

Chapter Six

A Pigeon Among the Cats

Following the Fate Entity, the travelers stepped through another portal to find themselves in a very familiar spot—just inside the entrance to the cave guarded by the sleeping dragon. Only steps from the Pool of Death, they quickly placed some distance between themselves and that hazard.

The dragon outside was a baby, and the travelers reasoned they had come to Elmara Lodés in nearly the same time as they had on their last visit. The Fate Entity confirmed this by telling them, “This is roughly two years before you made the bargain with the elves for the Eternity Stone.”

As they stepped out of the cave, the portal disappeared from view; however, the Fate Entity assured them, “It will be available to you when you need to return to Heaven’s Jewel, and it will take you back to your correct time.”

The baby dragon only looked slightly smaller than he had on their previous visit. “Dragons must take a long time to grow,” remarked Jordan.

Nodding, the Fate Entity responded, “He will be a baby for about twenty-five years.”

As they passed him, the creature briefly woke to greet the travelers. The double twins got over their apprehension of being in close proximity to an awake dragon very quickly as the baby waddled up to the Fate Entity to nuzzle his scaly neck against the man’s shoulder. Though small compared to a full-grown dragon, the baby was roughly the size of a small airbus, and his nuzzling pushed the Fate Entity around quite a bit. Laughing, and pushing back, the man said, “He wants his neck scratched.”

Boldly moving forward, Daniel reached up to oblige the beast. “Not around the crest or ears,” the Fate Entity warned. “Just scratch his neck. They don’t like their ears or the tops of their heads messed with.”

Lily, Jordan, and Sean also got to pet the dragon, who became sleepy again very quickly from such a relaxing and enjoyable scratch by so many hands. After only a couple of

minutes of enjoying the attention, the creature emitted an enormous steamy yawn before waddling back to his favorite spot to lie down and settle in for a long nap.

After climbing the mountain and briefly entering the flame oracle's cave to once again borrow suitable weapons and garments for their journey, they entered the forest which, except for the absence of the Jewel Trees, looked pretty much the same as it had on their previous visit.

"I won't be able to go with you on your journey," the Fate Entity informed them. "However, I have arranged a helper for you." As he said this, the travelers noticed a masked and heavily-cloaked man approaching on foot through the trees.

The double twins smiled in welcome at none other than Retama, one of the Protectors of the Trees.

"I have brought Retama to this time," The Fate Entity explained, "to act as a guide for you. He is well qualified to be your guardian, having acted as such for the Jewel Trees for so long."

Since Retama greeted them with familiarity, and because he looked roughly the same age as they remembered, the travelers reasoned that the guardian had been brought from a time shortly after their first trip to Elmara Lodés, during which they had met several of the Protectors of the Trees.

As the Fate Entity departed, bidding them farewell with "Safety and good speed," Retama led the group toward the entrance to Underfalls.

After passing through the curtain of falls and mountain tunnel, the guardian explained, "We are going to an elf encampment to meet someone who will help us find an important item needed to begin our journey."

"We weren't very successful in navigating elf encampments the last time we were here," Sean remarked. "Based on our wits and weapons, we barely got out of the smaller one alive; and we had help from a sylph when we visited the larger camp."

"That is the primary reason that I was chosen to guide you," Retama answered. He stopped walking as he said this and slowly removed his mask.

Jordan was the first to notice exactly what the guardian was revealing to them, and she gasped. Though they hadn't noticed before, the man's ears and chin were pointed, and his eyes

slanted slightly inwards towards his nose. This could only mean one thing—Retama was an elf!

With a small smile, he confirmed this, as he removed his gloves to reveal elongated hands, another prominent elf feature. “I’ve kept a pretty big secret,” the guardian said somewhat sheepishly. “I always wear a mask and gloves when in company with anyone not of elfkind.”

The travelers were speechless as Retama revealed another secret. “Rowan is my twin. Though we are both elfkind, we have warm hearts, something that is becoming increasingly rarer amongst our peoples.” Shaking his head sadly, the man paused before adding, “There is no way for us to turn the tide; however, we can act on the side of good. Rowan and I have chosen to do this and have given oaths to our king and queen to remain loyal to them.”

Sean was the first to find his voice. “It’s like there’s no end to the twins in all of this. They’re everywhere.”

Jordan laughed as she remarked, “Maybe it’s something to do with the cosmos. I’ve always felt twins are special and have a special place among the stars.”

“Or maybe it’s because Heaven’s Jewel and Elmara Lodés are something like twins,” Lily observed.

As he again donned his mask and gloves, Retama brought the subject of being their guide back around by telling them, “Since we must begin with the elves, you can see why I might be an asset to you on your quest.”

As they moved along the wooded path toward what would eventually become the sizeable city of Underfalls, Daniel stated, “So Life Nest is actually being put to more good use, if certain elves using it to stay young are on the side of good.”

“Yes,” responded Retama. “That’s a good way to look at it. The longer the few elves with warm hearts can stay alive, the better chance we have of combating the evil brewing amongst our kind.”

“What will we be looking for in the elf camp?” Lily asked.

“Believe it or not,” Retama responded, “a magic mirror needed to create Mirrorseed.”

As the double twins stared at him, Retama smiled and said, “I know. You don’t like that place very much, so you probably don’t want to have a hand in creating it. Unfortunately,” he added, “it is necessary.”

“Just like the Eternity-Stone bargain with the elves,” Lily responded. “We didn’t want to do that either, but we didn’t have a choice.”

“Yes, this is similar,” the guardian answered.

“Building a fortress will take forever,” Daniel said. “Faced with a task like that to start with, how will we ever finish our quest?”

Shaking his head, Retama answered. “Be assured, Mirrorseed will be created very quickly; and once inside, we will find a doorway leading to the path we must take to locate the seeds needed to plant the Jewel Trees.”

Instead of going through Underfalls, as they had before, Retama led the travelers on a narrow path through the forest east of the currently-small settlement.

As they walked, Lily posed a question to Retama. “Is your mask somewhat magical? It doesn’t even cover your ears or chin, yet it conceals your elf features so well. I mean, we didn’t notice before and even now it’s hard to tell.”

Retama smiled as he explained, “It’s not the mask. One of the Jewel Trees bestowed a kind of alchemical disguise magic on Rowan and I, so that we might blend in better. However, the masks are still important because they help keep other elves from recognizing Rowan and I when we are in our protector personae. The other guardians wear the masks mainly for symmetry, though concealing their true identities is important for their safety as well.”

After several hours on the winding footpath, they came upon a cluster of crude huts that marked the beginning of the elf encampment, at which point, Retama hastily removed his mask and gloves, stowing them inside the folds of his cloak. In a lowered voice, the guardian told them, “Since this is before the time when you acquired the Eternity Stone, none of the elves will be maliciously looking for you. And since I am with you,” he added, “they won’t be as suspicious as they might be otherwise. They will most likely think you are some of our spies. Just act natural, but don’t act friendly because elves are suspicious of any being that pretends to like them.”

As the travelers approached, several sentry elves armed with spears and swords stepped out of the huts to coldly eye the visitors. Sean and Jordan made it a point to glare back at the

elves, while Daniel and Lily, as casually as possible, ignored them.

Retama guided them without incident through the center of the encampment toward a cluster of smallish tents on the far outskirts of the camp. As they walked, the guardian told them in a low voice, "I've been in the area nearly two months setting this up." In an even lower voice, he added, "In this time, Rowan and I haven't even been born yet, so there's no danger of me running into my counterpart."

The double twins hadn't even thought of that. Though they had been taken out of their normal time on several occasions, time travel was still very confusing. They did remember the Time Entity telling them that no one could meet themselves in exactly the same time. They could only meet an older or younger self during time travel. However, the principles must be even more complicated than they were capable of imagining since people obviously could travel to times long before they were even born.

As they wound their way through the tents, the visitors noticed the display of colorful banners and flags containing odd symbols. They also passed through several sprawling stone gardens that reminded them of places in which religious ceremonies might be held.

The cluster of smallish tents housed a group of pluie, gnomelike creatures who all looked exactly alike and who were also named alike as simply, Pluie. These particular pluie were aligned with the elves and were not remotely kind or pleasant as many other pluie were.

Ducking to enter a particular tent, Retama bid his friends to stay outside. They did so, keeping a close eye on their surroundings, while acting as casual as possible. Several pluie also kept eyes on the visitors by peeking out of their tent flaps to shoot sour looks at them.

To the double twins' relief, Retama emerged only a few moments later with a pluie wearing a large cobalt blue jewel earring. As they were introduced to Pluie, the travelers could almost feel the cold emanating from the jewel, designating this particular creature as one having a cold heart.

During the past few weeks, Retama had managed to convince Pluie that he was on an important secret mission from the High Elf and that Pluie was needed to assist with the mission. Though

accustomed to taking orders from elves, pluie were always paid for their loyalty and work. Handing a small pouch to Pluie, Retama stated, “You will get the other half when the task is complete.”

After briefly rifling through the clinking contents of the pouch, Pluie nodded and proceeded to lead the group to a large vacant tent occasionally used for pluie gatherings.

A brightly-feathered bird in an enormous iron cage squalled a welcome to them as they entered. After dumping a quantity of food pellets that smelled like rotting fish into a dish for the bird, Pluie left the tent, telling the visitors, “We leave at dawn.”

Putting as much distance as possible between themselves and the fishy-smelling bird cage, the travelers spread out blankets from a large pile to sit down and have a meal together.

As they began eating, the bird began squawking and excessively pooping, almost as if in indignation of having to share the tent with the visitors, or perhaps in an effort to spoil their appetites.

In response to the double twins’ crinkled-up noses (because the bird’s poop smelled infinitely worse than the food pellets), and their efforts to cover their mouths and noses, Retama laughed and stated, “They don’t make very pleasant pets; however, having a sunya madra bird is a status symbol among pluie. The pluie we are working with owns this one, and he is very proud of his pet, so try not to say anything unfavorable about the bird on our trip tomorrow.”

The travelers agreed, particularly because the sunya madra settled down in short time and actually began cooing pleasantly at them, which helped them fall asleep more easily a short while later.

As they were arranging makeshift beds with more blankets from the pile, in low tones, Retama explained, “Based on what we know in the future, Mirrorseed was created when an evil and powerful magic mirror of unknown origin was planted as a seed, and grew. It has long been a legend among pluie that the mirror exists, and this particular pluie assures me he knows its current location.”

It was somewhat hard to imagine a huge fortress growing from a mere seed; however, a lot of magical events were hard to imagine.

Placing himself nearest the tent entrance as they settled in for the night, Retama told his friends, “I sleep light, so you don’t need to worry. Try to get plenty of rest because we’re going to need it.”

Chapter Seven

The Creation of Mirrorseed

After a peaceful and restful night, the travelers woke before dawn to fold up blankets and gather their gear.

The sunya madra squalled a hearty goodbye at them as they exited the tent to find Pluie ready and waiting outside. In addition to a small pack strapped to his shoulders, he carried a sack containing a round object roughly the size of a soccer ball.

Dawn met them as they hurried along a trail through the trees, and the sun rose behind them as they began a two-day journey which first took the group west, then north through the familiar area of Stone Hollow.

The travelers were careful of what was said around the pluie. They spoke of nothing related to their current quest or past adventures in Elmara Lodés. Instead, they made idle chit-chat focused on admiring the sights and predicting the weather. On several occasions, Sean and Lily made sure to comment on the beautiful plumage and lovely songs of the sunya madra. The compliments seemed to please Pluie.

The current home of the magic mirror turned out to be deep in the rocky chasm separating Stone Hollow from the wooded lands that would eventually be home to both Mirrorseed and Elf Castle.

Unfortunately, the goolegung that generally occupied the chasm was in full residence. Though currently asleep, and snoring, the enormous form of the hairy beast was quite intimidating, even as distantly viewed from the crude bridge spanning the gorge.

“We’ll have to climb down with Pluie,” Retama quietly explained. “All pluie believe the mirror to be cursed, so they won’t touch it.”

“Yep, it’s cursed,” Pluie confirmed, “won’t touch it.”

It was quickly decided that Sean, Jordan, and Retama would make the climb.

Pluie seemed undaunted by the task at hand. Shedding his gear for the climb down, the little man removed a square orange

pouch from his pack before stuffing the pouch into his trouser pocket. Next, while giving Lily and Daniel a severe glare, as if warning them not to mess with his stuff, Pluie closed the neck of the sack containing the round object with several tight twists before tucking the bundle in close to his pack.

“Don’t worry,” Lily told him. “We won’t let anyone touch your things.”

Pluie seemed to believe that Lily’s words carried weight because he gave her a short nod as he quickly strode away from his gear to a rock crevice near the bridge entrance which would allow easy access to the chasm. The rest of the climbing party quickly followed to begin the steep and treacherous climb into the gorge. Extremely worried about interference from the gooleegung, because the horrid creatures were known to be light sleepers, the climbers attempted to make their descent as quiet as possible.

From their position above, Lily stood with her bow at-the-ready, while Daniel prepared to hurl rocks at the beast, if necessary.

As it turns out, their assistance would not be necessary because Pluie was perfectly prepared to deal with the gooleegung if he should wake, which he did when they were right at the halfway point in their climb down. Outraged at the intrusion into his gorge, the clawed and fanged creature rose to his full twelve-meter height quickly and roared as he rushed towards the invaders. Pluie acted equally quickly, retrieving the orange pouch from his pocket and, with an expert flick of his wrist, tossing the powdery contents into the face of the advancing beast. Almost instantly, the glittering powder took effect to put the monster to sleep.

Unfortunately, a thunderous sneeze emitted by the gooleegung just before he fell started a rockslide above the climbers. As they struggled to keep their hand and footholds, the impact from the fall of the gooleegung further shook the gorge, causing the slide to worsen. Sean was able to help Jordan squeeze into a widened crack in the rocks where they took shelter together until the avalanche abated. However, Retama and Pluie were not so lucky in their positions and they each took a tumble. Retama was fortunately able to break his fall by grasping a scrubby shrub, which allowed him to land on a rock ledge about four meters below the spot where he lost hold. Though bruised

and shaken, he was not seriously harmed. Pluie ended up skidding and bouncing the rest of the way down to the bottom of the chasm. Fortunately, pluie were incredibly stout creatures, and the fall merely took the little man's breath away for a few moments. By the time Sean, Jordan, and Retama caught up to him, Pluie was quite himself again and was already in full search-mode for the magic mirror.

Looking helplessly on from above, Lily and Daniel breathed enormous sighs of relief.

Pluie found the magic mirror in short time under a rock that closely resembled the top of a personal umbrella both in shape and size. Though very symmetrical, the stone looked natural, as though it had simply weathered that way. The travelers were surprised that Pluie was able to initially hoist the heavy rock by himself, assisted only by Retama and Jordan in moving it to one side.

The mirror, cradled in an indentation in the clay-like earth beneath the umbrella stone, was roughly the size of a large hand mirror. Shaped much like a pumpkin seed, the glass sported intricate carvings along its edges, along with soft fringes that resembled feathery roots.

"Won't touch it!" Pluie reminded them in a somewhat forceful manner, as though they might have forgotten and were expecting him to pick it up.

As Sean bent to retrieve the mirror from its cradle, Jordan spread a shirt previously taken from her pack on the ground. After protectively wrapping the mirror, she stowed the bundle in a pocket of her cloak for the climb out of the gorge.

Skirting the area of the rockslide, their ascent proved much more peaceful than the trip down. Snoring loudly, the gooleegung never woke. "He'll sleep for two days," Pluie told his companions.

Upon reaching the bridge, the party quickly set off for the future site of Mirrorseed.

All pluie were expert gardeners with knowledge that included the secrets of seeds, even magical seeds such as those that were also mirrors. Pluie's skills were about to come in handy when planting the magic mirror because the process was somewhat tricky. Indeed, as they traveled, he consulted a small notebook. He also stopped several times to gather items such as goat dung, hawthorn berries, and cypress tree mulch. "We'll have to wait

until the new moon,” he said breathlessly when they reached their destination.

The new moon was three days off, and the travelers took the opportunity to practice weaponry and explore the woods surrounding the future site of Mirrorseed. At night, since they were in goblin country, they took turns sleeping and watching. Even though many goblins were aligned with elves and pluie, the nasty creatures were never to be fully trusted, particularly because they liked to roam at night and rob travelers. Sure enough, small groups of passing goblins made visits to their camp each night. However, since the travelers were both alert and armed, the goblins wisely refrained from mischief.

On the night before the new moon, a seemingly friendly man stopped by their camp. After a few brief moments of conversation, the man began to hum, at which point, Sean quickly sprang into action to put a blade to the man’s neck. The man looked shocked and immediately ceased humming. Sean had been correct in his assumption that this was a creature similar to one they had met before, namely Dal Enek, who had the ability to lure others to sleep by means of an enchanted melody derived from captured songbird spirits. Cautiously lowering his blade, Sean instructed, “Be on your way, and don’t come back.” As the man quickly complied, Sean tossed after him, “And keep your humming to yourself!”

The next night, when the moon was just right, Pluie gave instructions to Lily and Daniel as to how to plant the mirror which, when sown correctly, would sprout at the first touch of dawn.

They first dug a small north-south furrow under the watchful eye of Pluie who fussed and scolded (over what seemed like less than a teaspoon of dirt taken out or put back each time) for nearly a full hour. When the furrow was finally right, to meet Pluie’s standards, the planters spread a thin layer of goat dung in the bottom. Five hawthorn berries were then carefully laid in the north end of the furrow. The magic mirror was placed next, with the sharp end of the seed pointing south. A thick layer of cypress mulch was then spread over the mirror. This completed the planting as the magic seed required no watering in.

With nothing left to do but wait, the travelers returned to their camp, which was sited well away from the planted seed. As they took turns resting and watching, Pluie spent some time

reorganizing the contents of his pack and occasionally peering into his sack to check on the safety of the round object it contained.

Lily, Daniel, and Pluie had evidently done a good job of sowing because, at the first touch of dawn, the seed began to sprout. The sun rose quickly, but not nearly as quickly as Mirrorseed, whose gleaming walls sprang forth from the earth in an extremely alarming fashion. Indeed, as the onlookers watched in awe, the fortress fully formed itself in less than fifteen minutes.

“Amazing,” breathed Jordan, when finally able to catch her breath a few moments later. The other agreed. Even Pluie was impressed, and very proud of himself as he accepted another payment pouch from Retama.

Mirrorseed was not shrouded in fog as it had been on their previous visit, and they were able to find the main entry door easily. Pluie accompanied the travelers into the fortress.

Being newly created, and not yet used as place of elf enchantments and experiments, Mirrorseed was currently free of traps and deceptions. But despite their relative safety, the travelers could still feel a malevolent presence surrounding them, which led them to believe that the magic mirror had indeed been cursed.

As he led the group up a series of staircases, Retama said, “Before we find the doorway, we have another short task to complete.”

The task involved the highest tower of Mirrorseed in a chamber instantly recognized by the travelers as the one in which the tiny ice spirit, Iglace, had been held captive. At this point, Pluie’s sack containing the round object finally came into play. Upon receiving another payment pouch from Retama, the tiny man unwrapped a crystal sphere identical to the one in which Iglace had been imprisoned. Supposedly under further orders from the High Elf, Pluie’s next mission was to set a trap. Pluie were expert magical trappers and often created enchanted objects, such as the sphere, to trap tiny spirits whose powers often proved useful to elves and other evildoers, especially if the spirits could be converted to evil. Pluie would be checking every so often to ensure the sphere was safe because, according to Retama, the High Elf wanted to catch a particular ice spirit.

Though extremely upset by what they were witnessing, the travelers wisely held their tongues.

Upon setting the trap, and after only a curt farewell, Pluie exited Mirrorseed and was quickly on his way back to the elf encampment. Some distance from the fortress, he paused to look back. Something in the departing expressions of his traveling companions had pushed a suspicion button in him, and this was certainly something he needed to pay attention to.

Back in the fortress, the double twins were very upset. “Not only did we help create this terrible place,” Lily fumed, “we are also responsible for trapping Iglace?”

“This is horrible!” Jordan loudly exclaimed.

Retama shook his head as he stated, “She must be imprisoned so she will be here to help you in the future. I would have thought by now you could understand that certain things are necessary.”

Sean was nodding as he said in an almost reciting manner, “Some things are meant to be, even some unpleasant things.”

“And it’s not only your future,” the guardian added, “her future depends on it as well.”

The travelers were quiet as Retama led them to a lower chamber in the rear of Mirrorseed where they discovered a face puzzle which, when pieced together, would reveal the doorway leading to the next part of their journey.

“Speaking of meant to be,” Jordan ventured, “I guess it was good that we got trapped in that other horrible castle by the other evil pluie on our last visit here because we know what a face puzzle is.”

“And this looks a lot like the one we had to piece together to reveal the stairwell in that fortress,” Daniel added.

He was right. Though slightly darker and larger than the other one, the face on this puzzle was definitely that of a boutonk—a creature resembling a hairy pig. And thanks to Niwa, the cloud spirit they had freed from the utmost top of the fortress, they knew where the mouth and nose of the boutonk should go—exactly opposite those of a normal pig.

They began right away, sorting the pieces by color and looking for corners and edges. As they began dragging the huge puzzle pieces around to place them in their correct spots, Retama told them, “Well, I have seen a boutonk, but I’m no good at puzzles, so it’s good that you have the experience. Most elves

are not good at puzzles, of any kind,” he added. “But when we can get over our jealousy and frustration of not being able to master them ourselves, we actually admire those who are good at them.” Retama had spoken the truth—he was not much help at all. However, he did retrieve several pieces for them at their direction.

When the last piece was placed, the puzzle immediately began to change shape, into that of a long stairwell leading down into a stone tunnel which, when followed on its winding path, led to a circular metal doorway of a pale silver color that reminded the travelers of softly-brushed aluminum. The lever-style handle of the door looked to be made of black iron.

Pausing by the unopened door, Retama asked, somewhat mischievously, “Before we head out, I wonder if you can tell me what we might be looking for, as far as the origin of the Jewel Trees?”

As they thought about the question for a few moments, Lily was the one who came up with the answer, and she recited nearly the exact words given to their ancestors by the red Jewel Tree on their visits to Elmara Lodés. “The trees are Old-Growth Jewels, whose seeds were first found in the Dark Inferno by the Cloud Walkers after they traveled through the Great Abyss.”

“Correct,” Retama said admiringly, adding as he turned the door handle, “We will need to remember those words as we go forward to make sure we stay on the right path.”

Chapter Eight Cloud Walkers

Upon stepping through the circular doorway, and immediately exiting an identical door set into a cube-like structure of bluish stone, the travelers found themselves in a valley filled with thick clouds that were not in the sky but were instead nestled into the folds of the valley as though they had tired of floating and had decided to tuck themselves in for a long nap.

Walking through clouds turned out to be much different than walking through fog. Where they might have simply become damp from a foggy hike, the travelers quickly became soaking wet. There was no way to avoid this because the dense wet fluff literally filled every crevice of the valley, as though all of the clouds in the sky had suddenly decided to attend a cloud convention in this very spot. Barely able to see two meters ahead, the travelers chose their path carefully, often pausing to listen to their surroundings.

“At least it’s not cold,” Daniel remarked, trying to lift their soggy spirits.

“That’s something,” Lily murmured as she tried to loosen her clinging cloak. The garment’s heaviness not only made her feel trapped and claustrophobic, the skin on her shoulders was starting to prune.

After nearly an hour of what seemed more like wading than walking, the clouds grew slightly less dense, allowing them to glimpse shadows of tall trees fringing the edges of the valley.

Two more hours found the travelers ready to stop for lunch, which they did atop a rocky plateau situated slightly above the clouds milling about the valley floor. Though hanging fairly low, the gray clouds filling the skies above looked strangely distant, almost as if they were aloft in aloofness and had no intention of mingling with their tucked-in cousins below. The breathing room atop the plateau served to lighten the air of oppressiveness in the valley, along with the spirits of the travelers.

By the time they finished eating, their clothing had dried somewhat, affording them a lighter journey as they continued their trek across the valley, which was gradually becoming clearer as the clouds began to break apart and drift.

Though they were able to travel more swiftly, Retama still paused frequently to listen. His companions wondered at his caution but didn't question him. As they were picking their way through a particularly dense area of vegetation, the guardian stopped the party entirely and turned to backtrack several meters along their path. With a small smile, he pointed to a spot amongst the foliage where a gargoyle sat tucked between two enormous ferns. With cloud strings draping him like cobwebs, his pale gray form looked gauzy and, to the girls' delight, romantic in a Gothic sort of way.

"Oh, I didn't even notice him," Lily exclaimed.

"Even if we had," her sister added, "at a glance, we might have thought he was just another stone."

"This is an odd place for a gargoyle," Daniel remarked.

"Indeed," replied Retama. A moment later, to the surprise of his companions, he added, "As a gentleman, I ask the other gentleman to reveal himself."

The double twins were even more surprised when the gargoyle suddenly stood up. Slowly emerging from his fern cover, the stone figure's formerly fierce and stony expression became sheepish as he came to stand before them. "I am called Kumo," he said, almost shyly. Though somewhat grotesque—with a sharp nose, protruding cheekbones, pointed chin, oversized feet, and claw-like fingers—Kumo's chiseled form had been made to resemble a man. The travelers might have felt some apprehension in encountering a stone man roughly the same height as Retama; however, since Kumo lacked features such as fangs and scales, he seemed less foreboding than other gargoyles might have been in close company. He was also very beautiful close up, with delicate streaks from mineral deposits and weathering winding over his pale gray body like a fine web of plantlike tendrils.

After friendly introductions that included much handshaking, Kumo asked if he might tag along with the travelers. "I like taking long walks," he added.

"But isn't it unusual for gargoyles to walk about?" asked Sean, as they continued on through the valley.

“Yes,” Kumo admitted. “It is somewhat odd for a gargoyle to roam. But I am a journeyer. As a young gargoyle, I was given a challenge to complete three magical tasks that would allow me to remain mobile, if I wished. I did wish this because I did not like always staying stationary.” With his new friends listening intently, Kumo continued. “All gargoyles are given this chance, but few choose to undertake the tasks, and even fewer follow them all the way through. Most gargoyles consider motion something of a bother, since moving stone takes some effort, so they prefer to just sit comfortably. We don’t have to move to act as protectors, which is the main purpose of gargoyles. But I decided early on that the effort was worth it, to see something more of the world than just what I could view from my perch on the abbey upon which I was placed. So I decided to take on the challenge I was given.”

When Kumo paused, and didn’t appear to be about to add anything, Jordan breathlessly asked, “What were your three magical tasks?”

“Were they very difficult?” Lily rushed to add.

Sean and Daniel also urged their new companion to share his exciting tale.

“Well, there’s not much to tell,” Kumo answered modestly. “As it turns out, the tasks were not much of a challenge for me. I freed a trapped unicorn from an enchanted fountain, healed an injured gryphon, and saved a baby halcyon from a cursed undertow.” Though his listeners continued to prod, Kumo seemed reluctant to add more details, and simply said, “It really wasn’t all that exciting—just all in a day’s work.”

When Retama added, “I believe that the halcyon you saved ended up being the one that helped some friends of ours whose balloon was caught in an air stagnancy over the seas,” Kumo’s reply was simply, “Yes, halcyon not only calm winds, they can also stir them up, if they want to.”

Even as they stopped to set up camp for the night amongst towering elms occupying a dense valley grove, Kumo kept his conversation to a minimum, and the travelers found themselves wondering if gargoyles were creatures of limited words. However, he did tell them, “Even though gargoyles fight evil spirits, we often try to find better homes for them, rather than just destroying them.” It seemed Kumo was trying to make a good

impression on his new friends, even if he didn't like to share details.

As the evening wore on, and the travelers decided they could trust their new companion, they shared a few details about their current quest and, in particular, the riddle they were following.

"We are looking for seeds to plant trees that are Old-Growth Jewels," said Daniel. "The seeds were first found in the Dark Inferno by the Cloud Walkers after they traveled through the Great Abyss."

"We found the clouds, obviously," said Jordan, "and walked through them. Now we need to find the Dark Inferno."

"Which you can only do after going through the great gorge filled with a sea of water," Kumo said. "That must be the abyss that you mention." Smiling as he read the excited expressions of his new friends, the gargoyle added, "I know exactly what path you must take. I have traveled it myself several times. If you like, I can accompany you a little farther on your journey, to show you the way."

The travelers most certainly did welcome Kumo's company, and with his protective presence in the valley, they were able to fall asleep easily. Though damp from the still-milling clouds, they slept peacefully, as though wrapped in a blanket of relief in knowing that they would have some guidance for the next part of their journey.

Kumo did not sleep (because gargoyles didn't need to), but instead spent the night watching over his companions, while occasionally quietly gathering edible roots and berries as a breakfast surprise for his new friends.

Sean was the first to rise the next morning. Unfortunately, his peaceful slumber had been interrupted shortly before dawn by a disturbing prophetic dream. The vision wasn't something he could share with his companions, but it was definitely something he was anxious to discuss with his grandmother upon their return home.

As the sun rose, the travelers found the valley packed every bit as densely with clouds as the previous morning. Facing another day of wading through wetness, they were in no hurry to set out and lingered to enjoy the surprise breakfast and to thank Kumo for the treat.

After leisurely packing their gear, the travelers could find no further excuses for delay, and so continued their trek through the

valley, now under the guidance of the journeyer gargoyle who told them, “Finding the abyss might be somewhat tricky and difficult.”

“For sure,” replied Lily in somewhat of a downcast tone as she batted at the particularly thick cloud she was pushing through. “Since we can barely see a half meter ahead, we will definitely have trouble finding what we are looking for.”

“That is not what I mean,” Kumo replied. “The difficulty lies in the fact that the doorway to the abyss moves around, so it can never be found in the same place twice.” Observing his companions’ confused expressions, Kumo hastened to explain. “It is the nature of shifting sands. The dunes are never the same two nights in a row.”

Lily was about to ask Kumo a question when the quiet of the nature-filled valley was suddenly interrupted by a loud mechanical roar that sounded much like a truck engine revving up. As the travelers halted, they heard other sounds similar to engine noises, some coming closer to their position.

“This is tricky too,” Kumo told them. Unlike his companions, he didn’t seem surprised by the noises. “Even though there is a crosswalk, we must proceed with care because the vehicles may not see us through the clouds.”

“What vehicles?” Sean asked as they slowly moved forward. “And what are they doing here?”

“We are not completely in the boonies,” Kumo answered. “Civilization is all around us. And this is a main thoroughfare for the area.” They had just reached the edge of a road paved with what appeared to be pale blue asphalt. “We must cross, but we need to use the crosswalk. It will be safer because the vehicles must obey the *Slow* sign.”

Kumo led the group as they paralleled the road about a hundred meters, skirting several fat spruce trees laden with clouds. The clouds were so thick at the point of the crosswalk the travelers had to listen to know if the way was safely free of traffic. After two smallish vehicles and what sounded like a bus whizzed by, the only sounds of traffic were very faint.

“Join hands for safety,” Kumo instructed, just before leading them across the road. Linked so, the double twins were oddly reminded of a time early in their homeschooling when, on rare occasions between natural disasters, they had been allowed to go on field trips to museums and factories and had to hold hands as a

rule to stay together when crossing streets. Since they couldn't see much of anything in front of them, they kept their eyes on their feet to avoid feeling as though they might trip over something at any moment. Looking down at the pale yellow stripes of the crosswalk, Jordan imagined they were walking on a golden ladder spanning a blue sky full of puffy white clouds.

Once they were safely across, and unjoined, Kumo stated, "I know someone who can help us find the doorway to the abyss. At least, I hope so. He helped me find it the last time I came this way."

Led by the somewhat-confident gargoyle, the travelers followed a winding cobblestone path through the cloudy valley to a nearby village consisting of a dozen or so quaint, thatch-roof stone bungalows and a small wooden water tower standing proudly beside its hard-at-work windmill. Though the homes and water tower appeared kept up, and the yards were tidy and trimmed, the small village was completely deserted with the exception of a lone, heavily-cloaked male figure sitting on the first step of a stile crossing a garden wall at the far end of the village.

Staring at the cloaked man in an oddly intent manner, Kumo stepped forward. As the others made to follow, he said in a hushed voice, "Just stay here for a moment, please."

Though confused, the travelers obeyed.

Upon reaching the cloaked figure, Kumo conversed with the man for a few seconds. A moment later, the onlookers had to shield their eyes from a blinding burst of green light that appeared to shoot up from the ground at a point directly between Kumo and the cloaked man. As the light faded and they were able to look again, the travelers simply saw Kumo walking slowly towards them with a grim look upon his face. "It is safe to proceed now," he said.

"But what was all that about?" Daniel asked.

Kumo didn't look at Daniel as he replied. Instead, staring into Retama's eyes, he said, "That was a phantasm disguised as a person, so I had to send him away." Continuing to stare at Retama, he added, "I know all elves are not evil, but many are. And they have many foul agents working for them."

"I am not of the evil sort," Retama replied, staring evenly back at the gargoyle.

“Indeed you are not,” Kumo responded. “I can sense evil even in small amounts. But it is an odd coincidence that an elf agent just happened to cross our paths, when none has been seen in these parts for many years.” Finally unlocking eyes with Retama, the gargoyle added, “He was marked by a tattoo that many elf agents bear, and that you should keep watch for.” Kumo knelt as he said this and scratched a small symbol resembling a maple leaf, sectioned into five parts by crescent-moon shapes, into the soft dirt. “His mark was on the heel of his hand very close to the thumb. I saw it right away; that is why I asked you to stay back.”

“You saw it all the way from across the village, and through the clouds?” Lily questioned.

Kumo nodded.

“You must have incredible eyesight,” remarked Jordan.

Again nodding, Kumo replied, “All gargoyles do; otherwise, we could not do our jobs very well.” After a moment’s pause, he added, “But there was once a blind gargoyle who was more powerful than a whole legion of magical stone creatures.”

They passed the stile leaving the village. Though the cloak of the phantasm lay flattened on the ground, it swirled slightly as though still containing life. The garment also emitted a green glow. As the travelers gave the cloak a wide berth, Kumo said, “Do not fear. It simply moves from the reminder of the spirit. The phantasm himself is far away and will not be able to return for many years.” With a small smile, Kumo stated, “The cloak contains a reminder of me as well—a lovely glowing shade of green, if I do say so myself.”

As they left the village behind, Retama told the double twins, “Elf agents frequently carry their marks on their hands, but the tattoos can be in others places. I have seen them on earlobes and behind the knee.”

Kumo was nodding. “And some elf agents, like goblins and gooleegungs, are not marked at all. But you should still be wary of them.”

“Now that you mention it,” Daniel said, “I think the pluiie who imprisoned Niwa and trapped us in the fortress had a tattoo like that on his neck.”

The others didn’t remember this, but since Daniel had been the one holding the viewing globe in which the image of the pluiie had appeared, he had gotten a better look than his companions.

“Come to think of it,” said Jordan, “Dal Enek had a mark on the heel of his hand. Maybe it was one of these tattoos.” Sean and Lily also remembered the mark, but they had not gotten a close enough look at it to know for sure if it was an elf sign.

As they continued their trudge through the valley, Sean urged Kumo to “Tell us more about the blind gargoyle.”

“There is nothing more to tell,” Kumo stated flatly. “He was powerful. No one knows why particularly.” Noting the disappointment on his companions’ faces, Kumo tried to make an effort to please them. “He was about my height. His ears were bigger, but his feet were smaller. And he was made of white marble.”

Kumo didn’t quite understand the nature of adventure and mankind’s crave of adventure. To him, battling evil spirits was simply, as he said before, “All in a day’s work.” So he didn’t know that his new friends wanted to know the story of how the blind Guillermo had singlehandedly stopped an army of giant centipedes from destroying the aqueducts. Guillermo’s face-off with a powerful wizard named Brusarus also never came to mind.

When the disappointed expressions persisted, but no more comments or questions were put to him, Kumo fell silent, wondering worriedly about his new friends, and what their expectations of him might be. A few moments later, he was totally relieved by Jordan’s remark of, “We are so lucky to have you along, Kumo. I don’t know what we would have done back there.”

Sean agreed. “We really don’t know anything about battling evil spirits. The few times we have come across them, someone has always been there to help us.”

With a smile, and almost brightly though he still tried to keep a modest tone, Kumo said, “Well, that’s my main job, taking care of evil spirits. So I can definitely help when you come across them.” Kumo was so pleased by their comments, he smiled for nearly an hour (which was a very long time for any gargoyle to smile) as he continued to lead them through the valley.

Pausing only once for a small meal, they walked the rest of the day. The clouds grew less and less, and as the day neared dusk, the travelers came upon another small village where numerous hut-like structures were built into the sides of cliffs containing shallow caves so that the homes were something like a cross between a cave and a hut. This village was inhabited, and

though the residents were polite, they seemed too busy at present, hurrying to gather dinner fixings and their scattered children, to bother with visitors.

Kumo entered the door of one of the smaller cave-huts without knocking. His companions followed to discover an old man, garbed in a silk tunic and pantaloons, sitting in the center of the main living area, seemingly staring into his own hands which were cupped, palms up, in his lap.

As the visitors neared the man, Kumo softly said, “Gudgeon is the friend I mentioned—the one who told me where to find the doorway to the abyss the last time I came through here. Hello, Gudgeon,” Kumo added. “Could you help my friends here the way you helped me last time?”

Gudgeon smiled, but didn’t reply to or even look at Kumo. He took no notice of the other visitors either. Instead, still staring into his cupped hands, he rose from his seated position and moved to kneel next to a pile of sand, ringed with smooth stones, situated in one corner of his cave. Continuing to stare intently into his hands, he leaned over the pile of sand.

Very softly, Kumo explained, “Gudgeon is a prophet, but he never speaks until he has consulted the man in his hands. He sees himself as the man in his hands, and he asks himself for advice. The man in his hands doesn’t speak, but he somehow tells Gudgeon everything he needs to know.”

As the travelers inched nearer the sandpile, they could see the flickering image of a tiny man, resembling the prophet, standing in Gudgeon’s hands. The image nodded to Gudgeon before making several sign-language gestures. The tiny man also scraped a toe across the palm of his holder’s left hand several times in what seemed like an effort to communicate something important. Gudgeon nodded his understanding of the gestures and toe scrapes. In the quiet of the cave, the awestruck onlookers watched for some time as the tiny man continued to motion, with Gudgeon continuing to nod.

After a time, Sean ventured a whisper, “It must take an awesome amount of brain power to produce an interactive projected image like that—one that we can see and that he can communicate with.”

Jordan nodded and responded, also in a whisper, “I think the old ideas about telepathy and teleporting things might pale in comparison to what Gudgeon is probably capable of.”

The visitors were startled when Gudgeon suddenly jumped up to leap into the center of the pile of sand, the man in his hands vanishing as he did so. After splashing water onto the sand from a cylindrical vessel, Gudgeon knelt once more to excitedly begin molding a small sand sculpture. After several furious minutes of sculpting, the prophet sat back and finally turned his gaze to his guests. He beamed happily at them, pointing to his creation, as he finally spoke. "In the desert plateau, on the other side of the mountain, look for a rock of this shape." The sculpture was shaped like a mushroom with two caps, one on top of the other. "It will be about six meters high," Gudgeon added.

"I know exactly where this rock is," Kumo said. "It is only about two kilometers from where the doorway was last time."

"Although the passage to the abyss shifts," Gudgeon told them, "it likes to stay in the same general area."

After thanking the prophet and bidding him farewell, the travelers set up camp for the night on the outskirts of the village. As they were unrolling their bedmats, Lily asked Kumo the question she never got to ask in the morning when the truck engine had startled her. "So the shifting sands you mentioned are not a metaphor, but real sands?"

"Yes," said Kumo.

"And the shifting sands cause the doorway of the abyss to move around?" asked Sean.

"I guess so," answered Kumo. "If what Gudgeon said is true about the doorway staying in the same general area, I imagine it is somewhat fixed, but able to move around. But I don't know if the sands cause it to move, or if it just likes to."

"It's lucky for us that you know the area," Daniel remarked. "Even if we had managed to talk to the prophet, we might have had a really hard time finding the rock without you."

As they were settling in for the night, Jordan ventured a thought. "I think Gudgeon is brilliant to discuss things with himself, and question himself."

Lily agreed. "A wise man will go over everything thoroughly before speaking or acting."

Troubled by his dream from the night before, which had kept his thoughts occupied much of the day, Sean had difficulty getting to sleep. The vision involved an event of the past, which was somewhat confusing to Sean because he usually had dreams of the future. But in mulling over what the Time Entity had said

about events occurring in *Circles of Time*, it made a little more sense. Though he had at first been anxious to discuss the vision with his grandmother, Sean was now having second thoughts. A full day of processing the matter in his brain had caused this reservation, since the dream involved an event that had been very traumatic to his grandmother as a young girl—that of the death of her mother. With his brain still battling over the issue, Sean finally drifted off in exhaustion just past midnight.

Chapter Twelve

The Peppermint Pig Contract

Despite little use over the years, the copper door opened easily allowing the travelers access to a steep, winding stairwell leading to a wooden door at the base of the round building. The wooden door led them into a downward-sloping stone tunnel that leveled out after a few hundred meters. The tunnel was lit by ceiling-mounted glow-tubes filled with a lava-like substance.

After walking for nearly an hour, the travelers at last came to the mouth of a cave that looked out upon forested canyon lands stretched as far as the eye could see. According to Kumo, taking a path through a fairly shallow gorge directly in front of the cave would lead them to their destination. The canyon walls, arches, boulders, hoodoos, and other stony features were of brilliant orange and red shades that were so vivid they looked surreal and almost unworldly. Late evening had not quite reached nightfall, and though the area was dark and overcast, a huge moon spectacularly lit the colorful landscape, waking their tired eyes, which had more than grown accustomed to seeing in dark surroundings. Though still warm, the canyon region was not nearly as hot as the plains and twin cities had been. The travelers breathed a sigh of relief, along with the wonderful piney smell of various conifers, as they shed their firecoats and gloves, stowing them in the cave for use on their return journey.

After setting up camp for the night in the shelter of the cave, Kumo told his friends of a fantastic battle he had once witnessed between a male dragon and a female tiger. Since the double twins had been sharing tales of some of their adventures, Kumo had finally figured out that they wanted to hear stories, the events of which, though not all that extraordinary to him, seemed to greatly excite and please his new young friends. Daniel's mouth hung open upon hearing of the tiger's leap of a thousand mountains, and Lily fairly swooned during the rescue of the prisoner from the dragon's citadel, who turned out to be none other than the tiger's love of forty lifetimes.

Since the story had a happy ending, and neither the dragon nor the tiger had died, the double twins wondered if it was real.

“Of course it really happened,” Kumo said, somewhat indignantly.

“It’s just that it seems too good to be true,” Lily said, “especially with no one getting killed in such a ferocious battle.”

“Just as the lake must live at the foot of the mountain,” the Shardman told her, “the dragon and tiger must both live.”

After a few moments of silence, during which the group pondered the Shardman’s words, Sean was the one who worked out the meaning. “He’s talking about the balance of yin and yang,” he said. “The counterparts of moon/sun, female/male, winter/summer, earth/heavens, tiger/dragon, rain/sunshine, and lake/mountain all exist to balance one another.”

With a soft smile, the Shardman nodded at Sean’s understanding.

The travelers all felt their new friend probably had much to share with them, if he could manage to get it out.

Passing a restful night in the cave, the group woke to begin their trek through the shallow gorge, which was not much brighter by day than it had been at night due to dense cloud cover. However, though still dim, the canyon lands were considerably less dark than the plains region had been. The travelers soon discovered something else different about the area. While the plains had been home to considerable volcanic activity, the canyons were riddled with earth tremors. Frequent low thunder also kept the group company on this new segment of their journey. With no lightning visible, and no rain from the heavy clouds, the thunder seemed separate from other natural elements, as though it might only be present to lecture the canyon and its residents. When the thunder occasionally rose to a roar, Kumo assured his companions that this was normal for the region. Having seen very little animal wildlife in the plains, the travelers were pleased to discover vast numbers of rodents, birds, and reptiles present in the canyon. Standing like protectors, the towering pine trees not only shaded their journey but also helped them feel more settled while skirting rock slides started by the earth tremors.

“The landscape of this area is constantly changing,” Kumo told his friends, “much like the shifting sands surrounding the plateau and the new earth of the volcanic plains.”

At the end of a hard day of hiking, they carefully chose their campsite, away from cliff walls that might drop rocks, and away from boulders that might move from the gentle quakes. Even with the knowledge that Kumo was awake and keeping watch, sleep was fitful from the frequent intrusion of thunder and tremors.

Sunrise found the travelers tired and tense, but the morning passage through the breathtaking surroundings helped to ease their cares. As they made their way through a beautiful corridor fringed with delicate rock steeples and statuesque greyhawk pines, Daniel remarked, “I can see why they call this the Dark Inferno. The colors make it look like it’s on fire, even in the dim light.”

“It *is* pretty,” Jordan answered, with a weary sigh, “but I’m getting tired of the dark. It’s like being under ground all the time. I miss real sunrises.” However, as tired as she was, Jordan wasn’t sure if her eyes weren’t more tired from lack of sleep than lack of light.

Shortly before noon, the Shardman pointed out an interesting sight. Several elm sprites were buzzing around in a grove of golden-leaf pines banked by clumps of kagen juniper. Though the double twins had missed seeing the elm sprites in their tour of the garden, they recognized the twiggy creatures from the descriptions given to them by their grandparents and great uncle. In sneaking closer, they were able to see glints of the sprites’ shiny wings even in the overcast setting.

As a sudden heavy rain shower forced the travelers to take shelter in the pine grove, the sprites scattered, chattering angrily at the intruders as they zoomed away. Though completely drenching, the rain brought a sense of relief to the group. For as long as the thunder had been talking to them and the clouds pressing upon them, it was oddly satisfying for the seemingly long-overdue event of rain to finally arrive.

The rain turned from heavy to downpour as they huddled together. In an attempt to ease the plight of his friends, the Shardman hurriedly conjured up a mirror in the shape of a sleek, oversized umbrella from a pocket watch he had been carrying. As they scrunched together under it, Retama said, “The Fate Entity told me he was planning to borrow the elm sprites from the garden on the island for a couple of weeks for a special project. I wonder if these are the same ones.”

“If so,” Lily said, “what project might they be working on here?” It was impossible to see anything clearly outside of the protection of the umbrella.

But even when the rain lessened to light shower, then sprinkle, finally stopping ten minutes later, the travelers observed nothing significant amongst the trees. Even Kumo’s excellent gargoyle eyesight missed the all-important event the elm sprites were assisting with, which was none other than the birth of a baby river dragon from a camouflaged egg secreted high in the bushy golden-leaf pine treetops. Of course, this was an event the travelers, and all other canyon visitors, were supposed to miss, as was the baby dragon being collected by his mother a few moments after his birth. As the two flew away, only canyon finches and ground squirrels observed their frothy, shimmering forms passing over the trees.

As the travelers moved on, Jordan remarked, “I remember Grandpa telling us that Ruin Foster said the elm sprites went missing from the island for a couple of weeks.”

“That’s right,” Sean agreed, “and it got really cold because they weren’t there to help the lava troll.”

“I wonder if the Fate Entity’s project corresponds to that,” Jordan said.

After a brief stop for lunch, the travelers resumed their trek, which soon became muggy and stifling from the recent rain.

In an attempt to cheer his friends, Kumo said brightly, “It is not far now. The Old-Growth Forest is just beyond the township of Clock, and we are almost there.”

“Clock is an odd name for a town,” Lily said.

“Named after the Clock family,” Kumo responded. “Baron Clock pretty much owns the township.”

Retama seemed cheered by the news that they were almost to their destination, and he said energetically, “Even though magic is destroyed in the future, the seven jewel seeds still exist. We will find the seeds and restore magic to the world.”

Smiling at his enthusiasm, the double twins picked up their pace, eager to get on with their mission.

A little farther along the path, Jordan suddenly thought of something, and she asked, “If magic is destroyed, how can a magic mirror have grown Mirrorseed; and how can an enchanted sphere trap Iglace?”

“Those magical items had already been created,” Retama responded. “They were already in existence within the Circles of Time before the natural disasters began and before the Time Entity created the garden. But new magic is not present, and it needs to be for other wonderful magical things to be created. In short, the future needs new magic.”

A particularly intense earth tremor interrupted the discussion as the travelers struggled to keep their footing.

“You’ll get used to them,” Kumo told his friends as he helped to steady Daniel.

Dodging a flurry of pebbles and small rocks cascading down the canyon walls, Lily found Kumo’s words a little hard to believe.

Late in the afternoon, they reached Clock, a bustling small city perched on a ridge separating the shallow gorge from a larger and deeper canyon.

Clock’s residents were friendly and welcomed the visitors with refreshments at an outdoor picnic area and park. After a time of pleasant conversation, one of the townspeople suggested that they pay a visit to a local seer. “He always has good advice for travelers,” the man told them.

Kumo was familiar with the seer and also thought consulting the man was a good idea. “But he is very shy,” Kumo said. “This is too large of a group.” It was quickly decided that Retama and the Shardman would visit the seer while the double twins and Kumo stayed in the park.

After the two set off, the rest of the party wandered around to stretch their legs and visit with various townsfolk. Feeling reminiscent about childhood, Lily and Jordan found the swingsets in one corner of the park irresistible. Smiling, Daniel and Sean soon joined their cousins while Kumo made his way to the opposite side of the park to examine a unique cluster of boulders. He smiled as he ran his hands across the cool stone, admiring the lovely gold and copper colors streaking the rocks. As engrossed as he was, Kumo completely missed what was going on in the area of the swingsets. A group of teens had approached the double twins bearing gifts of four small peppermint pigs complete with tiny hammers. The teens left swiftly after presenting the gifts to the visitors.

Lily was familiar with the tradition of the candies. “Break the pigs with the hammer,” she said, “and you will have good luck for the whole year.”

There didn’t seem to be any harm in cracking a candy pig and enjoying the treat. However, they almost hated to spoil the pigs, so they decided to break off only small bits at first. Lily had just placed the curly tail of her pig on her tongue and Daniel was in the process of putting an ear into his mouth when Kumo came rushing across the park in a huge panic. “You didn’t break them, did you?” he barked at them.

Both Jordan and Sean held out their open palms to show Kumo the hooves they had just broken from their pigs. Lily couldn’t answer with her mouth full of tail, but Daniel slurpily responded with, “You want the other ear? Or a leg?”

“Oh no!” cried Kumo, in an obvious huge distress that more confused the double twins than alarmed them. They couldn’t understand what could be so horrible about eating peppermint candy.

Shaking his head, Kumo sank into one of the swings as he wearily told them, “I’m so sorry. I didn’t think to warn you.” After a pause in which his stricken look did indeed begin to alarm his friends, he added, “I can save you from evil spirits, but not from this.” With a long sigh, he slowly went on. “The pig is a magical binding contract. If you accept the pig, and break it, you are bound to fulfill the contract.”

“What does the contract involve?” Jordan asked.

Kumo was obviously very upset with himself and instead of answering, he just kept repeating, “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry....”

“Tell us what’s wrong?” Daniel interrupted and insisted.

When Kumo finally gathered his wits, he didn’t get the chance to answer because uniformed authorities were already crossing the park to collect the double twins. The police were armed with both guns and shock sticks, and Kumo advised, “Don’t resist them. I will get our friends and we will work on fixing this.”

Retama and the Shardman were just arriving in the park as the four were led away in arm shackles. Several of the police stopped the pair as they attempted to follow the captives, and a tall female officer told Retama, “One hundred and fifty-three days of service in Baron Clock’s factory; that’s what they agreed to. There is nothing you can do to stop it.”

Chapter Thirteen

Inside the Factory

The double twins were kept overnight in a holding cell at the city jail. Given food, but no information, they were unable to sleep. Frequent thunder and earth tremors didn't help to settle them. In the morning, they were brought before the local magistrate where they were finally given an explanation.

"But we didn't agree to anything!" Sean argued.

"Oh yes you did, young man," the magistrate told him. "It doesn't matter if you don't know the rules of these parts. Rules are rules and they must be followed. We don't allow anarchy here."

As Lily was about to take up Sean's protest, the officer who had escorted them from their cell firmly told them, "The contracts are binding even for visitors. You will have to work in the factory for the time agreed upon."

"There is no need for further discussion," the magistrate said with finality. "You will now be taken to the factory to fulfill your contracts."

There seemed little point in arguing further; and the prisoners were meek as they were led away and placed on a shuttle for transport to the factory, which was an enormous structure elaborately built into the steep walls of the larger canyon. Even though it was connected to the cliffs, the factory was expertly designed to be flexible to withstand the quakes of the region.

The new contract workers felt relieved to discover that *Clock's Fancies* was a candy factory. After all, how hard could it be to make candy?

Inside the structure, nearly every nook and cranny not devoted to candy making was filled with various shapes and sorts of clocks. They passed a huge shelf of carriage clocks behind glass just inside the entry. The main hall housed a massive tree decorated with an assortment of hanging clocks. Even the ceiling tiles were inset with elaborate clocks. Baron Clock's office contained about a hundred timepieces of various types, including a huge grandfather clock and several unique cuckoo clocks. The

burly man didn't speak to the new workers; he merely sized them up before nodding with a grunt towards the door.

The new arrivals were given uniforms and put to work right away in separate parts of the factory.

The relief they had felt in landing in a candy factory and not someplace worse lasted only briefly because Baron Clock was a slave driver. His employees worked twelve hours straight each day with only one short lunch break of twenty minutes. Restroom breaks were monitored and hurried. Ovens, conveyers, boilers, boxing lines, and all other operations were on strict timers, allowing little breathing room and no time for mistakes. And as it turns out, the factory was driven not only by clocks but also by cruel supervisors who had little patience with subpar work standards by either seasoned or new employees.

The factory was divided into four sections each containing six floors, and the candy making was separated into seasons within these four sections with winter occupying the top of the factory and spring housed in the bottom. Each of the new workers was assigned to a different section—Daniel winter, Sean fall, Jordan summer, and Lily spring. The types of candies made and the décor perfectly corresponded to the characteristics and events of each season, which might have made the factory a really neat place to work had it not been for the harsh and hostile atmosphere. In the spring section, the flowering vines and greenery served not to decorate but rather to clamp workers into their chairs. And the giant snowflakes drifting about the winter floors were trained to sharply prod employees into working faster.

Over half of the workers had been tricked into service in ways similar to the peppermint pig contracts. Others simply took the horrible low-paying jobs to feed their families since there was little industry and few other jobs in the area. Eating any of the candies was forbidden and would result in a double sentence for those under contract and docked pay for other employees. When the supervisors were not present, surveillance cameras monitored every aspect of work, ensuring that no one was slacking off. However, as bad as the situation was, workers were able to take some comfort in watching the carrier pigeons, used by the supervisors to send messages, flutter about. The benign expressions of the birds conveyed serenity, and watching their flight gave a small sense of freedom to onlookers.

Sean was assigned to the boiler room in his section where he found it difficult to feed bricks of animal dung mixed with straw to the heat tanks quickly enough to keep the fires going to melt the massive quantities of chocolate, butter, and sugar needed to make the candies. Having to work next to huge fires in a building frequently rocked by earth tremors didn't help with safety issues either. By the end of the first day, he couldn't imagine going on for a second, much less a hundred and fifty-three.

Jordan was first placed on a bon-bon line which ran so fast it reminded her of a vintage comedy television episode she had seen as a child where friends Lucy and Ethel briefly worked in a candy factory and had trouble keeping up with the pace of the conveyor. However, there was nothing funny about this situation. Unable to build speed quickly enough while learning the process, Jordan was removed from the line and sent to work in the shipping department of the Summer Section. Loading boxes onto trucks was even more difficult, and she again had trouble keeping up. By the end of the day, she had shifted through three more departments before finally finding a supervisor who would put up with her apparently slow-for-this-factory learning curve. Jordan felt relief in her success in learning to clean chocolate molds, and she found herself hoping to keep this job for the rest of her stay in the factory.

At night, the contract workers were housed in the lowest level of the factory, in a dungeon-like basement labyrinth. Small quantities of food and water were provided. With their gear confiscated, the double twins had no access to their own supplies and, therefore, had to content themselves with the meager provisions. After dinner, the basement residents were allowed one hour to use shower and toilet facilities before lights out. The sleeping quarters were cramped and uncomfortably hot, and did little to ease sore muscles and aching feet. Lily had a number of blisters on her hands, and Jordan had a burn on her leg from a hot sugar accident. Unfortunately, barring serious injuries, first aid was basically unheard of in the factory. Despite the pain, unpleasant surroundings, and constant earth tremors, the double twins slept fairly well due to their fatigue.

The schedule the next day included a small predawn breakfast, followed by a solid morning of hard work before their short lunch break, after which they worked straight through until

allowed to return to the basement for dinner, showers, and lights-out.

With their muscle aches and various cuts and bruises healing over the next few days, the double twins got used to the routine. However, they were still miserable, primarily because the only time they could see one another was briefly before going to sleep.

Meanwhile, outside the factory, their friends had not been idle. Retama, Kumo, and the Shardman had been busy acquiring white jade, which was commonly used for trade in these parts. In six days, through some bartering of their own possessions, and a trip to a nearby mine, they were able to obtain enough white jade to gain an audience with Baron Clock. They didn't have enough to secure the release of the double twins; however, through a lengthy discussion, they were able to convince the factory owner to engage in a different and creative type of trade agreement.

"All right then," Baron Clock agreed. "If the four can pass a challenge set to them, I will cancel their contracts."

Knowing that this type of bargaining was common and highly thought of in this area, Kumo had been the one to come up with the idea of passing a challenge. He also knew how creative and resourceful his friends were, and he had confidence that they would be successful.

Retama also felt the double twins had an excellent chance of success. After all, they had taken on and passed many other challenges. Why not this one too?

Chapter Fourteen

The Challenge

Lily, Jordan, Sean, and Daniel were extremely surprised when they were brought to Baron Clock's office the next morning just before lunchtime; and they were at first overjoyed to see their friends. However, upon learning that their release had not been secured, the double twins were somewhat crestfallen. But their spirits rose again when they heard Baron Clock's proposal. "I have devised an obstacle course within the factory," the man began. "You will start at the top and work your way down, solving puzzles as you go. You must successfully solve each puzzle to gain access to the next. Your goal will be to reach my office within one hour of the clock. If you successfully complete this challenge, I will release you from your contracts."

The town magistrate was on hand for these official proceedings, and he held out a paper contract for the four to sign as Baron Clock said, "Do you agree?"

"One moment please," Sean said, dragging his brother and cousins to one corner of the room, out of earshot of the baron and magistrate.

After a somewhat long discussion in whispers, the double twins approached the baron's desk smiling where Lily delivered a different and lengthy proposal. "We will agree to participate in the challenge, but only if a larger prize is given as reward. In addition to our release, we want you to agree to change the way your factory operates." The room was silent as she recited their demands. "Nine-hour workdays with a full hour for lunch and two additional twenty-minute breaks, no more trick contracts—paid employees only, standard vacation and sick-leave benefits, meals provided at triple the current amounts, all employees allowed to leave at night if they want to, more space for living quarters for those who choose to lodge here, reasonably-priced lodging available for those who want it, adequate cooling and heating for comfort in both the factory and living quarters, and conveyer lines and production schedules slowed to one-third the current rate."

The baron was at first inclined to say no to such a preposterous proposal. However, he really wanted to put this challenge that he had designed in his spare time to someone. Plus, he couldn't imagine that four teens would be clever enough to figure out his puzzles. After a time of thought, with all eyes glued upon him, the baron finally said, "I agree," at which point, the magistrate, with a few reminders from Daniel and Lily, began scribbling out the additional provisions on the contract.

In only a few minutes, the new agreement was signed and in place, at which point, a supervisor arrived to escort the challenge participants to the Winter Section of the factory. Retama, Kumo, and the Shardman smiled encouragingly at their departing friends before settling into office chairs in front of a viewing screen to watch the challenge along with the magistrate, Baron Clock, and his wife, who had just arrived.

Factory operations were halted, and factory workers cleared the floors to troop down to the living quarters to watch the challenge on a giant broadcast screen that was generally used to rouse residents at five in the morning. By loudspeaker, Baron Clock announced what was about to happen.

The double twins were first taken to the Cloud Fudge and Icicle Toffee Room to begin their challenge. "If you solve the first challenge," Baron Clock's voice boomed at them, "a lit green arrow will lead you on to the next. Just follow the arrows." The arrows were meant to be used in emergency situations, such as fire, to help workers efficiently evacuate; but the factory owner had programmed them today to lead the challenge participants along the obstacle course. Setting a fancy timer clock on his desk, the baron next announced, "One hour to reach my office, and your time starts now!"

The first puzzle was simply a circle of cloth stretched on a standing embroidery hoop. The cloth was empty, as no stitching had begun, but a needle and thread at-the-ready sat on a small table next to the hoop.

Within only a few seconds, Daniel reasoned out that the circle was supposed to represent the face of a clock. "*A stitch in time...*" he said. "We need to stitch in the numbers and hands of a clock."

Lily had always been clever with needlework and hurriedly did so, using roman numerals and stitching in the hands at eleven

o'clock. "In case it's supposed to be at *the eleventh hour*," she said.

The baron had designed this challenge to begin with the *stitch in time* cliché, but he had not thought of *the eleventh hour*. As he watched their progress, he had an early pang of fear that these four might prove cleverer than he imagined.

As Lily finished stitching, a green glass arrow set into the floor suddenly lit up, followed by another across the room. A series of arrows led the double twins from the fudge and toffee room and down a long hall full of racks used to cool blizzard cream bundties and snowsweet petite fours. At the end of the hall, set up directly in front of the door to the stairwell, they came upon a pen containing a fluffy white dog. The dog's food bowl contained a key, and a sign hanging from the neck of the dog read, "Guess my name to get the key."

Thinking of various clichés related to time, Jordan guessed, "*Nick of time*. Is your name Nick?"

The dog shook his head, panting and wagging as he did so.

"Is it Dawn?" Sean asked, "*Dawn of time*."

Again the dog shook his head.

"*Call it a day*," Daniel said. "Day is your name."

He was correct, and Day immediately confirmed this by retrieving the key from his bowl and depositing the slobbery object into Daniel's hand.

A downward green arrow lit up on the door, and the double twins squeezed in behind the pen where Daniel used the key to access the winding stairwell, which they sped down to reach the Fall Section of the factory. As they raced down the stairs, a strong earth tremor shook the building; however, the challenge participants took little notice of the quake and it didn't slow their descent. Apparently, Kumo was right—they were getting used to them.

In the basement of the factory, the rest of the workers were loudly cheering their success so far. Even the supervisors cheered; it seemed many of them were more than ready for drastic changes to factory operations. In Baron Clock's office, the double twins' friends were clapping. Both the magistrate and Mrs. Clock were smiling. The baron scowled, but only for a moment as he thought about what lay ahead for the four. They had only just begun. Surely, something in his obstacle course would stump them. As young as they were, these participants

couldn't be wise, knowledgeable, clever, and quick. It would take all of these things for them to succeed; therefore, the baron was confident that he would prevail.

Meanwhile, the double twins had reached the next puzzle. On the far wall of the room where marzipan acorns and jellied leaves were boxed, an extremely tiny travel clock with a single feather balanced on top of it sat on a small table next to a door. This time, Sean was the one who came up with the correct saying. "*Time flies...*" he stated. However, it took a few moments to figure out what to do next. Daniel and Jordan came up with the answer at the same time, and they both rushed to retrieve a carrier pigeon, from the top of a tower of boxes, and hold the bird steady so that Sean could attach the travel clock to the loop on its leg.

As the pigeon took flight, Jordan tried to open the door. "Ouch!" she cried, jerking her hand back. The handle was burning hot.

Unsure of what they had done wrong, the double twins didn't have to wait long because the pigeon shortly returned carrying a pair of gloves each stamped with the face of a clock. "*Time on your hands,*" Lily said triumphantly, handing the gloves to her sister.

Upon putting on the gloves and discovering that the insides were coated with a soothing balm, Jordan stated, "And...*time heals all wounds...*thank goodness."

When the door was opened, they followed lit arrows down the stairs to the Summer Section of the factory.

The basement was full of cheers, as was Baron Clock's office, with the exception of the baron himself who now wore a perpetual scowl.

Upon opening a designated door in the Summer Section, the challenge participants got quite a shock when they came face to face with none other than Dal Enek who immediately began his hypnotic humming in an attempt to lure them to sleep. After stuffing a huge wad of suncatcher all-sorts into the spirit's mouth and binding his hands and legs with cinnamon licorice cattails, the double twins spent only the briefest time wondering if this particular obstacle was part of the baron's planning, or some other foul entity's.

"Twenty-seven and a half minutes left!" the baron's voice boomed on the loudspeaker.

At the far end of the large chamber containing the candy-making operations for butterscotch nougat tadpoles, turtle taffy chews, dragonfly gummies, and other summer pond candies, the challenge participants faced three doors each with a clock positioned above the doorframe. The center clock was set at noon, the one to the left at nine a.m., and the clock on the right was set at two p.m. After thinking for a moment, Sean said, “*No time like the present.*”

Since the center clock was closest to the correct current time, they immediately opened the center door to enter the Hall of Time, Baron Clock’s favorite part of the factory, where delights such as candy carriage clocks, peppermint pocketwatches, and horehound hourglasses were made. The center of the chamber contained a huge vat of boiling sugar with folding ladders positioned on either side supporting a rickety gangplank crossing the vat and bouncing like crazy, as though it were a huge wriggling snake. Green arrows led them to the nearest ladder next to which stood a small lamb furiously wagging her tail. They obviously needed to cross the gangplank, but were dreading the prospect of losing their footing and being sugar boiled.

In their delay, Lily watched the lamb closely. She also kept a close eye on the gangplank. It seemed to her that it stopped bouncing when the lamb slowed its wagging tail. Her thoughts racing, she said, “*Two shakes of a lamb’s tail.* That’s when it will be safe to cross.”

She was correct. After a brief furious waggle, the lamb slowed its tail to wag very deliberately only twice, at which point, the gangplank stilled itself completely.

Feeling they could not afford any further delay, the double twins hurriedly scaled the first ladder and filed across the plank to descend the second ladder. No sooner had they crossed the gangplank than it began bouncing crazily again, so much so that a huge chunk of it came loose and splashed into the vat.

They had no time to celebrate their relief as they hastily followed more green arrows to a slide leading down to the Spring Section.

In the Festival Room, the double twins raced past rolling carts filled with parasol pearlies, divinity picnic pots, marshmallow maypole twists topped with ribbon candy, and nonpareil frizzies, to reach a large table bearing a cake spelling out the word, Second. A large kitchen knife sat next to the cake.

“*Split second!*” Jordan exclaimed, to which Daniel responded by grabbing the knife and hurriedly cutting the cake in half. In the center of the cake they found two keys—one labeled, Late, and the other, Never.

“*Better late than never,*” Daniel said, taking the key labeled, Late, to a door situated behind the table. As he unlocked the door, they ran down a long flight of stairs which led to the entry hall of the factory.

Following arrows set into the floor, they raced toward Baron Clock’s office but were halted midway down the hall by a large wire, waist high, strung between two enormous clocks. As Lily attempted to skirt the obstacle in her haste to reach the office, Sean grabbed her arm to stop her, stating, “*Under the wire.*”

Squeezing under the wire, the four resumed their run toward the baron’s office, throwing open the door a mere two seconds before the timer signaling the end of the hour went off.

They had won!

The baron may have been an incredible jerk, and cruel in many ways, but he was a man of his word. Admitting defeat, he immediately released the challenge participants from their contracts and gave instructions to the supervisors to begin implementing the changes to factory operations that he had agreed to.

The baron’s wife saw to it that no work was done in the factory for the rest of the day so that all workers might rest while she organized a huge barbeque and dance celebration for that evening. Even the baron found he enjoyed the celebration, and he danced so much his feet hurt for three days following.