

Chapter One After the Crash

What seemed like about a thousand thoughts ran through ten-year-old Aaron Wallace's mind as he crouched in the back of the cave watching his older brother and sister as they grappled for rocks near the cave opening. Fourteen-year-old twins, Patrick and Christine, were also crouching, ready to defend against the danger outside if it managed to get in. The cave, which had provided the family with shelter for the two nights they had spent in this strange land, was now saving them from, of all things, a dinosaur. Of course, this was completely impossible. Even Aaron, with his immense love for fantasy and science fiction stories, knew this to be impossible. There were no dinosaurs left anywhere on the planet; they couldn't exist in the world of today. Yet, here they were. But where was here? Where on earth had they crashed?

His hands and face dirty, his clothes caked with sand and mud, in a frazzled state of nerves and fear, mixed with grief, Aaron couldn't help but cry. They had just finished burying their parents when they spotted the dinosaur, who had spotted them as well, about two hundred yards from their position on the beach. They had barely had time to make it to the cave and squeeze inside before the creature crashed into the rocks at the entrance in an attempt to follow them.

Weeping softly, Aaron was very frightened. What were they going to do? His mind, which had been numb since the plane crash, was now racing. How could their parents be dead? How could he, Patrick, and Christine have survived? *We should have died too*, Aaron thought, *but we didn't for some reason. But we all had life vests on, so we should all be alive.* However, Aaron knew that his mother didn't know how to swim, and that his father had probably taken the brunt of the explosion when the stone hit the plane's engine.

Keeping a firm grasp on two softball-sized stones as he watched the cave entrance with eagle eyes, Patrick's mind was busy too. He was very worried about his brother and sister,

particularly Christine. Though active in tending to their cuts and bruises, and in hunting for food, she had said very little since the crash. Patrick had done his best to take charge of the situation, but he wasn't feeling very confident; and even though he had been a Boy Scout, he was already questioning his survival skills.

For food, they had found only mussels so far, which tasted terrible raw. Maybe cooking would improve the flavor, but they hadn't yet had time to try to light a fire. They hadn't scouted for fruit trees yet either, but were hoping to find some along the shore. They should be able to find crabs too, and maybe even birds. As far as plants, Patrick was trying to remember the rules as to how to tell if they were poisonous or not. Rub a leaf on the skin first and see if there's a reaction. Then chew a small bit, but spit it out, and wait for a reaction. Then eat only one small leaf or part of a stem, and wait. They could also eat bugs, if they had to, instead of starving. While digging their parents' graves, they had unearthed what looked like a gigantic centipede that was nearly two feet long. That would have probably been good protein.

In addition to searching for food, they were also looking for bits of plane wreckage to use for tools and for building a shelter because they were worried about the cave being so close to the shoreline. If a storm hit, it might fill with water. So if they were not rescued soon, they would need to find or build shelter farther inland.

Patrick was planning to build a signal fire as soon as possible; however, finding water, shelter, and food had to take priority. They had found some fresh water lying in pools in rocks from a recent rain; but they would need to find more soon, and an ongoing supply. Shelter, water, and food first, then build a signal fire for rescue—that was the logical order. However, they had also needed to figure out what to do with their dead parents, since they couldn't leave them lying out in the open for vultures and buzzards, and who knows what else, to have at. As soon as they found the pools of water and the cave, Patrick turned his focus on what to do with the bodies. He was sick over it, but he had to be strong for Christine and Aaron. So he set about finding a place to bury their parents. When they found a suitable spot, far enough back from the water and in soft earth, they dug two graves. Then, wrapping the bodies in palm fronds tied with strips of bark, they conducted a short funeral. They dug only shallow graves

because they expected the arrangement to be temporary, with the bodies dug up and buried back at home as soon as they were rescued.

Aaron's crying was probably the best thing that could have happened because it threw Christine into big-sister mode, which drew her out of shock for the first time since the crash. Making her way to the back of the cave, she knelt and put her arms around her little brother.

Crying into her shoulder, Aaron shakily wheezed out, "What are we going to do? It'll take them forever to find us. Aunt Jordan and Uncle Tom aren't even going to miss us for another two weeks."

"No," Christine said firmly, "that's not true. Remember, we talked about this. We had a flight plan. When we don't show up on Kauai, they'll know we're missing, and they'll start looking for us." Her words were reassuring, and they all needed reassurance because, with the intensity of their situation, information was definitely taking two or three repeats to sink in.

Aaron calmed down slightly and took a deep breath as his sister continued. "It's going to be okay. The lizard can't get through the opening." Though her voice was strong, Christine shot a frightened look at Patrick, as if desperately hoping her words would hold true and that he would confirm them.

Patrick was frightened too, but was trying very hard not to show it. Doing his best to steady his voice, he said, "She's right; it can't get in."

The creature also appeared to be losing interest because the crashing, snorts, wheezing, and grunts seemed less intense than when they had first sought refuge from the beast twenty minutes before.

Unfortunately, none of the three survivors had ever really studied up on dinosaurs, so they didn't even know exactly what was after them. They did know it was a carnivore because when they first noticed the creature, it was ripping something that looked like a hairy pig to shreds. From what they had been able to glimpse during the pursuit, the dinosaur was bluish green with dark streaks and spines on its back. It was about eight feet tall and probably close to fifteen feet long, with muscular back legs containing long, talon-like claws. The lizard's front legs were less massive than the back, but were still long and bore sharp, curved claws.

With no boulders inside the cave small enough to roll, they weren't able to block the opening. They did have several pieces of metal salvaged from the plane inside the cave, but the largest piece was only about three feet long. So they basically had nothing that would be of any use in fighting something the size of the creature that was after them. Upon reaching the safety of the cave, Patrick and Christine had quickly gathered up a number of loose rocks of the size that could be thrown fairly easily if the creature managed to get in. Thank goodness they weren't going to need them, since the dinosaur couldn't fit through the opening and wasn't strong enough to break the stones surrounding the entrance.

In another five minutes, when the frenzy outside the cave had diminished to a mere sniffing and half-hearted scratching, the occupants of the cave were startled by a tremendous squeal from the lizard. As pounding footsteps sounded nearby, Patrick saw a flash of something furry and incredibly large as it thumped past the cave entrance. "Oh great," he said, before he could think, "something even bigger and probably worse—as if we didn't have enough to deal with." Catching himself, he glanced back at his brother and sister, saying, "Sorry. I'm just a little frazzled right now."

Nodding, Christine responded, "We all are." Rising, she made her way to the front of the cave as she asked, "Is the lizard gone?"

"Yes," Patrick answered, "something chased it away."

Listening carefully to the noises outside the cave, they could hear crashes and grunts, along with a trill and another squeal, as the dinosaur high-tailed it away.

So as not to alarm his brother and sister, Patrick was careful to refrain from any additional comments relating to their doomed situation of having to deal with gigantic predators. However, his brain was already scrambling to figure out how to fashion weapons out of some of the wreckage because they weren't going to be able to hide in the cave forever. They were going to have to go out to get food and water, and eventually light a signal fire. But they could manage in the cave until morning, even without water. It was already late afternoon, so hanging out in the cave and playing it safe until morning was definitely the best idea.

Keeping watch near the entrance, Patrick could see a good stretch of the shoreline, which was peaceful for now, though not

deserted because a huge, turtle-like creature, about the size of a small car, was sunning itself a short ways down the beach. The turtle's horned head swayed back and forth as it stretched its long neck upwards as far as possible, as though trying to take a lick of the sky.

Sleeping in the cave had been fairly comfortable so far because the floor was mostly sand. They had fashioned pillows by wrapping smallish, tender plant fronds around bundles of grasses.

Christine and Aaron tried to relax by playing tic-tac-toe in the sand. "If we end up staying here awhile," Aaron said, almost brightly, "we can make a checkers set out of pebbles; and maybe a chess game too—we could use seashells for the different pieces."

"Good idea," Christine responded, with a smile, though she desperately hoped there would be no need to devise long-term entertainments.

When tic-tac-toe got old, they played a few games of charades. Since the area outside the cave entrance was quiet, for the time being, Patrick left his watch-post to join in. After all, charades wasn't much fun with only two players.

Though they were hungry, no one mentioned it, because they all knew it was best to stay put for the night. As it was getting dark, Christine speculated, "I wonder if we ended up in the Bermuda Triangle somehow."

Patrick had to laugh as he responded. "Let's see, flying from Oregon to Hawaii, not much of a chance since the Bermuda Triangle is not anywhere in the vicinity."

"It's not even in the same ocean," said Aaron.

"Well, I don't know, do I?" Christine said, a little sharply because her nerves were definitely on edge. "You're the science-fiction freak, not me." After a short pause, she added, "So, what's your explanation for the dinosaurs?"

"Don't have one," said Aaron, quietly, his voice sounding as though he might cry again.

Christine was also very emotional, especially because she couldn't get the possibility of being killed by dinosaurs out of her mind. Looking at Patrick, she said pleadingly, "What are we going to do?"

Patrick knew he needed to be brave and take charge, so he said firmly, "We'll figure it out. Don't worry. We have metal,

so we can make spears and knives. And we can eat plants, shellfish, and even bugs if we have to. It's hasn't been too hot, so the water in the rocks will probably last a few more days. We can start searching for more fresh water right away. There's bound to be a lake or stream or pond somewhere near here. With all of the greenery, there's got to be water somewhere."

Christine agreed, "Inland does look a lot like a tropical jungle," she said.

Her mind full of the events of the last few days, Christine couldn't sleep even after her brothers had dozed off. Their dad had been so happy when he got his pilot's license in the spring because he was allowed to reserve the company plane for three weeks each year. Their mother had always wanted to see Hawaii, and they had great fun as a family picking which island to visit and planning the trip.

For the past two nights, Christine had been haunted by the last few moments their parents had been alive. Mr. Wallace had spotted the land mass below, and had lowered the altitude so they could have a better look at the sparkling shoreline and lush greenery. As they were admiring the trees, hills, and glittering sand, Christine was startled when her father suddenly said, "What was that, a meteor?"

Her surprised mother replied quickly. "Since when do meteors fly upwards? It was a boulder."

Christine also remembered Patrick's gasp as a rock about the size of a beach ball sailed past his window. It was followed by a second and third in rapid succession.

The surprise in their mother's voice had turned to panic by the time she shouted her last words. "Get us out of here! Climb!"

But it was too late. Barely a second after her shout, one of the large stones sailing upwards from the land below hit the plane's engine. Along with her mother's scream, Christine remembered smoke and an explosion. With its only engine out of commission, the small craft went down fast.

The impact was a complete blur as Christine struggled to recall it. She did remember getting bounced around against seats and against Patrick as the cabin of the plane quickly plunged under water. Then everything was wet and she felt something pressing down on her. Seeing light from above, Christine wrenched herself free from whatever it was that was pushing her

down and struggled toward the light, gulping air as her head popped up above the surface of the water. Seeing Aaron not far from her, she swam towards him. He was already heading for the shore which, thankfully, was only a couple hundred yards from where the plane had submerged. They struggled ashore together, out of breath. Aaron had a cut on his thigh that was bleeding freely, but he seemed otherwise unharmed. Christine was wearing two t-shirts. Thinking fast, she peeled off the outer one and used it to put pressure on her brother's leg. The cut wasn't deep, so the t-shirt stemmed the flow of blood fairly quickly.

Very worried for their parents and brother, Aaron and Christine looked around for them. They were relieved to see Patrick about a quarter mile down the beach, running towards their position. But he was alone. Small bits of plane wreckage were already washing up, but there was no sign of their parents.

When Patrick saw that Aaron and Christine were safe, and relatively unharmed, he wanted to swim out to try to find their parents. He could see a large chunk of the plane bobbing, and he thought they might be trapped. However, Christine wouldn't let him go back out into the water.

"I'm a good swimmer," he argued. "They might need help."

And that's when Aaron spotted the red of their mother's sweater amongst a cluster of rocks down the shore.

Racing down the beach, their worst fears were realized. Aaron watched, helplessly, as Patrick and Christine dragged the lifeless body of their mother away from the water's edge to a position beside a short cliff ledge where a clump of trees growing atop the cliff shaded the spot. Thanks to a couple of jagged boulders, the area was also somewhat protected from the stiff ocean breezes. Their mother's arm was broken, and though there wasn't much blood, she had several deep gashes on her back and one on the side of her head. They tried to revive her but could not.

The shock had not even begun to wear off when they found their father's body, barely an hour later, in even worse shape than their mother's. A short while later, they decided to drag both bodies farther inland, where they covered them with palm fronds weighted with rocks to protect them.

Patrick, Aaron, and Christine had all lost their shoes during the crash and swim to shore. Their parents had not lost their shoes. Before wrapping his mother's body, Patrick removed her

tennis shoes and handed them to Christine. She and her mother wore the same size and often shared shoes. Unfortunately, neither of the boys was going to be able to wear their father's shoes because his feet were much larger than theirs.

Kneeling close to her mother's body as she cradled the shoes, Christine was white as a sheet and couldn't speak a word. Aaron sat next his sister. He was also pale but was able to choke out, "What are we going to do?"

As he repositioned one of the weighting stones, Patrick tried to be brave, but was fighting back tears, as he answered. "We're going to look for water and shelter first. Later, we'll look for food." Though just as upset as his brother and sister, Patrick's head was starting to clear and he recognized the importance of getting into survival mode pretty quickly. There was no telling how long it might be before they were rescued.

They got lucky on the water issue right away when they found the pools of rainwater amongst an area of flat rocks along the beach. Just before dark, they got lucky again to find the cave about a half mile down shore from where their parents lay.

The next morning, they scavenged as many bits of plane wreckage as they could while looking for food. They also found Patrick's suitcase, which was filled with t-shirts, socks, underwear, and his extra pair of shoes. Having these few items made them feel somewhat better.

Now that Patrick and Christine had shoes, they needed to figure out what to do about Aaron. Patrick's feet were a good deal larger than his brother's, so they couldn't really take turns with the shoes. Aaron, wearing two pairs of his brother's socks to pad his feet while trekking around to hunt for food and whatnot, didn't complain.

They found their mother's make-up case, empty of its contents, and a couple of water bottles, but nothing else in their initial search. Scrounging for food, they only found the mussels, which seemed plentiful on this particular beach. Though they tasted terrible, it was comforting to put something into their empty stomachs. If they had to keep eating them, Christine hoped cooking the mussels might make them taste better, as soon as they could build a fire.

Christine took a deep breath as her thoughts caught up with the events of the funeral and hiding from the dinosaur afterwards. In the quiet of the cave, she did finally manage to drift into an

uneasy sleep, still fretful of dinosaurs, hunger, the funeral, and what to do about Aaron's lack of shoes.

Chapter Twelve

Time Stands Still

The man wore a sword sheathed in a scabbard and clothing that somewhat reminded them of movies they had seen set in medieval or renaissance times. He was also masked, which made him look as though he was wearing a costume and set to attend a masquerade ball. Approaching warily, Patrick lightly touched the man's right hand, which was resting on his thigh, while the left clutched the reins of the horse. "His hand is warm," Patrick whispered to Aaron and Christine who were tucked in close behind him.

"So he's not a statue," said Christine, coming out from behind her brother to stroke the horse's neck.

Aaron was the first to notice a patch of color through the trees. Patrick and Christine followed Aaron as he beckoned to them where they discovered two more masked people on horseback, a man and a woman, also frozen in place. Though they were also dressed as though set to attend a renaissance fair, the woman was not wearing a gown; instead, she was dressed much like her male counterpart, in a tunic-like garment, with formfitting trousers and boots, and a long cloak.

Passing next into a small, cliff-top clearing, they came upon another sparkling crystal tree of a pale green color. They also discovered a squirrel near the base of the tree that was frozen in place, much like the people on horseback. Crouching beside the squirrel, Aaron remarked, "The ants aren't moving either."

"So that's why the forest seems so still," Christine said, "everything is frozen in place."

However, her observation was only partially correct. Everything on the mountain was not completely still, as they soon discovered when they heard the sound of a small rockslide that had started a short distance from their position in the clearing. This drew their attention to a narrow cave opening about a hundred yards along the cliff top from their current spot. Though the entrance lay in shadows, they thought they saw movement inside the cave.

After hesitating only briefly, they decided to investigate. Reaching the cave opening about two minutes later, they saw only a narrow rocky tunnel filled with shadows as they glanced inside.

“Hello!” Patrick called tentatively. “Is anyone there?”

“Come inside!” a voice answered. “It’s safe.”

They entered cautiously and followed the voice’s command of, “Come in, come in; don’t dally now,” through the tunnel to find a small chamber about twenty-five feet in from the entrance.

An elderly man dressed in golden robes was sitting on a large red floor cushion in front of a huge fireplace, alight with pleasantly flickering flames, carved into a rock wall of the chamber.

“I have been expecting you,” the man said, beckoning them to sit on other pillows strewn about the cave floor. “Yep, three of you, that’s right then. But you’re younger than I expected.”

“How could you be expecting us?” Christine asked as she took a seat on a deep orange cushion. “We certainly didn’t plan to land our balloon here.”

“Oh, you came by hot air balloon,” the man stated. “That’s what was meant by ‘By basket, three will come....’” As Christine scrunched up her face in confusion, he added, “But I didn’t really answer your question, did I? I am a flame oracle. I read and interpret signs of the future in flames.” He gestured to his fire as he said this.

When Patrick and Aaron had settled themselves comfortably, the oracle went on. “Outside of this cave, time is standing still because the Time Entity is waiting to be born. Someone must help with his birth, and that’s why you’re here.”

After a very long pause, Patrick said, “If he hasn’t been born yet, how can he have caused our crash?”

The oracle responded right away. “I should have been clearer; I am forever being unclear. He is waiting to be *reborn*. You could have met him before, in a different time and place. In the here-and-now, he needs to be reborn, because he died somehow. Even the Time Entity can’t escape death, which is inevitable for every being. However, unlike most mortal beings, the Time Entity can be reborn.”

“We didn’t actually meet him,” said Aaron quietly. With a sigh, he added, “But he did something that caused a pretty big problem for us.”

“And we’re certainly not interested in helping him get reborn,” Christine interjected, somewhat hotly.

“Exactly,” agreed Patrick, “right now, we’re only interested in getting home.”

“But you won’t be able to get home,” the oracle told them, “unless you help with the birth of the Time Entity.”

“There’s no way we’re helping him,” Christine said firmly.

“You are angry with him,” the oracle said consolingly, “but he has to exist. He has to be reborn, or time will stand still here forever.” After a short pause, he continued in a fatherly manner. “I don’t hold all of your answers, but I do know that you must continue a quest you have already started. The next part of your quest lies here, on this mountain. But time must move forward for your journey to progress because the Protectors of the Trees must speak to you. It is urgent that they speak to you.”

After thinking for a few moments, Patrick said, “Then...I guess we don’t have a choice.”

Christine couldn’t speak. Red-faced, with her lips pursed, she shook her head. A moment later, she began to cry.

Patrick moved to sit beside her. With his arm around her shoulders, he said, “It’s going to be okay. I promise we’ll find a way home. And look at it this way—we’ll finally get to meet him, so we can tell him off.”

Christine laughed through her tears, which caused her brothers to laugh too. With the atmosphere somewhat lightened, she pulled a handkerchief from her pocket to wipe her nose, as she asked, “Okay, so what do we need to do to get this *beast* reborn?”

“That’s the spirit!” the oracle exclaimed. After rubbing his hands together in anticipation, and taking a deep breath, he added, “The Time Entity is inside of an egg. Time began standing still when the egg arrived on the mountain. He is very tightly wrapped in this egg; he cannot break free on his own, so he must be unwrapped. However, and this is very important, none of the wrappings can be harmed in any way, so you must be very careful.”

As they listened carefully, the oracle went on. “The egg lies in the cave beyond the sleeping dragon. But you must visit the dragon on your way to the cave because he holds something you need. Once you obtain the object, you must be careful when entering the cave because a Pool of Death lies just inside the

entrance. Do not touch the water of the pool; to touch it means death.”

“So, helping with the Time Entity’s birth is going to be dangerous,” Patrick said, shaking his head, “a dragon and a Pool of Death...great...just what we need; and all of this to help the person who is responsible for our parents’ deaths.”

After digesting what Patrick had said for a moment, the oracle added, “I’m sorry about your parents. However, I should tell you that Pools of Death, though very mysterious, are believed to be good things. They are thought to have been created by the Fate Entity to trap those who were meant to die, but who somehow escaped their first fated meeting with Death. The person taken by the pool is then given a destiny that impacts the future in some wonderful way.” A moment later, the man again stressed, “Just don’t, under any circumstances, touch the water.”

“We won’t,” said Aaron. “Thank you for warning us.”

“Unfortunately,” the oracle added, “I cannot go with you. If I leave this protected place, I will lose my ability to read the flames and I will stand still in time, just as the others on the mountain.”

“How is it we didn’t stand still in time when we arrived here?” Christine questioned.

“Probably because you weren’t here when it first happened,” suggested the oracle. “Either that, or you carry some type of protection with you, like a talisman maybe.” He was eyeing Christine’s shell necklace, but he didn’t mention it.

“But let me stress again (the oracle was becoming very repetitive), be careful with the eggshells. A great catastrophe is foretold if any are broken.”

“We will be careful,” Christine affirmed.

Since it was getting somewhat late in the day, they decided to wait until morning to set off. The oracle produced a great quantity of food for his guests from another chamber in the cave. This prompted Patrick to offer their host some of the food pills, in an exchange of hospitality.

“This is very good,” the oracle exclaimed with delight, as he sampled one of the pills, “some kind of shellfish.”

“We have plenty of them,” Christine said, “so we’d be happy to leave some with you.”

“That’s very good of you,” the oracle said with appreciation. He retrieved a small box from a shelf beside the fireplace, and

they helped him select various food pills they thought he might enjoy.

“This will give me great variety; what a treat,” he said as he carefully stowed his box on a shelf farther from the fire than it had been. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Aaron responded.

As they continued to enjoy their meal, Christine asked the oracle, “You mentioned that death is inevitable, what other things are inevitable?”

“Change and making mistakes,” he answered, in a matter-of-fact tone.

“That’s exactly what Ruin Foster told us,” said Aaron, in surprise.

“Sounds like a smart chap,” the oracle responded.

They were helping to clean up after dinner when Patrick suddenly thought to ask, “Are the people on horseback the ‘Protectors of the Trees’ you mentioned?”

“Yes,” answered the oracle. “They are from a city deep in the mountain.”

“Inside the mountain?” Aaron asked.

“I think so,” replied the oracle, “but I have never seen it.”

“And what about the crystal trees?” Christine said. “Tell us about them.”

“They are called Jewel Trees, but I don’t know much about them,” answered the oracle. “They hold certain magical powers; that’s mainly why they need protecting.” He shook his head slightly as he went on. “Being confined to this cave most of the time, I don’t know much about what’s going on outside. People who come here are usually seeking information, not giving it.”

The oracle retired to another chamber a short while later, after helping his guests arrange the floor pillows into make-shift beds in front of the fire.

When they were settled, Patrick and Aaron fell asleep fairly quickly. As usual, Christine had trouble getting to sleep. She was plagued not only by the task in front of them, but also by memories of her parents, and specifically the plane crash. As anger and sadness filled her, she wept, but was careful not to wake Patrick and Aaron. She couldn’t understand why her brothers weren’t as upset as she was about their situation. *Maybe it’s true that girls are more emotional than boys*, she thought.

In truth, Aaron and Patrick were not in much better shape than Christine, emotionally. They were sad and angry much of the time too, but they were trying very hard not to show it. Patrick, especially, felt the need to stay strong for his brother and sister. He very much felt the weight of responsibility for trying to get them all home, and he was frustrated with himself for not having been able to accomplish it yet.

An hour later, having let out some of her emotions, Christine was finally able to drop into an uneasy sleep.

Chapter Thirteen

Beyond the Sleeping Dragon

Early morning found them on a steep path down the mountainside, following directions given to them by the oracle during their dawn departure from his cave.

At the base of one of the smaller mountain peaks, they found the sleeping dragon curled up directly in front of the cave entrance they were seeking. The dragon couldn't have been missed because he was larger than a house, and a pretty good-sized one at that. A fancy silver dagger lay between the dragon's toes next to an odd-looking metal tool that resembled a spiraled and notched lollipop, but with the pop set at a right angle to its stick. They took both items with them since they didn't know which object the oracle had referred to. The dragon never woke; presumably, he was frozen in time too, like the other mountain inhabitants.

A large lamp with a metal base shaped like a lion sat directly inside the cave entrance. Turning on the lamp allowed them to clearly see the Pool of Death, which was circular and about five feet in diameter, in order to miss it. The water in the pool was a deep blue color, but it was not still as they thought it might be. Instead, it swirled gently like a fading whirlpool.

The light from the lion lamp also allowed them to see well enough to traverse a narrow set of winding stairs fashioned from natural cave ledges in the walls of the entrance chamber. The stairs led to another large cave opening in which they found the Time Entity's egg, held upright by three enormous stone gargoyles. At nearly five feet high, the creamy white egg glowed with an amber-colored inner light.

The cave was very warm, and they immediately took off their jackets.

"We'll need to remove the wrappings," said Patrick, examining the egg. Several natural chimneys in the massive chamber let in enough light for them to see to work by.

"This is probably like one of those Russian nesting dolls," remarked Christine, edging in closer, "but shaped like an egg."

Stepping up onto a large rock beside one of the gargoyles, Patrick found a small circular-shaped indentation containing spirals and notches on the top of the egg. “Hand me that thing we found with the dagger,” he said.

Sure enough, the metal lollipop gadget fitted the indentation perfectly. “It must be a key,” said Christine.

When Patrick pressed the key into the indentation, a small clicking noise was heard. With the click, the outermost layer of the egg split in two, horizontally, exactly at the midpoint, and the top half of the eggshell raised itself ever so slightly.

After pocketing the tool, Patrick gently lifted the top half of the outermost shell from the egg. When he did this, the bottom half of the first wrapping simply dissipated. The removed shell was nearly as wide as an umbrella, so Patrick raised it over his head for ease of carrying. Stepping down from the rock, he carefully carried the shell to a corner spot in the cave, well out of the area they would be working in, where he placed it gently on the floor. He then returned to the egg to again step up onto the stone. Removing the key from his pocket, he repeated his actions to remove another layer of eggshell, which he placed on top of the first removed shell. The layers were paper thin, so he was extremely careful.

After nearly an hour, Christine took over the operation. When the stack of wrappings reached about a foot high, she began another stack, to lessen the danger of a topple that might damage the shells.

For the rest of the day, the twins took turns unwrapping the Time Entity. When Aaron wanted to help, they wouldn’t let him. They felt it was too delicate of a chore, and they didn’t trust him to be careful enough.

Aaron was disappointed, and angry. *Here we go again*, he thought. *Nothing ever changes*. However, he didn’t argue with them because he could tell they were stressed by the task. Instead, he tried to stay out of their way, accomplishing this mainly by climbing to explore the many cliff ledges in the chamber.

By moonlight and starlight filtering into the cave, Christine and Patrick worked far into the night, until they were both too exhausted to continue. The next morning, they began their task again, once more taking turns.

Aaron again stayed out of the way by hanging out on the cliff ledges. On the largest one, he discovered a small empty bird's nest constructed of pale yellow grasses. It was delicate and airy, and exactly the sort of thing he would have collected to keep on his dresser at home. However, in the cave, for some reason, he hesitated to touch it. There was something about the nest that said, *Hands off. I'm not to be touched.*

On the third day of their task, Aaron made about twenty trips outside of the cave to bring in armfuls of grasses and fern fronds, which he used to make mats for them to rest on. Christine and Patrick very much appreciated this. The mats were immensely more comfortable to lie upon than the clothes and backpacks they had been using. This allowed them to be much more comfortable while taking breaks.

By the fourth day, they were all exhausted, including Aaron. Even though he wasn't working as hard as his brother and sister, the fact that the egg had only shrunk to about half its original size was wearing on him.

Having relieved Patrick about fifteen minutes earlier, Christine was just stepping down from the stone, while raising the latest shell she had removed over her head, when she froze in fear at the sight of a gigantic snake, whose body was nearly three feet thick, facing her about ten feet from her position behind the egg.

Patrick was asleep on a mat about fifteen feet behind her, but Christine couldn't speak to get his attention, and she wasn't able to move either. She was still frozen in place when the snake lunged and crashed into one of the gargoyles in front of her. The egg teetered precariously but thankfully didn't fall.

As startled as she was by the appearance of the snake, Christine was even more startled by the war cry of her little brother as he leapt from a cliff ledge to land astraddle the snake's neck, just behind its head. The snake began thrashing immediately, as Aaron stabbed at the head with the silver dagger. Even with being violently shaken, Aaron was able to perfectly place several of the stabs, which killed the snake in less than twenty seconds.

Aaron's cry had wakened Patrick who got over his grogginess incredibly quickly upon sighting the thrashing body of the dying monster.

Christine was thankful that, out of some sort of instinct, she had managed to hold onto the eggshell because she certainly had not had time to think about it. However, in shock, she was still not able to move. After dismounting the snake, Aaron led his sister to the latest pile of wrappings where he helped her place the shell on top.

Though he had been very afraid, Aaron didn't seem nearly as fazed as his siblings over what had just happened. After helping Christine, he proceeded to clean the dagger using sand from the floor of the cave and the edge of a rock as a scraper to remove the bits of snake goo from the blade. However, he dropped the dagger a few moments later when Christine grabbed hold of him from behind. After a big hug, she looked him over good to make sure he was okay, before shakily gushing, "My little hero! You're such a hero!"

Patrick, fresh from examining the still-twitching snake, clapped his brother on the back and said, "Well done!"

Aaron, though still keyed up over the incident, tried to make light of it. "It was nothing. Good thing we had the dagger though; it would have been harder to wrestle him to death."

"Well, if anyone could have done it," Patrick praised, "you could have."

A few moments later, as she came further out of shock, Christine pondered, "I wonder why the snake wasn't frozen in time like other creatures on the mountain."

"Maybe this is another protected place," suggested Patrick, "like the cave of the flame oracle."

They didn't want to think about the possibility of a different reason, like that maybe someone or something didn't want the Time Entity to be reborn and had sent the snake to kill them.

When the snake finally stopped twitching, they tried to move it, but it was far too heavy to even roll. They were just going to have to leave it there while they worked.

After having a meal together, which helped them to calm down from the snake incident, Patrick and Christine went back to work in shifts, while Aaron continued to explore the cliff ledges. He visited the little nest again, but still did not want to touch it for some reason. It was such a lovely little thing, all golden and airy light. Again, it seemed to say, *I'm not to be touched; I thank you to keep your hands to yourself*, which Aaron did.

Since there was a possibility of other predators like the snake, they slept only in shifts so that someone was always keeping watch.

On the fifth day, while they were eating, Aaron said, "I've been thinking about Ruin Foster. We should try to find a way to help him get home too. Since we're about to meet his father, maybe we can convince him to take his son home."

Patrick and Christine agreed, but they thought it was more important to ask about their own way home first.

In the afternoon, Christine and Patrick finally let Aaron help with the unwrapping. He was very careful, and they were glad for the break.

They continued to let him help the next day too. They also talked while they worked. Since they were so used to their task, talking wasn't much of a distraction and didn't present any danger as to how careful they were with the shells. However, the conversation *was* a nice distraction from the snake, which was starting to smell pretty bad.

"I've been thinking," said Christine, "if the experts all agree that people can't travel to the future, how is it possible that prophets can see the future?"

Aaron responded. "We talked about that on the island. What prophets see has probably already happened. Their messages or visions are of a future that has already happened for someone else."

"Oh, that's right," said Christine. "It's just all so confusing."

Early on day seven, they finally got the egg down to about the size of softball. Removing the final shell about an hour later, they found that the center of the egg contained a pale, amber-colored jewel that was warm to the touch. With the top shell placed aside, and the bottom one dissipated, the jewel rested in Patrick's hand.

Since they didn't know what to do next, they waited.

After about ten minutes, Patrick handed the stone off to Christine. The jewel didn't do any tricks for her either. Again, they didn't know what to do. Shrugging at one another, they again waited.

When another ten minutes had passed, Aaron suddenly said, "I have an idea."

Christine passed the stone to him without question.

With his siblings following, and while carefully cradling the jewel, Aaron climbed the ledge to reach the little nest where he gently placed the stone amongst the golden grasses.

The nest immediately glowed with an intense amber light that became so bright, they were forced to look away.

As the intensity of the light decreased somewhat, and they were able to look again, they discovered the nest empty with a wispy figure that appeared to be made of amber-colored smoke and light hovering above it. The figure floated to the cave floor where it next took on the form of a man, dressed in robes, who slightly resembled Ruin Foster.

Christine, Patrick, and Aaron scrambled down from the ledge as quickly as possible because the Time Entity, having neither addressed nor acknowledged them in any way, was now heading for the cave exit.

Running, they only caught up to the swiftly-moving man near the Pool of Death, where he finally stopped. Removing a thin crystal vial from his robes, he dipped it into the pool to fill it with the deep blue water. Capping the vial with a stopper, he handed it to Christine, saying, "You might need this on your journey."

Without further word, the Time Entity turned to leave.

Patrick and Christine were so angry, they didn't know what to say; but Aaron managed to find a few words. "We wouldn't be on this journey if it weren't for you!" he yelled after the man.

"Hey!" shouted Christine. "Come back here!"

"You need to help us get home!" Patrick added.

The man paused near the snout of the sleeping dragon to look back at them and say, "For now, you must stay here. The mountain holds the answer as to how you will reach your home."

They couldn't follow the Time Entity as he fled because the dragon suddenly waked. After yawning, and having a good stretch, the beast let loose a small burst of fire from his throat before raising his wings to take flight. With several great flaps, he was in the air and speeding away in a matter of seconds. They lost sight of him as he dipped behind a distant mountain peak.

Time had evidently begun moving forward again. High above, a soaring bird gave a loud screech; and in a clump of bushes near the cave entrance, a badger snarled at them before lumbering away on a path through the rocks and shrubs.

Chapter Seventeen

Mirrorseed

The morning, which marked the beginning of the travelers' fifth day in Stone Hollow, brought the weather change as predicted by the local expert. Heavily shrouded in fog, the settlement looked as though the daily strings of morning mist had vastly multiplied and had woven themselves together to form not only an immense blanket, but thousands of dense pillows to tuck the residents and their structures more cozily into the rocky landscape.

Finally, the time was right to cross the bridge unnoticed by the gooleegung. Erkley would accompany the group to the bridge. Starcoil was not able to go with them because she had no way of disguising herself, and her glowing presence very likely would have alerted the gooleegung. Instead, she bade them farewell with "Safety and good speed." She also gave the travelers a message from the tiny seer spirit. "Telltale said to tell you, 'Sometimes mishaps and missteps are meant to be. When they happen, stay calm and try to look for the positive in the situation.'"

Patrick, Christine, and Aaron imagined that the seer was probably somehow aware of their frustrations and doubts, and was trying to encourage them, so they wouldn't give up hope. Though the advice was helpful, they didn't particularly feel any better about setting off on this next leg of their quest, especially since they still had no specific plan for getting into Elf Castle upon reaching it.

It was a good thing Erkley was guiding the travelers because it was difficult to see three feet in front of them in the fog. They walked slowly and Erkley waved a long stick in front of him as he led, so as not to bump into anything.

At first unknown to the travelers, Grump and Snowdrop were following close behind the party. However, Erkley was a wise and alert dwarf and soon became aware of the whispering flutters of the spirits' tiny wings. Stopping, and turning, he smiled and said, "Hold up."

With both caution and confusion clouding their faces, Christine, Patrick, and Aaron immediately froze in place.

The tiny spirits also halted. Hovering, they held position a short distance behind Aaron who brought up the rear of the group.

Erkley came to stand beside Aaron, as he gruffly said, "Come forward, you two."

As Snowdrop and Grump flitted forward, the travelers smiled in relief; however, they were even more overjoyed when Snowdrop squeaked, "We want to come with you; we've been to Elf Castle before."

Grump gave a small and severe nod as he brusquely added, "Yep. We want to help."

This was wonderful because Erkley was not going with them; he was only leading them to the bridge where they had planned to embark on the journey to Elf Castle on their own.

Along with plain clothing resembling pale tree bark, Grump wore his perpetual scowl, while Snowdrop's expression was bright and bubbly and a perfect accompaniment to her glistening white dress that resembled spun spider silk. Satiny, pale pink flower petals formed a cap on her head, which she hadn't been wearing when they first met her in the meadow. "This is my traveling cap," she said, in answer to Christine's admiring compliment.

Grump immediately retrieved a cap made of tiny nettle leaves from his pocket. His scowl deepened as he stuffed it onto his head. After admiring his cap as well, Christine asked, "What kind of tree is your spirit from?" to which she received a gruff, "Birch," in answer.

With another hour of travel, the group reached the border of Stone Hollow where the rolling flatland rock gradually turned into a large mountainous forest, though they couldn't see this transition in the fog.

Erkley left his friends at the entrance to an enormous wooden bridge spanning a jagged rock chasm. He smiled encouragingly at them as he departed with "Just stay quiet on the bridge and the gooleegung won't notice you. Then follow the stone path through the trees. That will lead you directly to Elf Castle." After adding, "Safety and good speed," the dwarf departed.

The gooleegung evidently lived in the chasm, and they could hear him breathing and snorting as they cautiously crossed the

bridge, which was evidently very sturdy and well made—they heard not one creak as they walked across.

They reached the end of the bridge in only a couple of minutes where they followed a walkway made of natural stones each spaced approximately a gentle stride apart. The walkway wound through groves of trees that gradually became taller as they grew more closely together.

The fog never lifted and, at points, actually seemed denser. Since they could barely see two paces in front of them, they cast their eyes down to keep an eye on their feet to be able to continue to follow the path and avoid tripping on uneven stones or running into trees. The spirits fared no better in the fog and hovered close by their friends' shoulders to avoid getting lost.

After nearly two hours of walking, the natural stone path beneath their feet suddenly became incredibly flat and they found themselves walking on pavement of square bricks like those that might overlay the ground in a courtyard. As the fog abruptly lifted, to their surprise and concern, they found themselves inside a large room surrounded by stone walls instead of trees. Their concern became even greater as they looked behind them to discover no exit to a pathway. It seemed they had suddenly been swallowed by a building, but how they had entered was a mystery because the only visible door, which led into another chamber of the structure, lay in front of them.

“We made it to Elf Castle,” whispered Patrick.

“The fog was a big help in getting in,” Aaron quietly responded.

“No!” Snowdrop squeaked, almost frantically. “We took a wrong turn somewhere. This is a bad place, a very bad place.” With Grump nodding in agreement, she added, “This *is* a castle, but it’s not Elf Castle. This is Mirrorseed, a place of elf experiments and enchantments.”

“This is where they keep their disguises and decoys,” said Grump.

“We need to find a way out of here,” Snowdrop urged, “and fast.”

Trying the windows in the room, they found that none could be opened, so they moved cautiously into the next chamber, which led to a large hall where Grump’s comment about disguises and decoys soon became understood. The lengthy hall

was lined with small round pedestals upon which, seemingly frozen in place, stood hundreds of elves.

“They’re not real,” said Grump, flying over to the closest one to pass his hand through a lock of the elf’s hair.

“Oh, they’re like holograms,” said Aaron, reaching out to pass his hand through the man’s arm.

“These are just the models,” explained Snowdrop. “The elves can adopt the look of another briefly to hide their own appearance or to impersonate someone.”

“The decoys are used to protect important people,” added Grump. “The High Elves sometimes get Lesser Elves to impersonate them when they are in danger of being assassinated.”

“Exactly,” said Snowdrop. “But they don’t use these fake people. They take a pill and their own bodies transform to look like whichever of these models they choose.”

The lifeless models of the elves were of normal person size, as Zilfa had described, but their hands and feet were noticeably longer, and would have looked out of proportion on a human being. Their ears and chins were pointed, and their eyes slanted slightly inwards towards their noses, giving them somewhat of a cruel look.

Examining a complex-looking machine near the center of the hall that evidently produced the disguise pills, Christine remarked, “This is an amazing invention. The elves must be incredible inventors, very ingenious.”

“It’s also believed that the elves experiment with cloning here too,” said Snowdrop.

Leaving the hall by a door adjacent to the machine, Patrick loosened his cloak. Mirrorseed was a very warm castle, which seemed unnatural for a structure made almost entirely of stone.

As they wound their way through the lower level of the castle, looking for an exit, they entered a smaller chamber housing a huge table laden with platters of appetizing food. The sight and smell made their mouths water and, against their will, they were drawn to the table. Patrick was just reaching out to grab what looked like a juicy and perfectly-browned turkey leg when he was brought to his senses by a sharp pain in his earlobe. Grump had delivered the vicious pinch.

“Ouch!” Patrick loudly exclaimed, flinching and brushing at his ear. Grump had already zoomed away. Two more cries filled

the room as Snowdrop quickly pinched the ears of Aaron and Christine.

“What did you do that for?” cried Christine.

“Didn’t you remember what I said?” Snowdrop scolded. “This is a place of elf enchantments. You can’t eat any of the food here.”

Looking back at the table, Aaron, Patrick, and Christine immediately understood the reason for their tiny friends’ actions. The appetizing food had been a trick of some sort. The platters were in reality filled with moldy, rotting food crawling with maggots.

Finding no unlocked windows or any exterior doors on the ground floor of the castle, they climbed a winding staircase to the second level.

When checking the windows in a turret, they discovered a huge mirror resting on an easel back. In front of the mirror, they found themselves frozen in place, looking at images of themselves that appeared dead. Though the eyes of their reflections were wide and staring, their bodies looked pale and lifeless. The three tried to move their legs, but found they couldn’t, nor could they draw their eyes away from their dead counterparts.

Once again, ear pinches were necessary. This time Grump scolded them. “Smart people can recognize elf tricks and enchantments.”

They weren’t as easily fooled in a bedchamber on the third level of the castle when what looked like a cuddly puppy ran to greet them. Aaron immediately drew his dagger and Christine her sword, which caused the creature to halt in his tracks, whereupon, he turned into an enormous fanged rat that scuttled away from them with a snarl.

“Good, you are learning,” Grump said, nodding approval.

Finding no exits, they continued to be drawn upwards in the castle, which became even warmer the higher they went. They were all sweating profusely by the time they climbed the final stair to reach the topmost tower, which contained only one door. The heat in the tower was the most stifling they had felt since entering Mirrorseed. Not only were they soon dripping with sweat, they had some difficulty breathing in the suffocating swelter.

“This is the end,” Patrick said, as he grasped the iron ring to pull open the door. “If we don’t find a way out through here, we’ll go back down and try to break a window on the first floor.”

Inside the tiny room, they discovered a small glass sphere sitting upon a stone pillar. The sphere contained a prisoner—a tiny ice spirit named Iglace. “Break the glass!” she pleaded.

Aaron, Christine, and Patrick were somewhat leery of helping the tiny spirit. What if this was another elf trick? Or perhaps there was a good reason the ice spirit was kept contained. However, after a brief consultation with Snowdrop and Grump, who couldn’t believe that any of their fellow spirits could be guilty of working with the elves, they decided to help Iglace.

“Just drop it on the floor,” she said, as Patrick approached to figure out a way to break the glass. “I’m not strong enough to roll it off the pillar,” she added, “or I would have done it already.”

Aaron and Christine stood back as Patrick picked up the sphere, which was very cool to the touch. In order to avoid hurting anyone with flying glass shards, Patrick tossed the sphere far across the room, where it instantly shattered upon contacting the floor, releasing the tiny spirit. As Iglace obtained her freedom, a blast of cold air flooded the castle, bringing much-needed relief to the group.

“I can show you the way out,” Iglace told them. As it turns out, the ice spirit herself had cast a spell on the castle to lock all of the windows and conceal the outer doors in the hopes that someone might eventually find her. Due to elf trickery, mountain travelers often lost their way to end up inside Mirrorseed. However, those who didn’t perish from encountering enchantment traps inside the castle usually found their way out before reaching the highest tower.

On the way down the narrowest staircase, the group avoided touching tempting flowers which suddenly began springing from the stone walls. This was wise because the flowers were really poisoned metal spikes in disguise.

As they were speeding down a hall to reach another stair, Patrick suddenly slowed and said, “Hang on a second.” They thought he needed to catch his breath, but he had something he wanted to say. “I’ve been thinking about Telltale’s message, about mishaps.”

“They are sometimes meant to be,” Christine said.

“Yes,” Patrick answered. “I think we ended up here for a reason. We can use the elves’ decoys to disguise ourselves.”

“And that’s how we can get into Elf Castle!” exclaimed Aaron with delight.

“Exactly,” said Patrick.

“That’s brilliant!” said Christine.

“If the pills are safe for the elves to take,” said Snowdrop, “they’re probably safe for you too.”

“I know how to work the instrument,” Iglace told them, referring to the strange machine they had seen. She was very anxious to return a favor to her rescuers.

“So, technically,” said Christine as they continued their downward trek, “this wasn’t a misstep at all, since we can use it to our advantage.”

“Correct,” said Patrick, “but I might not have thought of it if I hadn’t been thinking about Telltale’s message.”

As they entered the hall, Iglace told them, “Just choose your model, and I’ll enter the information into the instrument.”

With nearly as many female models as men, they all had plenty to pick from. However, they had some difficulty choosing, especially since they didn’t know which ones might work best. They were somewhat worried that they might pick an elf who was too well known, or perhaps someone known to be away from Elf Castle on a trip. However, without knowing details, they were just going to have to take their chances.

As Christine made her way down the hall ahead of her brothers, she was shocked to discover models that looked exactly like Rowan and Hawthorne. Patrick and Aaron quickly joined her as she motioned and called to them.

“Elf impersonation deception,” remarked Patrick. “So the Jewel Trees probably aren’t as safe as the guardians think they are.”

“Which means the guardians aren’t safe either,” returned Christine.

After a moment’s reflection, Patrick added, “I’m sure they know there is danger involved in their job.”

Grump, who was getting worried about their lengthy stay inside Mirrorseed, flew to his friends. “Hurry,” he said, “we need to leave this place as soon as possible.”

Shaking off the shock of discovering the duplicates of Rowan and Hawthorne, they quickly picked their three models, pointing

them out to Iglace, who rapidly entered the information via a small keypad on the side of the machine. Within only a few seconds, a small slot below the keypad spit out three disc-shaped pills that were almost exactly the width and thickness of dimes. The machine made no noise as it worked, but a panel on the top did emit three short flashes of light.

As Iglace was handing out the select-model pills, the group was suddenly distracted by the sound of a window shattering at the far end of the hall. Immediately following the burst of strewn glass, an entity resembling a short stream of brilliant red light entered the window and began rapidly flying towards them. The heat from this being of light was very intense.

“Run!” shouted Iglace. “It’s the phantasm that guards the castle!”

As the stream of light whizzing towards them suddenly took on the form of a cluster of red-hot daggers, the travelers immediately ran toward the chamber in which they had first entered the castle. Inside the chamber, as Patrick threw the door closed, Christine dragged a heavy chair towards it, intent upon trying to brace the door, until Snowdrop stopped her with “That won’t stop him, just get to a window!”

They raced to one of the largest windows, which Iglace was in the process of unlocking using magical ice crystals flicked from the tips of her toes.

However, they weren’t able to exit immediately because another spirit suddenly burst through the now-unlocked window into the room. Ardela was a sylph, an air spirit with control of winds. Luckily, she was friend to Iglace; and it was a good thing she arrived when she did because the phantasm had just finished squeezing his way under the door.

At Iglace’s instruction, the group took cover under a large table as Ardela called upon the winds to help her battle the phantasm. The tiny spirits clung to the cloaks of their larger friends for safety as swift winds, sharp as razors, began slashing about the chamber.

Since wind is such an awesome force, the sylph accomplished her task in short time by dividing the phantasm into hundreds of pieces with blasts of air. She then blew out the highest windows of the chamber and forced the pieces of the evil entity through the openings, where the winds outside drove them far away from the castle. The travelers would be safe from the

phantasm for some time because it would end up taking him nearly ten hours to gather all his bits and pieces together again from the nooks and crannies of the forest in which they were settling.

After it was determined that everyone was okay, the group made their way out from under the table where Iglace introduced her new friends to Ardela.

“Thank goodness you came to help us, Ardela,” the ice spirit said. “I thought I had the phantasm locked out of the castle,” she added, “but I guess he was stronger than I thought.”

Ardela was wearing a pendant with a rectangular jewel that looked like a diamond. As she offered it for them to feel its warmth, she told them, “Starcoil sent me to help you. Based on information from Telltale, who sensed that something went wrong, she figured out what happened.” Smiling, the sylph added, “The fog that helped you cross the bridge safely also caused you to take a wrong turn.”

“Actually,” Patrick countered, “I think we were meant to come here first, before going to Elf Castle.”

“I’m sure glad you did,” said Iglace.

The travelers were happy to be able to feel the warmth of Ardela’s jewel to know that she was a friend. This also helped dispel any small doubts they might have had about the ice spirit. As a friend of the sylph, it was now certain that she could not possibly be working for the elves.

However, something quite shocking happened next that fairly shook Aaron, Christine, and Patrick to the core.

As the occupants of the room were about to exit Mirrorseed by the large window, they suddenly heard the door to the hall open. Turning, they discovered Zilfa standing in the doorway. “I’ve come to help you,” she stated, stepping towards them.

The shocking part occurred next as Ardela, grabbing Christine’s sword, flew forward as quickly as the wind to slay the wood nymph with one stroke.

Snowdrop and Grump squealed and covered their eyes.

Patrick, Aaron, and Christine gasped in horror, until Ardela stepped to one side to reveal that the creature lying at her feet was not Zilfa. “It’s a kezit, or mimic,” the sylph told them, “an evil, shapeshifting spirit working for the elves.”

“I’ve never seen a mimic,” said Iglace, “but I’ve heard of them. They work as assassins.”

“They’re pretty rare,” said Ardela, as she cleaned and returned Christine’s sword. “Now, minus this one, even rarer, I hope.”

The dead kezit looked like a mass of mud lumps oozing blood. The creature also emitted a nasty, stagnant smell, as though it was beginning to rot.

Leaving Mirrorseed via the large window, they backtracked as quickly as possible through the fog, which was lifting, where they picked up the correct path to Elf Castle in less than an hour.

“I’d like to come with you,” Iglace announced, as they turned onto the path. The travelers welcomed her company, especially Grump, who seemed even grumpier (but in a blushing kind of way) around the ice spirit. As they flew, Grump and Iglace stole shy glances at one another.

The fog soon lifted entirely and the party enjoyed a pleasant, winding trek through tall trees alive with the rustling and scurrying sounds of birds and squirrels and such.

They traveled well after dark to reach the home of an elderly friend of Ardela’s where they were invited to stay the night in safety. Iglace explained that Rossa, who was not a magical being, had been Ardela’s childhood governess.

Before settling into bed, the guests were treated to a delicious meal of stew and salad.

They were also invited to view a pen of unique pets currently under Rossa’s care. “Orclettes and goblin kittens,” she explained. Even though the tiny, furry creatures were playing with squeaky toys and rag dolls, they looked both adorable and mean at the same time, so the visitors admired from a distance.

“Any person who can turn either a baby goblin or a baby orc to good,” Ardela explained, “receives a wonderful prize because, instead of growing up to cause trouble, the babies turn into magical flowers that grant wishes.”

“This is my retirement hobby,” Rossa told them, with pride. “I’ve turned seventeen to good so far, and I always use my wishes to get more babies. Their parents usually don’t want them anyway; they kick them out of their nests pretty early and make them fend for themselves, so it’s not like I’m kidnapping them.”

After viewing the orclettes and baby goblins at play for a few minutes longer, Rossa secured their pen, before leading her weary guests to a large room filled with comfortable floor mats where they retired for the night.

Chapter Eighteen

Elf Castle and Life Nest

After a hearty breakfast the next morning, Ardela and Rossa sent the travelers on their way.

“I’m sorry I cannot accompany you,” Ardela told them. “I am known to the elves, and I have no means of disguise. I usually avoid them, as they avoid me. If I suddenly turned up in their midst, it would arouse suspicion.”

“Thank you for your help in getting this far,” Christine said.

“I think we’re in good, capable hands,” Aaron said, indicating the three hovering spirits.

Patrick immediately chimed in with “Yes. They’ve been excellent guides and protectors so far.”

Snowdrop, Grump, and Iglace seemed pleased with the compliments.

Ardela agreed that the travelers were in capable hands. “Iglace, especially, will be an excellent guide once you reach Elf Castle,” the sylph said. “She probably knows things others don’t about the elves, having been imprisoned by them for so long.”

The ice spirit was nodding. “One hundred and twenty-two years,” she said.

“One hundred and twenty-two years!” exclaimed Aaron. “I would never have thought you were that old!”

“I’m eight hundred and twelve years old,” Iglace told her very surprised new friends.

Grump responded with “You’re just a babe then. I’ve got about two hundred years on you.”

As Iglace giggled, a sound like a tiny patch of ice cracking during a spring thaw, Grump blushed and gave her a lopsided grin.

Snowdrop didn’t seem to want to share her age; instead, after thanking Ardela and Rossa for their hospitality, she said goodbye before leading the way along the stone path towards Elf Castle.

Two hours along the quiet, winding path brought them to the tomb of the most recent king and queen of Elmara Lodés, who lay side by side in a crystal sarcophagus. Since their deaths were

sudden, and somewhat recent, successors had not yet been chosen. In truth, their descendants were currently in hiding due to the threat of the elves. When the time was right, with some stability and safety restored to the region, they would receive their titles and begin their rule.

As Snowdrop, Iglace, and Grump stopped to pay their respects, Christine gazed thoughtfully at the king and queen as she quietly remarked, "They look asleep, not dead." The royal pair did indeed wear peaceful expressions and appeared very comfortable in their death chamber.

Another hour along the quiet path, the peaceful trek suddenly ended when they were set upon by a pack of goblins. With no time to flee, the travelers backed up against several tree trunks, preparing to defend themselves. The tiny spirits didn't know what to do. Based on their size and the limits of their magic, they usually just fled from things such as goblins. Iglace hurled tiny iceballs at the nasty creatures, which helped some, though they were still advancing. Grump rose into the branches overhead to shake out acorns to bonk the goblins' heads. Following his lead, Snowdrop shook acorns too. This also helped, but only to a very limited degree.

Though fearful and shaking, Christine and Patrick raised their swords, preparing to defend. Aaron had already drawn his bow. He was nervous and afraid too, but not any more so than when he had killed the snake; in fact, his hands were steadier than he expected. Though way outnumbered, the travelers weren't going down without a fight.

Just as they were about to engage the enemy, Christine whispered, more to herself, "If Noppi were here, he'd make mincemeat out of them." At the exact moment she said this, her shell necklace thumped lightly against her chest, before emitting a tremendous growl that sounded just like a giant sasquatch about to mincemeat an enemy.

As Iglace and Snowdrop squeaked in fear, with Grump ducking for cover behind a leaf, the goblins jumped in start, before turning quickly, to hightail it away, as fast as their dumpy legs could carry them.

Aaron, Patrick, and Christine were also startled, but very pleased, of course, to have the spirit of their large island friend with them.

Smiling, Aaron called after the goblins, "That's right, run!"

Patrick laughed and clapped his brother on the shoulder.

Breathing a sigh of relief, while silently expressing thanks, Christine lightly stroked her necklace and remarked with admiration, “Wow, *it is* like a little talisman, as the oracle said.”

The spirits were also relieved, and happy to have other, apparently large and powerful spirits on their side.

Resuming their trek, they reached Elf Castle by early afternoon and secreted themselves in the dense foliage near a side entrance gate. Covered with flowering vines, and sporting elaborate architectural flourishes, the fortress was amazingly beautiful.

“It’s hard to believe this is a place of evil,” whispered Patrick.

“Not all of the elves are evil,” Iglace told him, “just most of them.”

“There used to be fewer evil ones,” said Grump, “and more good ones. But the evil elves killed a lot of the good elves to shift the balance.”

“I didn’t know elves could be killed,” said Christine. “I thought they were immortal.”

“They’re not immortal,” Iglace said, “but they are long-lived because they have a place of healing and renewal, a magical pool of water, in the very heart of this castle. It’s called Life Nest.”

Snowdrop was nodding. “That’s why they live so long. The elves were a short-lived race long ago, like other creatures. Then they found Life Nest and claimed it as their own, building their castle and kingdom around it. As far as anyone knows, only one such magical pool has ever been found. The elves must stay close to it, in case they are injured. But they have many agents working for them as they seek to spread their evil into other kingdoms.”

Though fascinatingly similar to the Fountain of Youth legends they were familiar with, Life Nest didn’t particularly interest Aaron, Patrick, and Christine since they were questing for something entirely different.

“Where in the castle might they keep the Horn of Spidersong?” Patrick asked Iglace.

“I don’t know,” she answered. After a moment’s thought, she added, “However, since it’s probably very well guarded, I would think they keep it near Life Nest, since the pool has heavy security.”

“That sounds reasonable,” said Christine.

“I can take you to Life Nest,” said Iglace, “and we can start the search there.”

Patrick, Aaron, and Christine were just about to swallow their elf-impersonation pills when they heard a sound in the forest behind them. A moment later, a man wearing a green jewel pendant appeared from behind a thick oak trunk. Smiling, he told them, “I’m so glad I found you; Starcoil sent me to help you with getting into the castle.” Stepping forward, he added, “I’m Dal Enek.”

As the travelers gave their names, Dal Enek nodded in greeting and, to their surprise, began humming softly. He had a beautiful and soothing voice, so beautiful, in fact, that it made them very relaxed and sleepy.

Aaron, Patrick, Christine, Snowdrop, and Iglace woke up three hours later to the surprising sight of Dal Enek tied securely to the oak trunk with vines, and gagged with a huge wad of leaves. Grump was sitting on a tree root near the man, humming a grumpy little tune of his own.

The waking party, all sporting terrible headaches, listened as Grump explained what had happened. “You forgot to feel his jewel,” he growled. “This *Dal Enek*, capturer and exploiter of songbird spirits that can lull others to sleep, works for the elves. But I don’t much like the songs of others,” Grump went on, “and I put my earplugs in, lickety-split, when he started his humming. So, as it turns out, I was able to use a few of my knotty-vine tricks on him.”

“My hero!” cried Iglace, racing to Grump to plant a smooching kiss on his cheek. Turning a brilliant shade of crimson, Grump was speechless for fully five minutes after the kiss.

A short while later, when their headaches had eased, Patrick and Aaron checked the vines securing Dal Enek to the tree to make sure they were good and tight. Grump, while muttering, “No more songs for you, not for awhile, anyway,” stuffed a few more leaves into the man’s mouth.

Christine, Aaron, and Patrick next swallowed their disguise pills, which worked instantly, making them perfect replicas of the three elf models they had chosen. They still wore their own clothing; however, it was similar enough to elf garb so as not to

make them stand out. Iglace informed her friends that the pills should give them about twelve hours of disguise.

After stowing their packs behind a grouping of rocks near the oak tree, the three made their way to the side entrance of the castle. Grump, Snowdrop, and Iglace hid in their friends' cloaks. Acting as casual as possible, the impersonators mingled with several real elves entering the fortress. The disguises were evidently working perfectly because the real elves took no notice of the travelers.

The castle interior was just as elaborate as the outside. Marble sculptures and ornate tapestries decorated halls and chambers.

Per Iglace's instructions, they made their way along select passages, which always seemed to lead downwards. At first, they were tingling and sweaty, but the fact that no one took notice of them soon calmed their nerves and fear.

Gradually, as they neared Life Nest, which was in the lowermost chamber of the castle, fewer elves crossed their path, and Iglace emerged from Christine's cloak to lead the way through the complicated maze of halls and stairs. The way became darker and more secluded as they made their way ever deeper into the castle.

Having met no one in the last several passages, the group began to feel secure and confident, as well as hopeful, in their quest's chance of success. However, unknown to the travelers, Christine had chosen unwisely for her double. The elf from which the template for her model was made had seen Christine enter the castle. Elf Originals were always informed when their Duplicates were being used. Mindena had not been informed; therefore, she knew something was quite amiss.

Mindena had followed the group discretely for some time. When she surmised they were heading toward Life Nest, she broke off her tail of them and immediately made her way to the chamber housing elf Security Operations to report the actions of the intruders.

The travelers entered the Life Nest chamber at the same time Mindena was reporting them. They were surprised to discover no elf guards on duty and, as far as they could tell, no surveillance devices keeping watch on the pool. Though thankful for the seclusion, they did wonder why something as important as Life Nest was seemingly unguarded.

The setting for the large, magical, kidney-shaped pool was a rocky underground cave with boulders strewn about the floor. Situated at the farthest end of the cave from the entrance, Life Nest was rimmed with a hundred evenly-spaced and perfectly-round stones.

An unnatural stillness surrounded the travelers as they neared the pool. Christine, Aaron, and Patrick were oddly reminded of their parents' funeral.

Reaching the rim of the pool, they gazed into the gently-swirling pale green, gold, and amber water. Several elves were floating in the pool, seemingly asleep.

"They're in a deep trance," whispered Iglace. "As long as we're quiet, they won't wake. In addition to healing wounds, the water reverses aging so they will remain young. However," she added, "no one can cheat Death forever." The tiny spirit shuddered as she said this.

A small wooden door was situated in a secluded corner of the cave. Motioning for the others to follow, Patrick made his way towards it, hopeful that it might lead to a chamber containing the Horn of Spidersong.

They only made it halfway to the door when a stream of elf guards, accompanied by the High Elf himself, entered the cave. As the High Elf waved a magical hand in a short arc, in a mere instant, the travelers' disguises vanished.

One of the guards carried what looked like a giant butterfly net made of light, which was some sort of containment field for magical spirits. The net evidently held some sort of magnetic force that rapidly sucked Snowdrop, Iglace, and Grump towards it. In a matter of seconds, the three tiny spirits were swooped up and held fast in the net.

A large metsu was with the elves; the creature was anything but cute, sporting a cruel look on his face as he eyed the spirits in the containment net as though he planned to eat them.

Patrick, Aaron, and Christine attempted to defend themselves; however, being vastly outnumbered, they were quickly overpowered. And the elves were not only expert swordsmen, they had the ability to levitate and hurl heavy objects such as stones. In less than two minutes, Aaron's bow and Christine's sword were knocked out of their hands; and their situation basically became that of being in the center of a dodge ball ring, but dodging huge rocks instead of rubber balls.

The guards were quickly able to advance on the intruders who were much distracted by the frenzy of flying stones. The elves who had been in the pool awoke from their trances to rise dripping from the water to join the fight.

As a large rock grazed her shoulder, Christine was smashed hard against a wall. The force knocked the wind out of her and she collapsed to the ground, unable to rise in her bruised state.

Aaron, who had lost his dagger as well as his bow, continued to dodge rocks about the size of cantaloupes. With a loud *ummmph*, he managed to catch one of the stones as it flew towards his stomach. Intent on hurling it back at the elves, he tried to raise it above his head; however, thanks to elf magic, he suddenly found the stone to be about thirty times heavier than its natural state. With another *ummmph*, he fell to his knees, barely managing to drop the stone in time to protect his hands from being crushed under its weight.

Patrick, who had sustained a deep cut on his thigh from an elf blade, was backed up against the pool of Life Nest. Though blood flowed freely from the wound, thinking quickly, he dropped his sword and retrieved the vial containing water from the Pool of Death from his belt. Quickly uncapping the vial and holding it over Life Nest, he said loudly, "Do you know what this is?"

The elves did know. Not only could they sense the nearness of Death, the deep blue color of the liquid in the vial was very distinctive. Even one drop would destroy the nest. As the entire party of elves froze in place, the last of their airborne stones dropped harmlessly to the ground.

Breathlessly, Patrick continued. "We have come for the Horn of Spidersong. If you don't give us the horn and allow us to leave safely, I will pour this into your precious Life Nest."

The High Elf, at first, thought Patrick was bluffing. After peering at the teenager for a moment, the elf offered, "We'll give you your freedom, but not the horn."

During their encounter with the elves, Patrick's state of mind had again reverted to one of frustration and anger, and had brought him to a point where he basically didn't care anymore. He and his brother and sister still weren't any closer to home, nor was there any guarantee that they soon would be; and putting their lives at risk seemed completely stupid to him at this moment. Patrick sighed deeply as he calmly told the elf leader,

“Man, if you were inside my head, you’d know you just said the *way wrong* thing.”

With this, he began to tilt the vial; and he would have poured it had not the High Elf immediately shouted, “Wait!”

Patrick did pause, and stared directly into the elf leader’s eyes in such a cold and intense manner, the man could definitely tell he wasn’t bluffing.

Softly, as he strolled a little nearer to the pool, the High Elf said, “We will relinquish the horn, if you will leave the vial with us.” As Patrick nodded in agreement, the elf leader gestured to two of his guards who set off immediately through the door in the corner of the cave.

While the elves were retrieving the horn, the three spirits were freed from the containment net, which caused the disappointed metsu to throw a screeching tantrum. Two of the guards quickly shushed him.

Christine and Aaron joined their brother beside the pool, where Christine used a piece of cloth torn from the bottom of her tunic to put pressure on Patrick’s wound to stem the flow of blood. Patrick kept his hand positioned over the pool with the vial slightly tilted, ready to pour.

The two elves returned quickly bearing a large ram’s horn, bluish in color and with an extra bit of curliness to it, that was capped on both ends. As the guards neared the pool, Christine relieved them of the horn, immediately handing it over to Aaron to carry. The horn was warm and slightly vibrating; Aaron couldn’t believe Christine was going to let him carry something so important.

Iglace confirmed that this was indeed the horn containing Spidersong. “Oh, I can hear the song already,” she sighed, “just a little bit.”

Snowdrop and Grump were whispering in Patrick’s ear. Nodding to the spirits, Patrick handed the vial over to Grump who perched on one of the round perimeter stones of the pool with it. Snowdrop took position beside him as Patrick told the High Elf, “Our friends here are going to hold the vial over Life Nest until we are outside and safely away. Grump and Snowdrop had assured Patrick that they had a magical means to escape the castle and would join them later.

Retrieving their weapons, the travelers cautiously left the cave.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Heaven's Jewel

“Hello,” the man greeted them with a smile, startling them once again as he stepped from the painting to stand before them.

“Please, don't be frightened,” the man said, as another rumble of thunder shook the painting. “I am here to help you. I am known as the Historian, and I welcome all visitors who come here.”

The travelers, in addition to being slightly uneasy, were fascinated by the painting. “You can touch it,” the Historian told them. As Christine reached out to lightly stroke the frame, which felt warm and tingly, he added, “It's partly made of real earth and real thunder.”

After the travelers introduced themselves, Patrick, on impulse, said, “Do you by any chance have a jewel that we can feel?”

“No,” the man answered, “I don't have a jewel, or anything else you can feel. I am a holographic projection from a computer program designed to record history and greet those who arrive by the magical pathway, as you did.” With this, he offered out his arm, which Aaron's hand passed right through as he attempted to touch the man.

“But it's funny you should mention a jewel,” the Historian went on, “because you have come to the Land of Ekkocoilo, otherwise known as Heaven's Jewel, or Heaven's Jewel Island.”

“We're on an island?” said Christine.

“Yes,” the man answered.

The travelers were next invited to take seats in the soft grass in front of the painting so that the Historian, who stood before them like a lecturer, could tell them more about Ekkocoilo. He began with how the island got its name.

“The people here believe there is a jewel, Ekko, hidden somewhere in this land that holds the answers to the meaning of life. However, the original name of the island was Vista Terraceilo. When settlers first came here, they named it based on

what they originally observed. Some saw storms full of thunder; others felt the ground shake with earthquakes. Some people experienced both. To the early peoples of these lands, Vista Terraceilo meant three things: Land of Yielding Earth, Land of Heaven's Thunder, and Land of Both Views.

"However," the Historian went on, "as many things in life change, and are shortened, so did the name change. Due to the belief that the meaning of life is hidden here, and because the island is a protected and special place, akin in some minds to heaven, the name was changed to Ekkocelo, which means Heaven's Jewel.

"But I must take you back farther than the time of the early settlers," the man continued, "to a time just after the Mid-Century Wars."

Since Patrick, Christine, and Aaron were bursting with questions, such as "Where exactly are we?" and "What year is this?" they were pleased that the Historian was planning to explain further.

"We must go all the way back to a time when most areas of the earth were overcome by horrendous natural disasters. Great climate changes brought on by pollution and overuse of natural resources created a situation in which human beings struggled to survive. Toxic air and water not only made it hard to breathe and find enough water to sustain life, the conditions also made growing enough food almost impossible. Add that problem to the natural disasters that were increasing tenfold in both numbers and intensity each decade.

"The three main religions of the world, by population percentage, were all forewarned and were tasked with spreading the message to everyone else so that all would have the same chance to act and survive. They were told that the earth would soon become completely uninhabitable and would take one million years to heal to become habitable again. They were instructed to go to a protected place—an island of harmony and balance, so much so that it was untouched by the destruction plaguing the rest of the planet—where human beings could survive and build a new life.

"Some believed the prophecy and some didn't. And although protection from the climate horrors was promised, many didn't want to leave their lives behind to start over somewhere else. You see, those who delivered the prophecy couldn't do so too

early because, until the natural disasters worsened, few would have believed in it enough to act. So, with fairly short notice, refugees could take only few comforts with them. They could take knowledge, but very few devices such as computers or medical equipment. And life in any raw place is harsh and difficult, at first. Those who heeded the warning and came had to live a primitive life to begin with, while struggling to survive with the limited resources at hand.

“I have to admit it’s been fascinating to watch this civilization develop, and to record the details.” (The Historian evidently enjoyed his job so much that he was fairly bouncing up and down on his tiptoes at this point in his lecture.) “The mystery is one of the most fascinating parts,” he added. “No one really knows why Heaven’s Jewel is protected from the natural disasters outside. Whether the answer is spiritual, mystical, scientific, magical, or simply something like magnetism, sea spirits, luck...whatever it is, it is a great mystery.

“At first, the leaders instituted rules to limit the number of children born because people couldn’t feed or care for them properly. That didn’t last long, of course, because you can’t really contain procreation. Plus, they figured out pretty quickly that they would need to populate in order for the human race to survive. It was one of those things where they had to solve the dilemma of resources versus population, which is a common problem in many emerging societies. But the settlers got innovative quickly in use of and production of resources. At first, people had to take specific jobs, whether they wanted to or not, in order for everyone to have the best chance of survival. So there was less choice and fewer educational opportunities. People who had other interests relied on self education, instead of organized learning and training.

“We also had the normal crime issues of any developing civilization. But since those who didn’t comply with the rules were banished, the problems were brought under control fairly quickly.

“Ekkocceilo is a place of peace and cooperation. However, due to the nature of the island, and its resources, a slightly odd thing happened. Four colonies were established, and the divided peoples ended up keeping mostly separate from one another for many years. They even had separate but similar governments.

However, they eventually realized that for long-term survival and prosperity, they would all need to work more closely together.

“Now that we are more advanced, and things are easier, the colonies are starting to intermingle more. They are currently engaging in talks to form one large government, to better share resources. We’ll see how that goes.”

The Historian paused for a moment before going on. Christine, Aaron, and Patrick were breathless with anticipation, anxious to hear more of the story.

“The original harsh conditions made for rapid evolution, forcing adaptation for survival and progress. After one thousand years, people started to show significant physical evolutionary changes. At two thousand, the changes began occurring more frequently and were much more noticeable. Older physical features such as yours have become rare.

“The four settlements all began somewhat close to one another in proximity, in about five thousand square kilometers. They have now expanded to include multiple versions of the colonies covering over two hundred thousand square kilometers. The outer colonies are being settled by explorers, our *adventurers*, if you will. Most of the major hospitals, libraries, and schools are still situated in the original four colonies, but we are expanding. We began with just over nineteen thousand settlers. We now have close to seven hundred thousand. That’s not bad for four thousand years of starting with basically nothing but knowledge and raw resources. We did have a couple of scares along the way, when illnesses wiped out large groups of the populations; but with our advances in medicines, and increases in numbers, we are fairly safe from that problem now. And we expect even more rapid development in the future,” the Historian added proudly, “with our advancements in the areas of energy, recycling, animal breeding programs, education, transportation systems, and just about anything else you can think of.”

Along with the shocking information of what was going to happen to the earth in their future, the numbers the Historian was recounting left the travelers reeling, and they found they needed to interrupt to ask questions.

“Wait a minute,” said Patrick. “Go back and give us dates. When did this whole thing begin?”

“And give us more details,” urged Christine.

“We’ve never even heard of the Mid-Century Wars,” Aaron added. “That hadn’t happened yet in our time.”

The Historian, somewhat reluctantly, agreed to provide dates. “I am obligated to be accurate,” he said slowly, “though I worry about being too specific and giving too much information.”

He paused a moment and took a deep breath before going on. “By the year 2072, climate changes had become more pronounced; and water and food shortages had increased, with other resources dwindling rapidly as well. You’re obviously from the United States,” the Historian added. “In the states alone, a drought had dried up most of the south, from Georgia to California. But California had already been mostly destroyed by earthquakes, landslides, and wildfires. Meanwhile, flooding increased in the Midwest. Of course, people were never meant to build too close to rivers and lakes; but no one could have predicted that Missouri, Indiana, and Ohio would be eighty percent under water. Michigan and Illinois were close to fifty percent. Oklahoma and Kansas were plagued by ten times more tornadoes than normal, and these were mostly of the BL7 and BL8 categories—the most severe. Hurricanes had increased dramatically both in strength and numbers along the East and Gulf Coasts. Montana and Wyoming no longer existed because they were wiped out by volcanic eruptions.

“Other parts of the world were similarly affected. Australia, for example, was nearly completely wiped out by brushfires. The fires are natural down there, but with nearly half the continent aflame, they pretty much had to evacuate everyone. Japan had so many earthquakes over a five-year period that most of the cities were wiped out. And volcanic eruptions had turned Indonesia, the Philippines, and Iceland into new versions of Pompeii.

“We don’t know exactly when the prophecy about the protected place began to be circulated,” the Historian continued, “but over the next decade, religious leaders began to believe it. Eventually, people found it the only source of hope. The migration to the island began in 2089. By that time, so many had died from the disasters, the world population was down to well under two billion.

“They came in planes, boats, and even hot air balloons. Some made it, many didn’t due to weather factors. Some wealthier people began shuttle services for those who wanted to

come, but they eventually had to stop when they used up their resources.

“We received our last word of the outside world when the last of the settlers arrived in 2115. The devastation had continued. People were so desperate they were murdering one another for the smallest quantities of food and water. Those who sought shelter had no resources; when they went out to find resources, they were at the mercy of the elements, and others desperate to survive.”

While the Historian’s story was incredibly interesting, Christine, remembering the Sea Seer’s riddle and wanting to stay on track, interrupted with, “We are seeking the Ancient Path. Can you help us find it?”

“We have a Path to the Old Lands,” the Historian said. “I wonder if that is what you mean.”

“It sounds close enough,” said Patrick.

“I can definitely take you there,” the man said. “And you’ll get to see the four colonies along the way because the path begins at the farthest colony.”

Chapter Twenty-Four Cloudfish and Stonehounds

They set off right away with the Historian directing them down the hill to a small monorail station currently housing one shuttle car. Patrick, Aaron, and Christine walked there without the Historian because he needed to be in close proximity to a projection computer in order to appear to them. He was waiting for them outside the station.

Boarding the shuttle, they could see the buildings of one of the colonies nestled amongst the hills in the far distance. However, as the travelers soon discovered, they were not going to visit any structures on the ground just yet. Disembarking in an isolated spot after about a ten-minute ride, they immediately boarded an air shuttle to visit an entire city floating in the clouds.

“We’ll see the Cloudfish Colony first,” the Historian told them.

As they rose, Aaron commented, “It’s hard to believe things like pollution can cause such drastic climate changes.”

“I believe it,” responded Patrick. “Millions of plastic bottles are still ending up in landfills; and we’re still using a lot of wood and paper products, instead of things like bamboo and cork that are more sustainable, so we’re still cutting down trees that are meant to clean the air and provide habitats for a lot of creatures.”

The Historian nodded as he said, “Human impact on other aspects of nature has been extreme in your history too. Large-scale cloud seeding to combat drought ended up causing a lot of flooding and erosion problems. Another example, they took the sting out of nettles. Nettles had a purpose, to protect certain animals, birds, insects, etc. Without this protection, a particular small rodent was wiped out by foxes and coyotes. With the extinction, a particular type of hawk lost its primary food source and was unable to adapt, also becoming extinct.”

“Mule deer are having trouble adapting,” said Aaron, remembering an article he had read in a magazine.

The Historian gave him a nod and a small, sad smile, as if to confirm that mule deer had also become extinct.

They said nothing further on this subject, but reflected in quiet as they neared their destination in the clouds.

The sight of the city in the sky took their breath away. Most of the buildings had been erected on enormous platter-like platforms of various shapes and sizes. However, a few smaller structures appeared to float unsupported in the air. The building construction was very sleek, with clean lines and only a few carvings and engravings as embellishments. A handful of statues and monuments decorated open areas and courtyards of the support structures, but these were tasteful both in size and theme so as to be in keeping with the minimalist style of the colony.

As their craft climbed to a higher level of the floating city, the Historian explained, “One of first things the settlers needed to find to survive here was water.” (Aaron, Christine, and Patrick remembered this well from the time after their crash on the island.) “However,” the Historian continued, “the lakes here are filled with toxins, salt, and bacterial blooms similar to those of red tides. And it would have taken a lot of equipment and resources to desalinate the sea water, so that wasn’t the best option. They needed to figure out how to harvest rain before it could touch the ground and mix with the toxic waters to become unusable unless filtered, so they thought to start in the clouds. This colony was originally set up to process clouds into usable water. This region of the island has dense cloud cover much of the time.”

When they reached a landing platform in one of the higher levels of the city, the air was so cold the travelers put on their cloaks. Stepping out of the air shuttle, they observed a group of people hard at work around a device that resembled a giant spindle floating in a cloud mass about a hundred yards from the nearest platform. The workers who were not clinging to the spindle were somehow floating on their own in the air, with no visible supports such as cables or hooks that one might expect.

“That machine is one of the water harvesters,” the Historian explained. “The technology of this community is based on using properties of both water and air. The early pioneers of this colony developed ways to basically swim through the clouds, so the people became known as Cloudfish.” The movements of the

workers around the spindle very much resembled swimming motions.

“Then it makes sense for them to have learned to defy gravity,” said Aaron, “because when heavy objects are in water, they are so much lighter.”

“That’s exactly right,” said the Historian admiringly. “I believe that is one of the earliest concepts they studied. However, their techniques are somewhat mysterious; and though the Cloudfish work in cooperation with the other colonies, they don’t give all of their technological secrets away.”

As they watched, a craft similar to the air shuttle, but smaller and sleeker in design, picked up two of the floating workers and transported them away.

“By the way,” the Historian added, “the nicknames for the inhabitants of each of the colonies are not meant as derogatory in any way. The people of Heaven’s Jewel consider them rather affectionate terms. In other words, the people here don’t mind being called Cloudfish.”

They shortly boarded the shuttle again to see another part of the city that included wind turbines and a water purification system. A faint, rhythmic, musical humming issued from the machinery. The Historian smiled as he explained, “That’s one of the mysteries. They have incorporated the use of sound, specifically the way it travels, into their technology, and even more specifically, musical sound.”

“It’s probably something to do with the harmony and balance of it,” suggested Christine.

“And the fact that music is mathematical,” added Patrick.

“My goodness,” remarked the Historian. “We evidently have three young geniuses here.”

Aaron was pondering. “I wonder if they might have something like a scientific version of Spidersong,” he said.

Patrick slowly nodded in agreement, since it was certainly possible, as Christine answered, “That’s a good guess.”

The Historian looked at them somewhat quizzically, but didn’t question. Instead, he softly commented, “You have evidently been on a long journey.” After a pause, he added, “I’m guessing you still have a way to go before it ends.”

As they were able to observe several of the Cloudfish residents more closely in the area of the turbines, the visitors could clearly see the evolutionary changes previously referred to

by the Historian. The people were thin and wispy in stature, appearing very cloudlike, as though they could blend in and perhaps even meld with the clouds surrounding them. While Aaron, Christine, and Patrick labored with their breathing at this altitude, the Cloudfish apparently had no difficulty breathing, even when performing strenuous activities. The Historian explained that since they spent most of their time in a thinner atmosphere, their lungs had grown larger to process oxygen more efficiently. The Cloudfish also had larger noses and nasal passages. They had adapted to living in cooler temperatures as well. Even with their cloaks wrapped tightly about them, the travelers were shivering. In contrast, the Cloudfish seemed perfectly comfortable garbed in lightweight clothing that included short sleeves. Additionally, nearly every resident had hair bleached white and skin darkly tanned from sun exposure.

Several Cloudfish waved in greeting to the visitors, but none stopped their busy work in order to meet them.

As they boarded the shuttle to depart, the Historian told them, “The turbines generate enough power for all of these platforms to stay afloat. And about half of Ekkoceilo relies on power from the Cloudfish Colony. So it’s not just about the water up here; it’s about wind power too.”

Descending back down to the island, they chanced to see an enormous bird that they imagined must have been about three times larger than the giant condors of their own time. The soaring creature was magnificent and graceful, despite its size.

When the clouds thinned, they saw a mountain range in the distance with four distinct smoothly-humped ridges, the third one slightly dipped into the shape of a smile.

Aaron and Christine couldn’t figure out why the sight looked familiar until Patrick said, “Those look just like the mountains on Ruin Foster’s island.”

“Of course,” said Christine. “They’re nearly the same; that’s why they look familiar.”

When they reached the ground, they walked a short distance along a gravel path to meet the Historian at another monorail station, where they boarded to head in the direction of the four-hump mountain. They enjoyed the lush scenery as they snaked their way through the countryside. While admiring a herd of what looked like extra hairy cows, their mouths fell open as they passed none other than Ear Rock. There could be no mistaking

it. Though smaller than it had been, from wear of the elements over the years, the shape was exact and very distinctive. It was definitely the same rock formation.

They soon reached a station stop at the base of a quarry surrounded by high stone cliffs dotted with mine entrances. From the station platform, they observed hundreds of stout and muscular workers bustling in and out of the mines.

“This is part of the Stonehound Colony,” the Historian told them. “Again,” he stressed, “nothing bad is meant by the name. The Stonehounds were given the name because, in addition to spending most of their time working among the rocks, they developed a way to use smell, mainly to help them locate specific metals. For example, a Stonehound would be able to tell if a piece of jewelry you were wearing was copper or silver, or whatever, even if it was hidden under your clothing because he would be able to smell it, and somehow distinguish it from other metals.”

“That’s fascinating,” remarked Christine, with Aaron and Patrick nodding.

Though the Stonehounds were muscular in stature, they were obviously very graceful in their movements, reminding the travelers of the way dancers seemed to glide about, even when they weren’t dancing. When Aaron remarked on this, the Historian explained, “Being both nimble and flexible helps with their work. They have also developed extremely keen eyesight, having spent so many years under ground, in the dark.” The residents of the Stonehound Colony were also somewhat pale from having less exposure to sunlight.

“Shelter is another of the first things needed for survival,” the Historian told them, “and the early settlers began carving cave dwellings in these cliffs. They harvested the minerals, ores, and crystals they came across to use for tools and building materials. Thanks to smarts and ingenuity, they soon developed ways to further the uses of the raw materials. They can change the properties of some stones and metals using something similar to alchemy. But they don’t make gold, like olden alchemists. They make more useful things. For example, they have a chamber capable of reducing granite boulders into Ghering Pebbles, named after the man who invented the process. The pebbles are only the size of marbles but are highly sought after for their energy properties. They are like incredibly high-powered and

long-lasting batteries. The backup generators for all of our hospitals are powered by Ghering Pebbles. Though the Stonehounds freely share this product with the rest of the colonies, they keep the technical aspects of the reduction chamber secret.”

“I wonder if their reduction secrets have anything to do with their use of smell,” Aaron pondered.

Though the people of the Stonehound Colony were smiling and appeared friendly, they were busy and none stopped work to talk to the visitors.

After only a few additional minutes of observation, the travelers reentered the monorail car to continue on to the next colony. As they meandered through the hilly landscape, they observed many unique animals, birds, and reptiles. They also passed Noppi’s favorite arch, which was recognizable, though considerably more delicate now that much more of the stone had worn away from its inside. Stopping at an overlook of Fish Canyon to stretch their legs, they observed that although the canyon was still fish shaped, it was now approximately twice as deep as it had been. Taking a stroll along the overlook, they discovered fossilized footprints that looked like Noppi’s.

Christine, particularly, took notice and said, “I’m very familiar with his feet. These are definitely Noppi’s footprints.”

Aboard the monorail again, the Historian explained, “Growing civilizations need food, and a lot of it. It was a challenge to cultivate here. There aren’t a lot of plains to make into fertile farmlands, and the settlers were hesitant to clear very many of the treed areas because trees, especially old-growth ones, are very important, not only for clean air but also as habitats for wildlife. So they ended up building gardens in the canyon walls. They also developed hanging treetop gardens. The Lakebirds grow much of the food for the four colonies. They even do some underwater gardening. You’ll see the Lakebird Colony tomorrow,” he added. “I’m taking you now to a place to stay for the night.”

Since it was starting to get dark, the guests were quickly situated in an empty lakeshore dwelling that was the size of a small cottage. The Historian departed after getting them settled, promising to meet them again early the next morning.

As they were having dinner, Aaron said, “I can’t believe this is the same island, but in the future.”

“This is a pretty neat future for mankind,” said Patrick, “if you can get over the scariness of what happened to the rest of the earth with all of the natural disasters.”

Christine remarked that she thought the evolutionary changes of the settlers happened almost unbelievably fast.

“I believe it,” said Patrick. “The people were forced to adapt quickly, to survive.”

Aaron had been thinking a lot about the horrors of the natural disasters. “I wonder...” he began, “when we get back home, since we now know what we’re in store for, maybe we could convince people to build underground shelters, instead of resettling here.”

“Manmade shelters wouldn’t stand a chance against the forces of nature,” Patrick countered. “Flooding, earthquakes, volcanic activity—it’s all so powerful, and unpredictable. There’s no way.”

“I doubt we could ever build enough of them,” Christine remarked. “That would take a lot of resources.”

Aaron agreed, and they all decided resettling in a protected place such as Heaven’s Jewel was probably the best answer.

Though they could have talked all night, they were really too tired, so they retired shortly after eating, where they all slept soundly through the night.