



The
Gypsy Fiddle

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Butterflies, Bees, and Cypress Knees

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*To the inventors of bicycles, toad houses,
umbrellas, and other such nifty things*

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Chapter One

The Birthday Party

In a world not too different than our own, but in which magic was almost commonplace, a small curse was waiting to be born. Unfortunately, size had nothing to do with power because the smallest curses were often the most horrible.

When the Summoners of old first brought magic into being on Tanamez, they discovered that it could not exist without both good and bad components; therefore, curses had to exist but were kept locked in another realm. Unfortunately, those possessed of evil were constantly seeking ways to bring them forth.

A metaphysical element similar to a magical electrical thought was responsible for spawning curses. Traveling the universe like a crackling ribbon of light, the element constantly sought the nurturing (basically only magical skill and anger) needed to bring each curse into the physical world. Sometimes curses took a long while to fully form. It had been fifty-four years since a bitter mage named Tor Venyen had used his skill and anger to create the small curse on the verge of being born.

In the center of the city of Enikora, where clusters of industrial-type concrete structures mingled with quaint bungalows nestled into patches of hilly countryside, a castle-like tower rose. A widow named Matar Gyto lived in the tower, her ancestral home,

with her two children. Matar was of both little and great importance: little, because she chose to live humbly and quietly; and great, because she possessed a powerful gift stemming from a particular family connection. Though everyday magic was easy for most people to practice, magical gifts were very rare and generally stayed within families. The gifts could not be learned; people had to be born with them. Matar's great uncle had been a Curse Sage, one with the power to predict when curses would come into physical being. He had no ability to stop the curses himself; however, since he knew about them, he could engage help. Matar had quite a different gift, one even rarer than her great uncle's. She was a Curse Baj, a person gifted with the ability to create magical objects to counteract specific curses. In the last century, only a few magical objects such as this had been created, and most had already made their way into other worlds. Matar herself had never been called upon to create one. Fortunately, her gift required no practice to be effective.

Matar barely remembered her great uncle who had passed when she was eight. Her parents had also died two years after that. As a child, she had had the council of a close family friend—a local teacher of philosophy named Cecil Barlo who was himself a Curse Sage. Professor Barlo kept close watch over Matar because he knew of no others who currently possessed her gift.

On an early summer evening, in a walled garden at the base of the tower, groups of children, who knew nothing about the coming curse, waited for the cable

taxis, which were something like airy six-seater tricycles sporting huge wheels grooved to fit the incline cables. The children were excited about the birthday party they had been invited to in the tower.

At age eleven, Matar's daughter, Elin, had done most of the planning for the party for her little brother, who was turning seven. From an enormous round window in the party hall, Elin watched the activities in the walled garden below while her mother helped Bryce get ready to greet his guests.

The grounds surrounding the tower were sectioned into many lush lawns and gardens. Though the tower exterior was streamlined and fairly simple, as fortresses go, the interior contained many intricate objects. However, the inside walls were not decorated with tapestries and paintings as many other large homes were. Instead, the tower housed a vast collection of string art, though the string creations were made mostly of thread rather than string. Some were made by Bryce, confined to a rollchair since age three. Others had been collected. Also, most homes of this type and status were filled with glass art, sculptures, and fine metals. But not the tower because Matar preferred to decorate with folk art and tramp art; and the more useful the item the more highly valued it was, so much so that the artistic component of the piece, though important as well, often took a back seat to the functionality.

The cables whirred pleasantly as they ran the taxis up and down the incline. As viewed from above, the lush tower gardens, practically overflowing with both exotic and local plants, enchanted the partygoers with

their interesting shapes and vibrant colors. Garden rows in Enikora were never straight. Instead, hedges and furrows were most often curlicues, waves, figure eights, spirals, and s-shapes. The taxies ran slowly on purpose to give the children time to admire the gardens, and to build anticipation for the party.

Very few guests were bringing gifts because they had been told not to. Instead, all partygoers would be receiving gifts in celebration of Bryce's birthday. Huge bins of games, toys, and triple-thick tastycakes were waiting to be given out, along with books—the most highly prized of all the gifts. Each child would be taking home two books.

Children of Enikora, as well as those in many other Tanamez communities, learned to read very young, and were often able to master long novels by ages three and four. The majority of books were shaped like incredibly thick bookmarks, clasped together on one end and read by spreading out the pages as if unfolding a fan. (Paint and upholstery samples for home decorating were also often bound in this way.) Most children preferred to read, instead of watching television which, in Enikora and surrounding areas, was simply called the frame because this mode of entertainment began as living art. Early live installments such as *Waterfall at Sunrise* and *Philosophers Having Evening Meal* eventually evolved into prerecorded short skits, before progressing to longer performances in the Frame League's efforts to provide variety to increase viewership. However, live and in-person performances were greatly favored over these prerecorded ones. Though often scripted, the

artistry and unpredictability of the live shows was much preferred to the stale and repetitive entertainment of the frame.

Giving gifts on his birthday was one of Bryce's favorite things to do. He would be receiving some too, from Matar and Elin. This year, in addition to supplies for string art and several books, he was getting a memory book. In Enikora, it was more common for boys to keep these life journals than girls. Girls generally favored time capsules. At eleven, Elin had already buried two because it was tradition for girls to bury time capsules every five years, which would then be dug up on their fiftieth birthdays.

Bryce was excited to also receive a news subscription as a gift. News in Enikora was delivered on renewable pads that were kind of like self-healing craft mats. The pads were made from a type of tree bark designed to renew and receive fresh newsprint once every twenty-seven hours—the same number of hours in the day.

The first groups of partygoers were greeted at the upper taxi landing by acrobat and musician escorts who led the children through the maze of tower corridors and stairs, purposely getting them lost a few times, along with taking a few extra twists and turns, in order to delay somewhat so that later groups would arrive in the party hall at approximately the same time as the first.

As the final taxi was being loaded, an enormous balloon pulled up to one of the upper floors of the tower, bringing forty-eight children from the local hospital to the party. Though the outside of the tower

was generally plain, today it was draped with colorful banners, mainly purple in theme, to look like a gigantic king playing piece from the game of sakk, which was similar to chess. The visiting balloon was also colorfully decorated to complement the king as his favorite pet Filmeiser hound. The tower and balloon were both lit by purple, green, and gold floatglobes that looked like gleaming bubbles bobbing about the darkening skies. The last group of children watching from below held their breath at the surreal purple scene, as the sun fell away to sleep for the night, leaving the glowing tower under the gaze of the nearly-full twin moons.

Barely thirty minutes after the arrival of the balloon, the party was in full wallop as Bryce and his many guests enjoyed feasting, puppet shows, games, music, and the attic train ride. The bird and beast carousel was also in full swing, though many chose not to partake of the squawking, growling, and dizzying ride.

Despite her son's enjoyment, Matar found it hard to get enthused about the party because she was fretting about something she often fretted about—the lack of healers in the world. Retiring to her study to think, she thumbed through an album containing early snaps of her children. Bryce as a baby was very small and sickly compared to his sister. His health had never been good and was rapidly deteriorating as he aged.

Though their society was idyllic in many ways—with the philosophy of shared resources instilled in all residents from birth, and communities coming together during crises such as shortages and natural disasters—

Tanamez contained few healers, many of whom were in hiding so as not to be exploited, harassed, and even on occasion imprisoned and tortured by people desperate to have their loved ones healed, or angry if the healing didn't work. Not only were healers rare, many were only mildly gifted, and were therefore not capable of achieving a positive outcome when practicing healing. Many things relating to this issue were not talked about because people did not want to admit that anyone would be capable of taking extreme measures against healers, such as punishment for lack of success.

The existence of hospitals was mainly for show, since most of the staff were not healers and were completely ineffectual in administering healing.

However, even in other ways, Tanamez was really only idyllic on the surface because of the way magic had gone wrong. Throughout the ages, magic had supplied a lot to ease their path, but had caused a lot of problems as well. One of the ways in which magic had gone wrong was in fostering complacency. This was especially true in the field of medicine. For the last several hundred years, despite the lack of healers and healing magic, few people were interested in putting forth effort to do research. Indeed, even great minds were in short demand in this area; thus, thinking in creative ways as far as prevention and treatment of disease and disability had become very rare.

The complacency existed in many facets of human life on Tanamez. But thankfully, mainly in the last decade, many citizens had recognized the problem and were rejecting magic in favor of hard work. Some

were even lobbying for magic to be outlawed. Though this was unlikely to come about, the fervor of the fanatics gave many people hope and a resolve to do what they could personally; and this started a movement to get away from using magic and get back to the basics of people doing things for themselves. Among hundreds of examples, magical haircuts were being replaced by those done with razors and shears. Though not as easily accomplished, these ended up being more artistic and aesthetic. People were physically shopping, instead of teleporting their goods. Handwriting was beginning to be prized. Though magical fountain pens spouted thoughts much more quickly, the magical pens' marks, without any flaws to give them character, were considered too symmetrical and lacking in artistry. Gardening by magic was also being rejected to the point that back aches, weeding calluses, dirty hands, and knee pain were all wielded like trophies to be highly admired. Matar employed four gardeners, who were forbidden to use magic. Cooking and cleaning inside the tower were treated similarly, and Elin and Matar helped the three interior staff cook meals and keep their home clean.

In addition to the complacency issue, magic had been misused many times over the years when powerful individuals thought themselves superior to others with lesser abilities and took to abuse and other crimes against those they felt were inferior. Two large-scale incidents of genocide had stained the last century of Tanamez history, where thousands were killed before the murderers could be stopped. It was difficult to believe this type of atrocity could have

happened in a civilized society. Yet, it had. And magic was largely to blame. Even now, in certain dark corners, carnage of this type was still committed by some with more command of magic than others.

Misuse of magic had always been present, even in the earliest centuries of its existence, and this angered creatures such as dragons and thunderbirds who left to seek distant lands and other realms. Their departure was catastrophic because dragons were healers, and thunderbirds were creatures of great wisdom. However, these magical spirits were too smart to be manipulated. When they saw the evil in mankind, they chose to leave.

The Mythmakers of old actually hadn't created enough dragons. Nor had the Fablemasters been able to control them well enough to entice the creatures to use their healing powers to benefit mankind.

Two weeks prior to the party, Professor Barlo had let Matar know about the coming curse, which weighed on her in much the same way as the constant worry over her son's poor health. Of course, it didn't help that another particular matter was also currently pressing upon her.

Leaving the study, Matar pushed off darker thoughts in favor of celebrating. The jugglers had brought a gafu bird, which was currently telling jokes to try to trip up his friends as they juggled. The troupe's antics were very amusing. Despite her troubles, Matar found she enjoyed the food and games and visiting with many of the three hundred and twelve guests swarming the tower. Though she didn't feel like getting spun on the bird and beast carousel, she did

get in line for the attic train ride, which helped provide further distraction.

In a small office across town, Detective Bellin was not celebrating because the Tattoo Serial Killer had struck again; and this basically meant he had made no progress on this high-profile case of nearly two years. The “serial killer” part of the title was questionable. All but two of the eleven victims had survived because the attacker had performed medical treatment (such as it was) after the attack to stop the bleeding and clean the wounds. The assailant had also administered a numbing anesthetic prior to harvesting the sections of inked skin of his victims to make their ordeal less painful. Why he had done this was a complete mystery. Actually, nearly everything about this man was a mystery. As far as his motives, how he was choosing his victims—just about everything up to this point had pretty much stumped both the criminal and psychological experts.

Despite the attacker’s attempts to lessen pain and keep the wounded alive, one of his victims had had a blood disorder and his bleeding could not be stopped. The other had died from developing an infection. So this matter had been placed in the *serial killer* category, not just *serial psycho*.

The attacker had told one of his victims, “I can’t just rob graves; the inked flesh needs to be alive.” These were the only words any of the severely traumatized could remember hearing.

No patterns were discernable, as far as a schedule of the attacks; and the type of artwork being harvested was so varied that the experts could not predict what

might next appeal to the killer. Therefore, they had been unable to set any traps.

Even encouraging people to hide any and all tattoos had not been effective because nearly half of the targets had done so and had still been assaulted.

Early on in his investigations, Detective Bellin recognized that the Tattoo Serial Killer was good at eluding and was going to be hard to catch because he most likely possessed some sort of magical gift. Looking over the report of the latest attack, the detective pondered another mystery: *Why haven't people stopped getting tats? And why haven't others had theirs erased?* According to the local ink salons, new art business was booming, with no increase in erasures. With all of the warnings that had been issued, it was baffling as to why more people weren't concerned.

As he studied the file snaps, for some odd reason, Bellin's mind suddenly flew to a call he had received the previous week from a detective friend in a neighboring community regarding a murder that had occurred during a housebreak in which a painting was stolen. The police had a suspect in mind, based on priors and print evidence. They just needed to find the guy. In the process of tracking him down, Bellin's friend had called to give him a heads up that the suspect had formerly resided in Enikora, and therefore might return. The friends often kept one another informed since their jurisdictions were not far apart.

Anytime he received a consult, Bellin liked to review the file. Having done so, something about this robbery-murder was bugging him. The painting that

had been stolen was part of an ultra-private collection. Few people knew of its existence, and even fewer had ever seen the painting. So how did this somewhat run-of-the-mill thief even know about it? And why was he so selective? Having killed the owner, who was by himself in the residence, why didn't the thief take all four valuable paintings in the home? Why just the one?

Though bothered by this, Bellin had to push off these ponderings in favor of focusing on his own case. Deep in thought, he gazed at a framed Commendation Certificate on the wall beside his desk. The citation had been for catching the Above-the-Fold Villain, who specialized in only committing crimes worthy of premium, above-the-fold placement on news pads. Gaining semi-fame for the catch, Bellin had been promoted. However, he sometimes wished he hadn't because the reputation was a lot to live up to. He had really only gotten lucky. And he had only caught the Peerless Killer, who was knocking off other experts in his field of Gyare Architecture (in order to win a coveted prize), because the man had gotten sloppy. This latest sicko was definitely one cleverer than the others, and this made Detective Bellin extremely worried.

Chapter Two

Passages, Guilt, and Curse Blockers

The city of Enikora had a particular claim to fame in the magical world. Not quite thirty years ago, a young brother and sister found a book in the attic of a home they had just moved into. The book described certain inventions of a network of friends that included the former resident of the house. Enikora had long been home to conjurers who were like magicians, witches, prophets, and lunatics all rolled into one. The network of friends were part of a secret society of conjure people, and they had managed to create magical doorways to other places using ordinary machines.

The conjurers called these doorways passages, and each was designed to travel to a specific place on Tanamez. The book did not describe the particular mechanics or magic involved in making the passages; rather, it gave the location of a gigantic warehouse full of the actual machines. Over six hundred of these creations were discovered in the warehouse. Needing only to be large enough to fit a person inside, the passages were much varied and included machines like clothes dryers, phone boxes, chaff compartments of corn huskers, chest freezers, kilns, industrial churns, cremation chambers, plant propagation cavities, dish sterilizers, bean roasters, hall tower clocks, and other such contraptions.

The passages were popular for nearly a decade as a means of travel and exploration, particularly because many of the destinations were exotic and far reaching. However, some passages led to dangerous places, which resulted in several deaths. Therefore, many of the machines were destroyed, some by authorities, others by outraged family members of the deceased who went on personal crusades to destroy any and all passages. Following the passage death of a toddler, one particular band of crusaders was responsible for single-handedly locating and destroying over one hundred of the machines.

By the end of the second decade following their discovery, only a few of the six-hundred-plus passages still existed. New ones could not be made because the conjurers of the secret society each held specific pieces of information as to how the machines had been created. When several of the society members died unexpectedly, this left significant holes in the blueprints.

Children especially loved exploring with the remaining passages, though most were forbidden to do so. But it is well known that forbidden fruit is often too much of a temptation for children to resist.

As in many Tanamez communities, children in Enikora were schooled at home, mostly through self study. Bryce and Elin were very disciplined and often rose extremely early to begin their studies, so they could finish early and enjoy leisure activities. Two days after the party, but one hour before sunrise, they were already hard at work at their study stations.

After preparing and setting out the morning meal for her children's first study break, Matar went down to the gardens to do a little work before the day got too hot.

Coming inside two hours later, she checked on the study progress before heading upstairs to get cleaned up.

Bryce and Elin finished their daily studies just before the family's midday meal. After eating, Bryce set up at his craft table to work on his latest string art project as Elin left the tower to visit a friend down the lane. She was excited about the visit and walked very quickly.

Though they weren't particularly best friends, Elin had known Mandilyn Kup since they were both toddlers, and the girls shared many of the same interests, including an extreme love for art. Deciding she could trust her longtime friend, Mandilyn had sworn Elin to secrecy about the passage owned by her family.

Elin had only traveled by passage one other time in her whole life, so she basically couldn't resist and gladly swore to keep Mandilyn's secret. The first trip at age nine, inside an industrial paint spinner, had been to a farm halfway across the country. The shoe-stitching machine secreted in Mandilyn's basement had a fairly large inner compartment that had once held materials needed to make shoes, such as rolls of leather and enormous spools of thread. Both girls were able to squeeze inside. No sooner had the compartment door closed than the girls arrived (still inside the passage which had teleported itself to its destination) in a dense

clump of foliage on the grounds of a large art museum in a city that would have taken two days to reach by passenger rail or freight-hop.

All passages were equipped with individual keys, resembling coins, so they could be secured. Without the magical one-of-a-kind key that could never be duplicated, the machine would be worthless as a travel passage; therefore, theft of the passage was extremely unlikely. The only possible danger of getting stuck far from home might come from a lost key, or someone bent on destroying the passage. However, with the key safe in Mandilyn's pocket, and the machine hidden in the foliage, the girls were reasonably sure they could risk a two-hour stroll through the museum.

Elin was most fascinated by the sculptures, her favorite form of art. She had done some sculpting over the years, and she had enjoyed it, but she had never been very good at it.

As the girls passed through an exhibit of tramp art, Elin's thoughts flew briefly to home and, specifically, to her mother. Elin had been so anxious to leave the house, she hadn't particularly noticed that her mother was acting somewhat oddly. Though Elin usually got grilled on exactly where she was going and who she would be with, her mother hadn't questioned her at all today; and she had seemed happy to hurry her daughter out of the house.

The beauty and mysticism of the museum's water painting chamber easily turned Elin's thoughts away from home, and the girls enjoyed the rest of their tour in complete bliss, uninterrupted by any wonderings other than those related to their awe of the art.

Meanwhile, back at the tower, Matar was happy that Elin was out with friends for the afternoon because she was expecting a visitor. Since she hoped to keep her children entirely out of this particular business, she was also pleased that Bryce was engrossed in one of his art projects.

As she waited in her study for the arrival of the visitor, Matar thought about the situation that had been giving her waves of stomach sickness for nearly a week. She would never have believed herself capable of what she had brought about. And it sickened more than her stomach when she thought of how far her morals had been skewed. Desperation, mixed with magic and poor judgment, can lead to horrible things. This was, sadly, horribly true for Matar. In addition to stomach problems, she was sweaty and lightheaded. Chewing bits of rawlroot helped to slightly calm her nerves, but nothing could help with the almost crippling feelings of guilt over her actions.

When the visitor arrived, Matar locked the door of her study and spoke very quietly. This was her second meeting with the Hunter she had hired. Hunters specialized in tracking down magical objects, and Matar had paid a near fortune to this one.

“I can’t believe the sloppiness,” Matar complained. “No one was supposed to get killed; and according to my sources, your careless associate is on the verge of being caught. I thought I hired an expert.” She had to fight a wave of nausea as she finished with, “He didn’t even get the right painting! The man who died doesn’t own the painting in question; I’m sure of that.”

“I am cleaning up the mess as we speak,” the man told her. “And I have another lead on the painting—this time, a good one. I promise this will all work out.”

When the Hunter left, Matar sat at her desk for a long while. *Of course he was careful to leave me with some hope*, she thought angrily, *so I wouldn't just fire him and so he can get the rest of his money.*

After a deep sigh, and several minutes of contemplation, her brain chided her. *It's probably a lost cause; you should have tried something else.*

But I was just so desperate, her mind replied.

There it was, *desperate*—the word that had been used throughout history to justify terrible crimes. *Disgusting, evil, and stupid* would have been more accurate. As a wave of shock passed over her, Matar actually felt some of the life leave her body, and she felt incredibly old, and tired, more so than she had ever felt in her entire life. And she wept.

Later, as the tiredness and nausea softened somewhat, Matar thought about the select group of people on Tanamez gifted with magic so powerful that their words, art, music, food creations, and such could incite others to kill, fall in love, commit suicide, betray, and carry out other like actions. The painting Matar was trying to obtain had been created by one of these gifted individuals. When viewed, the painting could cure certain diseases, and Matar had hoped it would cure Bryce. Those who had studied the phenomenon speculated that the image incited such intense joy in the viewer as to cause certain chemicals in the body to fight or suppress the disease. But the

painting had to be viewed in person; simply looking at a snap of it would not work.

Many believed the painting to be a myth, since it was not an item currently being used for the greater good in a world with a shortage of healers. However, Matar knew that even mythical stories generally had some basis. She also knew that many owners of powerful magical objects took great pains to keep their treasures secret from those who might seek to either destroy or misuse them.

After evening meal, as she wandered the tower halls, Matar pondered the significance of paintings on Tanamez. So much magic and mystery surrounded that particular mode of art. *Could some of them be doorways to other worlds*, she mused, *and, if so, could they be used to escape?* She would have welcomed escape, to anywhere, at this moment.

Matar had set her quest for the painting in motion over a year ago, using underground magical channels to verify the painting's validity and obtain a list of Hunters with the expertise to track it down. Now, with a murder connected to the theft she had instigated, things were infinitely more complicated. *If I had known the outcome*, Matar tried to reassure herself, *I would never have done this. I would have tried something else.* However, a small voice in the back of her mind argued. *What else could you have done to save your son? Anyone in the same situation would have given in to the temptation.* Trying to justify her actions really didn't help; in fact, it made her more sick and disappointed in herself.

With the matter of the coming curse also pressing, Matar fought off waves of nausea and guilt as she slowly made her way to her workshop.

Elin had some difficulty concentrating during self study the next morning because she found herself daydreaming about the visit to the art museum. She thought she might like to be an artist someday, if she could find a medium in which she could excel more than she had in her attempts at sculpture. Mustering her willpower to study, she forced her brain to save the dreamier thoughts for later in the day.

To the delight of Elin and Bryce, Professor Barlo made a surprise visit to the tower in the afternoon. Matar had been expecting her friend sometime during the week but had kept his visit a secret from her children in case he wasn't able to come for some reason.

After giving Bryce a birthday gift of two books, and roughhousing with both children for several minutes, the professor accompanied Matar to her workshop to view her progress on the magical object she was creating to block the curse.

Although gaining admiration for her work was not in the forefront of her mind, Matar was very proud of what she had accomplished so far. Though she had had no experience as yet in creating Curse Blockers, she was familiar with several already in existence. One of her favorites was a hundred-year-old lattice trellis upon which anything grown would wither and die. Despite this anomaly (or perhaps because of it), the trellis was one of the most powerful Curse Blockers ever created. The latticework was comprised

of interwoven strips of chinowood and dot-knot alder, fastened with Holson Crystal nails. The trellis was anchored with silvertine stakes in the center of a garden courtyard on a private island estate. As well as being practical, the trellis was a true work of art. While not consciously trying to outdo another Curse Baj, Matar did hope to create something equally wonderful.

One of the reasons Matar prized tramp art more for its cleverness and usefulness than she did for its beauty was because she knew something about these unique creations many others did not. Select magically constructed pieces could perform certain tricks. For example, a small storage box Matar had acquired in her youth would magically shrink anything placed into it by half. She had found this out the hard way upon placing her grandmother's rubylace ring inside. Matar now had a doll-sized ring of considerable less value. However, the box had proven useful many times over the years for shrinking chain links and resizing cabinet knobs; and when Matar had difficulty finding guest washroom soaps, she simply placed full-sized bars inside the box to make her own smaller versions. A neighbor had once acquired another such object—a butterfly house which would convert every one-hundredth butterfly to enter into a magical wish. Matar had netted one of the wishes for herself, many years ago, but had been unable to convince her neighbor to part with the lovely house, at any price.

In choosing the item she would make, Matar drew on her love for music and musicians, as well as her love for practical art. Since she was particularly fond

of traveling artists and musicians, she chose to create a gypsy fiddle. She had tried to buy one once from a traveler. He had scorned the suggestion, and generous offer. “It would be like selling my soul,” he said indignantly.

Matar chose little hickory for the wood, and colorful sawal sinew for the strings. Elin and Bryce didn’t particularly know why their mother was making the fiddle; but given the number of hours she was working on it, they did know it was important. They also reasoned that it had something to do with the recent more-frequent visits by Professor Barlo. But this was just fine because both children loved his jovial company.

Matar estimated that it would take three more weeks to complete the fiddle. Both Elin and Bryce had plenty to occupy their hours while their mother worked, so they didn’t particularly miss her. In addition to spending time with friends, and her brother, Elin began experimenting with water painting. And over these three weeks, Bryce completed an elaborate string art picture resembling a painting he had discovered in the basement labyrinth of the tower. Matar had no idea that Bryce frequented the basement. He did this not only to sometimes get away from everyone and everything, but also because it inspired him. There was something about the cool darkness and endless maze of curvy halls that helped him think creatively. Upon completion of the picture, Bryce draped it and placed it into the alcove containing his art supplies because he wanted to save it as a surprise gift for his mother. Since the picture had a winter

theme, Bryce thought it would be perfect for her wintertime birthday.

Chapter Three

Making a New Plan

Visiting the tower a month later, Professor Barlo was considerably less jovial than he had been on his previous visit. Though Matar had completed construction of the gypsy fiddle, due to a special set of circumstances, the plan to counteract the curse now needed to be modified.

Setting a countdown clock for six years was the beginning of the modified plan. The device, which looked like an overly tall and large peppermill, turned slowly on a shelf above Matar's workshop table. Though not noticeable, the clock became shorter with each turn. When it stopped turning altogether, six years would have passed, and the clock would barely be as tall as a sugar pot.

Gazing at the device after the professor left, Matar felt numb over the events of the past few weeks. Though certain things hadn't turned out as she had planned, she was still hopeful. And this latest development, though initially upsetting and stressful, had actually served to shock her into a state of calm resolve.

The next morning, Matar set out on another quest, this time to purchase a passage, which took nearly half of her remaining savings. But it was definitely worth it to further the plan. Six days later, she had acquired a passage in the form of a hot-and-cold cart, once used

by street vendors to sell sausage rolls from the hot compartment, and ice milk from the cold one.

On the day Matar brought the cart home, Detective Bellin was assigned a new murder case. His friend had been correct in guessing that the robbery-murder suspect would end up back in Enikora. However, the fact that the man was found murdered was somewhat unexpected, though it was never a total surprise when career criminals ended up dead. The matter landed on Bellin's roster not because of the association with his friend, but because it was looking like this was going to be a bigger case than first predicted. Bellin had been right to question the actions of the run-of-the-mill thief, and he hoped he would have additional good instincts as things progressed. He was already certain that the thief had not acted alone. And he was equally certain that the painting in question was magical. But this would likely never be confirmed because owners of magical objects rarely revealed their secrets.

The fact that the case involved a painting made him wonder if the Kivuli were involved. A notorious but highly-secretive vigilante group, the Kivuli often used magical paintings when exacting their justice. But the more Bellin thought about it, the more doubtful it seemed. The Kivuli were generally subtler in their actions, and they were unlikely to associate themselves with known criminals. Also, they had lately taken a break from paintings and had been using sporting venues. Though it couldn't be proven, the police were fairly certain that the drowning of a man in a sand trap at a golf facility was the work of the vigilante group. Bellin also attributed the death of a polo player by

lightning to the Kivuli. Remarkably, the horse was completely fine, but the rider dead. This was freak, but plausible, which perfectly described many of the murders committed by the Kivuli.

Bellin also briefly wondered if the stolen painting might be a Seeing Eye. Certain artists were capable of drawing eyes so lifelike, they could be magically modified to record and transmit information. These paintings were frequently used by spies. However, the painting in question had no human, animal, or bird subjects; so unless an eye was cleverly concealed, this was unlikely. Checking out the insurance snap of the painting with his magnifier revealed nothing of interest to Bellin. But even if the painting was not a Seeing Eye, something else about it might be magically significant. Paintings had long been a popular means of channeling magic, and their functions could be nearly as varied as magic itself.

In addition to his latest murder assignment, Bellin was taking on a few extra lower-status cases because one of his colleagues was out on birth leave. The latest to land on his desk involved the theft of a valuable fiddle. Looking over the report immediately set off a suspicion alarm in Bellin's brain. The fiddle was made, valued, and insured all in the last six weeks. However, the owner hadn't filed an insurance claim and supposedly didn't plan to anytime soon because she was offering a generous reward for its return in the hopes the fiddle would be recovered.

Bellin's brain tried to connect the theft of the fiddle to anything else he was working on. It was surprising how often cases ended up being connected, and he had

trained himself to tie odd things together to obtain new leads. Criminals also occasionally tripped themselves up when unexpectedly forced to cross paths with other criminals, so mixing things up once in awhile was a good strategy. Although some of Bellin's colleagues thought he was a little crazy and haphazard, his methods often produced results. However, Bellin himself thought trying to connect the theft of a fiddle to the Tattoo Serial Killer was an incredible stretch. But it was definitely worth a think-through; he sometimes got lucky, unless the criminals were cleverer than luck.

Having midday meal at his desk, Bellin got caught up on paperwork before setting off to visit the owner of the fiddle.

While asking his standard questions, Bellin surveyed the household and its routines as closely as possible while being discrete. *Disciplined children, efficient staff, nontraditional art lovers, magic rejecters, high-status house kept in low-status state, health of son precarious, concerned mother...but concerned about more than just her son's health and the loss of a fiddle.*

"It's a gypsy fiddle," Matar corrected Bellin (for the second time). "The design was based on one owned by a traveling musician who once visited Enikora. It's slightly larger than a traditional fiddle, and has more inlays. And the sawal sinew is better for outdoor performances."

"I see," Bellin responded. "And the fact that it's handmade makes it more valuable?"

“All fiddles are handmade,” Matar said, somewhat impatiently. After a sigh, she added, “The appraiser set the value high due to the craftsmanship—little hickory is difficult to work with. I chose to use it because it is more comfortable for the artist to handle, and it resists warping. The fiddle is also worth more because the gauge on the appraiser’s cone rated the sound quality to be level seven, elevated. That’s just about as high as you can get with any musical instrument.” (Matar had refrained from telling the authorities that the fiddle was a Curse Blocker. As with the stolen painting, a powerful magical item such as the gypsy fiddle would never be advertised as such because those who might wish to interfere with or exploit its purpose would have an easier time in doing so.)

“Thank you for the details,” Bellin stated, trying to keep his tone flat and pleasant. “I’ll let you know of any developments.”

As Matar escorted him out of the room, Bellin paused to admire a string art landscape picture marked in the lower left corner as, *Bryce Age 5*. “Such intricacies and color sophistication from one so young,” he commented.

“Yes, he’s very talented,” Matar answered shortly, as she hurriedly ushered him down the stairs to the front entrance.

Bellin was definitely getting some weird vibes from this woman. Most parents were happy to gush for hours over their children’s accomplishments. He had gotten similar feelings while casually observing Matar’s uneasy demeanor as he examined the smashed

back-door security bolt, and the case in the workshop where the fiddle had been kept. Remarkably, no other valuables in the tower had been stolen. Bellin was reminded of the theft of the painting in the neighboring town—again, one valuable item taken, but nothing else.

Professor Barlo was just arriving at the tower as Matar handed Bellin off to one of the gardeners who would be escorting him through the grounds to his vehicle parked on a side street.

When they were alone in her study, Matar asked her friend, almost desperately, “Isn’t there any other way?”

“I can’t think of anything else,” he answered, shaking his head.

“Then, let’s go talk to her,” Matar said hesitantly. With a heavy sigh, she added, “I had the passage put in her room this morning.”

Professor Barlo squeezed his friend’s shoulder reassuringly as they left the study to find Elin.

At first, Elin was a little alarmed to be taken from her study station and led to her bedroom. In a slight panic, she thought, *Is something wrong with Bryce?* With stomach flutters, tingling hands, and a hot feeling in her face and neck, she meekly climbed the stairs behind her mother and the professor.

When she reached her room, the slight panic turned to confusion at the sight of the hot-and-cold cart stationed in the corner by the door to her washroom.

“Is that what I think it is?” she asked, her confusion mixing with a rush of excitement. Elin had instantly recognized the cart as a passage.

“Yes,” Matar answered, “it’s a passage.”

Trying to calm the thrill leaping up inside her, Elin asked, as nonchalantly as possible, “What’s it doing here?”

“Sit down for a second,” her mother said, indicating the bed.

As they all three climbed onto her bed, Professor Barlo said quietly, “We need your help, Elin.”

With a slightly sad smile, Matar added, “The fiddle I made was supposed to stop a curse.”

When her mother paused, Elin nodded slowly. “I kind of figured that,” she said. Elin knew her mother’s status as a Curse Baj, but it wasn’t something she thought much about. It was just one of those things that didn’t seem all that important. Curses were somewhat rare; but if one needed to be dealt with, her mother certainly knew what to do.

“This is a pretty bad curse,” Professor Barlo explained. “If not stopped, it will end our world.”

“I made the gypsy fiddle to stop the curse,” Matar said, “but because it was stolen, we had to figure something else out.”

“What do I need to do?” Elin immediately asked.

“It has to do with the passage,” Matar answered. “From what we have known before about passages, they have always led to other places within Tanamez. This is the only one known to lead to another world.”

“So it’s very special,” Elin said.

“Very special,” Matar responded, nodding. After a fairly long pause, as her daughter waited expectantly, she added, “Elin, would you be willing to spend two

hours a day in this other world? If you do this, it will block the curse and our world will continue to exist.”

Chapter Four

The First Visits

Elin agreed immediately. Two hours out of twenty-seven was nothing if it would stop a curse from destroying their world.

“I can’t make another object,” Matar explained, “because the time has passed when a Curse Blocker would have worked. So the visits to the other world might have to go on for some time, until something else can be figured out.”

“I understand,” Elin said. “I’ll do it for as long as I need to.”

The next morning, only her mother was present to see her off; Professor Barlo had left late the previous night. Elin had decided that she would visit the other world early mornings, before self study. “Best to get an early start,” she told her mother, “to get it out of the way.”

The cart was to be kept in her room, and Elin would carry the key on a chain securely around her neck. She would keep the key with her at all times, in both worlds, and she would never take Bryce with her. This had been the subject of extensive conversation the evening before. “Even if he begs to go, he can’t,” her mother said firmly. Elin understood and promised never to break this rule. Bryce would be told that Elin was using the passage to work on an important project, so he would understand that his sister was not simply

given the extravagant gift for fun and frisk. When he got a little older, he would be given full information.

Matar gave her daughter an encouraging smile as Elin entered the cart through the sliding side panel of the cold compartment.

As she slid the panel shut, Elin and her passage instantly found themselves in the other world. Cautiously opening the door, she brushed aside a tangle of vines covering the cart to look out into the early-morning darkness. *The only drawback of going so early*, Elin thought, *I can't see*. But as her eyes adjusted, she could see well enough to creep from her hiding place, where she huddled beside the cart. The air surrounding her seemed somewhat stagnant and she wished it were fresher.

Elin stayed crouched beside the cart for a long while, clutching her stuffed Freddy Hare and stroking his long blue ears. As she did this, she recalled the second rule drilled into her the previous evening. She could take some of her own things with her to the other world, like her Freddy Hare and her Rose Marie doll, but nothing from this new place could ever be brought back. She could take her own belongings back and forth, but everything originating in the other world had to stay put. No exceptions. Elin was fine with this. It's not like she was expecting to make friends that she might want to bring home. And she promised her mother faithfully that she would resist all urges to bring back things like stones and shells, even though she loved to collect them.

Elin wasn't exactly afraid, but she had to admit that the darkness was very unsettling. So she stayed beside

the cart until the sun began to show itself. However, though the sunrise seemed very similar to the ones she was used to, the day was very cloudy, so much so that it remained fairly dark even after sunup.

Having had a little time the evening before to think about her first trip to the other world, Elin had brought along a pocketful of glass beads for the express purpose of leaving markers to follow to find her way back as she explored areas away from the cart.

Leaving a trail of glinting beads about twenty paces apart each, Elin slowly made her way toward a hedgeline a short distance from where the cart was secreted amongst a thick jumble of shrubs and vines.

Is it my imagination? Elin thought, as a small breeze touched her cheek. *The air already seems a lot fresher.*

As an odd animal cry in the distance startled her, Elin sought the shelter of a tiny garden shed situated a short ways along the hedgeline. She fumbled with the door latch in the darkness. Upon entering, she tripped over a small bench before her eyes could adjust to the dimness.

Sinking onto the bench, Elin took a deep breath and surveyed her surroundings. Filled with gardening whatnots such as buckets and spades, the shed was so tiny, it probably only occupied slightly more ground space than her hot-and-cold cart. However, it was very tall, surprisingly tall for a shed. A single high window on the wall opposite the door brought in a little light. She heard the animal cry again; this time it seemed fainter.

Finding a blanket on one of the shelves, Elin curled up in it on the floor beside the bench. Rest was welcome because she suddenly felt considerably less exhilarated, and not nearly as brave, as when she had climbed into the cart in her bedroom. According to her timekeeper ring, she still had nearly an hour before she could return home.

It's the darkness, Elin told herself. *That's why I feel tired and down.*

However, even as she counted the slow minutes in the darkness, wishing to hurry them along, she recalled a recent conversation she had had with the professor, about how shadow could not exist without light. *Shadow has to have a light to exist,* she told herself. At the moment this thought entered her head, the small shed window brightened, as though someone outside had cast a light upon it.

Rising and repositioning the bench, Elin stepped up to peek out the window. The clouds seemed to be breaking apart somewhat as the sun woke for the day. From her limited view, she was able to see patches of trees and hilly fields bathed in the pinkish-gold sunrise. *This is a very pretty world, so far,* she decided.

Time seemed to pass more quickly as Elin waited, and it was soon time to return to home. Leaving the shed and picking up her beads, she made her way to her cart where she pulled aside the curtain of vines to enter the cold compartment. Upon sliding the door closed, she was immediately returned to her bedroom.

Elin was in a good mood as she went down to her study station, and the rest of her day passed much as any other. With strong afternoon rains preventing

them from exploring the gardens, Elin and Bryce played hide-and-find in the attic for two hours before their evening family meal.

It was custom for Matar to spend quiet time with each of her children most evenings before their bedtimes so they could share their activities of the day and talk through anything that might be bothering them.

With Bryce settled and off to sleep, Matar sat with Elin and listened quietly to the descriptions of the shed, hills, trees, and odd animal cries. “I guess I would have seen and heard more,” Elin said, “if I hadn’t been hiding in the shed.”

“There’s plenty of time to see and hear more,” her mother counseled. “You can hide in the shed for as long as you want.”

Though the experience had been somewhat unsettling, Elin was actually looking forward to her second trip to the other world.

Pushing aside vines and climbing out of the cart the next morning, she determinedly made her way to the shed. *At least I didn’t huddle beside the cart this time*, she thought. *I’m getting a little braver*. Glancing up at the cloudy sky, Elin discovered a surprise. “There’s only one moon,” she said aloud. “No wonder it’s so dark before sunup.”

Upon entering the shed, Elin again took a seat on the small bench. Though she was curious, and anxious to begin doing some real exploring, she remembered what her mother had said—that there was plenty of time. And she didn’t quite feel ready to venture out into the unknown yet. However, she did feel like

exploring the crowded shelves of the shed, upon which she discovered a small lantern, full of fuel. The lantern was similar to ones Elin was familiar with, and it was easy to light by a switch on one side. “I can read while I’m here,” she said, and she immediately thought of bringing some of her study materials with her on her daily trips. “I’ll be able to keep up with my studies, and maybe even get ahead.”

Elin quickly realized that she wasn’t just talking to herself; she was also talking to a small cricket sitting beside a seed caddy on the lowest shelf in front of her. Smiling, Elin immediately named her new friend, Spiro.

Spiro kept her company for the remainder of her visit. As she made her way back to the cart, Elin thought, *The two hours passed really quickly today.*

The next morning, Elin again made a visit to the shed where she lit the lantern before greeting Spiro, who was perched on the rim of a flowerpot. However, today, she was determined not to stay long in the shed. Reading the book she had brought only until sunup, Elin extinguished the lantern. Leaving her book on the shelf beside it, she cautiously crept from the shed. *It’s time to do some exploring,* she decided.

Setting off toward the sunrise, Elin didn’t feel the need to drop beads. *I can always look at the position of the sun to find my way back,* she thought. *I won’t be here long enough for the sun to go midday on me, and confuse me.*

Just to be on the safe side though, because it was somewhat foggy, Elin kept the hedgeline in sight as she headed out over the hilly fields. Just beyond a

patch of trees, Elin spied a garden. Despite the fog, the morning seemed brighter than the previous two she had spent in this world; and she could see furrows ripe with an abundance of vegetation. However, the garden rows looked very straight, which seemed strange to Elin. *What kind of world have I come to where people plant in straight rows?* But as the fog lifted slightly, Elin could see that the rows were much curvier than first she thought. The nearer rows that looked somewhat straight were only the beginnings of really long curves and spirals in the sprawling garden.

As she strolled along a row of small hills, exploding with marrow vines in glorious blossom, Elin again heard animal noises, but something more like snorting and neighing, instead of cries. Since the noises were fairly distant, she didn't worry over them. She also heard twitters of birdsong, which she couldn't remember having heard on her previous visits. Smiling, she thought how pleasant her surroundings were. *And the air is definitely fresh and clean,* she thought happily. Breathing deeply, she continued to stroll and enjoy the sights and sounds until it was time to return to her cart.

The next morning, while inside the shed reading by lantern, Elin heard more animal sounds, this time, snorting and scraping; and the sounds seemed very close to the shed. Though the unknown was always a little scary, Elin recalled something her mother and Professor Barlo were always telling her. "If you expect good things will happen, they usually will." And since she was actually more curious than afraid, she quickly extinguished the lantern in order to investigate.

The animal turned out to be a small pig, rooting and snuffling in the dirt and fallen leaves in the tree patch by the garden.

The pig was as friendly as a pup, and with much the same mannerisms. Bringing Elin a stick, which she tossed, the pig happily retrieved it.

They played stick toss for some time, until the pig decided he would rather go back to rooting and snuffling, at which point, Elin decided to do more exploring of the massive garden. The sun was just rising.

Following a furrow of plum latots around a bend, and just past a clump of fig bushes, Elin came upon a woman weeding a row of sugar beets.

“Hello,” said Elin, somewhat tentatively. Having never met anyone of this world, she felt somewhat nervous and shy.

Rising and brushing dirt from her knees, the woman smiled as she answered, “Hello. I’m Nachim Mervel. But, please, call me Nachim, even my children do.”

Elin was so relieved that the woman spoke her own language, and was friendly, that she didn’t answer right away.

“And you are...” Nachim queried.

“Oh, sorry, Elin Gyto. I’m just so in awe of your beautiful garden.”

“It has turned out rather well this year,” Nachim responded, “plenty of rain, but not too much.”

Nachim reminded Elin slightly of her mother; they were roughly the same age, build, and height. However, Nachim’s hair, under her enormous

gardening hat, was lighter than Matar's. The smile was similar though, easygoing and large.

As she again knelt to continue weeding, Nachim said, "You remind me a little of my daughter, Macyn. She's about your age, but her hair is darker."

Elin also knelt, to pull a few weeds, as they continued their conversation. "Is your daughter at your house?"

"No," Nachim answered. "She's staying with relatives right now. I have a son too, Cas. He's two years younger than his sister."

"I have a little brother too," Elin said.

When they came to the end of the row of beets, Nachim rose and suggested, "How about a tour of the garden?"

"Yes, please!" Elin eagerly responded as she bounced to her feet.

Indicating marker rocks and certain clumps of trees, Nachim pointed out the borders of the garden as they strolled along.

"What's this?" Elin asked, bending down to admire an enormous head of what looked like extra fancy and curly cabbage.

"Alom sprouts," Nachim answered.

"Sprouts?" Elin said. "You mean they get bigger?"

"Much," said Nachim. "But people only eat the hearts, and we feed the leaves to the pigs and edgits."

"What are edgits?"

Pointing to a field in the distance, full of what appeared to be goat-like creatures with extra-long necks, Nachim responded, "Those are edgits. You're not from around here, are you?"

“No,” Elin slowly responded. Knowing very little about this woman, Elin was inwardly chiding herself for not being more cautious. Though Nachim seemed very pleasant, so much about this world was unknown. “I’m just visiting,” she added, as casually as possible.

As they rounded a grove of portnut trees, Nachim again pointed. “And there’s the house.” An enormous barn and several large animal pens lay just beyond the quaint stone farmhouse. “Grain fields, pearmelons, corn fields, applecots, and rock gourds,” Nachim added, as she indicated sections of her rolling farmlands to her new friend.

“And you take care of all this yourself?” Elin asked.

“I have a little help,” Nachim responded. “But...yes, I mostly take care of it myself since my husband passed, last year.”

Elin didn’t quite know what to say, and after a lengthy pause, what came out was, “My mom’s a widow too, but longer than you. My dad died just before my brother was born, and he’s seven.”

Her smile now considerably less bright than it had been, Nachim suddenly changed the subject with, “If you have time while you are here, you might visit the river. It’s only a few minutes’ walk from the garden. Just follow the hedgeline past the shed and keep heading west. You can’t miss it.”

“Thank you,” said Elin.

“Well...I need to be getting back to feed the chickens,” Nachim said. “They need more than bugs to eat to keep laying well.”

“It was nice to meet you,” Elin said.

Already heading toward the farmhouse, Nachim responded over her shoulder, “You too, and come back anytime.”

Realizing that she was thirty minutes late, Elin ran back through the garden, stopping only briefly to toss the stick for the pig twice, before retrieving her book from the shed and returning to home.

During quiet time with her mother in the evening, Elin shared more details of her visits to the other world. “Time seems to be passing the same there as here. But there’s only one moon. Weird, huh?”

“A lot of things will probably be different,” her mother responded. “And some things might actually be better.”

“Some of the vegetables are very different,” Elin answered. After a pause, she added, “The lady that owns the farm seems nice, but I’m afraid I might have offended her.”

“Nonsense,” Matar responded. “She was probably just in a hurry. Running a farm means being in a hurry sometimes. She told you to come back, so she must not be too offended.”

As Elin lay awake thinking, she realized that the single moon seemed odd to her not only because Tanamez had two, but also because one of Bryce’s string art pictures, hung in the hallway outside her bedroom, depicted a world with only one moon. To Elin’s tired brain, that coincidence actually seemed stranger than the single moon itself. Her final thought as she slipped into sleep was, *I wonder if Bryce might have the gift of prophecy.*

The next morning, Elin decided to take Nachim's suggestion and visit the river, which was easy to find. Though the current was gentle, the water looked very muddy. "I wish it were clearer," Elin mused. "It's nicer to fish in a clear river." (Today, Elin was talking to a ladybird beetle on a small stick by her feet. She named him Twiggy.)

Other than birds and bugs, the river looked completely deserted with no people or houses in sight. However, an old shack filled with fishing poles, nets, waders, and other gear conveniently sat beside an enormous rock shelf jutting out into the water. The equipment looked in fairly good condition, and Elin felt sure its owner probably wouldn't mind someone borrowing it. But today, she was more interested in exploring than fishing. "Maybe I'll try my luck tomorrow," she told Twiggy, before saying goodbye to her tiny new friend and strolling away.

She explored the riverbank for nearly two hours before heading back to her cart.

The next day, she returned to the river where she made a remarkable discovery. The sparkling, slow-moving water was completely clear, not muddy at all. Marveling at the change, Elin shook her head. "Maybe it had just rained when I came last time, and it was all stirred up." Whatever had caused the change, Elin was extremely happy.

Borrowing a pole and several lures from the shed, she perched herself on the rock shelf to fish. "This is probably a good spot," she told a firefly, "because they put the shed right here." She was right. After only a few minutes, she caught a good-sized trout. Carefully

removing the hook, she bent down to gently release the fish. “I can’t take fish home, and I’m not hungry.” It had been nearly a year since Elin and Bryce had last gone fishing, with the professor. They had released all of their catches then too. But fishing was great fun even without keeping the fish.

At the same time Elin was fishing, several members of the Kivuli were visiting another river on the outskirts of Enikora. In the last three centuries, these powerful individuals had been doling out justice to criminals who could not be caught and punished by traditional means. After arranging the diving accident, set to take place the next day, they departed.

Chapter Five

Koltémin and Idos

Deciding to visit the farm again the next morning, Elin found Nachim feeding pigs in a pen behind the barn. One of the pigs turned out to be her little stick-toss friend.

After helping to feed both pigs and chickens, Elin accompanied Nachim on a tour of her farm, where she got to see edgits close up in their milking stalls. According to Nachim, several wonderful creams and cheeses were made from the milk.

Over the next few days, Elin helped to plant applecot trees, harvest rock gourds, assemble several folk art planters, and sand an enormous sway chair for the farmhouse back porch. During their conversations, Elin discovered that Nachim was struggling to keep the farm up. Though four helpers came on various days, the work was hard and harvests were unpredictable. Nachim also missed her children terribly. After the death of her husband, she had been convinced to send them off to stay with relatives for awhile. “It took me a long time to get my act together after Gesom passed, and I felt my sister and her husband could give my kids things I couldn’t in the state I was in,” she quietly told Elin. “They are doing so well in school right now, and making friends, so I don’t want to bring them back just yet.”

Realizing the situation was very complicated, Elin simply listened. Not only did she not feel qualified to give advice, she also knew that just listening was sometimes a help to others.

After a long pause, Nachim added, “But things are actually improving on the farm. I am hopeful they can come home soon.”

In other discussions, Elin discovered that the world she was visiting was called Koltémin, and that Nachim’s farm was part of a close-by city community called Idos.

Elin hadn’t realized it, but she had increased her time spent in Koltémin over the past several days, to about three hours per day. Farm life was so interesting, and she was having fun helping Nachim. Still reading in the shed while waiting for sunup each morning, she was easily keeping up with her studies.

In talking to her mother about her visits to Koltémin, Elin said, “Nachim reminds me of you, and I think I can trust her.”

“I think you can definitely trust her,” Matar agreed. “She seems sensible, caring, hardworking...and I’m sure she has lots of other good qualities too.”

After quiet time with her children, Matar retired to her study to think. Earlier in the day, she had received news that the Hunter she had hired was killed in a cliff diving accident on a nearby river. Though there was little hope now of acquiring the painting, Matar was hopeful that another avenue she was following might yield similar results. And while the information about the Hunter was unsettling, Matar felt slightly relieved. Hopefully, his death would eliminate any ties to her as

far as the murder associated with the stolen painting. Though still wracked with guilt and regret, she had important things she needed to do; therefore, staying out of prison was necessary, for the time being.

Since Elin loved spending time on the farm, she didn't do much other exploring. And because she felt she could trust Nachim, she confided in her about the passage and the reason it was necessary for her to spend time in Koltémin. Remarkably, Nachim believed everything Elin told her. Not only that, but she offered Elin use of a guest room in the farmhouse, so she could rest, or study, or whatever.

"It would be nice to keep some of my things here," Elin said.

"And it would be a much better place to study," Nachim answered. "The shed is really too cramped. If I had known you were reading in there, I would have offered you a room much sooner."

Nachim also suggested moving Elin's cart into her barn, for safekeeping. This was a fantastic idea and they immediately performed a test run, to see if the passage would still work in another location. With her required two-hour stay complete for the day, they wheeled the cart into the barn. Entering the cold compartment and sliding the door shut, Elin made it home safely; but instead of waiting until the next morning, she quickly closed the door to find herself once again in Nachim's barn. "It worked!" she happily exclaimed. "This is great!"

The next morning found the farm all a bustle in preparation for attending the Farmer's Souk in Idos. Two of the farmhands, Gruner and Criike, had come

early to load Nachim's sailbus with cheeses, fruits, rock gourds, vegetables, and several kid edgits. Elin was thrilled not only to be going to town, but also because she had never ridden in a wind-powered truck before. The extra-breezy day aided their travel and they arrived at the soukgrounds just as the sun woke, which was early enough to claim one of the best market stalls.

After helping to unload the bins and fogal-sized baskets, Gruner and Criike set off to deliver the edgits to another farm, leaving Elin and Nachim to set up and start selling.

Though she had had some contact with the farm workers, this was Elin's first view of a lot of Koltémin people at once. The kids looked much like those at home, except that some had really weird haircuts. Their clothes were similar to hers, but perhaps slightly plainer.

While helping Nachim sell goods, Elin discovered that the inedible rock gourds were mainly used to make bowls, cups, and scoopers. And the largest ones, when cut and sanded, were destined to become wash basins.

About an hour after the selling began, Nachim had things well under control, so she sent Elin off to explore other vendors' wares. Giving Elin some odd-looking money, she said, "This is enough to buy a necklace, or a blanket, or a book, if you want. And it can get you two Borkie Bears, if you bargain for them." (Borkie Bears were basically like stuffed Freddy Hares, but in bear version, of course.)

Grinning from ear to ear, Elin set off with her money securely in her pocket. She did see two Borkie

Bears she would have liked to have owned, and several pretty necklaces; but she was most interested in the books. They were bound differently here, flatter and wider, but they were still very recognizable as books. After considering for a long while, Elin chose a mystery story.

Elin returned to Nachim's stall to discover nearly everything sold.

Gruner and Criike made it back a short while later, and they all had an early midday meal together, before packing up the bins and fogals to return to the farm.

Elin started reading her story in the bus on the way back. As she finished the first segment, she told Nachim, "It's too bad I can't bring this back for Bryce to read. He loves mysteries."

"You can tell him about it," Nachim responded. "And maybe, when he's older, he can come for a visit."

The next week on the farm was a rush of potting, drying, and freezing ripe vegetables. "Harvest seems to come all at once sometimes," Nachim said breathlessly, as she heaved a fogal of marrows onto the kitchen table.

Elin was happy to help. She loved everything to do with the farm. And since everything was done by hand, there were days when she completely forgot that magical ways of doing things even existed. Tools and machines existed on Koltémin, and were well used; but they weren't magical so jobs tended to take longer. Fortunately, the people of Koltémin didn't seem to mind taking the time to do things this way.

The week following the potting, drying, and freezing, Nachim began teaching Elin how to make cheeses and frozen cream from edgit milk. “Cow milk is also good for cheeses and various creams,” Nachim said, “but it’s a little heavier. I prefer the lighter ones made from edgit milk. We do some trading for variety though,” she added, “so you’ll get to try both. In fact, there’s a huge cow cheesery in Debuvo. Maybe we’ll go sometime.”

When the cheese and cream project was well under control, Nachim arranged a surprise for Elin. Two kids living on a neighboring farm came at sunup to whisk Elin away for a morning of fun. Kate was one year younger than Elin; and her brother, Ashbe, was two years older. Cross lots, their enormous treehouse was reachable by fifteen minutes of walking.

“This is amazing!” said Elin, taking in the view of hills, rivers, and a distant Idos. She could just see the roof of Nachim’s barn from the topmost platform of the treehouse.

Most kids in Idos went to school, instead of studying at home, which is why this meeting had been too difficult for Nachim to arrange previously, since days off from school during harvest were generally too busy for visits with neighbors, at least, in the farming community.

Elin was fascinated when Kate and Ashbe talked of school: what their classes were like, the buildings, teachers, group projects, midday meals together, and such like. Her mother had often remarked that she thought that type of schooling was better than self study. But since staying home was better for Bryce in

his state of health, Matar had never lobbied for a change of schooling trend in Enikora, or sent Elin away to organized schools in other communities. She definitely didn't think it was right to break up the family over giving her daughter a slight edge in education.

As Kate talked about the netball team she was captain of, Elin recalled what her mother had said—that some things on Koltémin might actually be better than those on Tanamez. Schooling was probably a good example of this.

Since the late summer was slightly less hectic, Elin got to spend some time with her new friends on their days off from school. She also got to meet one of Nachim's closest friends, a retired teacher, who had just returned from extensive travels. In Idos and surrounding communities, teachers were given the title of don, instead of professor. Don Serapim had taught school in Idos for nearly forty years; he had been Nachim's teacher and advisor for two of her years of schooling. Now, he still advised her, but mostly on farm issues. He had grown up on a fruit and fish farm; and in longing to get back to his roots, spending time on Nachim's land was turning out to be his favorite retirement hobby. Though he had a house in town, he often spent full days helping to run things on the farm. Up to this point, only Nachim and the farm workers knew Elin was from another world. However, since Don Serapim was at the farm so often, Elin decided to let him in on her secret.

In quiet time with her mother, Elin rambled on about her new friends, farm life, and various projects

she was helping with. “We had a picnic in the treehouse. Kate and Ashbe have a pup, Regi. He’s so cute, and they carried him up to the first platform. Of course, they had to watch him the whole time, to make sure he stayed safe because he’s so wiggly. He’s a spotted nemm, and he looks something like a Wister hound, but smaller. Then he got into the picnic box and tore everything up. It was so funny.”

As Elin talked, her mother mostly just listened. “You know what else is funny?” Elin continued. “If magic exists, they don’t use it much. They mostly do for themselves, and they don’t seem to mind the hard work.”

It might have been Elin’s imagination, but it seemed that several times during their conversation, her mother started to say something, but stopped herself, almost as if she didn’t want to give her opinion or make too many comments. Since her mother was generally talkative, and had never been reserved as far as giving opinions, Elin thought this was somewhat odd. However, she knew her mother worried a lot. Even though Professor Barlo visited frequently, Elin had figured out that they still hadn’t found a way to stop the curse. That didn’t particularly matter to Elin, because she was happy to continue going to Koltémin. But there was also the matter of Bryce, which definitely weighed on her mother. Elin was worried about him too, particularly because he had been bedsick for the last week, unable to get up even to eat.

As her mother was leaving her room, Elin remarked, “You know, Don Serapim reminds me a lot of Professor Barlo.”

“That’s nice, dear,” her mother replied as she closed the door.

Chapter Six

The Garden District

In the late fall, just following her twelfth birthday, Professor Barlo sat down with Elin. With a great sigh, he said, “Would you be willing to spend four hours a day in Koltémin?”

“No problem,” Elin quickly replied. “I’m already there three on most days, and it was six on the day we went to the souk.”

“Good,” the professor responded. “We’re still trying to figure things out, and four hours a day would really help.”

“Okay,” Elin said.

The next morning, Elin and Nachim took a sailbus full of supplies to two farms in a neighboring community that had had poor summer harvests. A windstorm had also recently damaged several buildings on one of the farms, and several neighbors were on hand on this day to help with repairs. As Elin was unloading a fogal of applecots, she thought, *They do the same thing here as at home—when people get into trouble, other people come to help.* Elin looked forward to telling her mother about this. She lately looked for anything good to tell her mother, to help take her mind off of her worries.

On the days when things were fairly caught up on the farm, Elin spent some of her time in Idos. Nachim had recently acquired a refurbished wind scooter with

a basket on the front for ease of carrying things; and since the farm was only a short distance from town, Elin was able to zip to and from Idos fairly quickly. However, since this particular day was rainy, and scooter safety was very important, Elin took the trip to town very slowly. This was her second visit to Don Serapim's home, and she was very excited to be able to borrow books from his library.

As Elin shook off her umbrella before entering the house, Don Serapim said, "You know, when it rains, that's actually when the Umbrella People put away their umbrellas."

Thinking she was missing the point of a joke, because many people of Koltémin seemed to have an odd sense of humor, Elin smiled, but didn't comment.

"Yes," he went on, "they live in the Garden District, and they only come out from under their umbrellas when it rains. All the rest of the time, they hide under them."

"Why is that?" Elin asked.

"For years, no one knew," he answered, with a mischievous glint in his eyes. "And other people thought their behavior so strange, they wouldn't even go near the Garden District. I'm ashamed to admit I was one of them when I was a youth. We were all a little afraid of the Umbrella People, I guess. But it turns out they have a skin condition that makes them ultra sensitive to sun exposure."

"So they use the umbrellas for shade," Elin remarked.

"Yes, that's it," Don Serapim responded.

“They can surely come out at night without umbrellas,” Elin stated.

“True, and that’s another reason why people tended to fear and avoid them,” he answered. “They used to do their gardening, shopping, pup walking, and all sorts of other activities exclusively at night; and that really set them apart from others. Night activities are still pretty common for them, but more of them are out in the day now, under their umbrellas, of course. However, since the kids don’t go to school, they are still somewhat like outcasts.”

“So the city is segregated somewhat,” Elin remarked.

“You could say that,” the don agreed.

“I’d like to see the Garden District sometime,” Elin said.

“We can go today, if you want,” he answered.

“Yes, please!”

As they were heading out in Don Serapim’s small sailbus, he said, “The Umbrella People have a motto: *The world is less crowded in the rain.*”

“I imagine that’s the only time they are not bumping umbrellas with each other,” Elin responded. Though the more she thought about it, she realized the saying more likely referred to less people being out and about during times of rain.

The rain ended as they entered the Garden District, and Elin marveled at the dazzling sun glinting off raindrops stuck to a sea of colorful umbrellas stretched out in front of her. She had never seen so many umbrellas at once, literally thousands, packed into every nook and crease of the district. Of course, the

gardens themselves were open to the air and sunshine, but were rimmed by rows of umbrellas of many shapes and sizes. Elin had never seen oval, triangular, or square umbrellas before. And the artwork on them was spectacular—like snowflake sand paintings mixed with colorful sky ribbons streaking the heavens after rains. Umbrella-covered walkways, that might also have been called awning-shaded footpaths, wound their way through the gardens and alleyways between buildings.

Quite a few residents of the district were out and about, but tucked well under their great umbrellas. They were polite, but not overly friendly to the outsiders.

Admiring an enormous plot of golden roses and crimson evenders, Elin asked the don, “So the kids in this district don’t get schooling at all?”

“They are schooled at home,” he answered, “probably something like what you do.”

Thinking about the similarity, Elin said, “Then I guess I’m segregated too.”

“We could arrange a visit to a school,” Don Serapim said, “but if you wanted to actually get your education here, you would have to go full days.”

“I’m pretty used to the self-study thing,” Elin answered.

Strolling along a cobble path through a newly-planted garden, they noticed several umbrellas strategically placed to protect the younger plants from the intense western sun. “That’s really smart,” Elin said.

In the sailbus on the way back, Elin remarked, “Even where I’m from, we have sunshield cream. We don’t have a lot of medicine, but we at least have that. I wonder why something like a powerful sunshield cream hasn’t been developed here, to help the Umbrella People.”

“Sunblock lotions have been developed in more recent years,” Don Serapim responded. “I believe some of the Umbrella People use them, particularly when they travel, since carrying large umbrellas can be cumbersome. But the umbrellas are a way of life for them. Once you get used to things, like schooling at home and being awake at night, it’s hard to change.”

“I see,” said Elin. “It’s like a whole culture, and people often don’t want to break with tradition.”

“Very true,” he answered.

After selecting two books from Don Serapim’s library, Elin slowly scooted back to the farm.

The discussion about sunshield cream had started her thinking. Since she knew the firm rule about never bringing anything back, Elin hadn’t thought much about the medicine and healing practices of Koltémin. But even if she couldn’t take physical things back, maybe she could do some research and learn a few things. She could take back information in her brain; there was no rule against that. If any medical treatments on Koltémin could help Bryce, maybe they could be applied at home. Or, even better, perhaps Bryce could come to Koltémin someday. Elin was suddenly filled with happiness at this thought. *If they have better healers here, he could come for medical treatment, and maybe get well.*

Unfortunately, there was a small hitch. Her mother had told her that in order to block the curse, the passage had been modified to allow only Elin to travel to Koltémin. *Maybe they can modify it again sometime, so Bryce can come with me.* Elin was hopeful, and this made her determined to find out more about the healing on Koltémin.

Meanwhile, back in Enikora, Detective Bellin had arrived at the tower to give Matar an update on her case. Unfortunately, the news about the fiddle was not good. However, the visit to the tower turned out to be very good for Bellin. Since he was trained to be nosy, while initially waiting to see Matar, he chanced to pull back the drape in the alcove covering the string art picture Bryce had made while his mother worked on the gypsy fiddle. What an odd coincidence that it so closely resembled an exclusive stolen painting.

Bryce was working at his study station, and he noticed the detective looking at his work. Quickly rolling over, he again draped the picture, as he said, “It’s a surprise for my mother’s birthday.”

“It’s very pretty,” Bellin responded. “Where did you get the idea?”

Bryce suddenly had a funny feeling that he needed to be very careful. After a long pause, while staring intently into the eyes of the detective, he answered, “From a picture I saw in an art book once.”

Matar entered at that moment, preventing Bellin from questioning Bryce further.

Chapter Seven

Bastaya and Valas Rodo

Upon receiving the string art winterscape for her birthday, Matar found herself only mildly surprised to discover that Bryce had been in the basement. Why not? No place in the tower was off limits to her children, not even secret basement nooks suitable for hiding stolen paintings. However, as beautiful as the string art picture was, Matar needed to be careful, so she hung it in her bedroom.

Remarkably, Bryce's health had actually improved during the cooler weather, so Elin's thoughts about medicine and healing on Koltémin fled to the back of her mind.

Don Serapim was dressed up spiffy on his visit to the farm on this particular morning because he was set to attend an afternoon lecture at an institute in a neighboring town. Scooting a chair up close to the firebox in Nachim's living room, Elin admired his colorful vest. "When you first came in, I thought it was striped, but I can see that it's plaid," she said. "I guess I have stripes on the brain because I see the ringtail cat that lives in the dead tree by the barn nearly every morning. He's like a little friend."

"Ringtail cats aren't usually friendly," Don Serapim said.

"This one is," Elin replied.

Elin had received permission from her mother to stay in Koltémin for three whole days, in order to take a trip with Nachim to visit her children in Bastaya.

During the four-hour railcar journey, Elin marveled at the beautiful passing scenery of forests, plains, and even an immense canyon.

Nearing their destination, they slowly rounded a cove of an enormous lake bordered by small mountains. The cove seemed slightly too round to Elin, as though it were a little too perfect in shape. *Maybe erosion will eventually make it more interesting looking*, she thought.

Bastaya was primarily a fishing community.

Macyn and Cas were thrilled to see their mother. Nachim didn't tell her family that Elin was from another world; she simply introduced her as a friend who was staying on the farm for a time.

Elin was quiet upon first meeting Nachim's children, and she felt slightly uncomfortable; but after only a short while, she seemed to fit right in, as though part of the family. Macyn and Cas were as warm and friendly as their mother.

The next morning, Elin went fishing with Macyn and Cas who were on a short break from school.

For the second day of their stay, Nachim took them to an art museum and an outdoor musical performance in a downtown park.

Rising early the next morning to pack for their journey back to the farm, Nachim was quiet and thoughtful. She had had a lengthy discussion with her sister regarding a timeline for her children to return home, and they had decided to let Macyn and Cas

finish out the entire school year in Bastaya. Since Cas was on a rowing squad and Macyn was trying out for a role in the Interpretive Troupe's spring performance, waiting until the next Fall Break to transition them back to the farm seemed like the best plan.

Back at home, during her next quiet-time talk with her mother, Elin shared many details of her trip. "I didn't notice magic in Bastaya," she said. "They definitely fish without it. And I didn't notice it at the museum or in Nachim's sister's home."

Meanwhile, Detective Bellin was celebrating. As it turns out, the Tattoo Serial Killer was not cleverer than luck, and he was actually caught in the act of harvesting a tattoo.

In truth, Valas Rodo had gotten careless because this was the final piece of art needed to complete his project. Of course, he wouldn't be sharing that information with the police, nor would he be letting anyone know the location of the storage place of the tattoos he had been collecting.

Valas had been born a Lirat, or Foreseer, one with the magical gift of prophecy. In his mind, he had done nothing wrong in harvesting the tattoos because he was trying to create a doorway to another realm. Having known for many years exactly when Tanamez would fall into darkness, ending all life on the planet, Valas had bargained with a dark mage for the secrets of skin-art magic, which would allow tattoos to be converted into real magical objects, in this case, a portal. Having worked diligently on the project for over three years, Valas was furious with himself for not taking his usual precautions and allowing himself to be caught. Now,

he would need to direct his thoughts and energies into finding a means of escape in order to finish his work. And he must do it quickly because the Endtime was drawing very near.

In another corner of Enikora, about as far away as one could get from the cell holding Valas Rodo, the Kivuli were engaged in doling out more of their justice to a person they knew for certain was guilty, but who was unlikely to be caught and punished by lawful means. Though this secret society was busy all over Tanamez, they seemed particularly busy in Enikora these days. And the Kivuli weren't just in the business of issuing death sentences, they handed out other punishments as well, such as making a person relive a horrible moment over and over again for the rest of their life. However, this often did result in death when the afflicted person chose to commit suicide, rather than living with the ongoing punishment.

Though many would have considered their vigilantism to be as morally corrupt as the crimes of their targets, the Kivuli felt perfectly justified. And since the members of the society were powerful magical individuals, they were unlikely to ever be caught.

A large manor house sat in this far corner of Enikora. The owner had murdered his wife and child, and one room of his home was now being prepared as a death chamber for him. In the process of extensive renovation, the west wing of the manor contained an art hall, in which the Kivuli hung seven magical paintings. When the murderer entered his hall the next morning to check on the renovation progress, the doors

and windows of the hall automatically locked so that the subjects of the magical paintings could come to life and kill him.

Bellin was one of the detectives called in to investigate, and he quickly recognized the death as one orchestrated by the Kivuli. The doors and windows were securely locked from the inside, and no one was in the hall with the man who lay crushed under a heavy bookcase, which he had presumably pulled over onto himself while trying to break his fall from a ladder he had climbed in order to inspect the renovation work. All perfectly plausible, except for the fact that the dead man had been in the news of late under suspicion of murdering his family. But the seven paintings were what gave the Kivuli away to Bellin because the subjects didn't match their titles, which meant the paintings had obviously been altered. In the *Father and Son Picnic*, the child was obviously a girl. And a cleric holding a rope and a candlestick obviously shouldn't be in the background of the *Night Performance of the Selkert Ballet*.

Though many members of the police abhorred the actions of the Kivuli, and felt this was one of the ways in which magic had gone terribly wrong, Bellin actually welcomed their help because he knew that those on the receiving end of the sentences generally deserved what they got. *If we can't catch them, someone else should*, he thought. If members of the Kivuli could have been caught, they certainly would have been brought to justice. But Bellin knew better than to waste time on cases such as this; the Kivuli had never been caught, not in centuries of operation.

Better to spend time on matters that could be solved. After only a short visit to the art hall, Bellin left to return to Police Holding. Having gotten nothing from his first interview with Valas Rodo, he was anxious to begin another.

Chapter Eight

Sand Sculptures

When spring came to the farm, the garden was fairly overrun by insects. Remembering an old trick that worked at home, Elin asked Nachim, “Where might we find some flowerpots, old and broken ones would be fine?”

“The old glasshouse is full of them,” Nachim answered.

Elin had been warned to stay away from the run-down glass growing house, situated a good ways east of the barn, in a currently unused valley of the farm.

Wheeling a small loadcart, Elin accompanied Nachim to the glasshouse. Waiting outside as Nachim bade her, Elin surveyed the old structure. Approximately half of the glass ceiling panels had fallen in over the years, and one whole side of the house was completely skeletal, missing all of its glass and about half of its cross supports.

“I still don’t want you to ever go in there,” Nachim said as she unloaded the final armful of old and cracked clay flowerpots into the cart. “Macyn and Cas aren’t allowed in there either. It’s not safe.”

“I understand,” Elin said.

As they wheeled the loadcart toward the garden, Nachim said brightly, “I’m hoping we can restore it sometime, so we can grow things in winter.”

The flowerpots were for making toad houses, and Elin had brought a small spade with her for this purpose. Simply burying the pots on their sides halfway in the garden dirt would create suitable houses for toads who, for some reason, loved to live in them. “This works at home,” Elin said, “so it should work here. Toads love to eat bugs, masses and masses of bugs.”

She was right. Over next few weeks, many toads took up residence in the forty or so toad houses, and the insect problem was brought well under control.

Elin had a little chuckle with her mother when telling her about the toad-house project. “Who would have thought toads there would like the same kind of houses as they do here?” Elin said. “It’s amazing how things can be so similar among different worlds.”

When summer arrived, Elin found herself at home packing for a trip. She and Bryce were going to the seaside town of Vohely to stay with their Uncle Hirem, Matar’s widower brother, for several weeks. Bryce’s health was still in an upswing, and Matar thought he might never get another chance to see the sea, or visit with family. Uncle Hirem had twin children, Linca and Lowel, who were one year younger than Elin. Matar wasn’t going with them on the trip because she was working with Professor Barlo on a special project.

Elin and Bryce were thrilled when their mother gave permission for them to take a break from their self studies while on their trip. Since they weren’t due for a long break until winter, this was a special treat. However, Matar knew that her children would still read while on their holiday, because they loved to so

much they basically couldn't help themselves; so this wasn't a total break from their education. Bryce had already carefully packed his news pad, and Elin had a half-case of books chosen to accompany her.

Elin's passage went with her to the seaside. She was now spending five hours in Koltémin most days. Uncle Hirem, fully aware of her project, placed the cart in a secure back room of his house.

In the same way that Enikora was famous for its passages, Vohely had a claim to fame as well in the magical world. Trinity Cove, named after three distinctive rock formations situated along its shore, was famous because sand sculptures created there would come to life during the full moons. However, the sculptures would only last until dawn, when they would freeze up, never again to come to life, not even if preserved until the next full moons.

Excited about the prospect of seeing sand sculptures come to life, Elin and Bryce accompanied their cousins to Trinity Cove on the afternoon before the next full moons were set to appear in the night skies. Except for one man quite a ways down shore, the cove was deserted. Elin and Lowel helped Bryce out of his chair, and got him situated with tools and a good pile of sand, so he could begin sculpting a small tortoise. Linca and Elin worked together on a Dinatia pup while Lowel made a snow seal. Elin became a little frustrated as she worked because she wasn't faring much better sculpting sand than she had in the past when she tried to work with clay and stone. *I really need to stick to other forms of art*, she thought. However, with Linca's help, the Dinatia pup turned out

pretty good. He was cute and playful looking anyway. An elderly couple stopped to admire their work; otherwise, the cove remained empty even after the sun began to set.

“I’m surprised no one else is here to see sand sculptures come to life,” Elin said, as she got a lap blanket for Bryce from her beach basket.

“The phenomenon is so common,” Lowel answered, “it pretty much only interests tourists, like you.”

“And it’s too early in the summer for a lot of tourists,” Linca added.

As expected, with the first glance from the twin moons, the three sculptures awoke. Unfortunately, the tortoise and snow seal immediately took to the sea; and the sand artists found themselves wishing they had thought harder about their choice of subjects. The pup, on the other hand, was perfectly happy to keep company with the four beachgoers. They played stick toss with him for quite some time before he too decided to leave. Elin and Bryce waved goodbye to him as he bounded down the shore.

Since they weren’t due home for two more hours, the group sat in the sand to have a snack while watching the waves and seabirds.

As they were talking, Linca confessed, “We tried to use the magic of the cove last summer, to bring our mother back.” (The twins had lost their mother to illness three years previous.)

“It didn’t work,” Lowel said bitterly.

“We hired a real sand artist to work from a picture of her,” Linca further explained. “She came to life, but only until dawn.”

“Then the magic of the cove *did* work,” Bryce said.

“The real magic did *not* work,” Lowel answered, somewhat angrily.

Since her cousins were confused, Linca tried to explain. “Over the years, many people have tried to bring back loved ones this way, and it usually doesn’t work. But one time, long ago, it did work. The person lived, and stayed alive after dawn, and for many years after that.”

His anger subsiding somewhat, Lowel said, “No one has ever been able to figure out the reason for the one exception.”

“Why did you do it,” Elin asked, “since it was such a longshot?”

“Our dad was just so sad, even after two years,” Linca answered.

Elin could understand. She remembered her father, and she also remembered her mother’s despair over losing him.

“The experts in sand and moon magic have done a lot of research on this cove over the years,” Lowel said. “A long time ago, lightning struck the beach and created a glass sculpture. A mage dug it up and built a special tower for it, like a magical lighthouse. When the light from the twin moons passed through the glass, it infused magic into the sands of the cove. And that’s why only sand from this cove can make the living sculptures. It’s never worked when they’ve brought in sand from other places. The experts also think that the

word trinity doesn't really refer to the three rock formations. It's the two moons and the magical light from the glass sculpture that form the trinity of Trinity Cove. That's the theory anyway."

"We thought maybe because we were twins," Linca said, "the twin moons would bestow a special magic on our mother and bring her back to life."

"But it didn't work," Lowel said again.

Though Elin definitely felt for her cousins, having lost their mother, she was still slightly reeling from the fact that they had tried to bring her back to life. "Even in the myths of old," she said quietly, "mages seldom brought back the dead because bad things always happened."

Bryce agreed with his sister. "It's unnatural to bring back the dead," he said. Neither he nor Elin could imagine their mother trying to bring back their father, even if she found a way to do it among the many powerful magical channels she had access to.

After thinking everything through, Elin decided this was probably another way in which magic had gone terribly wrong. Instead of doing research and work in the field of healing, people put their energies and resources into magic that didn't really produce anything, other than some bad things, such as heartache, in this case. Imagine having your dead mother come back to life, only to lose her again several hours later.

The next day on the farm, Elin once again thought about what her mother had said—that some things on Koltémin would probably be better than those on

Tanamez. The existence of less magic was probably another good example of this.

Matar knew her children well, and she knew that the holiday wouldn't interrupt their education for long. After only two weeks at the seaside, both Elin and Bryce not only began avidly reading, they eagerly took up their studies again. To their minds, it seemed silly not to progress in their schooling when they had plenty of time for both study and fun while on holiday.

The farm was doing so well that Nachim was able to take on two more farm workers, and this gave both her and Elin more free time. Though she had less to do, by the end of the summer, Elin was spending six and seven hours a day in Koltémin. It just seemed natural to increase her time in a place she was so fond of. She brought study materials with her nearly every day and did a lot of her self study in her room, which was no longer a guest room, having been officially designated by Nachim as Elin's own special space in her home-away-from-home.

Also by the end of the summer, Elin had made a new friend, a boy her age who lived in the Garden District. She had met Kevin on one of her trips to the public library. They were leaving the building at the same time and he offered to walk her home. Elin was glad she had left her scooter at Don Serapim's house because Kevin likely wouldn't have had the chance to talk to her otherwise. She hadn't even known he was one of the Umbrella People at first because he liked to use the sunblock creams, instead of toting an umbrella.

Kevin invited Elin to midday meal to meet his family. And over the next few weeks, she enjoyed

meeting more residents of the Garden District while touring many of the beautiful gardens with her new friend. Kevin also spent some time on the farm, and he and Elin went fishing together.

Chapter Nine

Shantytown

Fall Break signified the end of the school year in Idos, which meant two full months off. This was a little odd for Elin, since kids in Enikora tended to have their longest school break in winter. But despite continuing diligently with her self study, she still had plenty of time to spend with friends on Koltémin.

Since Kate and Ashbe were off from school, Elin was able to spend more time with them than just the occasional treehouse fun. On one particularly cool and breezy morning, the three scootered to Idos together to visit Kevin.

Kevin was in a slightly sour mood because he somewhat resented having to look after his little sister, Tanasha, who was six. But it couldn't be helped because she needed looking after on school breaks while their parents worked.

Even though Kevin would have to drag his sister along, the group decided to do some exploring in the Garden District. Kevin and Tanasha didn't have scooters, but they did have bicycles, and Tanasha's was equipped with a huge umbrella because she didn't like to use sunblock creams.

The bicycle was new to Tanasha and Kevin had been teaching her to ride it, which was turning out to be somewhat difficult, particularly because the wind often caught the umbrella, causing the bicycle to

careen. Since the bicycle was not designed for a sail like the wind scooters were, this was causing a lot of balance problems for her. But she was getting better as she practiced, and learning to compensate when the wind made her lurch.

With or without umbrellas, Elin thought bicycles were wonderful, since Tanamez pretty much only had tricycles, scooters, and flatboards for kids to use to get around.

Kevin's home was situated on one edge of the Garden District, near a section of Idos called Shantytown, which was a sprawling area comprised mainly of rickety shacks, makeshift lean-tos, and haphazard cabins. The people who lived there were fanatical about bicycles and were often called Bicycle People, not only because this was their primary means of transportation, but also because they collected old bicycle parts such as chains and gears to use in unusual ways. In the same way the general population of Idos tended to avoid the Umbrella People, the Bicycle People were similarly outcast; and though they were close neighbors, most of the kids in the Garden District steered clear of the Bicycle People. Similarly, Ashbe and Kate didn't particularly want anything to do with the people of Shantytown. Of course, they hadn't really wanted much to do with Kevin either, until Elin became his friend.

At Elin's urging, the group slowly rode their scooters and bicycles one full block into Shantytown before stopping in a small public courtyard to turn around. "See, nothing scary here," Elin said. Indeed, Shantytown was much to be admired. Shacks and

other homes, though built with odds and ends, didn't look rundown; and they didn't look half bad either thanks to a good many artistic details such as metal mobiles and wind sculptures made from old bicycle parts. Most of the houses sported decorative window trimmings and unique door hardware. Even the courtyard in which they were stopped was packed with interesting items such as benches made from masses of old bicycle frames and small tables fashioned out of chain rings and handlebars. Hanging planters, lined with moss and overflowing with unusual plants, were made from old bicycle wheels and chains. Most of the people of Shantytown were riding bicycles, though a few were walking to their destinations.

"Wow, this is really pretty," said Kevin. "I always avoided coming here because the people are so different, but this is really pretty."

"When I first came to the Garden District," Elin said, "I thought the people living there were really different. But I wouldn't have wanted to miss seeing the beautiful flowers, or meeting the people who live there."

"I see your point," Kevin responded.

Elin thought Tanasha was unusually quiet for a six-year-old; but, then, holding onto the swerving bicycle was a task that pretty much took most of her concentration, and all of her tiny muscles. Elin also thought Tanasha might be feeling a little hurt, since she knew her brother resented having her along.

Since Elin, Kate, and Ashbe were expected back at their homes for midday meal, the group didn't have time for more exploring today; however, Kate and Elin

were planning to come back for another visit the next morning. Ashbe had already made plans to go fishing with a friend.

The next day, hoping to better make friends with Tanasha, Elin brought her a purple Freddy Hare. At first, Tanasha didn't want to take the stuffed hare; she wasn't really supposed to accept expensive gifts from people who were not her parents. However, Elin urged with, "I want him to have a good home; and I have another one, so he's like a spare, or a surplus." Smiling, Tanasha accepted the gift and right away named the spare hare, Sir Plus.

Kevin ended up being in somewhat of a bad mood again today because of something that had happened the afternoon before. Tanasha had gone into Shantytown when her brother wasn't paying attention, and one of the Bicycle People had put training wheels on her bike to help keep her steady while she learned to ride.

"But isn't that a good thing?" Kate asked.

"If my parents knew she went there by herself, I'd be in big trouble," Kevin responded.

"I told the boy in Shantytown I would come back sometime," Tanasha said. "He's my friend."

"Not if I don't approve of him," Kevin said.

"Then you need to meet him," Tanasha responded.

"I'll agree to go," Kevin said, "if you promise never to go there by yourself again."

Shrugging her shoulders in a nonchalant manner, Tanasha agreed. "Okay."

Setting off right away (but not before Tanasha had securely tucked Sir Plus into her bicycle basket), the

group was soon introduced to Zazu, a boy a year younger than Kevin and Elin. Zazu's father ran one of the many bicycle workshops of Shantytown, and the family lived in the back of the large cabin housing the shop. Elin was pleased that several Idos residents, not recognizable as either Bicycle People or Umbrella People, came in while they were visiting the workshop. It seemed not everyone avoided Shantytown.

"No, you don't need to pay for the training wheels," Zazu stated when Kevin offered. "But you could tell me the best place in the Garden District to buy a large umbrella. I could use some shade when I work on bicycles outside."

"I could do you one better than that," Kevin said. "We have loads of extras. We could bring one by tomorrow," he added, with Tanasha nodding earnestly.

Since his father was there to mind the shop, Zazu took a break to sit with his new friends at a table outside. His mother brought refreshments of frosted lakó cakes and orange fizz juice out to them.

In talking to Zazu, Elin discovered that many of the kids of Shantytown didn't go to school and were educated at home in a manner similar to her self studies. A windmill made from old bicycles and situated next to the cabin made faint whistling noises to accompany their conversation.

Elin was again fascinated with the bicycles. "We only have tricycles where I'm from," she told Zazu.

Two days after Kevin and Tanasha delivered a large patio umbrella to their new friend, the group all went fishing together. It was right after a rain, and

Elin expected the river to be muddy; but it wasn't, the water was completely clear.

Tanasha had never been fishing and she turned out to be very good at it. Her umbrella was attached to a shoulder harness, leaving her hands completely free. She especially loved showing her catches to Sir Plus, who had come on the trip to cheer her on. Zazu caught the largest fish of the group, and Elin took a snap of him holding his catch. On this day, they all brought fish home to have for evening meal, but only the exact numbers and sizes allowed by the rules set up to govern fishing in the region.

As a surprise for Elin's thirteenth birthday, Nachim secretly commissioned a bicycle from Zazu. Nachim also had her children's bicycles refurbished at the same time because they were coming home for good the following week. (The end of their school year fell two weeks later than the schools in Idos.) Elin was pleased to learn to ride the bicycle in two days. She was particularly happy that she hadn't needed training wheels because that would have been slightly embarrassing, to have to use an aid designed for little children.

Elin accompanied Nachim to Bastaya to pick up Macyn and Cas. The cove she had remembered as perfectly round was slightly less so on this trip, and Elin was surprised that erosion could work such wonders in less than a year.

Macyn and Cas settled in well when they got back to the farm. Though they had enjoyed staying with their aunt and uncle, they were definitely ready to be home again.

After two solid years of abundant crops, the farm continued to prosper. With the pigs and edgits all healthy, the future promised to be good as well.

When winter rolled around, and the kids of Idos were full into their next year of school, Elin found herself not only doing self study, but also studying with Cas and Macyn at the farmhouse each day when they came home from school. She was eager to learn more about Koltémin, as far as its geography, cultures, and history. She also studied art.

In continuing to visit Kevin, Tanasha, and Zazu, Elin made even more friends in both the Garden District and Shantytown. Nachim made several trips with Elin to the Garden District in order to trade seeds and bulbs with some of the residents.

Chapter Ten

The Gingerbread Factory

Spring found Elin visiting a school on the far side of Idos. Though it took a long time to reach by scooter, the trip was definitely worth it because the school library was so extensive. Don Serapim had once taught at the school and had arranged special library privileges for Elin.

In addition to the abundant reference materials, the library was also home to the detention classes of the school; and Elin was surprised to discover that most of the kids were there not because they were troublemakers, but because they had been sleeping in class.

As Elin visited the school over the next couple of weeks, this continued to be true; and it seemed the same dozen or so kids were always the ones in detention. Her curiosity peaked as to why these particular kids couldn't stay awake in class, Elin made a point of having midday meal with two of the more outgoing girls. However, when it came to the subject of why they were sleeping in class, Elin's new friends were not at all interested in sharing information.

A week later, after two more tries to get Alana and Rosie to talk during midday meal, Elin still couldn't get anything out of them, so she opted for a different strategy. On her next visit to the library, instead of coming early, she came in the afternoon, in order to be

able to follow the girls when they left the school at the end of the day.

Discretely tailing a group of the kids from detention, Elin felt a little like Coco Winterset, the girl detective from a mystery book series she was fond of.

Elin was surprised when the group ahead of her entered the gates leading to a gingerbread factory. Intent on following, she parked her scooter beside the gate; but before she could go in, she was stopped by Riley, one of the boys from detention, who had been following her. Grabbing her arm somewhat roughly, he told her, “Don’t go in there; don’t ever go in there!” Letting her arm go, he entered the gate, shooting a warning glare back at Elin as he quickened his pace to catch up to his friends who were just entering the factory.

The next morning in the library, Elin took a seat at a table as close to the detention section as possible, where she tried to get Riley’s attention. Alana and Rosie were tossing frightened looks at her, and Elin couldn’t understand why. If this group of kids worked in a factory after school, why were they all acting so weird, like it was some sort of big secret and they were scared of anyone finding out? But they seemed way more upset than just being worried about someone finding out.

Since it was obvious Elin wasn’t going to go away, Riley finally told her, “We’ll talk at midday break.”

While they were having their meal, Alana finally confessed, “We work there every day after school until midnight.”

“Why such a long shift?” Elin asked.

After a lengthy pause, Rosie was the one who quietly answered, “Our parents all work late shifts at their jobs, so they don’t even know we’re not at home.”

Taking a pause of her own to consider Rosie’s words, Elin finally said, “That didn’t really answer my question.”

When no one responded right away, Elin added, “Look, I won’t be trying to take any of your jobs. I live and work on a farm, and I’m busy with other things too. I don’t want to work in your factory.”

“We don’t want to work there either,” Riley said, with obvious anger in his voice.

Elin was just starting to ask what he meant when Alana interrupted with, “You can’t tell anyone we work there or we’ll be in a lot of trouble!” She said this almost frantically, and her voice shook.

Not quite knowing what to say, Elin slowly addressed Riley. “If you don’t want to work there, why don’t you quit?”

“We can’t,” he responded, rather shortly.

“We have to work there,” Alana said.

After another really long pause to think, it finally dawned on Elin. “Someone is forcing you to work there.”

Rosie was the one who admitted this as she softly said, “Yes.”

“They can’t force kids to work,” Elin said. “Do you even get paid?”

“No, we don’t get paid,” Riley said.

“Tell the police,” Elin replied. “Why haven’t you gone to the police?” When she got no response, Elin said determinedly, “I’ll go to the police.”

“No!” Alana was so upset, her voice squeaked as she spoke. “You don’t understand. Others are in there right now.”

“And if we tell anyone,” Rosie interjected, “they’ll get hurt.”

“My cousin is in there right now,” Riley said. “His parents work during the day, so they don’t know he’s at the factory. And he does home study, so he’s not missed from school either.”

Elin was starting to figure everything out, even with limited information. “So whoever is forcing you to work in the factory has carefully picked kids for each shift by knowing about their family activities.” Seeing that she was on target, Elin continued. “There are always some kids in the factory at all times, like overlapping shifts. And they’ve threatened to hurt the ones inside if someone outside tells.”

“Exactly,” Riley answered.

“Then we just have to find some way to get everyone out at once,” Elin said. “What about a fire exercise?” She was remembering the training she had participated in the previous week, when everyone had had to file in a quiet and orderly manner out of the library upon hearing the alarm signals.

“They’re too smart for that,” Rosie replied.

“In other words,” Alana added, “we already tried.”

“The shift right now is the largest one,” Riley said. “A lot of the kids are from Shantytown and the Garden

District. They do home study so they aren't missed from school."

"Ours is the smallest shift," Alana said.

Since their midday meal was coming to an end, Riley swore Elin to secrecy about their problem.

Elin agreed, but told him, "I'll keep quiet for right now, but I can't promise not to tell forever."

As she scooted home, Elin thought, *There has to be something we can do to get everyone out at once.* Her mind awhirl, she had a pretty good plan started in her brain by the time she reached the farm.

Later, when Elin was dozing off to sleep, her mind recalled a bad dream she had had once, long ago, about kids who were forced to work in a tastycake factory. She couldn't believe this situation was so similar to her dream. *I thought Bryce might have the gift of prophecy, she thought, but I wonder now if maybe I do.* Magical gifts often took a long time to fully develop in individuals, so it might be many years before she would have an answer to this question.

The next day, Elin shared her plan with Riley, Alana, and Rosie who actually thought it might work.

The gingerbread factory was fairly famous for wafer biscuits and thaz-chews, along with its many gingerbread creatures and characters, so the foremen were always giving tours. Since her new friends agreed that she could let a few others in on the secret in order to carry out the plan, Elin got together with Kevin and Zazu. Joie and Dane from Shantytown, along with Cameron of the Garden District, were also eager to help. Riley, Alana, and Rosie made sure the

other twelve kids working their shift were aware of the plan.

The evening shift was in full swing when Elin, Cameron, Kevin, and Don Serapim arrived at the factory requesting a tour. Elin felt it would be safer for the tour group to have a grown-up along. However, since she agreed with Riley that an adult would be more likely to go to the police right away, she only told Don Serapim that she and her friends wanted to tour the factory.

Kevin and Cameron had brought huge umbrellas with them into the factory, and this was a large part of their plan. Since the Umbrella People were not only sensitive to sunlight, but bright artificial lights as well, they would need to use their umbrellas inside the well-lit factory.

All of the hostage kids worked in the thaz-chews section of the factory, though in the back area, so passing tours wouldn't be able to notice that there were children working in the factory. Elin asked a couple of questions of the tour guide to delay their stay in the thaz-chews section so that a planned diversion by Cameron and Kevin could begin at a specific time. Upon Elin's signal of bending down to retie her shoe, Kevin accidentally knocked into Cameron, who lost his balance. With a large umbrella adding weight to his lurch, Cameron staggered violently sideways, directly crashing into a stack of empty packing cartons. When Cameron's umbrella went flying, along with many of the cartons, Kevin rushed toward his friend in an attempt to cover him with his own umbrella. However, he ended up knocking into Cameron again, who again

did the lurch and stagger routine, this time upsetting a huge vat of flour. As Elin went flying after the escaped umbrella, Don Serapim had a coughing fit from the cloud of flour. With the foreman engaged in ordering workers about for the clean-up process, and in getting a glass of water for Don Serapim, Riley and his fellow hostages had plenty of time to break a lock on a side door in order to exit the factory. Joie, Dane, and Zazu were waiting outside with three six-seater bicycles so that the group could escape quickly.

Don Serapim was a little wiser than Elin gave him credit for, and he definitely knew his charges were up to something. However, he didn't have any reason to think it was something bad, which is why he had pretended to have a coughing fit, in order to help them with whatever they were doing. After leisurely finishing his glass of water, in order to delay further, he asked the foreman for extra sample boxes, not for himself, but for his sick nephew.

By the time the tour group exited the factory, the escapees on bicycles had made it to Zazu's home, where they informed his parents of what was going on. By the time Don Serapim pulled up in his sailbus, the police were already on their way.

A short while later, the factory owner and eight foremen were arrested.

As it turns out, several of the forced-labor kids were from a community of traveling artists, craftsmen, and entertainers living in the dense forest on the outskirts of Idos, just beyond the grounds of the gingerbread factory. The parents of Hanah and Xavier were so happy that Elin had helped their children, they

invited her for a visit to their home, which was actually a large tent. With the exception of two warehouse-like buildings that housed several families each, most of the people of the forest community lived in tents because they traveled so much. This reminded Elin of the gypsies that set up their temporary tent communities when passing through Enikora every few months or so.

The residents of the forest community were often called Pinecone People because they collected pinecones to make candles, bird feeders, and such like. They also made things out of pine needles like baskets, trivets, hats, and even jewelry. In truth, the forest dwellers were experts at many arts, and were specialists in crafting musical instruments; but since many of their wares had pinecone and pine tree motifs, the Pinecone People nickname was fairly accurate. During her visit, Elin was given a handwoven blanket with a pinecone design as a gift.

Over the next several weeks, Hanah and Elin became great friends. Hanah loved visiting the farm. Likewise, Elin loved spending time in the forest while learning to make pine needle baskets and play the dulcimer, a favorite among the Pinecone People.

In describing the activities to her mother during one of their quiet times, Elin said, “The Pinecone People don’t use magic for their art, or for growing bigger pinecones, or for travel. Pretty neat, huh?”

“It’s wonderful, and exactly as it should be,” her mother responded.

“It’s just as you said,” Elin replied, “some things are better there.”

Chapter Eleven

Basement, Forest, and Rooftop Art

Just before Bryce's ninth birthday, his health suddenly slipped again. Matar was planning another tower party for him, but much smaller in scale than the one two years before. As it turns out, nineteen of the hospital children who had attended the previous party had already died. However, the smaller event was not necessarily due to that, but more because Matar was afraid the excitement would be too much of a strain on Bryce's health.

Two days before the party, very early in the morning, Detective Bellin made a visit to the tower to give Matar an update on the stolen fiddle. He had had no luck in tracking it down, so there was no news; but he actually wanted to talk to Bryce, and the fiddle gave him a reason to do so. While at first dismissing the coincidence of the string art picture being very similar to the stolen painting, with no luck in solving the robbery-murder case, Bellin was now inclined to chase every lead, even remote ones.

Arriving at the tower before sunup, he waited a short while to observe the household activities. One of the gardeners arrived at first light, just as Matar was leaving to finalize some of the plans for the party.

Congratulating himself on his perfect timing, Bellin hurried through the lawns to the side entrance.

“But she’s out for an hour,” the gardener told Bellin.

“I don’t mind waiting for her,” he responded.

“Suits me, if it suits you,” the man replied, as he called one of the house staff to show Bellin to the common living area of the tower where Bryce was just beginning self study for the day.

Bellin was a master of wooing and manipulating people, and within ten minutes, he was easily able to make Bryce trust him and confide in him.

“I saw the painting in the basement,” Bryce admitted. “Do you want to see it?”

“Yes, please,” Bellin responded.

However, after leading the detective through many twists and turns in the labyrinth, upon finally reaching the small chamber where he remembered seeing the painting, Bryce found the room to be completely empty.

“Well, this is where I saw it,” he told Bellin. “But that was some time ago. Maybe my mother sold it.”

“I can see why you like to come down here,” Bellin said, as they were leaving the basement. “It would help me to think if I had a place like this to roam.”

A short while later, after briefly telling Matar that there were no solid leads yet in her case, Bellin left. Having not actually found the stolen painting, he felt the need to proceed with caution which, for Bellin, often meant biding his time while he formulated a strategy.

By the time Elin turned fourteen, she was spending eight and nine hours a day in Koltémin, and sometimes

more when she lost track of time and stayed to finish projects.

The week following her birthday, Elin was happily packed into the sailbus with Nachim, Criike, Gruner, Cas, and Macyn. Hanah and Xavier had invited many of their friends to their annual Fall Art Carnival in the forest.

Since those attending were from all sections of the city, Elin observed many miscellaneous Idos residents mixing with people toting umbrellas and riding bicycles. As she strolled about, people-watching, Elin thought, *I wonder if the segregation of Idos is exaggerated.*

With everyone mingling and getting along, Elin suddenly realized that her mind had made the separations within the city into something negative, when it probably wasn't. And the longer she pondered, the more she thought that it was super cool to be part of a community with all these different sections. To live a distinctively different lifestyle than others could be considered very fashionable. In living on a farm, Elin herself was part of a unique and separate culture of the Idos community. *I wonder if anyone calls us Farm People,* she thought. *That would be fine by me. I love farm living.*

In touring the many booths of the fair, Elin was astounded by the quantity and variety of folk art. "My mother would go crazy here," she told Nachim. "She wouldn't be able to carry all of her purchases; she would have to hire a truck."

As Elin admired a wind charm made of glass, the man who had made it told her, "When the wind plays a

certain song on it, the charm can grant wishes.” With a mischievous glint in his eyes, he added in a sly whisper, “But no one knows what the song is.”

Elin was sly enough herself to recognize that the song was probably only a myth. However, she was starting to understand that the type of magic present on Koltémin was mostly the kind made of myth and mystery, which could give people hope, and make them wonder, and possibly help them work harder to achieve their goals. *Mystery magic is much better than actual magic*, Elin decided.

Hanah was showing an art project in the fair, and Elin was fascinated by the piece, which was an ensemble of unique objects sitting on a large pedestal. The items on display included a tiny chair beside an even tinier piano with tools sitting on its bench, and a huge toothbrush sticking out of an enormous coffee cup sitting next to a gigantic bar of soap. Hanah had fashioned the items out of forest materials, such as berries and twigs, and had done this so skillfully that everything looked very real. “It’s called *Elf Housesitting for a Giant While Mending a Pixie’s Piano*,” Hanah told Elin.

“It’s amazing,” Elin said. “I can’t believe it only won second place,” she added, indicating the red medal hanging from the pedestal. A sand painting of a basket of pinecones had won first.

“I’m plenty happy with my prize,” Hanah replied. She felt the sand painting more than deserved the blue medal.

Next, Hanah and Elin enjoyed a carnival treat of buttered pickles as they admired other art pieces.

Because she helped so much with chores on the farm, Elin had been getting an allowance like Cas and Macyn, and she bought a pair of striped socks and a sweater.

Nachim considered purchasing a knitting machine, but felt it was a little pricy, so she opted for a rag rug instead. “I’ll just keep knitting the old-fashioned way for now,” she said.

Wide-eyed, as he listened to the man giving the sales spiel, Criike ended up buying a wooden squirrel oven rack puller-pusher for his wife. “Just hold onto his tail, flip him upside down and use the notch behind his ears to pull the rack out. Then flip him back and use the mouth notch to push the rack back in. It’s perfect if you don’t have an oven mitt handy and need to check on something.”

Macyn bought a pair of Borkie Bears to add to her collection.

Cas ended up playing a few carnival games, while saving most of his allowance for an upcoming book fair.

The group had midday meal on blankets while listening to a man and a woman giving a dulcimer storytelling performance. Elin was mesmerized by the story of twin brothers who really had a triplet sister in secret because she had to be hidden away for her own safety due to the maliciousness of an evil aunt. The magpie of the story didn’t collect shiny things; instead, he collected secrets, and he was intent on giving away the sister’s whereabouts. However, thanks to twin shell-shaped message containers, which got mixed up, he ended up giving away the wrong secret and causing

an accident for the evil aunt. When other fanciful things were added to the tale such as a tiny sailing ship worn on a man's head like a hat, and a tree in the red forest that dispensed layer cakes and soft pretzels like it was dropping leaves, the story listeners were held captive for an entire hour.

After the story, Elin toured several booths full of gorgeous pottery. As artistic as the Pinecone People were in their crafts, Elin was just as pleased to meet the Saucer People. She had heard about this group of artists from Don Serapim. They lived in the exclusive Art District of downtown Idos. In their many rooftop studios, the potters made vessels of all kinds including bowls, basins, crocks, saucers, pitchers, and urns. Many of the artists also did sculptures. Elin and Don Serapim had long planned a visit to the Art District since many of the studios were open to visitors; however, because he had been traveling a lot of late, they just hadn't gotten there yet.

This was perhaps Elin's favorite part of the fair, because the art was so useful. Many of the crocks and saucers were affordable, though a few were ultra expensive. And though she would have liked to have owned a piece of the exquisite pottery, Elin decided she was plenty happy with her socks and sweater. They were going to be especially useful with winter coming up. Perhaps she could save up to buy a saucer later, when visiting the Art District with Don Serapim.

In lingering to admire the pottery, Elin met a girl her own age working at one of the booths. Keri was very friendly. "My ancestors shipped their saucers to many international destinations," she told Elin. "Some

were even used by ancient kings, for their pet horned lions to drink from.”

Elin was amazed. She was familiar with horned lions, though they were currently only creatures of storybooks, since no one on Tanamez had seen one in centuries.

As it turns out, Elin wasn't going to have to wait to make a visit to the Art District with Don Serapim because Keri invited her to visit her family's studio.

Two days later, Elin happily followed Keri up the stairs to the rooftop of her apartment building. Four studios occupied this particular rooftop.

Elin spent a full day with her new friends, and she got to make a saucer. “I'll fire it for you,” Keri told her, “and you can pick it up next week.”

When Elin came to pick up the saucer, she discovered that Keri and her mother were on their way to visit a local healer because Keri had a cough.

“Would it be okay if I come along?” Elin asked.

Keri's mother agreed.

In the same way that teachers of the region were called don, healers were given the title of varr. Varr Yulas worked in a local clinic. But since this was his day off, they went to his apartment, in a building down the street from Keri's home. Varr Yulas often helped out his neighbors, especially friends. He was a potter too; but since he didn't have his own studio, he sometimes used Keri's family's kiln.

Elin was very quiet during the visit; she didn't want to interrupt. And having not been around much medicine or healing in her life, she was in awe, and completely speechless, not sure of what to say, or ask.

Elin thought her reaction to meeting Varr Yulas was very odd because she would have thought she could come up with at least a thousand questions for a healer, having never met one before. The couple of times her mother had tracked down a healer to try to help Bryce, Elin had not gone with them to the appointments. Bottles of herbs and strange-looking tablets lined the shelves of a huge bookcase in Varr Yulas's living room. Having never seen pills, Elin would have thought the medicine was candy. The healer gave Keri an herb to steep in water and drink three times a day. "That should take care of the cough," he said, as they were leaving.

Having not been able to speak, Elin hoped she could visit the healer again sometime. *I could write down some questions, she thought, so I won't forget if I get speechless again.*

Meanwhile, back in Enikora, Detective Bellin had finally gotten something out of Valas Rodo, though the story was almost unbelievable. Yet, Bellin found himself believing it. For all of his years of experience, Bellin could tell when someone was telling the truth. He knew at least that Valas Rodo believed in his own words, and this added weight toward Bellin believing them too. Bellin was also certain that this man had a magical gift, though he couldn't pinpoint the nature of the gift as yet.

Chapter Twelve

The Glasshouse Incident

In the winter, when things were fairly quiet on the farm, Nachim took Elin, Macyn, and Cas to the cheesery in Dubovos. After doing a bit of trading of edgit cheeses and creams for cow cheeses and creams, they toured the farm. Elin was fascinated with the cows that were all mixed up as far as their colors and markings. This was much different than the dairies on Tanamez that generally had herds of nearly identical cows.

The cheesery kept a few horses too, which were slightly smaller than those on Tanamez, and Elin recalled reading about the early horses of Koltémin in one of Macyn's schoolbooks. Called the dawning horse, the creature was tiny and ran on its toes to make less noise and thus avoid attracting predators. The horse's toes had eventually become one toe, with a hard nail which then became the hoof. The horse remained somewhat small throughout the evolutionary process, even when eventually domesticated, mainly for farm use.

Though springtime was busy on the farm, the kids still had time for play. When Cas and Macyn were very young, they used to dare each other to run in and out of the old glasshouse, even though they were forbidden to do so. This probably hadn't posed much danger to them, since it had taken over twenty years

for forty or so roof panels to fall, and the other forty or so would likely take almost as long to come down. As they grew older, Cas and Macyn no longer set dares for one another; however, they did enjoy exploring in the ruins of the growing house where they were sometimes able to find wild cloudberry, unusual bird nests, and patches of five-leaf clover.

A fox had recently made her den in the rubble of the glasshouse. Very early one morning, observing that the mother fox had left her den, Macyn and Cas snuck inside to see the baby foxes. They didn't plan to get too close, they just wanted to peek at the youngsters. Remembering Nachim's rule about not going into the glasshouse, Elin was reluctant to enter. But since she really did want to see the baby foxes, she eventually allowed Cas and Macyn to coax her in.

The foxes of Koltémin were slightly larger and darker than those of Tanamez, but the kittens were born a very pale gold color for camouflage. According to Cas and Macyn, they wouldn't darken until late summer. Elin had already observed that the behavior of foxes around the farm was exactly the same as the foxes that visited the gardens around the tower. They loved to poop on anything and everything, and especially things that had been moved or changed. If a rock was moved or a bench painted, a fox was sure to poop on it. Elin wasn't sure if this was a sign of protest, re-marking of territory, or if the foxes simply wanted people to know that they observed the changes.

The behavior of buzzbirds was also similar. Listening to the giggles and squeaks of a pair zipping and zooming around the glasshouse, Elin was

reminded of those she often watched during strolls through the tower gardens.

Though no ceiling bits fell in on them, Cas unfortunately got a cut on his calf from a glass shard sticking out of a pile of debris that he hadn't noticed because the pile had clumps of grass growing up around it.

They rushed back to the house where Elin treated the cut with cleansing cream, pressure, and a styptic pencil before applying a bandage. She knew to do this because Nachim had once treated a cut on Elin's knee this way. However, Cas's cut was much larger, which frightened Elin. She didn't want to tell Nachim because they weren't supposed to be playing in the glasshouse. She wasn't afraid of getting into trouble, she more felt terribly guilty. There weren't very many rules on the farm, and Elin couldn't believe she had broken one. She was slightly older than Macyn and a lot older than Cas; she should have been able to talk them out of mischief. And she certainly had enough sense and willpower to keep from doing dangerous things for no good reason. The three agreed not to tell Nachim, for the time being. Cas mostly wore long pants in the springtime anyway, so his mother was unlikely to notice the bandage.

Unfortunately, the next day, the cut became swollen and red. Resolved to try one more thing before telling Nachim, Elin and Cas scooted to the Art District very early the following morning. Thank goodness Varr Yulas hadn't left for work yet. After only a brief examination of Cas's leg, he set to work

mixing ingredients from his many bottles and jars in a stone bowl.

Elin had been thinking about the healer a lot lately because she was again wondering if Bryce could somehow be healed on Koltémin. But she couldn't ask questions today because they needed to take care of Cas's leg.

As she watched Varr Yulas clean the cut, Elin started thinking about the dragons of Tanamez. Her musing was interrupted when she saw a tiny ball of light, no larger than a pea, appear next to the left shoulder of the healer. "What is that?" she asked. (Today, fortunately, Elin was able to speak in the presence of the healer.)

"It is a tool given to all healers when they graduate and take their oaths," Varr Yulas answered. "We call it a Pocket Dragon because the original light was a gift from the dragons of old. It's basically a reference guide," he further explained. "Healers can ask questions of the light, and the answers generally pop into our heads. Since it's not only a medical tool, but also a source of wisdom, we sometimes call it a Capsule of Wisdom."

Elin was ordinarily very careful about letting information about Tanamez slip to strangers; however, today she wasn't thinking, and she said, "The Mythmakers where I'm from didn't make enough dragons. And the dragons didn't want to help people."

"I'm familiar with Mythmakers and their creations," the healer answered, adding with a smile, "but a dragon won't be needed today because I can easily treat this infection."

Cas had never heard of Mythmakers, so Elin tried to explain. “Mythmakers were powerful, wizard-like beings who could create magical creatures and scenarios just by thinking them up. It’s like they could tell stories that would come to life and become completely real. Fablemasters worked with the Mythmakers,” she added. “They had the power to control the creations of the Mythmakers. But they could not control dragons. Plus, the dragons ended up leaving.”

“There are none left here either,” Varr Yulas told them, “at least, none that I know of. But dragons were always more teachers and advisors. Even in times of old, rarely did dragons do any healing because they wanted us to learn. They did not want to just do for us. I agree with that. I believe people need to rely more on learning and doing, and less on magic.”

With a small package of medicine, and full follow-up instructions drilled into them, Elin and Cas happily left the home of the healer to return to the farm, where they proceeded to tell Nachim everything that had happened.

She wasn’t angry; but she did make Elin, Macyn, and Cas swear to tell her immediately if they were ever injured again in any way. They agreed. As she gave them all hugs, Nachim said in relief, “I’m just glad nothing worse happened.” A few moments later, she added, “And this has made me resolved to get the restoration of the glasshouse under way. As well as the farm is doing, we can definitely afford it; and we’ll certainly enjoy having fresh vegetables in winter.”

Elin found herself again hoping to bring her brother to Koltémin. With Pocket Dragons at the disposal of the healers, surely something could be done for Bryce. During their next quiet time, Elin talked to her mother about this. Matar agreed that Bryce could go, but not until summer because it would take several weeks to modify the cart so that he too could use it for travel. Overjoyed by the thought of Bryce getting to see a skilled healer, Elin fell asleep with a huge smile on her face.

The next day marked another visit to the tower by Detective Bellin, who asked to see Matar privately in her study because he didn't want Bryce to overhear the conversation. He felt the time was right to confront Matar about the stolen painting. Professor Barlo was also visiting the tower. Something in Bellin's manner slightly alarmed him, and he insisted on staying with Matar.

Matar had never told Professor Barlo about her quest for the healing painting, or what had resulted from her actions. However, he was not nearly as shocked as Bellin was when Matar confessed everything. Since the painting was no longer in her possession, and the Hunter and his associate were both dead, Bellin could not have proved anything. Confused, he chalked her confession up to feelings of guilt, since she clearly wasn't a typical murderer.

"But I want you to give me two months," Matar pleaded with Bellin, "to arrange for my children to live with relatives. Then I'll sign the confession."

In the same way Matar wasn't a typical murderer, Bellin wasn't a typical detective, and he instinctively

knew there was much more going on with this family than either Matar or Professor Barlo was letting on.

After a very long pause to consider everything, Bellin told Matar, “I’ll agree if you tell me everything, right here and now.”

“I would,” Matar answered, “but you might not believe it.”

“You might be surprised what I believe these days,” he answered.

Since it was certainly in her best interest to be given two months’ reprieve, Matar didn’t hesitate long before telling Bellin that Tanamez was set to fall into darkness in roughly three years’ time. “The fiddle I made was a Curse Blocker, but it was too late to stop the curse,” she added.

Professor Barlo was about to confirm what was being said when both he and Matar were shocked into silence by the abrupt departure of Detective Bellin. He just up and left, with only a short farewell nod to them.

After a confused moment of pause, Matar asked, “What just happened?”

“You just confessed to a murder,” Professor Barlo answered, “in front of a police detective, who left without arresting you.”

Bellin didn’t need any more information from Matar at this time, which is why he had left. He knew of the approaching Endtime because Valas Rodo had basically told him the same thing, and had given him the same target date as Matar had. Anxious to talk to Valas again, Bellin hurried to Police Holding.

Matar and Professor Barlo had planned to spend their time and resources looking for escape doorways

during the remaining three years of life on Tanamez. Now, of course, Matar believed she would be spending her time in prison instead. But at this time, she couldn't think about either doorway quests or incarceration because she needed to concentrate on getting her children to safety.

Chapter Thirteen

Revelations

Bellin was in the process of making a bargain with Valas Rodo who had confessed his magical gift of prophecy and the exact nature of his project to Bellin, in exchange for the detective's help in saving his family from the approaching Endtime. Bellin himself had loved ones he wanted to save, and this was part of the bargain.

Bellin would be having the final tattoo needed to finish Valas Rodo's project inked onto his own shoulder. But they would wait to harvest the skin and create the doorway until very close to the Endtime. Based on sunrise-to-sunrise magic, the passage would only stay open for one day. As penance for his murders, Valas Rodo would be staying on Tanamez. This was his own idea, which Bellin again chalked up to feelings of guilt. Nearer to the time the passage would be opened, Bellin hoped to convince others to go through as well. The doorway couldn't be advertised too early because it would probably incite panic and mayhem. However, Bellin was hopeful that careful timing and planning would lead to others being able to escape at that time. Since there was no way to know where the doorway would lead, entering would be a risk; but it would be better than no chance of survival at all.

Having been given the specifics of the skin art he needed to get, on his way to the ink salon, Bellin again visited Matar to tell her that he would not be arresting her, or revealing her crime to others. In exchange for this, he made her promise to use any and all magical resources available to her to look for escape passages during the next three years. He also asked to be kept informed of her progress.

She agreed with his terms.

A few days after Bryce's tenth birthday, Matar told Elin that Bryce could now travel to Koltémin, but that they must both stay forever and never return to Tanamez.

Elin had somehow expected this, though she couldn't have known why until her mother and Professor Barlo told both her and Bryce the entire truth.

"When the curse was born, Tanamez had only six years and forty-two days before darkness was set to fall," Matar said. "There are only three years left now," she added.

"The fiddle was too late to stop the curse," the professor told them, "because Tor Venyen knew of the existence of Sages, Bajns, and Curse Blockers. He was very skilled and took steps to deceive as far as the arrival date of the curse, by one month, which means the curse was born right about the time of Bryce's seventh birthday party, not after, as we had thought. He basically created a curse destined to be born prematurely, like an early baby."

"Since we couldn't use the fiddle to block the curse," Matar added, "we sent it through the cart as a

test when we were originally modifying the passage. It is probably somewhere in Koltémin; we just don't know where. I filed the report of the stolen fiddle as show, so we could invent an important reason for you to go to Koltémin," she told Elin. "Even though your time there would not stop the curse, I wanted you to make a life there, and friends, so that you and Bryce could go to Koltémin to live before our world ends. I'm sure Nachim will want both you and Bryce to live on the farm."

Elin was certain of this as well.

Matar and Professor Barlo had been able to modify the cart to allow others to use it. However, because the gypsy fiddle had previously passed through, and because it was an incredibly powerful magical object created by a specific person, passage would be limited to only blood relatives of Matar. As her only other family, Uncle Hirem, Linca, and Lowel would be going along with Elin and Bryce. But no others would be able to use the cart as a means of escape from Tanamez.

Elin was able to make arrangements fairly quickly for her uncle and cousins to stay with Don Serapim for a time, while making a new home for themselves on Koltémin. Nachim, of course, was happy to have Bryce join the family. She already considered Elin to be a daughter and was overjoyed at the thought of having another son as well.

Less than a week after Bryce and Elin learned the whole truth, the family assembled in the tower, ready for final departure to Koltémin. By this time, Elin had already taken a few treasured items through for each

family member, but not many because they had decided to travel light. They were taking nothing magical at all, in case magic might possibly interfere with the function of the cart. Elin hadn't needed much to make a life in a new place; likely, her family wouldn't either. As part of the modification, the cart would not disappear entirely from the tower until Elin herself entered it. The passage would simply send the others without traveling itself. Also as part of the modification, Elin would be going through last of the group, which would officially end the function of the cart as a passage.

No matter how much Elin and Bryce pleaded with their mother, Matar refused to go with them to Koltémin. Not only did she think of this as penance for her crime, she also wanted to stay in order to help Professor Barlo search for other doorways.

"I'll always be with you because the fiddle is there somewhere," Matar told Elin. "Maybe you could look for it sometime."

Saying goodbye to her mother was difficult, but Elin knew she had to. Matar and Professor Barlo gave the tearful Elin an encouraging smile as she slid the door of the cold compartment closed for the final time.

As the cart disappeared forever, Matar collapsed to the floor in agony; and even with the professor's help, it took a long while for her to gain enough strength to leave Elin's bedroom.

When Elin was a mere three years old, her mother recognized the magical gift her daughter possessed—that of being able to make anything she could imagine come into being. After lengthy discussions with

Professor Barlo, Matar decided never to disclose the nature of Elin's abilities to her.

The gift would probably take all of her lifetime to master. Even at her present age, Elin could not create things simply by willing them into being. Her gift currently worked on a slower level than it would in the future when she would fully be able to master it, so she could not yet make things she was thinking of simply appear in front of her. Rather, her actions and influences ended up gradually forcing the magic to bring things such as animals, trees, canyons, structures, people, books, and anything else she was thinking of into being.

Matar and Professor Barlo had thought it would take Elin the full six years to create her new home and everything in it; this was why they sent her through the passage so early. But it had only taken her three years because her gift was more powerful than either of them had imagined. They had marveled at her progress. Even early in her travels to Koltémin, she was able to make the air fresher and the river clearer very quickly. Later, as more of her new world came into being, she was able to take a situation stemming from a bad dream (the gingerbread factory scenario) and think her way out of it in an incredibly short time.

In not telling Elin about her abilities, Matar and Professor Barlo hoped that by the time she recognized her gift, she would have gained the wisdom to control it and use it only for good.

"There will still be some magic in her world," Professor Barlo told Matar, "because she doesn't know a world without it."

“Yes,” Matar replied, “but there will be less, and hopefully the magic that does exist will be the right kind, to do some good, instead of evil.”

They both agreed that Koltémin would probably have a bright future, as far as worlds go.

“You told her to look for the gypsy fiddle,” the professor remarked. “She’ll never find it because it doesn’t exist anymore. It became the magical void in which she created Koltémin.”

“But if she thinks it’s there,” Matar answered, “she might have the power to create another one.”

Chapter Fourteen

The End and the Beginning

Matar telling Elin that her final trip through the passage was the last trip anyone could take actually made it so. Elin always believed her mother, so she had no reason to doubt that this was true. Thus, Elin's own mind rendered the cart permanently useless as a passage.

Matar wanted that doorway closed early because she was afraid something evil would follow her children to Koltémin. There were so many clever and powerful mages; and she feared someone might find a means by which others, not of her bloodline, would be able to pass through.

It was fortunate for Matar that Professor Barlo was one of the highest ranking members of the Kivuli because they were only four months behind Bellin in their investigations, and they immediately began planning her demise upon discovering that she was responsible for the death of the owner of the winterscape painting. Professor Barlo told them that Matar was currently working on an extremely important Curse Blocker, and he was able to convince his associates to delay their actions against her for three years. They agreed. By that time, Tanamez would have already fallen into darkness; and since Matar was determined to stay, whether other doorways

could be found or not, the professor felt the reprieve was just.

Not quite three years after Elin and Bryce were in Koltémin permanently, Elin found herself thinking about the hot-and-cold cart, still sitting in the barn. She knew the passage would not work anymore with a person inside because she had tested it. However, something had been tickling the back of her brain lately. Elin was remembering the rule early on in her visits to Koltémin, about not bringing anything back with her. Though she wasn't supposed to *bring* anything back, she was never told not to *send* things back. Since they were able to modify the passage more than once, Elin felt her mother and Professor Barlo might have been skilled enough to fix the passage so that it could send other things back.

As a test, she placed three objects into the cold compartment: a small string art picture Bryce had done of the farmhouse, a snap of Cas and Bryce running through the garden, and a saucer she had recently made. Elin held her breath as she slid the door closed. Opening the door again a few moments later, she felt elated. She had been right! Even though the cart never disappeared, the things inside had. Though the cart could no longer work as a passage for people, she had been able to send a small message to her mother. Elin didn't want to test fate by doing it again. She felt satisfied simply knowing that her mother would be able to see that Bryce was well and happy.

Eighteen days later, the cart vanished from the barn right in front of Macyn, who immediately ran to find Elin. Scrambling with the chain around her neck, Elin

discovered that the key had also vanished. She knew exactly what this meant. They had never been able to find a way to stop the curse, and Tanamez had fallen into darkness. Though she experienced some sadness, Elin was determined to make the most of the precious gift her mother had given her—a new life with family and friends in a safe place with wonderful things like healers, prospering farms, bicycles, and an abundance of books and art.

Elin was attending school now, and would graduate in less than a year. At that time, she planned to continue living on the farm while pursuing a career in art.

Over the years, Elin created many art pieces, mostly useful items in keeping with the folk art tradition. She especially enjoyed making small pieces of furniture and usable pottery, along with finding new ways to use rock gourds such as to make bird and toad houses. She ended up enjoying this more than the water painting and sculpting she had previously done.

Because she never thought she was any good at sculpting, Elin never realized that she had become one of the greatest sculptors Tanamez ever produced, since she was basically able to sculpt an entire world out of nothing more than a small magical void. She also never realized that she was the last Mythmaker of Tanamez. Even though she eventually recognized her gift, it never occurred to her that she was a Mythmaker; but that was probably because she was a very unconventional one, preferring to create real and everyday things, instead of magical ones.



About the Author

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