second later.

Deciding that he didn't want the pluie spying on them, Daniel left the glass sphere on the ground by the mirror before following Jordan, so no one saw Pluie inside the viewing globe stamping his little foot and exclaiming, "It's not fair! You had help from Niwa!"

The travelers ended up very near where they had been swallowed up by the trap of the evil pluie. However, the fog had

lifted and there was no sign of either the mirror they had just stepped through, or the castle.

“The castle is in a secret location,” Niwa told them. “But people end up walking through some kind of mystical doorway the pluie has set up in Stone Hollow, and that’s how they get trapped. They don’t see the doorway when it’s foggy.”

“If we happen to see it,” Lily remarked, “maybe we can destroy it somehow.”

The sun high overhead, they found they were hungry, so they stopped briefly for lunch before continuing their trek across the stone flatlands in the afternoon.

As expected, Stone Hollow was even more sparsely populated than Underfalls. They saw no one until they reached the settlement where they discovered only a couple of the caves occupied, with a mere three mud huts making up the rest of the dwellings.

The people were polite, but seemed to prefer to keep their distance. The travelers made camp for the evening far enough away from the homes so as not to alarm the residents. After a cozy evening of sitting by the fire with her new friends, Niwa bid them farewell and departed, once again thanking them for freeing her from the clutches of the evil pluie.

“Well,” Jordan responded with a smile, “you certainly repaid us by helping us get out of the castle.”

Chapter Fifteen

A Colorful Challenge

Early the next morning, the double twins made their way to the chasm bordering Stone Hollow and the forest beyond. The bridge was a good deal cruder than the one of the future, but was still traversable. Thankfully, they saw no sign of any gooleegung living in the chasm, so they were able to cross in safety.

After nearly two hours of forest travel, they came upon a small village inhabited mainly by elves, who actually welcomed the visitors in a somewhat friendly manner. As they were having brunch with a group of the villagers, Daniel casually mentioned, “We’re taking a year to complete a series of quests. Last month, we were looking for a firebird to bring a friend back from the dead.”

“Did you find one?” asked the eldest elf, who was called Margrave.

“Yes,” answered Lily, “but we could never figure out how to make the firebird use his magic to bring back our friend.”

“Very few beings know the secrets of firebirds,” Margrave responded. “No elves have ever been able to use their magic.”

“Well, we finally just had to give up,” said Sean. “But this month,” he added, “we are seeking an object called the Eternity Stone that is rumored to have the ability to stop time.”

“Imagine what someone could do with that,” said Lily.

An elf called Brinnen responded. “We are familiar with the object you seek. It has been in the possession of the elves for many years. However,” he added, “its magic is like that of the firebird, and the elves have never been able to make it work.”

“Maybe we could figure it out,” suggested Daniel.

Margrave laughed scornfully as he answered, “You? You are children. If the oldest and wisest elves haven’t been able to figure out how to use the magic of the stone, how could you?”

Sensing that Lily was about to retort in a strong manner, Daniel responded quickly to cut her off; and instead of getting defensive, he smiled and said, “The minds of children work

differently than those of adults. And sometimes, that way of thinking works to figure things out.”

“That’s true,” said Jordan. “We might be able to help the elves figure out how to use the Eternity Stone, if you could just tell us where to find the ones who have it.”

Unfortunately, the elves were not quite as dumb as the double twins had hoped. Brinnen smiled shrewdly as he responded with, “We could probably help you along in your quest, but only if you successfully complete a test here in our village first.”

“Yes,” Margrave said excitedly. “We like to set travelers a small challenge when they pass through here.”

The other elves were grinning in an almost lewd manner as Daniel asked, “What kind of a challenge?”

“Just a small one,” Brinnen answered. “If you complete it successfully, we will give you the information that you seek.”

“And what happens if we’re not successful?” Sean asked suspiciously.

“Nothing bad,” Brinnen assured them. “You’ll just be on your way without the location of the holders of the Eternity Stone.”

Since it was unlikely any other elves the travelers might cross paths with would be any more cooperative, the double twins reluctantly agreed to participate in the challenge in order to gain the information they were seeking.

“Follow us,” said Margrave, rising to lead them to a small outdoor amphitheatre near the center of town.

Word of the impending challenge spread like wildfire, and the village residents rapidly filled the seats of the amphitheatre as the rules of the challenge were explained to the double twins.

“It’s like a puzzle,” Brinnen told them, pointing to the center of the stage, which was occupied by six large statue-like objects that were so unnaturally bright in color, it almost hurt their eyes to look at them. The puzzle pieces included a red flower, a purple egg, a green feather, a yellow coffin, an orange cup with two handles, and a blue flute.

“You just have to put them in the correct order inside of ten minutes,” said Margrave.

“Yes,” agreed Brinnen, “it’s a test of the brain pan.”

"With a little muscle thrown in," said Margrave. As each of the objects was roughly the size of a large hog, this was indeed true.

"We can give you one hint," added Brinnen, as he readied the timer, which looked something like an hourglass but of an elongated egg shape with the sand particles moving upwards, instead of down. "There is no beginning, and no end."

"Get ready," Margrave warned, as he slowly turned the timer device to start the granules flying upwards. "Your time starts now."

Ignoring the cheering and jeering from the crowd, the double twins faced their challenge.

"I think the hint means we need to put the objects in a circle," Lily cleverly deduced.

"You're right," Jordan agreed.

"But in what order?" Daniel questioned.

"The egg might be first," Sean speculated, "and the coffin last."

"Like from birth to death," said Lily. "That sounds good."

"Then the feather would come after the egg because it represents growth," suggested Daniel.

"But where would the flower fit in?" questioned Lily.

"Maybe after the coffin," said Jordan, "because people bring flowers to put on graves."

"But the cup and flute don't fit into that sequence," said Sean, who had the strongest feeling that they were completely wrong in all of their guesses so far.

Nearly half of their time had passed, and the situation was starting to look grave. Trying to ignore the onlookers' loud booing, the travelers tried to concentrate, in the hopes that they could figure this out and not simply have to make a wild guess.

Remembering his recent dream and the follow-up conversation with his grandmother, Sean suddenly figured out what was bothering him. Gathering his cousins and brother into a huddle, he told them, "It's the colors that are important. We have to put the objects in the order they would be on a color wheel."

"That's easy," said Jordan, now excited.

"Except for the weight," said Daniel, who was already grappling with the heavy coffin.

Working in pairs, they managed to put the objects in the correct order in a circle, finishing with about five seconds to spare.

Breathing somewhat heavily, Jordan faced a speechless-with-shock Margrave to inform him, “The correct order in this circle is flower, egg, flute, feather, coffin, cup, flower again, and so on....”

Brinnen was also speechless because no one had ever figured out the puzzle before.

Before any of the elves could speak, the travelers were forced to move quickly out of the way of the six objects that had suddenly come to life in a spinning and swirling flurry of motion. Under the breathless watch of the audience and the challenge participants, the puzzle pieces quickly became blurs of color that formed something resembling a flying saucer which, after whirling in place for only a few moments, streaked away into the sky toward a brilliant rainbow in the far distance.

Since the magical objects, which had been stolen by the elves, were now on their way back to the wizard who had created them, Margrave and Brinnen would never again have the pleasure of setting this particular challenge to travelers passing through their village.

Unfortunately, solving the puzzle wasn’t going to move the double twins any closer to their goal because, true to form, the elves pulled a double-cross. With a group of heavily-armed elves sidling up to him, Brinnen gravely faced the travelers and said, “We cannot reveal the location of the elves who possess the Eternity Stone. To do so means imprisonment, followed by death.”

“However,” Margrave added, “since you passed the challenge, we will allow you to leave in safety. Not all who enter our village are that lucky.”

Being unaware of the high level of weapons’ skill of the double twins, the elves didn’t know they had made a wise decision in not detaining or attacking the visitors.

Though the travelers were boiling mad, they decided it would be best not to contest the issue, since it was doubtful they could get the information they were seeking by force. Keeping on their guard, the four quickly left the village.

Chapter Eighteen

Time Waits

Starcoil had been right—in carrying her pebbles, they had no trouble getting through customs and security checks with the Eternity Stone.

Having been successful in their mission, and happy to finally be home, the energy of the double twins quickly returned, and they were hopeful that the Eternity Stone would be the key to finding Heaven's Jewel.

Since all of the world would be frozen in time, and because there were only seven of Starcoil's pebbles, which would be employed by the seven travelers, Sean and Daniel made sure to spend a lot of time with their mother and father leading up to their planned day of putting the Eternity Stone into use.

Likewise, Patrick spent much of his time with Elaina.

Two weeks after the double twins' return, being careful to have the pebbles in secure pockets, both sets of travelers gathered at Christine's home.

The first part of their plan involved figuring out how to activate the Eternity Stone. Placing the stone onto a soft cloth in the middle of Christine's dining table, they pondered the puzzle for some time.

Sean was the first to come up with an idea, and he addressed his great uncle. "Remember how you figured out how to help the Time Entity get reborn by putting the egg-shaped jewel into the nest in the cave?" As Aaron nodded, Sean added, "Well, the Eternity Stone is shaped like a seed, like a peach pit, to be exact. If the egg went into a nest to be hatched, maybe the stone needs to be planted into the ground."

"That's brilliant!" exclaimed Lily, with the others nodding in agreement.

"I think you're right," said Patrick. "It probably needs to be planted to activate it."

Retrieving an empty ceramic flower pot from her back porch, Christine scooped handfuls of earth from the flower bed to fill it. Jordan slid a saucer under the pot as her great aunt placed it on

the dining table. Next, being as gentle and careful as possible, Sean tucked the Eternity Stone into the loose dirt of the pot. Lily was standing by with a glass of water, which she slowly poured over the planted stone.

Within only a few seconds, as the group held its breath, the pot awakened with a soft silver glow as a tiny sprig crept from the earth to form delicate leaves and vines as it further took shape to eventually resemble a round bush. The plant grew only to the size of a small cantaloupe before stopping.

Looking much as if they were made of water, the shimmering silver leaves were familiar to Christine from visions she had had in her youth. Sean, too, had seen something like this before, in a dream.

Filing out the front door, the group discovered that time, as they knew it, had indeed halted. Everything within their line of sight appeared frozen in place, including the neighbor's cat who, frozen in mid-stride on the sidewalk, looked much like a life-like decorative statue. The early morning sun would rise no farther on this day. Amidst an unnatural quiet, which actually seemed very loud, they observed motionless insects and birds suspended against a backdrop of unmoving clouds. Any possible exceptions to this frozen-state-of-the-world were not seen or known to the seven travelers, who breathed a sigh of relief at the success of their venture so far.

As they reentered the house, Lily speculated, "I wonder how we will start time moving again? Do we just dig up the stone to deactivate it?"

"That sounds reasonable," Daniel responded.

"We'll figure it out after we find the island," said Aaron.

And so came a brief time of reprieve from the fury of nature upon the earth, while the travelers diligently began a new search for Heaven's Jewel.

Though they had had no luck in previous searches, they now felt less time pressure. Again making close study of maps, charts, and other data he had collected over the years, Aaron was able to come up with numerous fresh places for them to search.

Christine was the only one of the group with a pilot's license, which she had obtained in her thirties in order to conquer an early fear of flying brought on by the accident that had claimed her parents' lives. She had kept up her license over the years, even adding to it so that she might be qualified to pilot many types of

air vehicles. Thanks to the generosity of one of her wealthier clients, she currently had access to two crafts—a small jet and a Kolibri allocopter. Named after the person who invented it, the allocopter, which was much like a quiet and roomy version of a traditional helicopter, was used more often in their searches. Though not as fast as the jet, the craft could still travel long distances due to enormous fuel capacity, and was a much better option due to maneuverability and the fact that it could land almost anywhere, whereas, the jet could not.

Patrick, who still suffered from motion sickness, had lined up a pretty big supply of anti-quease medicine. Making use of the water and food compression devices, they packed light for their journeys, so that they might travel as unhindered as possible.

Due to the frequency of their trips, and because it might someday be very useful, Christine began teaching flying skills to the double twins, who were thrilled with this new challenge.

Though their journeys took them to exotic, far-reaching places, five solid months of exploration found them all extremely frustrated. Tired of taking trips and not finding what they were looking for, they returned home, exhausted more with the growing feeling of defeat than with physical fatigue. Though some good had come from their journeys, because the double twins were becoming competent pilots, the travelers seemed no closer to their goal of finding the location of Heaven's Jewel.

Aaron, particularly, felt very old and achy. Even though they had found and made use of the Eternity Stone, it might not matter if they couldn't find the island. And, quite frankly, he was running out of ideas as to where to look. However, after a few days of rest and reflection, he was able to think more clearly and again draw on the measure of hope that he always carried in his heart.

As he pulled back the heavy drapes he was currently using to help him sleep in the constant daylight, Aaron puzzled over something Sean had recently said to him. "Weren't there any clues?" his great nephew began. "In the time you spent on the island with Ruin Foster, and when you took the tour of Ekkoceilo with the Historian, isn't there anything you can remember that might help? Sometimes," Sean continued, "the smallest things that might not seem important can be the most important things of all."

Sitting down a few moments later with a cup of watered-down tea, Aaron had a sudden thought. It was something Ruin Foster had said when they first met him—that the island was a magical place. He said that when he was blowing out his birthday candles, he wished to take a trip to a magical place, and that his father granted his wish. Aaron shook his head upon realizing that he had missed something so obvious for so many years, and he actually scolded himself aloud. “You stupid man,” he said. “No wonder we’ve failed. Ruin Foster told us the island was larger than Madagascar. The only way to hide a land mass that large is magically. We’ve been looking for the island by scientific means, and we should have been employing magical means.” With further reflection, Aaron reasoned that, when magically hidden, something as large as Heaven’s Jewel might not even take up a thimbleful of space on the earth. They had basically been looking for the equivalent of a speck of dust in the desert.

Gathering everyone together, Aaron explained his thoughts. “The island is a magical place; we were told this right from the start. But we’ve been looking for it scientifically. Instead, we should probably be looking for it magically, like someone would in a fairy tale.”

It sounded reasonable. They certainly all believed in fairy tales, for all of the magical things they had encountered in their journeys. Christine smiled as she remembered the fable of *How the Fox and Rabbit Became Friends*, and the queen’s story of how her future husband had sent her the boxes of magical moonlight.

In discussion, they also remembered when the original three travelers had met the Time Entity in the cave, prior to meeting him again with Ruin Foster on the island, and the story he told them of *The Man Who Could Only Travel West*.

“The Time Entity has been manipulating all of this,” Patrick said. “We’re pretty sure he created those pillars, and that he’s been putting us in the right places and times to make certain things happen.”

“Exactly,” Christine chimed in. “We’re like pawns in his chess game with Death.”

“I think we’re probably more important pieces than that,” Daniel ventured. “Aren’t pawns usually sacrificed because they’re considered expendable? We certainly haven’t been

sacrificed; in fact, we've been carefully protected, and sent on missions. I think we're more like knights or bishops."

"That's beside the point, and we're getting off track," said Lily, who understood what her grandfather had been getting at. "Would the Time Entity take the trouble of telling a pointless story, or would he tell one that has meaning, and is important in some way?"

"I see what you mean," Daniel responded. "The story he told was probably important, like a clue."

After a few moments of silence, with everyone thinking diligently about the Time Entity's story, Patrick was the one who hit on the answer. "West is the clue. We were traveling west when this whole thing started, all those years ago."

"We've already looked in the area of the Hawaiian Islands," Christine said.

"But we didn't know to look for something magical," Aaron countered.

"We're probably looking for a doorway," Patrick suggested. "Remember the Silver Talon structure we went through to get to Ekkocielo the first time," he added. "That was some sort of magical doorway."

"And the arch portals that led to all those different places," Christine said, "those were certainly magical doorways as well."

Smiling at their progress, Aaron rather elatedly announced, "So, we head west again," to which Christine responded, "Tomorrow!"

The others all agreed.