

# Netherwind and Laurelstone



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Clock Winders Book Three

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

*Netherwind and Laurelstone* is Book Three  
of the *Clock Winders Series*

### Clock Winders Series

Wind Horses and Horned Lions

Burnished Doves and Sky Serpents

Netherwind and Laurelstone

The Clock of the Universe

The Once and Forever Mountain

“The LORD’s curse is on the house of the wicked,  
but he blesses the abode of the righteous.”

—Proverbs 3:33



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## Chapter One

### Buses and Cars

Early Summer 1956

Frances Harrison caught her breath as Zapor swooped into the alley behind the church, scooping her up and swiftly flying off with her. Thankfully, her sister had already driven away before the chaos began.

With Annabelle safely out of the picture and her protector flying her home, Frances felt relieved, but also sad at what was happening back at the carpool lot, which would likely include something far worse than damage to the cars because the ignorant and misguided men invading the lot didn't particularly have qualms about using violence and hurting people when trying to shut down the carpool efforts. However, if she hadn't run for the cover of the alley, if she had stayed in the thick of things and gotten hurt, or possibly arrested, her parents probably would not have allowed her to continue helping with the bus boycott.

Ever since Rosa Parks had refused to give up her seat on the bus the previous December, much of the South had been in turmoil; and many bus boycotts were taking place, some informal, some highly organized. Actually, a lot of the unrest had started the year before with the implementation of school desegregation. Frances remembered her junior high school having security guards for five months straight to maintain safety. With 1956 being an election year, there had also been a lot of protesting in recent months about unfair voting practices, in the form of poll taxes and literacy tests, which kept many poor people, especially woman, from voting.

While Frances could see great things coming from the upheaval and unrest, such as everyone being able to use the same public restrooms and everyone allowed to sit at the same lunch counters, she was often afraid of the things happening around her. However, she couldn't just stand by and do nothing. Only a little over year ago, she might have done just that, nothing, except for having crossed paths the previous

summer with a mysterious girl from Illinois that had really made an impression on her. Since meeting the girl, who had called herself Marie, Frances had become quite a different person. And when she actually thought about it, she was amazed at exactly how much she had changed in just a single year.

For starters, she found herself taking advantage of opportunities offered to her that she might previously have shied away from, like making use of the huge library at Doyle Mansion. And she wouldn't have made friends with Gerard Doyle if it hadn't been for Marie encouraging her to do so. Among other friendly gestures, Gerard now no longer called her Fanny, since he knew how much she hated the nickname. Standing up to her sister about issues like the nickname was another thing Frances had learned to do. And Annabelle seemed to have a lot more respect for her when she did stand up for herself. In fact, with Frances becoming bolder, and coming out of her shell, the sisters were becoming better friends. Frances had become more outgoing at school as well, much less of a wallflower, and had made quite a few new friends. At home, she was praying more, and learning to trust in God. And in being in closer connection to Him, she was hearing from Him more often than she had in the past, not just in the form of answered prayers, but in guidance, concerning everything. She could feel not only the comfort and love of Jesus surrounding her, but also the Holy Spirit inside her, directing both her thoughts and actions.

Frances' best friend, Ellie Franklin, was a great help to her spiritual growth, having always been very religious, and a good influence on just about anyone she came into contact with. The Franklins had a large library too, which Frances often borrowed books from, particularly the mythology and folklore section; but the library at Doyle Mansion was absolutely enormous. And Gerard had offered her full use of it. At first thinking that she almost couldn't believe her luck, Frances soon realized that this wasn't luck, but rather, a blessing. And she would come to learn that all of the lovely things coming her way were blessings from God, to help her to stay on the path He intended for her, and to keep her going in the right direction.

In visiting the library at Doyle Mansion regularly over the past year, instead of just reading books for fun, Frances had started to do research, and keep a journal, which she was filling with research notes. While

she had, in the past, done a few fanciful things such as looking for gnomes in the garden and searching the neighborhood for unicorns, she never imagined that magical creatures might actually exist until she started really looking into it. And she might not have ever really looked into it if it hadn't been for a comment by Marie, which was completely seared into Frances' brain, for as much of an impact as it had had on her. "God wouldn't have put unicorns into the hearts of man if they didn't exist, so you should never stop believing."

But it wasn't just Marie's words and the research that were currently spurring her on. Something absolutely incredible had happened over Christmas Break in that Zapor and Folto had come into her life, as a truly amazing blessing from God. Just before Christmas, Frances had been almost fanatically reading the bible, because she was desperately feeling like she needed to do some good in the world, and take up some really good cause. However, she wasn't at all sure at the time what that cause could or should be—literacy, feeding the hungry, missionary work, witnessing—she just couldn't figure out what she might be destined to do. And she was also a little afraid, as many people are when embarking on important life ventures or journeys. But once again, something Marie had said was spurring her on. "God will help you. He will teach you to roar. All you have to do is trust in Him." Frances had been thinking of exactly this when praying in her bedroom on Christmas Eve.

*Father,*

*I thank You for Your many blessings. I think I really can do some good in the world, but I've always been scared to tackle big things on my own. I will obey You, whatever You call me to do. But I think I might need a helper, to help me at least get over being scared. Ellie helps me, I know. And I know You are always with me. But I'm still scared sometimes. I just want to get stronger and better, so that I can better serve You. Please help me. Please teach me to roar, and soar. I pray in Jesus' name, Amen.*

Just after praying, Frances randomly flipped open her bible, as she often did, to see if God might have anything to say back to her; and her eyes immediately fell on Isaiah 45:2-3. "I will go before you and level

the mountains, I will break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut asunder the bars of iron, I will give you the treasures of darkness and the hoards in secret places, that you may know that it is I, the LORD, the God of Israel, who call you by your name.”

Reading the quote twice, Frances took the inspiring message to mean that God would surely help her, and give her whatever might be needed—courage, a helper, other resources, whatever—for any task He might call her to do.

Her parents, sister, and two brothers, Charles and Edward, were all downstairs decorating the Christmas tree and watching television while Frances was upstairs reading and praying. She was just about to head downstairs to join them when she heard a noise on the balcony outside her bedroom window. With it being Christmas Eve, the little girl in Frances immediately thought, *Santa Claus! He's on the balcony!*

Rushing to the window, and raising it, she saw something even better than Santa and his reindeer (if that could be possible); and the sight of the two gryphons truly astounded her. Quickly realizing this was an answer to her prayer, she wasn't afraid. Climbing through the window, she intended to greet the magical visitors, both of whom were staring at her in polite expectation of making her acquaintance. However, suddenly feeling nervous, as well as dwarfed by their towering and somewhat foreboding presences—which seemed odd since Frances herself was very tall (for a girl of her generation), already five feet nine inches, and still growing—she suddenly found herself speechless, unable to utter a single word.

Not to worry, because Zapor didn't mind talking; and in his deep and rumbling voice, he simply told her their names, and that they had been assigned to help and protect her.

Considerably less nervous and finding her voice again, Frances replied, “Pleased to meet you. I'm looking forward to working with you.”

They didn't do much together to start with because Frances was still very young and needed to learn a few things, such as how to safely ride atop a gryphon, which was not as difficult as riding a horse, but was more difficult than riding a wind horse because gryphons don't have the type of aura that wind horses have that might hold a rider in place. However, while easing into things, the flying threesome did end up

stopping a hold-up at a bank in late January. In February, while on a short jaunt around town, they discovered a couple of mean kids pushing around a much younger kid at a deserted ballpark. In a flash, Zapor and Folto streaked in to knock the two ruffians down. Thinking a ghost was attacking them, because all they could see were a couple of pale gold streaks of light, the bullies quickly fled. Zapor dropped Frances off behind the dugout just after making his ghostly sideswipe at the taller of the two boys. She then walked with the younger boy to his home a few blocks away, the gryphons keeping an eye on them from the skies the whole while.

Having Zapor and Folto around prompted Frances to do even more research into magical creatures. Specifically looking up gryphons, she found most of the information pure speculation that didn't even begin to scratch the surface as to the true characteristics of these divine creatures. For instance, there was nothing in the books about gryphons being intelligent, shrewd, and well spoken, not to mention as wise as any philosopher and as knowledgeable as any college professor. Recognizing the limitations of even a large library, Frances was determined to find better books, collecting some of her own, if possible. She might even ask Zapor and Folto to take her to some older bookstores, ones that might specialize in antique and eclectic books.

Gryphons were also fast, incredibly so, another fact not particularly found in her research. *Fast like Superman*, Frances thought, amusing herself. *Like a golden streak in the sky. It's not a bird, or a plane, or Superman; it's Folto!*

While gryphons were extremely fascinating, and Frances was interested in all things magical, like many girls her age, she was most captivated by unicorns; and from her research, she discovered that real unicorns were definitely not much like storybook ones.

During the spring, while Folto was off doing other work for God, Zapor took her on a few more outings, mainly for fun; but during one trip, they managed to help the police nab a pair of pickpockets.

With Zapor and Folto around so much, the whole Harrison family soon learned about the gryphons who would often take both Frances and Annabelle places. The family also learned about Deena, the girl puck troll who had been living in the house for the past few years, but who

had previously only made herself known to Mr. Harrison, whose artistry in building wooden model ships she so admired.

By the time summer rolled around, Frances had basically learned to roar, as well as soar; on the gryphons, that is.

The watchfulness of Zapor and Folto was one reason Mr. and Mrs. Harrison had allowed Annabelle and Frances, being so young, to help with the carpool efforts for the bus boycott.

The town the Harrisons' home was situated in was somewhat rural, surrounded by farmlands, though the town was growing and would eventually turn into a good-sized sprawling suburb on the outskirts of a large city.

In the meantime, the large city was already nearby, and was one in which a bus boycott was taking place. As a result of Rosa Parks being arrested, many groups had been staging protests. Boycotting the buses was a peaceful and effective way of protesting, very much in the style of the teachings of Reverend King, who advocated strongly for everything to be handled in a peaceful and prayerful manner. Even at her young age, Frances realized exactly how important the bus boycott truly was, as a beginning step toward many other good things happening in the South. And as soon as Negroes were allowed to sit anywhere they wanted to on the buses, this would lead to places like public restrooms and parks being for everyone too. Then this would lead to more good things, like Negroes being elected to public offices.

With the boycott, a lot of churches had organized carpools so that people who had relied on the buses for transportation could still get where they needed to go, especially to work so that they would not lose their jobs. Many cab companies were also helping with the efforts, by charging the same fees as bus fare. Mr. Templeton, who lived across the street from Doyle Mansion, owned a cab company and had instructed his drivers to do exactly this, though he ended up getting fines for doing so. Many of his drivers also got tickets (though they hadn't done anything warranting them) because many police officers were unfairly targeting those in support of the bus boycotts. In addition to church parking lots, some private business owners were allowing the use of their lots for carpooling.

With school out for summer, Frances might have wanted to focus on her research. But with something so important going on relating to

Civil Rights, she had to put all fanciful notions on hold in order to do something she felt might help make a difference. Like many young girls, she felt a strong calling to make an impact on the world, in the hopes of changing it, to make it a better place for all to live in. Reading about unicorns and dragons and such could, and definitely should, wait.

Annabelle wanted to help too. At sixteen, she had been driving for over a year and had permission to drive the family's car for the carpool efforts. With Mr. Harrison working mainly from home, and with most of his work travels being by train and plane, he didn't need the car very often. As a housewife, Mrs. Harrison also didn't need the car frequently, especially with the market and post office near enough to walk to. Brothers Charles and Edward, eighteen and seventeen respectively, would have liked to have driven for the carpool; but they were working most of the summer on a nearby farm, so they weren't going to be able to help. They didn't need the family car either because they were picked up each morning by a friend also working on the farm. The boys' free time had been busy lately too, as they were currently building bunk beds and a table for a family down the street from Mr. Templeton whose house had recently burned down. (This was something people used to do a lot more of, help one another.)

There always seemed to be plenty of stuff for boys to do in the summers, but girls often just ended up helping their mothers with cooking and cleaning. Both Frances and Annabelle definitely wanted to do more than that. Ellie, too, wanted to do more than just help her mother and grandmother with gardening and canning, or sit around and read away the summer.

Frances and Ellie, both being fourteen, were not old enough to drive. Actually, some teenagers in the fifties did get driver's licenses as young as fourteen; but both girls' parents didn't think they were old enough to drive yet. So instead of driving, Frances and Ellie helped raise money, mostly by selling baked goods like cookies and brownies, and collecting glass bottles to return for the deposits. The money was mainly used for gasoline for the carpool cars and to help pay for tickets. Annabelle had gotten one ticket so far, for speeding, though she hadn't been speeding. The police officer was simply targeting her because she was driving for the carpool. Some of the funds raised were given to people to pay cab fare. His family being fairly wealthy, Gerard helped

by donating money and by purchasing all of the ingredients for Frances and Ellie to make the baked goods for their fundraising. By this time, since they were all such good friends, Ellie and Gerard both already knew about the gryphons.

The main focus of the carpool that Annabelle was signed up to drive for was getting people living in the city to their worksites in various suburbs, and then home again in the evenings; and many of the people she was driving to and from work each day were employed as cooks, maids, and chauffeurs in various wealthy households. She also occasionally took people to markets, doctor's appointments, and other such errands; but the driving was mainly related to helping people keep their jobs during the time they couldn't ride the buses. Gerard's mother employed a maid named Hattie Morton from the city three days a week; and while she didn't officially drive for the carpool, Mrs. Doyle did end up picking Hattie up and taking her home on these days. She also provided transportation for two other maids working in the neighborhood on these days.

Annabelle ended up driving for the carpool five and six days a week. Women from a military base about ten miles from the city were also driving, and Annabelle ended up good friends with several of them, one of which was the sister of the man Annabelle would eventually marry five years into the future.

In addition to the fundraising, Frances sometimes rode along with Annabelle, to occasionally read maps for her sister or to help spot house numbers of people newly signed up for the carpool services. Frances also helped to clean up various parking lots that were sometimes trashed overnight by people objecting to the carpools.

Along with protecting Frances and Annabelle, Zapor and Folto took it upon themselves to help with the bus boycott. All of their efforts were, of course, done as clandestinely as possible, mostly by highly magical means. Even from great distances away, either hovering or perched on rooftops, the gryphons could hold doors of buses closed as people were trying to open them. Sometimes they helped move cars around to unblock traffic jams. They were also able to dispel angry mobs so that things could go more smoothly and peacefully at the carpool lots.

Having whisked Frances away from the alley behind the church, only four minutes later, Zapor was dropping her off in the secluded alley behind Doyle Mansion. He departed the moment she slid from his back.

Since she could see Gerard on his back porch, Frances entered through the rear gate, waving to him as she did so.

As she approached, Gerard could see that Frances was upset and shaking, and he bid her sit down at the table while he went to the kitchen for glasses of tea for them. With his mother in her sewing room and his father at work, and with it not being one of Hattie's work days, they had a little privacy to talk.

Between sips of tea, Frances described some of the mess that had just happened.

"About twenty men came and tried to shut the lot down. They were obviously organized. This wasn't something spur of the moment, because they all had tire irons and baseball bats. And they all showed up at the same time."

Gerard almost couldn't believe it, though he had heard reports of goings on such as this on the news. It seemed a recent trend for groups of men to swarm the carpool lots, intent on smashing the cars, and possibly a few skulls as well.

The particular group Frances had just encountered had completely ignored the church pastor and several of the carpool drivers trying to talk to them and stop them. Blessedly, though the police had delayed in responding to the phone call made by the janitor of the church, help had actually arrived very swiftly, in the form of Folto, who landed on the church rooftop a split-second after Zapor zoomed away with Frances.

With great flaps of her wings, she directed bursts of energy at specific targets in the lot below. Her efforts were so effective, she didn't even need to enter the fray until most of the invaders had either already fled or been knocked flat by what they thought was a freak windstorm. A gargoyle on one corner of the church roof also helped by magically raising dust clouds to confuse the violent men, several of which ended up accidentally hitting each other with their tire irons and bats in the muddle. Folto did dive in at the end to clear the lot of the last five stubborn invaders by crashing into them several times each,

and knocking their weapons out of their hands, which finally did cause them to flee just before the police arrived.

No thanks to the police, but as a result of the magical help, only two cars were damaged, and the carpool lot was up and running again the next morning.

Annabelle went to the lot by herself the next couple of days, while Frances focused on the fundraising, along with running a few errands around the neighborhood for her mother.

During one such errand, Frances ended up doing something very impulsive, and very wrong. While delivering two jars of peach butter to Mrs. Lancaster, an elderly wealthy woman in the neighborhood, and while waiting for the woman to retrieve an empty jar from her pantry to take back to Mrs. Harrison, Frances simply reached into Mrs. Lancaster's open purse on the kitchen table and took out a twenty-dollar bill. She didn't take the money for herself, but rather for the cause of the boycott. And she did it without really thinking. Afterwards, she found her mind telling her that the theft was justified and that Mrs. Lancaster would never miss the twenty.

"Where'd you get the twenty?" Annabelle demanded, as Frances turned over the weekly fundraising proceeds to her late that same evening. (That was a lot of money for the time. In fact, neither of the sisters had ever owned a twenty-dollar bill.)

Instead of lying, Frances fessed up that she had stolen it from Mrs. Lancaster. "I just took it out of her purse," she told her sister. "I guess I thought she wouldn't notice because she has lots of money. She'll probably think she lost it, or spent it."

Annabelle couldn't believe what she was hearing. "You're not Robin Hood," she scolded. "You committed a crime. And I know for sure God wouldn't approve, not even for a good cause."

"Do you want me to take it back?" Frances asked. Having never stolen anything before, she had actually been feeling guilty about what she had done.

Annabelle paused to think for a few moments, after which, she decided to go ahead and put the twenty toward the cause, rather than risk Frances possibly getting into trouble trying to return the money. "Just don't do it again," she warned.

Frances prayed about the theft that night because she knew Annabelle was right. The Holy Spirit inside her was also telling her how very wrong she had been. Plus, in opening the bible randomly to read before going to bed, she landed right on the Ten Commandments in Exodus. ““You shall not steal.”” jumping out at her, she realized pretty quickly how serious the matter was.

Asking God for forgiveness, she vowed never to steal again, not even for a good cause.

Actually, what happened wasn't entirely due to Frances being impulsive or weak or making a bad decision. Etowa and Boko, the beings outside of time, ended up causing the scenario, while playing their ongoing and elaborate good-versus-evil game during which they often influenced human actions. Using a variety of means, but mainly magical seeds, the pair often planted thoughts into human brains, the thoughts equating to ideas that most often did come to fruition. With Boko being on the side of evil, basically working for Satan, he had planted the seed (by way of a cucumber seed) for Frances to steal the money. This resulted not only in a sin that Frances had to repent of, but also in a serious problem for Mrs. Lancaster's maid, a young girl named Doris Friel. Doris was nearly fired over the missing twenty, and the police were called. However, thanks to Etowa planting a seed (using a sesame seed) for Mrs. Lancaster's Scottish terrier to come exactly when the police were there to steal a five-dollar bill from her purse and carry it off into the yard to bury, Doris was saved. And Mrs. Lancaster not only apologized profusely to her, but also gave her a bonus on her next payday. Thankfully, all had turned out fairly well in this case, though Frances would always regret having stolen the money.

In spending time with the gryphons, Frances quickly learned that they didn't just speak aloud; they also had the ability to communicate with human beings telepathically, by basically laying thoughts onto the brain. This seemed the best way to describe it when Frances thought about it. And she had been getting very odd thoughts laid onto her brain lately by Folto, who, evidently being in a distracted state of mind, was accidentally doing this.

Frances first noticed this late one afternoon while reading in the back yard, as Folto was sitting under a tree nearby. *Oh, dear me*, Folto

thought, giving a great thought sigh as well. *Summer should be a time of joy, but sorrow pervades instead.* Another great sigh followed.

A couple of days later, as Folto was dropping her off in an alley near one of the carpool lots, Frances heard another sigh, and the thought, *It might as well be storming, for as gray as everything looks right now.*

Frances might have imagined that the unrest and violence was what was troubling the gryphon, though it didn't seem likely because both Folto and Zapor had lived through enough tumultuous history as to be basically used to the turmoil that came with great societal change. Frances decided it was more likely that Folto was missing Zapor, who was off doing some important and secretive business for God.

The next evening, with Folto on the balcony outside her bedroom, Frances' brain heard, *Woe is me (great gryphon sigh); what a world.*

Frances might have smiled at the melodrama in the tone, except that Folto sounded so very sad and serious, as though in a state of melancholy most deep.

Unsure as to what she might say or do to help her friend, Frances refrained from saying anything; until, that is, she received another unusual and unconscious thought a few minutes later. *Laura, sweet Laura, how the world does miss you.*

"Who's Laura?" Frances asked through the window.

Startled, because she hadn't at all realized she had been conveying thoughts, Folto responded, very hesitantly, in her soft alto voice. "Oh...um...just someone I used to know...a long time ago."

Having certain things in common with her protectors, such as intuitiveness and shrewdness, Frances could tell there was much more that Folto wasn't saying. And in being concerned, and believing she might be able to help if she had more information, she determined to try to find out more about this mysterious Laura.

## Chapter Two

### Netherwind Manor

#### Present Day

With school just out for summer, early Saturday morning, Em and Kip were preparing for a trip to see their Aunt Fiona at Netherwind Manor where they planned to spend a full eight weeks. Em had made checklists for both herself and her brother, so that they wouldn't forget anything important and so that the packing process would go as efficiently as possible. Aunt Eugenia was also going and was supervising the getting-ready-to-go activities. Preston had been invited as well and was at home packing.

Em might have done a week or two at a tennis camp during the summer, in preparation for trying to make the tennis team when starting high school in the fall, but instead opted to spend as much time as possible with her Aunt Fiona. She would be able to practice tennis at Netherwind, which had an old tennis court that included a backboard so she could hit balls by herself. Plus, she had spent spring break at a tennis camp, which Violet had arranged as an early birthday present for her, with her birthday falling three weeks later over Easter weekend.

Kip's birthday had fallen during spring break; and as a present, he had received a full week of martial arts training with Preston over the break. Dave and Violet actually paid for the classes for both boys since Preston had been doing a lot of work at the mansion, especially in getting the plantings in the new greenhouse started.

Preston had lately been giving up time in his friend's treehouse to focus more on martial arts, which he had neglected in recent months, but was now renewing interest in, especially in growing up some and in recognizing how very handy the skills were to have, particularly when called upon to battle creatures such as demons and hobgoblins.

Aunt Eugenia herself ended up dealing with a particular persistent hobgoblin who had crept back into the garden in the hopes of taking up

residence in the shed where he once lived. Though the hobgoblin was expertly camouflaged, in fact looking exactly like a stone the size of a large pumpkin, Aunt Eugenia, for some reason (mainly because age has its advantages), had seen right through his deception. On strolls through the garden, she often carried a foldable cane, which she swiftly unfolded in order to give the hobgoblin two hearty whacks while saying, “I know you’re not a stone. Don’t think you’re fooling anyone. Now skedaddle, before I give you a real beating. And don’t come back!”

While the elderly woman might have appeared frail to some, this was not so to the hobgoblin. In fact, from his perspective, she looked nearly three times as large as her actual self, this being because he could see the aura of her wisdom, courage, and life experiences surrounding her, like an enormous blanket. To his eyes, she looked like a gigantic human female who might be about ready to squash him with one meaty fist.

Vini happened to be working at the mansion that day; and while shaking out a rug from a second-floor balcony, she saw Aunt Eugenia in the garden talking to and whacking a stone. She then saw the stone rise up slightly and run off, in the direction of the back gate, which was open because Ben had been moving in a few wheelbarrows full of topsoil from a pile just outside the gate. Quickly putting on her rose-colored glasses, which allowed her to see creatures both invisible and in disguise, she saw the hobgoblin trotting swiftly away, while looking back over his shoulder a few times in fear that Aunt Eugenia might come thundering after him.

*What a persistent fellow*, Vini thought, in knowing that this was the third time he had been driven away from the estate. In glancing back to Aunt Eugenia, through her glasses, Vini saw something of the gigantic female the hobgoblin had seen, though to her eyes, this simply appeared to be a faint shadow surrounding the rather frail-looking woman. In not realizing that this was an aura, Vini thought Aunt Eugenia might have a magical protector, especially since Vini was coming to realize that nearly every human being might have one, those believing in and trusting in God that is, since He was the One providing helpers and protectors for His children. With the aura looking exactly like a large protective shadow, Vini thought this might be some unknown magical

creature, one that might act and even look like a gigantic shawl or blanket.

After finishing his packing, Preston came to the mansion to practice aikido with Kip. Having taken a variety of marital arts classes over the past year at a large training center, Preston had settled on aikido and swordsmanship as his specialties. With Kip just getting started, these choices were fine with him too, though he thought he might look into taking other classes later. Both boys would be taking a break from the classes for the summer, but would continue their diligent training. They were taking practice swords with them, along with archery equipment, as they were both still keen on improving in that discipline as well, often practicing with Ben and Sam.

Sam was lifeguarding for the summer at the local spring-fed pool, along with spending time with his girlfriend, a girl he had met when renewing his lifeguard certification.

Ben would be working at the mansion for the first part of the summer, before going to Netherwind later, along with Vini and Charlie who had also been invited. Both girls would be working the first two weeks of their summer at Camp Burberry Wiffle, Charlie cooking and Vini in the hippotherapy program, and would be heading to the camp together in Charlie's car late this afternoon.

Piszo was going to Netherwind as well, with Aunt Eugenia, though he was a little scared to be heading off into the unknown so far from home. With Louetta taking summer classes and getting ready for a showing at an art gallery, she wouldn't be coming to the mansion until the very end of summer. His friend, Heike, would be coming along. With Piszo planning to return early so as not to miss seeing Louetta, Heike had decided this would work well for her too because she was anxious to see Mr. and Mrs. Galloway's grandkids who were also coming at the end of summer. While Mrs. Galloway had known for some time about Heike and her little friend, Mr. Galloway and the visiting grandkids had only found out over spring break, during which time, they all became well acquainted. If Aunt Eugenia didn't decide to come back early as well, either Lydydu or Tulko could bring the puck trolls back from Netherwind, since both protectors would likely be around keeping watch over Charlie and Vini.

Violet and Dave would be keeping busy with Otto for most of their summer. Since he was now walking and getting into just about everything, and because there wouldn't have been anyone to look after him fulltime at Netherwind, Otto was not going with Kip and Em.

Just after church on Sunday, Aunt Eugenia packed up everyone and their gear into her car to make the trip. After only about ten minutes into the journey, Pizzo became very cranky, mainly because he couldn't see the sense in riding in a car when there were gryphons and even wind horses available that could get them to Netherwind Manor in three minutes, as opposed to the hour or so that the car would take.

Em and Kip had become aware of the gryphons three weeks before school let out. Zapor had wisely introduced himself to Aunt Eugenia first, and then she introduced Em and Kip to their protectors. However, aside from watching over their charges, which they had already been secretly doing for some time, the gryphons had not done anything particular with the brother and sister yet, such as taking them on flying outings. One reason for this was because they didn't feel the two were quite mature enough yet to handle certain adventures. Another reason was slightly odd; at least, it seemed so to the protectors. While Zapor was specifically assigned to Em, he found he liked and admired Kip more, particularly because he was more even-tempered and tended to behave himself better than his sister. Likewise, though Folto was assigned to Kip, she was slightly more drawn to Em, mainly because she thought Kip rather loud and irritating at times, which was true of many boys in the ages spanning preteen through early teen. So since the gryphons couldn't understand the "why" behind their specific assignments, at this point, they were basically both inclined to just do their jobs minimally, while waiting for the kids to grow up some and grow out of some of their annoying habits.

Coincidentally, about the same time Kip and Em learned of the gryphons, Vini and Preston decided to tell their parents about wind horses, thunderbirds, and various other magical things. After a slight initial shock, Mr. and Mrs. Aberdeen found they had no problem with their children having magical protectors, provided for them by God, as this meant they were basically safer than they would be otherwise in the world. Both parents had always suspected demons were closer than most people might think, but hidden in order to continue to perpetrate

the myth that Satan and his evil followers didn't exist. In petting and marveling over Tulko, they could also well believe that their daughter had the ability to summon unicorns, though she would not be able to show them, in keeping with her decision not to call them frivolously for fear that they would not have enough to eat in the world of today.

On the way to the manor, both Heike and Pizzo were buckled into their own tiny seatbelts (especially made for them by Dave in his workshop) between Preston and Kip in the back seat. Preston's protector, Eleta, was also going to Netherwind. The little vritsee was riding on his shoulder while shooting scolding looks at Pizzo who was squirming and searching his pockets for things to throw at Preston and Kip, which in this case turned out to be a butter mint and two cashews. Heike intercepted the second cashew headed toward Kip, after which, she patted Pizzo's hand to encourage his patience for the rest of the trip. Aunt Eugenia had wisely thought ahead and had packed snacks, namely oatmeal bars and fruit chews, which Em gave to Pizzo halfway through the journey to appease him. The strategy worked and the little troll was soothed and happy for the rest of the ride. Well knowing that gryphons and wind horses shouldn't be used frivolously, and being aware of the luggage, which fairly filled the trunk to bursting, Pizzo didn't really think they should have flown. He was simply unused to sitting still for any length of time.

Violet had sent two boxes of food for Pizzo, and a message to Aunt Fiona that she would be happy to provide more as needed, which wouldn't particularly be necessary as the manor's pantry was well stocked, along with two refrigerators and a chest freezer. And in addition to Netherwind's sizeable vegetable garden, the town nearby had a grocery store.

Arriving just after one in the afternoon, the visitors were met with a buffet-style lunch already laid out for them in the dining room, mainly of various sandwiches and cold salads, with cookies and a blueberry crumble for dessert. Pizzo, his hands and face nearly covered in blueberries, couldn't have been happier.

Em and Kip were overjoyed to see their great-aunt, who was especially pleased to meet Pizzo and Heike. For all of the magical happenings at the manor house over the years, there had never been a puck troll in residence. So she was basically thrilled to have two

visiting. And in the same way that puck trolls would never throw things at small children, they wouldn't at elderly people either, so Aunt Fiona was basically safe from this. But she might not have minded, being generally a hearty sort, especially for age seventy-five and now with her cancer being in complete remission. However, she was still putting back on some of the weight she had dropped during her illness, as well as growing back the hair she had lost from having the treatments.

Aunt Eugenia had visited Netherwind once before and knew basically what to expect, though she was a little afraid of getting lost in the vast home, into which four houses each the size of Doyle Mansion could probably have easily fit. Preston on the other hand, having only had descriptions to go by, was fairly astounded to see the house in person. Ivies covered large sections of the pale-gold brick of the home's exterior, also climbing up the twin columns on the huge front porch toward two rather foreboding gargoyles perched on the widow's walk above the porch. Several other gargoyles inhabited the roof. A large solarium occupied one end of the first floor, serving as a balance to the huge carport on the other side of the house. The roof of the carport was used as a large balcony, having stone railings like the widow's walk.

Zapor and Folto landed on ledges near two of the rooftop gargoyles just as the group entered the house. Inside, the incredibly-high ceilings dwarfed the residents, though the large and stately furniture seemed right at home, as did the other fine furnishings such as wall tapestries, floor rugs, statues, coats of armor, paintings, and various collectibles.

The newbies quickly met the estate manager, who was also the gardener, a somewhat elderly man named John Michaels. Em and Kip also introduced everyone to the live-in housekeeper, a widow named Rowena Boyle. The part-time cook, Teresa Small, didn't live at the manor and didn't work on Sundays so they would be meeting her the next morning.

A good bit of the house was currently not in use and was basically shut up, including most of the third floor, all of the mezzanine floor located between the first and second floors, and several rooms on the second floor. The doors weren't particularly locked, but all doors in the

unused areas were kept shut so as to limit dust and dirt moving around because the shut-up places were not regularly cleaned.

Most of the furniture in the unused areas was draped with dust covers, and served to give the rooms a somewhat ghostly appearance, especially at certain times of day, such as dusk and early dawn, when things tended to look especially gray and shadowy. Drafts and slight breezes also lent to this air in making the furniture drapes sway and swirl about in dance, as if to music only they could hear.

Since Aunt Fiona's husband, Peter Campbell, passed away six years previous, with only Aunt Fiona and Mrs. Boyle in residence, they simply didn't need all the extra space. Aunt Fiona's only child, Matthew, had died at age sixteen of leukemia. And Mr. Michaels lived in a small cottage on the estate. Though both the house and property, at nearly five hundred acres, were way too large for her, Aunt Fiona was reluctant to sell and move away from the home she had grown up in and raised her own child in. And she was still trying to carry on with making good use of the land, though, with what Mr. Michaels and his two helpers were capable of, only about forty acres of the property were currently planted, with soybeans and corn, instead of cotton and peanuts, which had been the original staple crops of the plantation.

With most of the third floor not in use, all of the bedrooms and guest rooms were currently located on the second floor. Kip and Preston were sharing a room, while Em and Aunt Eugenia each had their own rooms. Pizzo and Heike, each lugging their little suitcases, were settled into Aunt Fiona's enormous three-story plus-an-attic dollhouse from her childhood, which sat on a low table in one corner of the smaller of the home's two libraries on the first floor. Victorian in style, the dollhouse had been handmade by her father, who also built a lot of the pieces of furniture for it. The dollhouse family had been moved out temporarily for the visit of the puck trolls. Picking her room first, Heike chose one with lovely roses on the wallpaper, bright yellow curtains, and a teal and lavender bedspread. Pizzo ended up picking a room more woodsy in theme, decorated mainly in greens and browns, though the bed did have a dark red comforter and gold toss pillows. The tiny working lamps in the house particularly fascinated Heike and Pizzo, who, in awe of everything, were reminding themselves to be very careful with all of the beautiful and delicate belongings.

During their initial tour of the manor, they all had a quick peek at the lovely solarium, which wasn't used much by the residents, though the plants inside were well cared for.

The visitors quickly figured out that navigating the four staircases of the house was going to take some getting used to because the central stairs led only to the three main floors and the attic, while the two side staircases led only to the basement and mezzanine. The rear stairs, often called the servants' stairs, allowed access to all levels of the house, and did so in a somewhat confusing maze of twists, turns, and splits with several of the access doors hidden behind wall panels and bookcases, the original intention of this being for the servants' comings and goings to be less noticeable.

While Eleta had ridden with Preston to the mansion, to make sure she knew where it was, she would actually be gone periodically throughout the summer, several days each stretch, on important business as directed by God. Leaving through a window shortly after they arrived, she laid a thought onto Preston's brain to tell him she would be back in a few days.

After unpacking, they all headed outside for some fresh air. In addition to the vegetable garden, situated on one side of the house, the manor had lovely side and rear formal gardens full of roses, lavender, tulips, and various other shrubs and flowers. Ball and spiral topiaries adorned many of the sprawling beds, winding borders, and curved walkways. A three-tiered fountain surrounded by stone benches was situated in the exact center of the rear garden. Tall hedges separated the formal gardens from the tennis court, which was located just behind the vegetable garden. While the gardens were a little weedy and overgrown, because Mr. Michaels had a lot of trouble keeping up with them, they were still very beautiful.

When taking their initial outside tour, from a spot just beyond the tennis courts, they could see the crop fields and several outbuildings including a smokehouse, an old carriage house, two barns, Mr. Michaels' cottage, and another cottage. About thirty gigantic oak trees (affectionately called grandfather oaks by many of the locals) dotted the plantation, each much larger than any of the towering moss-draped oaks lining the long front drive of the property. One of the grandfather oaks contained a treehouse, and Preston was thrilled to discover that it

belonged to the estate, though it was situated much nearer a neighboring manor house than to Netherwind.

“That’s Laurelstone Manor,” Em said, pointing to the neighboring house that they could easily see approximately a half-mile in the distance.

“Our cousins live there,” Aunt Fiona added. “Netherwind and Laurelstone have always had family connections, ever since the two houses were built, well over a hundred years ago.”

From a croquet lawn situated at the opposite end of the formal gardens from the tennis courts, they could see a pecan grove and three ponds nestled into the rolling hills of the property. Preston and Kip decided there would be plenty of space next to the croquet lawn to set up a bull’s-eye target, one of which Kip said was stored in the carriage house, so that they could practice archery.

Back inside, in looking around after dinner, Kip and Preston noticed that, despite some of the house being shut up, plenty of the remaining rooms had good open spaces in which to practice aikido. Their sword training, of course, would take place outside, likely in the same area as archery practice. The manor had several antique swords hanging on the walls of the larger library. These, they wouldn’t be using for practice. However, Aunt Fiona did say they could use the fencing equipment, currently stored in a large cupboard in the gallery adjacent to the dining room. Having taken a few fencing classes, Preston thought he might like to hone his skills, as well as teach Kip a few things.

Over the next few weeks, Aunt Fiona and Aunt Eugenia would end up mostly hanging out in the parlor—playing cards, reading, knitting, and occasionally watching television. Also, with both of them being devout Christians, they would frequently hold bible studies together. Em, Kip, and Preston, on breaks from other activities, would be invited to some of these, along with Aunt Eugenia’s storytelling sessions.

## Chapter Three

### The Staircase Conundrum

With so much to see and do, Pizzo and Heike right away started exploring and going on picnics. Enjoying the countryside, they loved climbing the pecan trees, swimming in the ponds, and making friends with the area finches, rabbits, squirrels, and sparrows. So busy were they that the people in the house didn't see much of them during the first week or so of their visit.

Em and Kip got busy fairly quickly too. They, of course, felt right at home, having lived at Netherwind Manor for nearly a year before going into the foster care system when their aunt wasn't able to look after them properly anymore. Though they had lots of things planned for their stay—namely training, exploring, and tree-housing for Kip; while Em mainly wanted to practice tennis, go jogging, write poetry, and make a few clothes for Pizzo and Heike—having discovered a mystery shortly before leaving to go live at Doyle Mansion, the brother and sister arrived back at Netherwind with the intention of picking up exactly where they left off as far as investigating.

The mystery involved the main staircase of the manor, situated in the massive foyer of the home. The other three sets of stairs in the house, though each large in their own right, were basically complete juniors compared to the massive center staircase, which was very unique in that small drawers had been built into both ends of each step of the flight leading from the first floor to the second, the drawers totaling seventy-two in all since the stairs numbered thirty-six. With the staircase being basically freestanding in the center of the foyer, all of the drawers were accessible, the higher ones simply by stooping on the stairs to reach through the carved wooden railings to open or close the drawers.

When Em and Kip had asked their aunt about the drawers, she said she didn't know what they had been used for, but speculated that possibly candles had been stored in them before the manor had

electricity. However, the drawers themselves were not the puzzle; rather, the current contents were. Shortly after coming to live at the manor, Em and Kip noticed that many of the drawers contained odd little household and personal items such as a pair of scissors, a deck of playing cards, an old valentine card, a lace handkerchief, a green hair ribbon, a folded apron, a page from a desk calendar, and a cat's eye marble. And new things were secretly added on a regular basis. In taking a peek since arriving back at the house, they noticed quite a few more items added to the drawers. Aunt Fiona swore she didn't know anything about the contents of the drawers; she definitely wasn't the one adding things. Mrs. Boyle also told them she didn't know anything about what was in the drawers, other than the fact that she had noticed a few of the items missing from other parts of the house like a pin cushion and spool of thread from the third-floor sewing room, and a bottle opener from the kitchen. Mr. Michaels and Ms. Small, too, had no idea as to who might be putting things into the drawers, or why.

With no one ever seeing anyone add things to the drawers, Em and Kip reasoned that the items were being placed there at night, as the residents of the house slept. Since there had never been any signs of a break-in, they also felt that something supernatural and ghostly might be going on.

"Either that," Preston suggested, "or something like a raccoon might be putting them there. I think they like to collect and store things, kind of like magpies."

"A raccoon couldn't get into these drawers," Em argued.

In knowing that a raccoon's little hands were a lot like those of a person, and that their curiosity and determination were probably at least equal to that of a human being, Kip countered, "A raccoon could absolutely get into just about any drawer."

While this was true, Em still couldn't see how it might be possible for a raccoon to be in the house without being noticed, especially for such a long period of time. "There's no sign that any critters have been here," she said. "Someone surely would have noticed by now."

The boys had to agree with her on that point.

"So I think we should set up a stakeout," Em added. "Camp out down here tonight after everyone else has gone to bed, like in the coat cupboard, and see if we can find out what might be going on."

This suggestion truly excited Kip and Preston, who were all for the fun of a stakeout, especially since they had the whole summer to do all of the other things they had planned.

Having taken Monday to get settled in, the three sleuths were basically raring to go on this Tuesday morning; and in looking forward to the stakeout, they found it hard to focus on anything else while waiting for nighttime. After gathering a few things they would need for their adventure—like snacks, flashlights, and pillows to sit on—they basically wiled away the day reading and watching television in the living room.

Shortly after dinner, they all enjoyed one of Aunt Eugenia’s storytelling sessions in the parlor, all except Pizzo and Heike that is, who were off exploring somewhere.

“One summer when I was a young girl,” Aunt Eugenia began, “I discovered four tiny books hidden inside a tree hollow in my back yard. They were the diaries of genies. Yes, genies do exist, but they are not like the ones in storybooks that live in lamps. Instead, they live inside old hatboxes, unused teapots, empty cookie tins, and such like. These are fairly cozy and comfortable homes for them because genies are small like fairies, though they don’t have wings like fairies. They can still fly, but mostly genies just appear and disappear very quickly, like little pops or snaps, here one minute, gone the next. They don’t stream around like smoke, or change shapes and sizes, as many people seem to think. Also, while they can grant wishes, they do so because they want to, not because they have to when someone discovers them. Plus, since they work for God, as some of His special helpers, they mostly only grant wishes that He would approve of.”

Having the rapt attention of Em, Kip, Preston, and even Aunt Fiona, Aunt Eugenia continued. “Now, back to the diaries; I was able to read them with help from a magnifying glass. Evidently, genies love to record certain details of their exciting lives in diaries; and this is how I learned about the Garden of Dolls, which belonged to an old woman living down the street from me. Most people avoided the woman, who was stooped and often cranky, and really stood out in the neighborhood as being strange-mannered and somewhat unfriendly. Her house too was odd, a tiny bungalow painted purple and blue, and practically falling down for want of repairs. She wore old baggy clothes and never

brushed her hair, and she had a large wart on her chin. Unknown to everyone, the woman was a conjure woman, who had certain magical abilities. Well, for years, the genies noticed she had doll parts strewn about her garden—an arm here, a leg there, a head stuck in a hill of dirt as though it might have been a squash or cucumber plant, a row of tiny hands and feet looking like radishes in a furrow, a pile of hair curls in another spot. It was all very strange, and the genies thought she was simply a very mean woman who liked to rip apart little girls' dolls and bury the parts in her garden. But, as it turns out, something quite different was going on."

At this point, with everyone leaning forward in anticipation (Aunt Fiona so much so that she was nearly falling off the settee), Aunt Eugenia took a pause for a sip of water before going on.

"Mrs. Higginbotham was her name, the conjure woman that is, and she was actually using her garden to grow replacement parts in order to fix old dolls. People would bring her old and broken dolls, and she would use her magic to grow new parts for them so the dolls could be well and whole again, after which, she most often donated them to hospitals and orphanages. When the genies found out what she was doing, they ended up helping her. With their magic added to hers, they were able to grow the replacement parts ten times as fast."

"Amazing," Aunt Fiona said, believing every word, as Aunt Eugenia was most sincere and serious in the telling of the story.

"Yes, yes, it was," Aunt Eugenia earnestly answered. "And having found out about the Garden of Dolls from the diaries, I used to help Mrs. Higginbotham collect broken dolls from people in the neighborhood. I think I collected sixteen that same summer. And once, when I was visiting the garden to drop off a doll, I got to meet one of the genies I had been reading about in the diaries. Her name was Millefiori, Mille for short, and she loved flowers. I remember the little outfit she was wearing, like a leotard, was covered with tiny flowers of all different kinds. Apparently, it was she who first discovered the Garden of Dolls as she was visiting the garden and wondering why it didn't have flowers in it like other gardens. I got to meet a few other genies later, but their stories will keep for another time."

Aunt Eugenia's stories always included a lesson of some sort, although the listeners often didn't notice. In this case, the lesson was

that appearances can be very deceiving. While it had appeared that Mrs. Higginbotham might have been up to something no good, the opposite had actually been true. And she was not particularly unfriendly, just focused and busy. Also, being poor, she often couldn't afford to have home repairs done or purchase new clothing. However, according to Aunt Eugenia, these were things the genies, as her new friends, ended up helping with.

Meeting in Em's room just after ten—when they were sure the aunts and Mrs. Boyle had gone to bed, which they usually did around nine-thirty each evening—the three sleuths crept back downstairs to hide in the huge coat cupboard situated just inside the front door. From that spot, with the cupboard door slightly cracked, they had a good view of the entire staircase.

Though somewhat of a tight squeeze, the three all fit fairly comfortably. They kept the flashlights off mostly. When switching them on for brief periods of time, to root in the snack bag or adjust pillows, they directed the lights away from the door crack so anyone passing would be less likely to notice. With moonlight streaming through the front windows and slightly illuminating the area around the staircase, and with their eyes adjusted to the low light, they had no trouble seeing.

The house was fairly quiet, though they did hear an owl shortly before midnight, evidently on the roof, hooting down the parlor chimney.

Even after a couple of hours of watching and seeing nothing, their excitement didn't wear off. However, in such close quarters, sitting still for so long, they did start to feel a little like they might have been three genies squeezed into a small cigar box. With genies on the brain, in whispers, they speculated that it might well be tiny genies that were placing the objects into the stair drawers, so they definitely kept their eyes peeled for anything small that might be flying about. (Since Em, Kip, and Preston could never be sure as to which of Aunt Eugenia's stories might be tall tales, they basically chose to believe them all.)

With nothing unusual happening, they finally went to bed a little after two in the morning, deciding that four hours was definitely long enough to be cramped in the coat cupboard. Stretching as they made

their way up the stairs, they worked out most of their stiffness before tumbling into their beds.

The next morning, while planning another stakeout that night, they decided to tackle the investigation in another manner as well by studying the contents of the drawers. Armed with her notebook (because she was always very organized), with help from Kip and Preston, Em started making a list as to what each drawer contained, also numbering the items as far as which drawer each item had been in, from bottom to top, and right and left with regard to which side the drawer was on when facing the stairs.

Kip and Preston, situated left and right on the stairs respectively, basically helped by taking the items one-by-one out of the drawers and holding them up for Em to see, after which, they carefully placed each item back into the same drawer, so as to leave the contents exactly as they had been, without mixing anything up. Em took fairly detailed notes, in case details might turn out to be important.

- 1 Left: Piece of old metal pipe, about seven inches long, no rust.
- 1 Right: Light green girl's hair ribbon about two feet long.
- 2 Left: Small white candle, used, with trimmed wick.
- 2 Right: Empty drawer.
- 3 Left: Faded news clipping about a man killed when hit by a train.
- 3 Right: Old deck of playing cards, counted, one card missing.
- 4 Left: Recipe card, French bread recipe only partly written out.

The list went on and on, for a total of forty-eight items stored in the seventy-two stair drawers. Because the somewhat tedious chore had taken nearly two hours to complete, and since they were planning another late-night stakeout, the detectives decided they had done enough work for one day.

Glad for the break, Em grabbed her racquet and headed to the tennis court to hit a few balls against the backboard. Since the boys didn't feel like practicing aikido or archery, or getting out the fencing equipment, they made their way to the treehouse to hang out, taking peanut butter sandwiches and apples with them so they wouldn't have to return to the house for lunch.

Just after lunch, Em read the bible for a bit before deciding to write a poem about something she had noticed earlier when hitting tennis balls. Mr. Michaels had recently cut a window in the hedge that separated the tennis court from the garden so that people could look through from one to the other. Inspired by both the hedge window and several bible passages she had just read, she set to work writing in her bedroom.

While the poem took nearly three hours to complete, Em was very pleased with the results.

### The Window in the Hedge

The little vine lived under the boughs of a yew,  
Sheltered and shaded all the long while that he grew,  
Beside a green hedge pruned nicely square, wide, and tall  
That kept a gardener busy both in spring and fall.

A window cut into the hedge was a surprise,  
For through it the little vine saw his first sunrise.  
Seeing light at night too when he normally slept  
Out from under the yew tree, the little vine crept.

He soon found the bright stars, so many in number,  
For many long hours would keep him from slumber.  
To turn them all off he did greatly desire,  
Not knowing as to what the task might require.

Leaving the yew's safe shelter, he scaled the hedgerow;  
Speedy and unpausing, he passed through the window.  
Up, up, up the vine went, like the broom of a witch,  
Most intent on reaching the stars' great big light switch.

Hopping cloud by cloud as though climbing a steep stair,  
The vine enjoyed his time out in the brisk night air.  
But with the great big switch still some distance away,  
The man in the moon strived to keep him well at bay.

Puckering and puffing, the moon blew and he blew,  
Until the vine tumbled right back down to the yew.  
Though he ended up exactly where he began,  
The little vine determined to try once again.

Laughing as he caught a swift barn owl by the tail,  
*Surely*, the vine thought, *this time I can't and won't fail.*  
But when sideswiped by a comet, just passing through,  
Once more he fell back down to the boughs of the yew.

Still determined, he thought, *The third time is a charm.*  
*In trying once more, I can come to no great harm.*  
This time on a ladder he began the long climb,  
And he reached the great big switch in pretty good time.

Sadly, a hefty breeze caused the ladder to tip,  
And in the teeter totter, the vine lost his grip.  
But a hand from above coming fast to his plight,  
Steadied the ladder against a gate tall and white.

Shaken, the little vine did slowly climb back down,  
Happy to have his leaves once more on the firm ground.  
Peering up through the window at the vast night sky,  
The vine glimpsed Who had saved him in a place most high.

Though probably safer to keep well out of sight  
To try once more to climb, the vine thought he just might.  
But he would leave the stars on, to see all around,  
The great majesty and marvels sure to abound.

Each trip worth the effort to reach taller than tall,  
He wanted to thank Who had saved him from the fall,  
The One watching more than through windows in hedges,  
Watching all—nooks, crannies, even under ledges.

Again and again, the vine climbed higher than high,  
And he viewed many wonders in the vast night sky.  
He saw marvelous things over many a year,  
And became friends with the bright stars both far and near.

In stopping to inquire at the tall white gate,  
He was told that to enter he must simply wait.  
When the vine found his leaves he could no longer lift,  
He longed to be given a truly special gift.

To be near the One Who had saved him from the fall,  
The One mighty and strong standing taller than tall.

Gazing at the window, he saw a hand reach through,  
One that gathered him gently from under the yew.

Taken into the white gate so lustrous and tall,  
The vine stayed near the One watching over us all.  
Jesus is the window we all need to step through,  
To be close to Our Father, so loving and true.

Feeling very good about her productive day so far, Em strolled downstairs, stretching as she descended to work out the stiffness she felt from having sat still for so long. With a little over an hour left before dinner time, she thought she might join the boys in the living room to watch television for a while. However, as she was passing the door to the parlor, she overheard Aunt Fiona and Aunt Eugenia talking. She didn't mean to eavesdrop; but she did stop outside the door to listen because they were talking about something that directly concerned her, and Kip, and Otto. Evidently, Dave and Violet wanted to legally adopt all three of them, and had been discussing this with Aunt Fiona.

Hearing this was quite a shock to Em, who had fully expected, as soon as their aunt was fully recovered, they would all three come back to live with her at Netherwind.

While she had gotten better lately about controlling her temper, only occasionally getting annoyed with Kip, Em suddenly felt very angry. But instead of going into the parlor and talking to Aunt Fiona, like maybe she should have done, she rushed back upstairs to her bedroom and shut the door.

Inside the room, she screamed silently at the dresser mirror for a minute or so—cussing Violet, Dave, her Aunt Fiona, and the world in general—before throwing herself onto the bed and hitting the pillow hard with her fist several times while crying.

A few minutes later, her tears spent, she felt a little calmer, though she was still angry. Unfortunately, she also now felt antsy, as though she might need to climb the walls; and if she didn't find a good wall to climb really soon, she might well scream. Grabbing her tennis racquet, she headed outside. However, instead of hitting balls, on a fast trot through the gardens, she ended up purposely hitting bushes and flowers with the racquet.

Piszo and Heike were playing croquet (by tossing and rolling the balls rather than using the mallets), and they noticed her behavior, which was basically the equivalent of a teenage tantrum. Shaking their heads in a disapproving manner, they did their best to ignore her as she strode past them. They had thought she was getting better about controlling her anger.

Zapor too was looking on, perched in one of the large oak trees near the house. However, in knowing what was upsetting her—because he had overheard the aunts talking (with his excellent gryphon hearing that was much more acute than human hearing), and because he knew that Em had heard their conversation as well—he understood, and felt a little sorry for her.

Feeling a great need to burn off more steam, Em headed to the pecan grove to take a good long walk, which did serve to help her further calm down, at least enough to sit down to dinner a little while later and behave in a civilized manner, though she did maintain a somewhat surly disposition throughout the meal.

She knew it was wrong to be angry; but as far as what was left of the anger after dinner, she was far angrier at herself (for being angry) than at anything else. Plus, she was feeling guilty about having ugly thoughts, mainly while marching around the pecan grove. Being sure that Violet was the one behind the idea of adoption, and not her aunt, Em had actually wished for something bad to happen to Violet. In realizing how horrible it was to wish something like this, and in not really wanting anything bad to happen, Em now wished she hadn't had the thoughts.

In her room, lying on her bed while praying and asking for God's forgiveness, she realized that she also needed to forgive herself, because, of course, she hadn't meant it. It had just been such a shock—finding out that she and her brothers weren't going to be able to come back to their aunt's house to live. She and Kip had specifically left a lot of their stuff at the manor because they thought they would be coming back. On each of their four recent visits, they had chosen to leave most of their books, games, stuffed animals, and even some of their clothes at Netherwind.

As far as the things that were troubling her, Em felt that asking for God's help was probably the best answer, the only answer actually

because she didn't feel she would ever be strong enough to conquer certain issues on her own. She was exactly right. Human beings are frail, and flawed, and desperately need God's help. Kneeling down beside the bed, she continued to pray.

*Dear Lord,*

*Praise Your holy name. Praise all that You are, ever have been, ever will be. Praise the Holy Spirit. Praise Jesus. Thank You for loving me. Thank You for my life, and the many blessings You've given me. Thank You for my Aunt Fiona, and for Violet and Dave. Thank You for Otto and Kip. Please help me conquer my anger and ugly thoughts. I know I can't do this alone. And help me understand why I am so angry sometimes. In Your name I pray, Amen.*

Rising from her knees, Em suddenly had a thought that seemed very strange to her. She wasn't just angry at things in the here and now, she was angry at her parents, for dying, and possibly at her Aunt Fiona too, for getting cancer. And even though this was something of an answer to her question as to why she was so angry, she felt like she needed to ask forgiveness for these thoughts too, because they seemed so irrational. Of course her parents hadn't wanted to die, and Aunt Fiona hadn't wanted to get sick.

A few months before, in a book Vini had earmarked for her, Em had read about and taken notes on the stages of grief. Among the various stages, she seemed to experience more feelings of anger than anything else like sadness or guilt. While the book didn't have much listed as to what a person might do that could help while grieving, she had looked online for a few ideas, and had taken more notes, which she now scrambled for in her notebook.

"Talk to people, don't isolate self, pray, talk to God, be creative, get a lot of exercise, and write feelings down."

Of the ideas she had employed over the past four or five months, she found that prayer and reading the bible helped the most to make her feel less angry and better settled. Writing poetry and making tiny clothes for Pizzo and Heike had also helped. Jogging was another good thing, and playing tennis. Weeding in the garden at the mansion was another thing that had worked. Em often helped Ben and Sam weed,

and she had been surprised to find that weeding made her feel better because she had always hated gardening before. And she had to admit that being around people kept her from thinking too much about the bad things, and helped her focus on more hopeful things of the future. All of these things had helped calm her down, and make her feel better, happier, and more secure, as though things might be okay after all, and that the future might turn out okay.

*I'll help Mr. Michaels in the garden while I'm here, she decided as a firm plan. He could really use the help. I'll keep writing poetry and playing tennis too, and I'll go jogging.*

Em met Preston and Kip downstairs as planned just after ten. The house was very quiet, though they could hear occasional snores from Pizzo and Heike in the small library down the hall.

Settling into the cupboard to watch the staircase, having noticed that Em seemed a little cranky at dinner, Kip and Preston were somewhat wary of her mood, and especially at the prospect of being cooped up in a small space with her.

Thankfully, she was not only in a better mood, but on this night they only had to watch two hours before something happened.

Just after midnight, they noticed the ghostly figure of a young girl come into view on the second-floor landing. While she wasn't glowing or greenish like ghosts they had seen in movies, she did look wispy and semi-transparent, as though only half there. And in reflecting some of the pale moonlight, her figure did hold something of an outer-worldly sheen. As they watched, the ghost drifted slowly down the stairs. While she appeared to be walking, the walking looked more like gliding because her feet didn't quite seem to touch the steps.

At the bottom of the staircase, the girl turned and, in an airy and floaty manner, walked to the left side of the stairs where she proceeded to open one of the drawers, about level with her shoulders. They couldn't quite see what she was doing, but it looked like she was putting something into the drawer, which she slid shut with a couple of taps of one finger. The ghost next opened the drawer just below the one she had shut and removed a small object, which seemed to float just above her upturned hand for a couple of seconds. She then bounced the item lightly several times on her palm, the bounces looking like slow-motion to Kip, Preston, and Em who were reminded of film footage they had

seen of floating astronauts pushing small things around inside their spaceships. After a few bounces, the object remained in the air, hovering above her palm and spinning slowly as the ghost gazed at it intently. Evidently, ghosts were able to levitate everyday objects.

*Pretty cool*, Em thought. While she was ready to confront the ghost right away, Preston and Kip seemed a little reluctant.

However, with Em urging (even shoving and pulling, because this was the exact reason they had been watching the stairs), the boys did emerge from the cupboard with her. They were all a little stiff from sitting, but were still able to move pretty well.

Afraid of scaring the ghost, Em didn't want to approach too quickly; however, she was anxious to talk to the mysterious figure, so she moved forward confidently, with her brother and Preston in tow directly behind her.

While startled, the ghost thankfully didn't bolt, or disappear, which Em was afraid might happen, since she didn't know anything about ghosts, or their capabilities, or habits.

The hovering object, which they could now see was a fishing lure, still remained in position in the air even after the ghost's hand dropped to her side with her surprise.

At a position about six feet from the ghost, while smiling and taking a deep breath so as to slightly calm the intense exhilaration she was feeling, Em said in a tone as even and non-threatening as possible, "Hi, I'm Em; and this is Kip and Preston."

When the girl didn't answer, but simply looked at them in a slightly confused manner, Kip softly ventured. "Who are you?"

The ghost still didn't answer. Instead, raising her hand and with a series of small taps, she returned the fishing lure to the drawer and closed it, before rounding the stair banister to slowly drift down the hallway toward the parlor. Casting small glances behind her, she seemed to be inviting them to follow, though not with gestures, only with her eyes.

They did follow, as quickly as possible because the ghost was picking up speed, past the living room, parlor, music room, study, and the small library. At the very end of the hall, the ghost made her way up the side stairs to the mezzanine, a floor extending the entire length of the house (minus the solarium and carport) and containing twelve

rooms, six each situated on either side of its wide central hallway, which was not perfectly straight because it jogged side-to-side in a few places to circumvent the positions of the center and rear stairs, and because the twelve rooms were not all the same size. Heavy doors at either end of the hall separated the mezzanine from the two side staircases.

The mezzanine door was ajar about eight inches, which was how they reasoned the ghost had entered and not simply vanished, or used the other door on the landing, which led by a small passageway to the servants' stairs. Em, Kip, and Preston were reluctant to turn on any lights, for fear of waking the household. Plus, they didn't want to frighten the ghost. Armed only with their flashlights, they were hesitant to investigate further in the dark. With a little back and forth whispering, they decided to wait until daylight to enter and explore the mezzanine. However, before going to bed, they did venture a peek through the door, which they pushed slightly farther open in order to lean in a bit and shine their flashlights around. While the ghost was nowhere in sight, they did discover something very interesting. As though written with a finger, in the dust on the floor, two words were visible—Lizzie Dwyer.

## Chapter Four

### Lizzie Dwyer

Fairly early on Thursday morning, Aunt Eugenia had already breakfasted and was out in the garden weeding and pruning rosebushes by the time Em, Kip, and Preston made their way downstairs to have breakfast with Aunt Fiona. As they were having cereal topped with sliced peaches, Kip casually asked Aunt Fiona, “Who is Lizzie Dwyer?”

With surprise showing on her face, and a brief moment’s pause, she answered, “It happened in the early sixties. I was away at college when an eleven-year-old girl was murdered, Elizabeth Elaine Dwyer. Her parents worked on the plantation, and the family lived in the cottage a couple hundred yards behind the one Mr. Michaels lives in. It’s deserted now, but a lot of the family’s belongings are still there because her sister lived there until she died, oh, about eight years ago now. I decided not to rent it out after that.”

After having a sip of coffee, Aunt Fiona continued. “Lizzie Dwyer had been beaten and strangled, and her body was found behind the barns, which was evidently where she had been killed according to the evidence. It was terrible, especially for that day and age. Things like that just didn’t happen around here. Or if they did, we didn’t hear about them. It was like a safer age, and people often didn’t even lock their doors at night like they do now. They suspected it was the teenage son of the stable master living at Laurelstone Manor. Laurelstone had a lot of horses so they had someone just to look after them. Paul Reuters was the boy’s name; he was fifteen I think. Anyway, one of Lizzie’s teachers had seen the two together after school on the day she was killed. He said he had just walked her home, which he often did; they were friends. But he was the last person seen with her, and his hands were the right size to have made the strangle marks on her neck.”

“She walked to school?” Preston interjected. “That must have been a really long walk from out here. Where was the school?”

“About five miles from here, in town,” Aunt Fiona answered. “The town is still fairly small, but was even smaller at that time and the school district couldn’t afford school buses. A lot of school districts at that time didn’t have school buses. So kids would walk, or ride bicycles. That’s why people used to be healthier; they got more exercise than they do now. Anyway—”

Piszo and Heike happened to be in the kitchen, on the counter, gathering food for an outing they were planning. At the exact moment Aunt Fiona said, “Anyway,” Piszo threw a peach pit at Kip.

As the pit hit him on the back of the neck, Kip loudly yelled, “Ow!”

“Surely that didn’t actually hurt,” Preston said, somewhat scornfully, having taken whole peaches thrown at him by Piszo with less complaint.

“No, it just surprised me,” Kip said, somewhat sulkily.

As Kip gave him a dirty look, Piszo just grinned. Having not thrown anything at anyone for a bit, he had just felt like doing so. Kip had ended up as the target because he was farthest from Aunt Fiona, whom Piszo didn’t want to hit accidentally. Plus, in a weird sort of way, Piszo’s choice of Kip was something of a gesture of the little troll’s fondness for him.

Giggling, Heike helped Piszo gather the corners of the large napkin they had been filling with grapes, raspberries, cookies, butter mints, and other goodies; after which, Piszo slung the enormous sack over his shoulder while Heike tucked two granola bars under her left arm. Next, the pair hopped down from the counter onto a bar stool before sliding down the legs of the stool to scurry across the floor and out the screen door of the kitchen to be off on their outing and picnic.

“Anyway,” Aunt Fiona took up her story again, “back to Paul Reuters. The police brought him in for questioning, but he was released because there wasn’t any evidence. Most people in the area didn’t think he had anything to do with it, especially because her books and notebooks from school were at the house. It wouldn’t have made much sense for him to have walked her home to drop off her books before killing her. Sadly, he hung himself a week later. So that made some people think he did it after all. But after he was dead, a witness came forward to say she’d seen him in town at the time Lizzie was supposed to have been murdered, which would have been too far away for him to

have made it back out to the plantation to commit the crime. Some believed the witness, but others suspected she lied just to try to clear his name.” After another sip of coffee, Aunt Fiona finished with, “I think the whole thing about Paul Reuters just muddied the waters and probably distracted the police from looking in the right places. So, in my opinion, the whole thing is an unsolved mystery.”

As Em, Kip, and Preston were mulling over everything, Aunt Fiona slyly questioned, “Why are you asking about Lizzie Dwyer?”

Taking turns telling her, the three amateur detectives fessed up about investigating the staircase and staging the stakeouts.

“Oh, I wondered what you all were doing fishing around in the drawers,” Aunt Fiona replied.

“I think the ghost of Lizzie is trying to solve the mystery of who murdered her,” Em wisely surmised.

“Wouldn’t she already know?” Kip asked.

“Not necessarily,” Em countered. “She was beaten and strangled. If she was struck on the head before being strangled, she might not have seen her attacker.”

“Since Lizzie has been putting things in the drawers,” Preston said, “the answer as to who killed her might be found in the drawers.”

“But she hasn’t been able to work it out yet,” Kip added.

“Exactly,” Em agreed. “So we should help her figure it out.”

Aunt Fiona had no problem with them continuing their investigation, and she was fine with them exploring the mezzanine too. “You can spend as much time there as you like,” she told them, with a twinkle in her eye. She had certainly spent a lot of time on the mezzanine, especially in her youth; and her son had too, before he passed away.

As Em, Kip, and Preston were rinsing their cereal bowls and spoons, and placing them into the dishwasher, Aunt Fiona made her way to the gardens to help Aunt Eugenia before the day started to get too hot.

To begin their investigation, the three immediately headed to the mezzanine, and were delighted to find the ghost of Lizzie Dwyer sitting cross-legged (well, sort of), in a large armchair at one end of the hall. She was sort of sitting because she was actually floating about two inches above the chair. While it was somewhat dark in the hall, the

windows being fairly heavily draped, Lizzie was reading a book. Evidently, she didn't need much light to do so.

While she hadn't talked to them the previous night, they were hoping she would today. After all, in giving them her name, she had introduced herself to them.

"So you're the ghost of Lizzie Dwyer," Em said enthusiastically as they approached.

"I prefer the term, spirit, instead of ghost," Lizzie immediately replied. "Most spirits do."

"Okay," Em good-naturedly answered back. "Sorry."

"That's okay; you couldn't have known," Lizzie responded, "unless you know other spirits."

"Nope," Kip said. "You're the first spirit we've met."

"We'd like to help you," Preston eagerly interjected, "if you are trying to find out who murdered you, that is." Receiving an elbow jab from Kip and a scolding look from Em, he hastened to add, "I mean, even if that's not what you are doing, we might be able to help with something else." With Kip and Em still looking at him as though he had said something terribly wrong, Preston shrugged and said, "What? We want to help; I'm just being honest."

"Yes, and I appreciate it," Lizzie replied, with a smile. "And you are correct. I am trying to figure out who killed me."

A long cushioned bench sat adjacent to the chair the spirit was floating over. As Lizzie gave a slight wave of her hand, the dust cover slid from the bench and basically folded itself up in midair as Em, Kip, and Preston quickly complied with Lizzie's beckoning gesture for them to sit. The folded dust cover then proceeded to float over to rest on the back of Lizzie's armchair.

Folding her book in her lap, the spirit sighed softly before launching into her story. "I can't remember much, you see. I couldn't even remember my name when I first came here and started wandering the house. I think that was about two years ago. But for some reason I was drawn to that little cottage where I evidently used to live. And that's how I found out my name, from a photograph album and a school yearbook. Then I found some old news clippings about my murder. And it was quite a surprise, I can tell you, because I couldn't remember anything about that either. Truthfully," Lizzie added, "I haven't found

much in the time I've been looking into it. But I get these weird little inklings sometimes when I'm around certain objects. So I've just been gathering them, kind of hoping they might be related to my murder. I started putting them into the stair drawers because it seemed like a convenient place to store them. I just don't know what most of them mean, and how they might be connected to what happened to me."

"We'd definitely like to help you figure things out," Em said. "Our Aunt Fiona doesn't mind if we investigate."

"Thank you," Lizzie answered, smiling. "That would be much appreciated. But I don't like to be out in the daytime; it's too bright. So I pretty much stick to roaming at night. I do like hanging out here sometimes during the day," she added, gesturing to the hall. "It stays pretty dark with the window curtains all closed."

"We'll start looking into things," Preston said, "and come and give you an update if we find anything."

"Okay," Lizzie replied. "And if you don't see me right away, just call, I'll be around."

They started investigating by again looking in the stair drawers. One of the items was a photo of Lizzie with a slightly-older girl that looked a lot like her, and that they presumed was her sister. Since Lizzie in the photo looked a lot like her spirit, they assumed it was taken shortly before she died. A map of the county caught their attention because someone had circled a small section of it and drawn something in pencil on one bottom corner. The drawing turned out to be the circled section of the map enlarged to show more detail and upon which an X marked the location of something. But what might the X represent? They couldn't imagine. It reminded them of a treasure map; but, of course, they weren't looking for a treasure so they didn't think this was a good guess. They also examined a rolled-up blue gingham apron and a large cat's eye marble, while speculating what these items might have to do with the murder of a young girl.

After about a half-hour of looking through the drawers, Em started to get the idea that their time wasn't being very well spent. She had always been an efficient person, and this seemed like a waste of time, and one that wasn't getting them anywhere. "There is way too much stuff here, and this is way overcomplicated," she told the boys. "We already have the list of the things in the drawers, and we can come back

and look at them anytime. There has to be a better way to investigate, or a better direction to take, at least.”

“She’s right,” Kip agreed. “We could probably spend the whole summer looking at and puzzling over the contents of the drawers and never get anywhere. If Lizzie herself hasn’t figured anything out about this stuff, we might never make anything of it ourselves.”

“What about looking in the cottage where she lived?” Preston suggested.

“Good idea,” Em said.

Though some distance from the manor house, the cottage was only about a four-minute walk; and, being abandoned, the door wasn’t locked. As they entered, directly into the cottage’s small living room, Kip sneezed a couple of times from the dust, and their feet left prints in the dust as they made their way farther inside.

One of the first things they noticed, other than the dilapidated and dirty state of the home, was a good-sized painted portrait of Lizzie looking about the same age as her spirit and the photo they had seen in the stair drawer. On a wall adjacent to Lizzie’s portrait hung a painting of the other girl they had seen in the photograph.

“So that was definitely her sister in the photo,” Em said quietly.

In addition to the living room, the cottage consisted of two small bedrooms, an eat-in kitchen, and a tiny bathroom. They discovered from looking through the remaining belongings that Lizzie’s sister was named Edna. According to some of the letters, bills, paystubs, greeting cards, photographs, and other personal items still left in the home, it appeared that Edna had never married but had worked at a grocery store in town for many years, as well as looking after her aging parents who evidently lived in the cottage until they passed away. In other circumstances, the visitors might have felt guilty about looking through the family’s private things, except that they were trying to piece together a murder mystery, so they didn’t feel too badly about snooping.

However, even after nearly an hour of looking around, they didn’t find anything significant. Plus, in the stuffiness of the cottage, their brains began to feel just about as cobwebby as the house itself.

“I think we could all use some fresh air,” Em ventured.

“And a break,” Kip said.

Since Preston and Em agreed, they all decided to meet up again after lunch.

Since it was only just after ten when they got back to the house, Em decided to do some weeding. The boys didn't feel like training or walking to the treehouse, so they ended up reading comic books in the living room.

After weeding, Em went jogging, circling the ponds and pecan grove twice, and doing several laps around the barns and one corn field, before returning to the house.

As she was having a sandwich and apple in the kitchen for lunch, while Kip and Preston took their food outside to eat in the garden, Em looked over her list of the stair-drawer contents.

She ignored the numbering of the drawers, as well as the Left and Right labels. Since Lizzie hadn't said she had any particular reason for placing certain objects in specific drawers, Em felt that information probably wasn't important.

*Some of the things in the drawers won't pertain to the murder, she reminded herself, but some probably will, since Lizzie felt drawn to them.*

*A pocket watch, and an old valentine like the kind we used to pass out in school in maybe second or third grade, she pondered. Old news typeset letters, made of metal, the letters E, another E, D, and P.*

*After a short think, Em's brain told her, These are Lizzie's initials, standing for Elizabeth Elaine Dwyer. But what does the P stand for...maybe Paul, the boy who was her friend and that was suspected of her murder?*

*A match container that is small and round with seven matches inside...possibly not related to Lizzie since Aunt Fiona said they might have stored candles in the drawers long ago.*

As she pondered, something again felt wrong to her about the drawer items, as though they were a distraction, rather than a help. *People often get sidetracked, especially by things, belongings, whatever.*

*All this thinking about drawer stuff is just more cobwebs on the brain, she decided, as she ran upstairs to brush her teeth before coming back down to meet Kip and Preston in the foyer as planned.*

Coming back into the house through the kitchen, Preston and Kip passed Aunt Eugenia and Aunt Fiona who were lunching while sharing stories of the past. With Aunt Eugenia laughing rather raucously, Aunt Fiona finished telling her about something scandalous from her day that occurred when a certain dance was held at the manor. “Of course, that sort of thing is quite commonplace today” Aunt Fiona said, with tears in her eyes from laughing so hard while telling the story. “Oh my...if these walls could talk.”

With his aunt’s last phrase replaying in his mind, Kip suddenly had a good idea, as they met Em by the central staircase.

“If walls can be watching or listening,” he told Preston and Em, “I think portraits might too.”

“‘If these walls could talk’ is just a figure of speech,” Em says. “‘The walls have ears’ would be another. Both phrases are clichés too.”

“I know, but we have access to magic,” Kip said. “And we might as well use it.”

Being very familiar with Pizzo’s magical skills, both Preston and Em very quickly got the gist of what Kip was referring to.

While in the garden, Kip had seen Pizzo and Heike heading in the direction of the old smokehouse, which is exactly where the detectives found the pair, who had been exploring and searching for secret tunnels on the property. Having already found one the day before, under the larger of the two barns, the pucks were anxious to look for more.

Arriving breathless from having jogged the distance, Kip said in a somewhat winded manner, “Pizzo, would you please bring a painting to life in the cottage behind Mr. Michaels’ house?”

As he shrugged slightly and gave a small nod, Pizzo’s face basically said what he was thinking. *Sure, no problem.*

“Thanks,” Kip said, scooping his little friend up to ride on his shoulder, as Em picked up Heike to ride on hers.

They walked instead of jogging to the cottage, so as not to shake up the puck trolls too much, though Pizzo and Heike, both being pretty tough, probably wouldn’t have minded.

Inside the cottage, with a series of odd expressions on his face as he pointed and grunted a couple of times, Pizzo brought Lizzie’s portrait to life fairly quickly, in a sparkling swirl of colorful light twinkles that

reminded Em, Kip, and Preston of miniscule fireworks, but ones that didn't make any noise, other than maybe soft *swooshing* sounds.

While they had met Lizzie's spirit, they hadn't met her portrait, the subject of which decided to stay in the painting while talking to them. "I've seen my spirit wandering around," she said, "so I'd rather stay in the painting. I think it might be awkward to have two of us roaming around."

In answer to their query as to whether or not she could tell them anything about the murder, the portrait answered, "I'm sorry, I don't think I can help you. I saw my parents and sister grieving over my murder. More recently, I've seen my spirit visiting the cottage to look around and take a few knickknacks. But I don't really know anything else, other than just what I see day to day, like spiders spinning webs and a squirrel that sometimes comes in through a hole in the kitchen floor and wanders around. And I saw you in here earlier in the day."

Smiling, but also feeling a bit disappointed, Kip said, "Okay, well, thank you anyway."

"Goodbye," Em and Preston both said at once, as Pizzo magically settled Lizzie back to her normal, motionless state in the portrait with a wave of one hand and a soft whistle.

As the group exited the cottage, Kip called to Pizzo and Heike who were already heading off to do more exploring as they waved goodbye to their friends. "Thank you! See you later!"

Heading back to the house, all three of the detectives were in a fairly subdued state because they felt as though they hadn't made any progress at all. Finding Aunt Fiona in the parlor, they told her about their investigations so far.

Aunt Fiona smiled in hearing about the painting of Lizzie coming to life. "I remember the portrait was done a short while after her death," she said, "from her most recent school picture, I believe. The one of her sister was done the year before. The family could really only afford to have one done at a time. With Edna being older, they did hers first."

As what his aunt was saying sunk in, Kip suddenly realized something. "We should have asked Pizzo to bring Edna's portrait to life," he said.

"You're right!" Em said, rather excitedly.

Preston understood as well. “Edna’s portrait was there at the time Lizzie was murdered, so she may have seen something.”

They fairly tripped over one another in flying out the parlor door and then the back door on a search for Pizzo and Heike.

Though they made wide circles, while calling loudly, it took an hour to find the trolls who were nearly a half-mile from the manor, in the shade of a gigantic oak tree called Heritage Oak.

But, in actuality, the pucks were the ones who found them. In hearing the calls, Pizzo had thrown a rock in their direction, trying to get their attention. When they didn’t notice, Heike threw a larger rock, about twice as far, which did get the attention of the searchers. Clearly, Heike had the better arm of the two.

Kip, Preston, and Em could hardly believe that Pizzo and Heike had made it so far from the cottage so quickly, or that they would roam so far in one day. In truth, puck trolls could travel great distances fairly quickly, when they wanted to. But that hadn’t been the case on this day. Instead, the pair had hopped a ride on an enmorse who happened to be going in the direction they wanted to go, and who didn’t mind giving the puck trolls a ride. In fact, while enmorse were often loners, this particular one had been feeling rather lonely lately, and was glad for the short-term company.

To Preston’s query about bringing another portrait to life, after giving a little wave and nod that said, *Sure, whatever*, Pizzo once again rode on Kip’s shoulder, as Heike was given another ride on Em’s for the trip to the cottage.

With Lizzie’s painting having already been brought to life, the Memory Magic the subject held would now allow the likeness of Lizzie to come to life basically whenever she wanted to; and she smiled at them from the portrait as they entered, while saying, “Back so soon?”

As Edna’s portrait was brought to life too, the two sisters were overjoyed to see each other.

Crying with happiness, Lizzie said, “Oh, I’m so happy to see you.”

“I’ve missed you so much,” Edna responded. “And I have so much to tell you.”

“Me too—”

“Sorry to interrupt,” Kip said, “but this is important.”

Em then explained that they were hoping Edna might have some information that could help to solve the mystery of who murdered her sister.

“Actually, I might,” Edna responded. “With such a good view of the door from my spot on the wall here, on the night Lizzie was killed, I saw one of her teachers, Mr. Pendleton, come to the door. Then Lizzie went outside with him, and that’s the last I ever saw of Lizzie.”

Unknown to everyone presently in the cottage, the spirit of Lizzie—having seen a good deal of the running around of the detectives from occasionally peeking out of the draped windows of the mezzanine—had decided to brave the light outside (since it was somewhat cloudy and not too bright) to make a trip to the cottage. Standing just outside the front door, she heard what her sister’s portrait had said; and this brought back a flood of memories for her.

Entering the cottage, and slightly surprising everyone, she said to Edna’s portrait, “I remember now. It *was* Mr. Pendleton. Mom and Dad weren’t home yet from work. I remember I was just thinking of starting something for dinner—you know how you and I used to take turns making dinner because Mom and Dad sometimes came home late—and he came to the door. I went outside because I didn’t want to be in the house with him; I actually thought I’d be safer outside.”

After taking a deep breath, the spirit continued. “He was the one who killed me. But the whole thing went back about a month before that. You know how I liked to gather walnuts from those trees all the way down by the train tracks. It was on a Saturday evening, and I had already gathered nuts. It was just starting to get a little dark, and I was thinking of heading for home when I saw Mr. Pendleton. He was with another man, and they were arguing. Then Mr. Pendleton picked up an old shovel and hit the man in the head with it several times. He picked up a big rock too, and hit him again. I had ducked down among some bushes, I remember, because I didn’t want him to see me. I was really scared, especially because I was pretty sure he had killed the man, as hard as he hit him and as much blood as I could see. Then I saw Mr. Pendleton drag the man over to the railroad tracks and put him onto the tracks. Then he poured a bottle of something over him and left the bottle beside the tracks.”

“That’s why you put the news article about the man killed on the train tracks in the stair drawer,” Em said. “You subconsciously remembered that the event was important. The news article said he was drinking, but that was evidently staged.”

“And the damage from being hit by the train would have covered up that the man had been murdered before the train hit him,” Preston speculated.

The spirit was nodding as she answered, “Yes, and Mr. Pendleton came back to the spot where he had killed him and covered up the bloody leaves and dirt with fresh leaves and dirt. And he took the shovel with him, so it wouldn’t be found. I imagine he disposed of it later, someplace where no one would find it. And he might have cleaned it up good, so if anyone found it they wouldn’t suspect anything. They didn’t anyway because they just assumed the man fell asleep on the tracks, or was drunk and stumbled onto them, passing out.”

“So did Mr. Pendleton see you?” Lizzie’s portrait asked her spirit.

“Only because I sneezed,” the spirit replied. “I had hay fever that year, so I was constantly sneezing. I ran off, and he ran after me. But he only caught up to me when I was within shouting distance of the house. Edna, you were outside taking in the washing from the clothesline. He told me if I ever told anyone what I had seen, he’d kill you.”

“Oh, Lizzie, you should have just told me,” Edna said sadly and earnestly from her painting. “I’m sure I could have found some way to help. We could have figured something out.”

“Well, he kept threatening,” Lizzie answered. “When I’d see him at school, he’d have me stay after class every few days so that he could remind me that he’d kill you if I talked. I guess I shouldn’t have believed that he wouldn’t do something else evil and murderous, even if he was pretending to make a bargain with me about me keeping silent. And he did do something evil and murderous. When he came to the door that day, after I came outside, he told me he had you tied up behind the barn. So I went with him. I guess I thought it was true, and that I might be able to help you, even if he ended up killing me, which he did, probably because he thought I’d eventually talk.”

“As shocking as all of this is to hear,” Edna said, “and as terrible as the whole thing was to go through, both your death and Paul killing himself, I have some news for you that I hope might ease your mind just a little. Mr. Pendleton moved away at the end of the school term, and we heard that he died a couple of months later—hit by a train when drunk.”

“Poetic justice,” Lizzie’s spirit said, with a soft smile. “It is good to know he likely didn’t have the chance to kill anyone else. Who knows why he killed the man by the tracks, or how many other people he might have killed in his lifetime.”

“This is all so amazing to hear,” Lizzie’s portrait said.

“In a way it’s good to hear,” Edna ventured, “so we can all finally know the truth.”

Lizzie’s spirit agreed. “I am glad to finally remember.”

So that the sister portraits could have a chance to catch up, Pizzo didn’t settle the subjects as he might have on other occasions. They could settle themselves later. And thanks to Memory Magic, the paintings would often come alive to talk to one another.

The spirit didn’t stay to chat, but accompanied Em, Kip, and Preston back up to the manor house. Pizzo and Heike came too, intent on visiting the kitchen, having long since finished off the sack of goodies they had started the day with.

On the walk back to the house, Em asked Lizzie about a few of the more puzzling items in the stair drawers.

“No,” Lizzie answered, “I didn’t put that little decorative red box in there. I noticed it, but that wasn’t me. I did put the thimble, thread, and pin cushion in the drawers, probably because I was remembering my mother teaching me to sew the year before I died. The county map marks the spot by the tracks where Mr. Pendleton killed that man. I remember drawing on the map and putting it away so I’d remember where it happened. I guess I hoped to be able to tell or show people one day.”

“What about the marble?” Em asked.

“No, that wasn’t me either,” Lizzie responded.

Inside the house, the spirit made her way back up to the mezzanine, while Em, Kip, and Preston went to the parlor to tell Aunt Fiona and Aunt Eugenia what had happened.

“That’s incredible,” Aunt Eugenia said, after hearing the story.

“It might be equally incredible that you three managed to solve a decades-old murder mystery in just one day,” Aunt Fiona praised.

“Oh, I feel so bad for the boy who was suspected, Paul,” Aunt Eugenia remarked, with everyone else agreeing.

“His cousin still lives in town,” Aunt Fiona said. “Harold Reuters is a retired accountant who still works part time helping people with their taxes. But he’s turned hobby journalist, and he now runs the local weekly newspaper.”

Em still had the contents of the stair drawers slightly on her mind, and the mention of the newspaper made her think of the old type letters. *So the P probably stood for Pendleton, rather than Paul*, she realized. It also occurred to her that maybe Paul’s cousin would like to know what really happened.

“That’s an excellent idea,” Aunt Fiona said when Em mentioned it.

“And I bet he’d like to hear the story straight from the people who helped figure it out,” Aunt Eugenia suggested. “Mr. Michaels was planning to run some errands in town this afternoon. I don’t think he’s left yet, if you three would like to go with him.”

Em, Kip, and Preston were thrilled at the prospect of talking to Mr. Reuters, if he happened to be available at his little office in town.

“Oh he’s usually there, typing away,” Aunt Fiona said. “I see him through the window just about every time I go to the grocery store or the post office.”

Sure enough, when Mr. Michaels dropped the three off, promising to pick them up again in exactly an hour, they found Mr. Reuters in his little accounting and newspaper office, above which he had a little apartment.

After introducing themselves, in thinking Mr. Reuters would be skeptical about a story involving spirits and talking paintings, Em had started off by saying, “You might think what we are about to tell you is strange.”

“Oh unlikely,” Mr. Reuters, quickly replied. “In fact, I doubt I’ll find anything told to me about Netherwind Manor to be strange. It’s always been a mysterious place. I remember going to a barbecue there once, with all kinds of strange things going on, like gargoyles moving around on the roof, and some weird furry thing dangling from an attic

window. And Laurelstone is just the same. My cousin lived on the grounds, and he used to tell me stories, some real doozies, so I doubt I'll be surprised by anything you might tell me."

Mr. Reuters was completely fascinated with their story. "After all this time," he said, "it's such a relief to know what happened."

Surprisingly, Mr. Reuters had some information to pass on to his visitors. "The man on the train tracks was Mr. Pendleton's former business partner. They had embezzled money together. I imagine that's what the quarrel was about, money. Also, Mr. Pendleton was the one who said he saw Paul with Lizzie the day she was murdered, which was true, Paul did walk her home; but it now seems likely he told the police just to cast suspicion on Paul, and he probably put it in such a way as to do just that." Shaking his head sadly he added, "Oh, my poor cousin; what a life he might have had. And Lizzie too; it's so sad."

After a few moments' consideration, Mr. Reuters said, "It's also sad that the police never connected Mr. Pendleton to the Lizzie Dwyer case, even after he was proven to be an embezzler. Of course, he was dead by the time they found out about that, which is probably why the police never revisited anything involving the body on the tracks. With both embezzlers dead, it would have been pointless to do so. Even if the authorities had been able to figure out that the train accident was really a murder in disguise, there wouldn't have been anyone to pursue as far as charges." Pausing for a few seconds in thought, Mr. Reuters added, "However, I know a retired detective that I might give a shout to. I think he might be very interested in looking into the murder of Lizzie as a cold case because that's what he does now as a hobby—works on cold cases."

"What a good idea," Preston remarked.

"I think it's especially worth looking into because they had already proven Mr. Pendleton to be a criminal," Mr. Reuters added. "So they might very well be able find something to prove he killed Lizzie for seeing him kill his partner. Then maybe this will clear my cousin's name for good."

"Let's hope so," Kip said.

"Or better yet, let's pray about it," Em suggested. "If we firmly place this in God's hands, I believe He will make happen whatever is meant to happen."

“Well, I agree with you there,” Mr. Reuters said smiling, and rising to shake their hands in farewell.

On the trip back in the car, Kip remarked, “I’m glad Mr. Pendleton didn’t completely get away with it, murdering his former business partner and Lizzie. But I guess he sort of did, since the police didn’t catch him.”

“No one ever truly gets away with their bad deeds,” Em said. “If he didn’t get caught in this life, he’d end up paying in the next. I’m sure God makes sure of that.”

“I doubt he ever repented,” Preston chimed in. “Based just on what we know, he doesn’t seem the type. And it’s unlikely he ever accepted Christ, so he’s probably paying the ultimate price of spending eternity in hell.”

When they got back to the manor, they discovered that the surprises were not yet over with for the day. For one thing, Eleta had returned. Being such a shy little thing much of the time, most people didn’t notice her around anyway; however, Preston always keenly felt her absence. She was basically his best friend, and he definitely missed her whenever she was gone.

Secondly, Em immediately noticed that one of the higher stair drawers had been pulled out and left open. Flipping pages in her notebook, which she had started to carry with her just about everywhere she went, she fairly bounded up the staircase to investigate. The drawer was one she had previously listed as Empty Drawer. Now, it contained a note from Lizzie asking Em, Kip, and Preston to meet her on the mezzanine at seven that evening.

How exciting! They would be able to tell her about their visit to Paul’s cousin in town.

It was almost hard to wait, through dinner and the short time after, until just before seven when they made their way up to the mezzanine.

Lizzie’s spirit was again floating cross-legged above the armchair in the hall, but she got up right away when she saw them.

With the shadows lengthening and the mezzanine fairly dark much of the time anyway, since they didn’t want to have to turn on lights which might bother Lizzie, they had brought flashlights with them. However, there was no need for them because the curtains of two of the windows in the hall were pulled halfway open.

“Daylight isn’t so bad after all,” the spirit remarked, indicating the windows. “In fact, I quite enjoyed my outing earlier. I guess I’m just more used to moonlight and starlight.”

Lizzie was happy to hear what they had to tell her about the man on the tracks and that Harold Reuters was going to ask a detective friend of his to investigate her case more, in the hopes they could find evidence (in the here and now, as opposed to in the spiritual world) to prove Mr. Pendleton killed both her and his former business partner.

However, while this was all very good and pleasant for Lizzie to hear, she had a much bigger and more wonderful surprise in store for her new friends, in that she was about to reveal where she spent most of her time.

Opening the door nearest the armchair, she slowly slipped inside, beckoning them to follow.

In doing so, they at first thought they had entered something like a planetarium, but unlike any they had ever seen or heard about because the stars, nebulas, planets, moons, comets and other heavenly what-nots were not being projected on ceilings, walls, and floors. Instead, they were floating around, like in 3-D, but of course looking a lot more surreal than real, especially since the visitors could neither see nor feel any kind of floor in the place they were in; so it seemed as though they were actually walking amongst the stars in outer space. But they didn’t particularly feel any different, like lighter or anything. Gravity actually felt the same as when they had been in the hallway just a few short moments before.

After giving them a chance to take it all in, Lizzie said quietly, “Welcome to the Garden of Stars.”

In almost a whisper, Em echoed, “The Garden of Stars,” as she continued to slowly gaze all about her, at the colors and lights, streams and streaks, undulations and flashes, which were more spectacular than she could have ever imagined from previously having only seen pictures of things in space, and from seeing a few science fiction movies. *Pictures and movies don’t do the real thing justice*, she thought. *If this is real*, she wondered.

Kip and Preston were in such awe, they temporarily couldn’t find their voices.

“Is this real?” Em ventured to ask Lizzie, a few minutes later. “I mean, is it outer space, or heaven?”

“I can answer all three of your questions,” Lizzie replied. “It is real. It’s not outer space as you know it from looking up at the stars, because people on earth can’t climb into a spaceship and get here. Nor is it heaven. Heaven is much more wonderful than this. The Garden of Stars is a magical place through which people in heaven can briefly visit people on earth. It’s kind of like a go-between spot. However, those visiting from heaven through the Garden of Stars temporarily can’t remember too many details about heaven, this being so that the spirits can’t give too much away because the details of heaven are supposed to be kept a secret on earth. Just in case you were tempted to ask,” Lizzie added, almost apologetically. “I can tell you though that the food in heaven—along with the beautiful natural places, and the art, and everything else—is so much more amazing than anything you can find on earth, and more wonderful than human brains are capable of imagining.”

“Wow,” Preston breathed, finally able to find his voice.

Kip still couldn’t make a noise, but this might have had something to do with the fact that he had been unconsciously holding his breath and was about to pass out because of it. Thankfully, he did manage to take a gulp of air so that he wouldn’t pass out, after which, he started breathing normally again.

“I wondered why you didn’t hang out at the cottage,” Em said. “Now I think I understand; it’s because this is where you live, in this lovely garden.”

“No, I don’t live here,” Lizzie responded. “I’m just visiting. I guess it is a somewhat prolonged visit because I was meant to meet you; and since you went away for a while (indicating Kip and Em who had been gone from the manor for several months), the visit might have taken a little longer than it would have otherwise.”

Finally able to speak, Kip said, “I hope you can finally rest, since you now remember what happened.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” Lizzie said, with skepticism in her voice. “I am happy to remember, but I can’t rest because I have work to do. We all have really important work to do in heaven, just like we did

on earth. Everyone has to work. Speaking of which, I'd better get going. Goodbye then."

"Goodbye," Kip, Preston, and Em said in unison as the spirit drifted away amongst the stars, growing smaller fairly rapidly as she fluttered a hand back at them in farewell.

The door to the hall was cracked, thankfully, or they might not have found their way out of the Garden of Stars because they couldn't discern walls in the cosmos surrounding them. A faint sliver of pale light from the hall, in the dusk of the evening, allowed them to find their way back to the door.

As they were leaving the mezzanine, a little slowly because they were still awed and pensive over what they had just seen, Kip lagged slightly behind Preston and Em. On a whim, passing another door, he dared an expectant peek inside, hoping to see something else amazing like the Garden of Stars. And what he found was truly amazing, but a little scary as well because behind the door was an enormous peacock occupying what appeared to be another garden, this one of a more traditional type with flowers, vines, and shrubs. "Enormous" in this case was a bird roughly the size of a large delivery van, whose plumage was of many more colors than a common peacock. If Kip had had to describe the creature very quickly, in a few short words, he probably would have said, "giant rainbow peacock," because that was the first thought that had popped into his startled brain.

Closing the door quickly, because he was afraid the bird might not be friendly, he shook his head at himself, in a scolding fashion. Having found exactly what he had hoped he might find, he couldn't believe he had turned into such a scaredy-cat. However, as he watched Preston and Em at the far end of the hall disappearing through the door to the stairwell, his brain told him, *You probably just imagined it, like an overactive brain.*

Sure enough, as he dared another peek into the room, he saw nothing more than furniture draped with dust coverings. Scooting to catch up to Em and Preston, he thought, *My eyes were probably playing a trick on me, from being dazzled by all the stars.*

However, in finding his Aunt Fiona on her own in the kitchen as she was raiding the refrigerator for a snack, Kip decided to talk to her about

the mezzanine, in general, and about whether or not it was possible for a gigantic bird to live in one of the rooms.

“Oh, you’ve met the peacock!” she exclaimed in delight, the delight being more from her memories of the bird, rather than from her great-nephew getting to see the creature.

“But it wasn’t there when I took a second look,” Kip said, in surprise to discover the bird was real.

“You probably talked yourself out of it,” Aunt Fiona replied. “Believing is the key. I learned that as a little girl growing up in this house. Non-believers will open a door and see a bedroom, or a nursery, or a craft room, or whatever they might be expecting to see in a house like this with so many rooms. But if you believe, you will find something miraculous and wonderful, you surely will.”

Aunt Fiona was right. He had talked himself out of what he had seen.

Kip snuck back up to the mezzanine by himself to again look into the room in which he had seen the peacock. Closing his eyes while opening the door, he was confident that he would discover a magical place and not just draped furniture. Sure enough, when he opened his eyes, he viewed the lovely garden he had seen earlier. However, the peacock wasn’t there. But that hardly would have mattered to a visitor because the sprawling garden was absolutely exquisite, even in the waning light of the day. A large central fountain was surrounded by flower beds and shrubs of many varieties, and Kip particularly noticed huge patches of roses (his favorite flower) blooming in colors he might never have imagined. Low hedges of various shapes and sizes contained many of the planted areas, and he could distantly see walls of stone covered with ivies and climbing flowers bordering the outer edges of the garden.

Since it was rather late, and because the day had been enough of an adventure already, he decided not to do any further exploring; so, after only a couple minutes of looking in, he simply closed the door and left the hall.

A half-hour before bedtime, they all gathered in the parlor for a short bible study.

Em had been pondering something since visiting the Garden of Stars and saying goodbye to Lizzie, the discussion of which ended up

leading off their bible study. “Lizzie said she was busy with work in heaven, and that she wouldn’t be resting,” she said. “I thought people in heaven might get to rest, but they evidently all have to work.”

“Just like here,” Kip said. “We’re all supposed to work; no one is supposed to be idle.” With this, he looked up a bible passage he remembered relating to this to share with everyone. “The last part of Second Thessalonians 3:10 says, ‘...If any one will not work, let him not eat.’”

Aunt Eugenia chimed in next. “It is correct that we are not supposed to be idle. Proverbs 12:24 states, ‘The hand of the diligent will rule, while the slothful will be put to forced labor.’”

Em had been reading the Book of Proverbs recently and was also able to contribute, with Proverbs 19:15. “Slothfulness casts into a deep sleep, and an idle person will suffer hunger.”

“Also look up Proverbs 6:10-11 later,” Aunt Fiona suggested.

“Like homework,” Preston said, smiling. “We can’t get away from it even in the summer.”

Aunt Fiona was also smiling, as she said, “And that’s the whole point of what we’re talking about. Working is good for us; it keeps us occupied and fulfilled, and out of trouble.”

“But going back to what Lizzie told you,” Aunt Eugenia said, “since we’re supposed to be busy here, we’ll probably be busy in heaven too. We shouldn’t be idle.”

Aunt Fiona agreed. “Some people just laze around, wasting their days and being a burden on others. It’s not meant to be this way. It is a sin. And if God doesn’t approve of it here, He’s certainly not going to allow it in heaven. The only exceptions to not working would be people who have severe disabilities and the infirm elderly, and there aren’t going to be any of those in heaven.”

Preston had been puzzling over something that turned out to be the next focus of their bible study, and something Em and Kip were both also extremely interested in. “I was really surprised that Lizzie didn’t seem angry at all,” he remarked. “She knew she had been murdered and her life cut short, but she was so accepting and calm about it. She didn’t even have any harsh words to say about Mr. Pendleton. I think that’s amazing.”

Kip agreed and said, “You’d think she might have been at least a bit upset.”

“She might have been at one time,” Aunt Eugenia said, “but we all have to practice forgiveness, and mean it. As far as where she is now, all of the things that happened to her on earth don’t matter anymore. But for those of us still here, we have to forgive offenses, even terrible ones. Otherwise, anger and unforgiveness can eat us alive, and drive us apart from God. He expects us to forgive one another. Jesus even forgave those who crucified him,” she added. “We are all sinners. We’re all guilty, so we don’t really have the right to hold things against others. Forgiveness means we forfeit any right to get even or to stay angry. And we shouldn’t wish ill on anyone. We’re even supposed to pray for our enemies; and if our enemy is thirsty, we should give him something to drink.”

“That’s from Romans 12:20,” Aunt Fiona said. “‘...if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head.’”

Em had been flipping pages in her bible to find Proverbs 14:29, which had to do with anger. “He who is slow to anger has great understanding, but he who has a hasty temper exalts folly.”

Kip then contributed Matthew 18:21-22. “Then Peter came up and said to him, ‘Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.’”

Lastly, Aunt Eugenia read Matthew 6:14-15 aloud. “‘For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.’”

“It’s sometimes very difficult for us to forgive and to control our anger,” Aunt Fiona admitted. “Also, Satan is sometimes the cause of anger and unforgiveness; so the answer is prayer, asking for God’s help, because we can’t do it on our own. If we’re having trouble with anger and unforgiveness, we should ask God to intervene.”

The aunts had been planning to talk about Jonah during the bible study; but, of course, it was fine to divert to something else because it was important to apply the bible to real life as often as possible.

As they were just getting ready to go upstairs, Aunt Fiona remembered something she wanted to tell them, about the doors on the mezzanine, since she was pretty sure they would be doing more exploring. “They can’t be opened from the inside. I imagine Lizzie, as a spirit, could manage to open a door. But a flesh-and-blood person like you and I wouldn’t be able to, unless you find out some magical trick that I never found growing up. So remember each time you go into one of the rooms to leave the door open, just a crack.”

Over the next few weeks, the explorers would discover several of the mezzanine doors to be locked and not enterable since they didn’t know where they might find the keys, Aunt Fiona also having no idea, as she herself had not had access to all of the doors during her years of exploring.

Wrapping up the bible study, Aunt Eugenia had been flipping pages in her bible, and she assigned one further passage as a homework assignment, which was Colossians 3:12-14.

Trudging upstairs to bed, Em realized that what they had discussed was something she very much needed to hear. After brushing her teeth and doing her homework, she checked the notes she had taken from the bible study, in order to read a couple of the bible passages again.

About an hour later, with a lot on her mind from the exciting day, she found herself struggling to get to sleep. Seeing the Garden of Stars had probably been the most exciting part. In remembering exactly what Lizzie had said about the garden, that it was a go-between spot through which people in heaven could visit people on earth, she suddenly realized that the garden might allow her to see her parents again. *What a wonderful thought!*

Hardly daring to hope, she speedily donned her robe and slippers and quickly made her way downstairs, then up the side stairs to the mezzanine.

Remembering to leave the door cracked, she slipped inside the Garden of Stars, again marveling at the beauty and wonder of it, so much so that she temporarily forgot why she had come. Only upon seeing Lizzie float-walking towards her did she remember.

When Em confessed that she was hoping to see her parents, Lizzie consolingly replied, “That’s not really how the garden works. God has to decide who sees whom; then He arranges it.”

Em smiled and nodded. While she had pretty much been expecting this answer, she was glad she had come back to the garden and asked. Strangely enough, she didn't particularly feel disappointed.

"It might happen someday," Lizzie added. "We just can't know for sure. I would suggest that you pray about it; then wait for God's answer."

"Prayer is the answer to everything," Em remarked, more to herself than to Lizzie.

Em had brought her notebook with her. On impulse, she asked Lizzie if she wouldn't mind looking at her list of items in the stair drawers. If you could maybe mark the ones that you didn't put there, I would appreciate it. I might someday want to solve the mystery of the other things."

"Oh sure, no problem," Lizzie answered.

While Em might have had trouble reading in the somewhat low light of the Garden of Stars, the spirit seemed to have no trouble, as she flipped pages without actually touching them, and used the pen in much the same manner to make little check marks next to the objects she hadn't placed in the drawers. Em was again reminded of astronauts making things float around in space.

Tapping the pen and notebook on a floating path back to Em, Lizzie stated, "Well, I'm off to work now. It's splendid actually; I'm really enjoying work. Though...I can't right this minute...quite remember...exactly what it is that I do. Oh well, no matter; but I'd better get back. Good night, and sleep tight," she added, as she turned and started to drift away.

*...and don't let the bedbugs bite*, Em thought, waving to Lizzie before she too turned to leave through the cracked door.

## Chapter Five

### Weatherly's Birthday

Em, Kip, and Preston were very excited on Friday morning to again be heading to town, this time to go shopping for gifts for a party they had been invited to on Saturday at Laurelstone Manor.

Weatherly Dawson was cousin to Kip and Em, and the party was to celebrate her fourteenth birthday. Em was actually very good friends with Weatherly; but the Dawson family had been out of town for the past couple of weeks, which was why the cousins hadn't seen each other yet this summer. Mrs. Boyle was driving them to town, and Aunt Fiona had given each of them some money to shop for small gifts for Weatherly.

While the kids were off shopping, Aunt Fiona and Aunt Eugenia were off to the dilapidated Dwyer cottage to see what might be salvaged. The mention of the portraits of Lizzie and Edna had reminded Aunt Fiona to get a move-on in doing this, before everything in the home deteriorated beyond the point of saving.

After dropping Kip, Em, and Preston off downtown, near various shops and boutiques, Mrs. Boyle headed to the grocery store, which was fairly close by, so they could walk there to meet her after finding the birthday gifts.

In knowing Weatherly best, Em was able to help Kip and Preston shop for her at the various stores. Talking the boys out of comic books and something to do with slime at the toy and game store, she steered them toward a small clothing-and-accessories boutique and a used bookstore. As a result, Kip and Preston ended up choosing a set of headbands and a mystery novel respectively, while Em purchased a bead bracelet for her cousin.

When they got back to the manor, after wrapping the presents, the boys headed out to the treehouse, taking lunch with them, while Em got busy hitting tennis balls, weeding, and reading the bible. She also reorganized all of Mr. Michaels' seeds in the garden shed, which he

appreciated and complimented her on. Now being both categorized and alphabetized, the seeds would be much easier to find in the future. Organizing things and keeping busy had always proved a tonic to Em, and she found her mood much improved over that of the past few days.

From her vantage point in the gardens, Em could see Zapor and Folto on the roof of the manor. Back inside the house, she headed to the attic where she made her way up a short set of stairs and through a trap door in the roof. A good part of the roof was flat enough to walk on safely, and she easily made her way to a spot near where the gryphons were perched atop ridges in order to keep a good eye on things. She found the protectors engaged in telling jokes to one another, but not laughing at all because they had set a contest between them. Whichever one laughed first would have to provide the other with a dozen field mice, or two rabbits, for dinner.

Sitting down on the roof, Em listened for a bit.

Folto ended up laughing first, not at what Zapor was saying, but at Em, who was trying so hard not to laugh (for fear of messing up their game, because laughter is often contagious) that she turned bright red, and rolled onto her side while shaking with internal giggles and snorts that eventually did spill out into laughter.

With Folto finding Em to be the funniest thing happening on the roof, she ended up chortling before she could catch herself. Quickly resigning herself to having lost the game, she immediately took off to begin hunting.

Sitting up and wiping tears from her eyes, Em told Zapor, “Sorry. I didn’t mean to disrupt your game.”

“Not at all,” Zapor replied. “In fact, I thank you. She never would have laughed had it not been for you. Now, I can relax and have my dinner brought to me.”

Taking in the breathtaking view from the roof, Em spied the boys trudging home from the treehouse. Bidding farewell to Zapor, she went back inside to help with dinner preparations.

On Saturday morning, Heike and Pizzo were excited because they also had been invited to the party for Weatherly. With lots of magical happenings at Laurelstone—and with the party attendees being mainly the family and estate workers, who were considered to be family—the puck trolls were unlikely to cause anything of a stir. Eleta, though

invited too, opted not to go, instead deciding to hang out with Folto and Zapor for the day.

As they all piled into two cars to head to Laurelstone, Em reflected on how much she had missed Weatherly in the past few months. The girls had been classmates, as well as cousins and neighbors, and this had been a big part of the reason why Em disliked her new school so much, the other reason being that it was no fun to be uprooted.

While it would have been ideal for Em, Kip, and Otto to have gone to live at Laurelstone, instead of entering the foster care system, it simply wasn't possible. Weatherly's mother had died of cholera six years back while doing mission work. Her twenty-year-old brother, John, who was in college, basically acted as her guardian because their father traveled for work and wasn't at home much. Even with a handful of household staff, there wasn't anyone who could have looked after Otto fulltime, or been a good supervisor to Em and Kip. So instead of trying to finagle something, like hiring a nanny, Aunt Fiona had decided it was best to use the foster care system, which was what God had told her to do when she prayed about the situation. And this was definitely meant to be because Kip, Em, and Otto were all destined to land at Doyle Mansion, to become family to Dave and Violet, this being slightly helped along by a watchman (an angel working for God to help make certain things happen according to His plan) watching over the process of foster placement, and basically doing a few fancy maneuvers to make sure the kids ended up where they did.

In addition to Weatherly's father and brother, Laurelstone's housekeeper, Mrs. Smythe, attended the party, along with the estate manager, Mr. Blessing, and the four farm workers under his direction. No one was surprised by Heike and Pizzo, who fit right in because the gargoyles from both Netherwind and Laurelstone had also been invited. However, only four attended because the rest had opted to stay put to keep watch over things. With their job basically being to protect the dwellings of humans, they took their duties too seriously to leave any home to which they were assigned totally unprotected for even one minute. The party also included a gargoyle who had once long ago lived atop Laurelstone (until one wing of the manor burned), but who now lived on a church near Doyle Mansion. While Anei knew Vini, he

had never met Preston, Kip, or Em, though he had seen them many times in the neighborhood.

The Netherwind group had come early because the party was pretty much an all-day affair, including lunch and games. With Preston, Aunt Eugenia, and the puck trolls all being first-time visitors, they were treated to a lengthy tour of the estate upon arriving, but after being offered early refreshments, which everyone (and especially Pizzo and Heike) cheerfully partook of.

Like Netherwind, much of Laurelstone's property was currently not in use, though less in comparison because Laurelstone was quite a bit smaller in size at right around three hundred acres. While they had once raised horses, the Dawsons now had only six for the farm workers to use to get around the property. They raised corn and soybeans, along with hay for sale to area farmers and ranchers who were not able to raise enough for their own needs.

The visitors got to see the burned-out wing during the tour. Though most everything wood had burned, along with the roof shingles, much of the stone was left, forming a kind of walled garden on that side of the house. Indeed, the family did garden some inside the walls of the burned wing, which helped protect the flowers and vegetables from various critters and sometimes the elements. Benches and birdbaths had been added as well, to make the area a kind of retreat.

Laurelstone was wider and more sprawling than Netherwind, though not as tall, being only two stories with an attic and not having a mezzanine. The two manors were sister houses originally, built by two brothers at around the same time, Netherwind first, then Laurelstone about six years later. Both estates had stayed in the same family over the years, Aunt Fiona having been Fiona Dawson before becoming Fiona Campbell when she married.

When Preston admired the stone of the manor, John told him that this was how the house had been named. "The stone was quarried not too far from here. The greenish hues, with accents of butter yellow, reminded our great-great-grandfather of the bay laurel tree in bloom. And that's why they planted all these laurels," he added, gesturing to the nearly two hundred laurel trees surrounding the home and lining the front drive.

Aunt Fiona then related how Netherwind got its name. “The two years they were building it were bad years for wind storms. In fact, a tornado even came through and flattened nearly half of the town. But nothing at Netherwind was damaged, not even one shutter. Since the wind mainly just blew over them, they named the house Netherwind to basically mean ‘under the wind.’”

Other than the basic structural differences between the two houses, Laurelstone had a lot more stained glass than Netherwind, which had only five stained glass windows in comparison to twenty-one at Laurelstone, not even counting those of the small chapel on the estate which had nine more. When touring the chapel and admiring the stained glass, Mr. Dawson told the visitors that, in the past, fewer people were able to read, so the windows told the stories of the creation, the flood, the virgin birth, the crucifixion, and so on.

The outside tour ended a good ways behind the house near the large chicken coop and pigpens adjacent to the stables. To the visitors’ delight, Laurelstone had a small flock of peafowl, and the party goers were able to pick up several bundles of feathers to take home as souvenirs.

Inside, Laurelstone was furnished much like Netherwind, but looked very different because the stained glass windows really stood out, particularly in being much larger and more elaborate than those at Netherwind. The colorful scenes reminded Preston and Aunt Eugenia of the large tapestries of banquets and forested landscapes at Doyle Mansion. While some of the windows were religious in nature, like those at the chapel, many simply featured scenes such as exquisite gardens and waterfalls, which, of course, could be considered religious since God made all of the beauties of nature.

With the tour complete, the party officially started with games and a fabulous buffet lunch, followed by a layered chocolate birthday cake and three kinds of gelato ice cream. Mr. Dawson had catered in most of the food so as not to tax Mrs. Smythe, who usually did a lot of the cooking. Today, he simply wanted her to be able to relax.

While they were celebrating, Pizzo did something pretty wonderful (which he was prone to doing at parties), in that he brought to life two of Weatherly’s stuffed animals, a bunny and a turtle, along with a wood carving of a bear cub, a ballet dancer from a painting, and an antique

automaton of a young boy playing a violin. The boy ended up serenading the birthday girl, while the stuffed bunny and bear cub danced together.

Prizes were given out to the winners of the games, and Pizzo and Heike ended up winning the most; but they also ended up sharing them around upon realizing they didn't need (nor could carry) so many prizes for themselves.

Back at Netherwind in the late afternoon, Kip and Preston got out the archery equipment and were setting up the target in the area next to the croquet lawn when something quite unexpected happened. While demons rarely came near the house—because they were afraid of the gargoyles, gryphons, and other such magical protectors—one dared come near on this day upon spying a chance to rid the world of Preston and Kip, who were both destined to do great things in their lifetimes in working for the Kingdom of God. With neither boy armed, other than one holding a bow and the other just picking up a quiver of arrows, from his position hidden in a tree adjacent to the croquet lawn, the demon sprang out at them, very fast, almost like one of their arrows might fly.

However, the boys wouldn't have a chance to be much startled, or harmed, because the demon, in mid-air leap, was himself pounced upon by none other than Eleta, who was having none of this nonsense. *Honestly*, she thought, *the nerve of this demon, to attack my charge right under my nose*. Eleta had been perched on one of the wooden croquet posts, so that she could have a good view of the boys' practice session. (She often watched Preston practice in order to give him pointers by thought to help with his training.)

Even if Preston and Kip had been surprised by the demon, the shock of the encounter would end up coming from Eleta herself. Not that Preston would be amazed by her strength; he already knew that she was super strong for her size. Nor had he been all that surprised when he first learned she could fly—a fact not observable simply by looking at her sitting still because her tiny wings were hidden, tucked close to her body when not in use. Rather, the shock would come in learning that she was shapeshifting (mainly pertaining to size because she tended to like to stay in the form of a vritsee.)

Growing very rapidly as she leapt—to the size of a small donkey, which then made her roughly equal in size to the demon—Eleta basically tackled him in the air, rather easily because her pounce was slightly faster than his, and she was slightly nearer the boys' position. Once the nasty creature was on the ground, the vritsee basically ripped him to shreds with the razor-sharp pincers on her front legs. Under this assault, the demon quickly dissipated, leaving nothing more than a bit of greasy-looking sludge smeared across the grass that would end up washing away with the next rain. Obviously, the demon either hadn't seen Eleta, or didn't know much about vritsees. Two of the gargoyles from the roof of the manor, Yami and Korszak, landed on the lawn near the scene just as Eleta was polishing off the demon. While gargoyles were good protectors, they were not quite as fast in a sprint as other magical creatures such as vritsees and wind horses. Since Eleta had basically finished the job, with nothing else dangerous in the area to take care of, Yami and Korszak quickly returned to their positions on the roof. The gryphons hadn't been around, but of course had made sure other protectors were before departing the manor.

Eleta shrunk back down to her normal size just after the departure of the gargoyles. Feeling the need to be close to Preston, she flew to land on his shoulder.

"Thank you, Eleta," Preston gushed. "Without a sword or even a stick handy, we'd have been in real trouble without you. And...Wow! You never told me you could shapeshift. That's pretty fantastic!"

Eleta tilted her head to one side and down a little, while slowly shrugging one tiny shoulder, as though in shyness. In truth, like most of her kind, she preferred to stay in a smaller state, no bigger than a mid-sized grasshopper, in order to be as inconspicuous as possible. However, if she wanted to, she could grow to the size of the largest of wind horses, which would mean she could take Preston places, if he needed to go. In truth, he hadn't needed to go much of anywhere in the time she had known him. And since his legs worked just fine, and walking was good exercise, it would have been rather silly to fly him here and there on normal daily business—it's not like she was a school bus, or a taxi. Aside from their occasional size changes, vritsees rarely changed shapes to imitate other creatures because they just didn't think

it was a nice thing to do, so Eleta pretty much looked like herself most of the time.

The boys decided not to practice archery after all, being slightly shook up from the encounter. Heading inside to read for a bit in his room, Preston thought about how utterly unprepared he had been for the attack, not just in being unarmed, but in being off his guard. Aside from that, he had been neglecting training lately, in lieu of lazing around, either watching TV or hanging out in the treehouse. *That's not acceptable*, he scolded himself.

Everything about archery and martial arts had come so easily for Preston, without even all that much practice, which was part of the reason how he knew it was what God meant for him to do. He had grown better at archery than either Sam or Ben, and he was more advanced in sword skills than other boys his age with similar training. So he now felt incredibly guilty about neglecting his training. And he was right to feel that he needed to take his training more seriously because, in opening his bible, his eyes immediately flew to Jeremiah 48:10, which he knew was a message of warning from God. “Cursed is he who does the work of the LORD with slackness; and cursed is he who keeps back his sword from bloodshed.”

He definitely needed to be a lot more committed to doing what God intended, especially when the direction was this clear. Preston not only knew this from receiving messages and from being good at certain things, he also knew it deep in the core of his being, and especially in his heart. Praying, he promised God he would be more committed to doing His will.

“I wonder why Eleta never shapeshifted before now,” Preston ventured to Kip when the boys were heading down to dinner later.

“Maybe it takes a lot of energy,” Kip speculated.

“No,” Preston replied, after thinking for a few moments. “I think she’s just shy, and doesn’t want to show off, or get noticed.”

In truth, what happened outside had actually been a move and countermove in the game Boko and Etowa were playing.

Boko sent the demon using a caraway seed which the demon inhaled up his nose and which planted the firm idea in his tiny brain that the gargoyles were too far away to stop him; basically, they would notice too late to save the boys.

Etowa, in turn, had made sure Eleta was there. The writsee had been planning to go with Folto and Zapor to explore a couple of nearby caves; but in somehow stumbling over a seed from an acorn squash, which she had then nibbled on a bit, it suddenly seemed like a good idea to stay near the manor. And she was very glad that she had. While the gargoyles might well have been able to save Preston and Kip, the boys might have been injured. No, it was better that she herself take care of this sort of business whenever possible, since this was what God had instructed her to do.

Em had missed the whole thing in being shut in her room for nearly two hours writing a poem inspired by the birthday party, so she heard about the boys' encounter, and Eleta's big surprise, during dinner.

Eleta was on the roof with Zapor and Folto, giving them an update as to what had happened. Folto was nearly beside herself in thinking that Kip might have been injured or killed, and she was very thankful that Eleta had decided not to go cave exploring. In a similar manner to Preston recommitting himself to training, the protectors resolved to keep closer watch on their charges.

Making a couple of small revisions to her poem after dinner, Em carefully copied the final version into her notebook.

### Saving Up Wishes

If we saved wishes from the shooting stars we see,  
We might change the great big world, rather splendidly.  
Surely, our birthdays could still be a lot of fun,  
Even if candle wishes, we saved every one.  
A coin in a fountain, an eyelash from the cheek,  
These wishes could add up, if saved week after week.  
A breath held through a tunnel, save that one as well.  
One from blown dandelion seeds would be just swell.  
The first flower of spring, the first star seen at night,  
A ladybug on the arm, a horse of snow white.  
In not having certain things we might dream about,  
It might be no problem to simply do without.  
Following this plan, we managed to save them all,  
So many wishes, rolled into a great big ball.  
With so many saved, we decided not to wait;  
To use the gathered wishes, we set a firm date.

As for what to wish for, just one thing came to mind,  
For all to know Jesus, so none get left behind.  
When the date arrived, it felt good to get it done,  
In saving all our wishes, we saved everyone.

As far as wishes, Em was again feeling guilty about wishing Violet ill, especially because she had to admit that Otto was completely happy and thriving having a new mom and dad. And with Violet and Dave both doing a good job, she also had to admit that it probably would be a good idea for all of them to officially have parents again.

However, in knowing her personality and shortcomings, especially her anger and sometimes the impulsiveness of her words and actions, Em was worried that she might mess things up for all of them. With a feeling of real fear coming over her, she knelt down to pray. *Dear Lord, whatever is meant to happen, whatever is Your will, please don't let me mess things. Please stop me if I start to mess things up for Otto, Kip, and myself. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.*

With still plenty of daylight left in the evening, Aunt Fiona and Aunt Eugenia gathered the kids to head out to the former Dwyer cottage in order to bring a few things back to the main house. Mr. Michaels had already taken several items to his cottage, mainly some cookware and a couple of chairs that he thought he might use.

"We're not sure about the building" Aunt Fiona said as they walked to the cottage. "We might eventually get it refurbished for someone to live in, but right now we can't take on a project like that. All of the plumbing and electrical will need to be redone. For now, I just want to get the rest of the salvageable things out."

They carried three boxes of collectibles back to Netherwind to store in the attic, but left six boxes containing items to be donated to the local thrift store because a truck from the store would be coming on Monday to pick them up, along with the furniture in the house, with the exception of one small table lamp that Aunt Fiona wanted for use in her bedroom, which she carried back with her to the house.

As far as the portraits of Edna and Lizzie, Mr. Michaels had already moved them to the hall in the mezzanine, hanging them across from one another so the girls could easily converse and keep one another company, which they would end up doing fairly regularly. The sisters would also enjoy talking to visitors to the hall on occasion.

## Chapter Six

### Three Doorways

After attending a church service in town on Sunday morning, and after lunch, Kip and Preston decided they wanted to explore other doors of the mezzanine. With Kip having told Preston about the garden with the peacock, the boys had decided they definitely wanted to know what might be behind the other doors.

“They’re probably all magical,” Preston said excitedly.

Though they invited her, Em decided to pass on exploring for now because she wanted to write and help out in the kitchen. The aunts were making Italian bread and pizza dough, and she hoped to learn a few things about cooking with yeast. “Just let me know what you find,” she said, “and I’ll probably go with you later.”

Remembering about needing to leave the doors cracked, the boys retrieved three rubber doorstops from a desk drawer in the study so they could actually prop doors open. The mezzanine had a hall table with a drawer in which they could store the doorstops for anyone to use when exploring the rooms.

They first peeked into the room containing the garden and peacock; but since they didn’t see the bird, and because they regularly spent time in pretty gardens, both at Doyle Mansion and at Netherwind, both boys decided they’d rather do something else.

Upon opening the door directly across the hall from the garden one, they were immediately greeted by a woodsy scene of a fairly good-sized clearing in a forest. Stepping inside to have a look around, they propped the door, which was tucked into the foliage of the tree fringe. Listening to birds chattering, they meandered across the clearing to a pond situated on the far side, just on the edge of the woods. As they watched, something resembling a raccoon snuck out from the trees to have a drink from the pond. Though exactly the shape and size of raccoons that Kip and Preston were familiar with, the creature was completely silver in color and had only the faintest markings of a mask.

While the boys felt comfortable in the serene setting, and they could see the start of a path on one side of the clearing leading into the forest, with nothing immediately exciting presenting itself, they decided to return to the hall.

They were very glad they had propped open the door to home because, from this side, it looked exactly like the forest, as though almost invisible in blending in with trees and other foliage. Indeed, they only found the door because they could see part of the outline of it, in the form of a small sliver of hallway wall that was visible when they looked from exactly the right angle. Aunt Fiona had said the doors couldn't be opened from the inside, and this was very apparent not only in their camouflage, but also in the fact that the door had no handle or knob. In further exploring of the mezzanine, they would discover this to be true of all of the doors they were able to enter. Also, if fully closed, the doors would completely vanish from the inside, not only from sight but also from touch, being designed this way so as not to interfere with the magical worlds in which these portals were situated, since it would hardly be fun for a deer or a peacock or a person to run into a hidden door.

Back in the hall, in opening the door immediately next to the one with the forest clearing, they discovered a vast watery world. Indeed, the doorway was perched on a rocky ledge overlooking a wide and fairly swift-running river. Across the river, waterfalls cascaded from several places along steep cliff walls. Downriver from their position, they viewed an immense sea, stretching as far as they could see. Inching forward a couple of feet, the boys were reluctant to step too far inside because the rocks of the ledge looked very wet and slippery from the mist overhanging the river. Just as they were thinking of stepping back into the hall, a teenage girl rowing a canoe-like boat passed by. In glancing their way, she saw Kip and Preston, and the doorway, and looked surprised. As she used her oars to slow the boat, Kip called to her, "What is this place?"

"Antica!" she called back. Struggling somewhat to hold her position, she was just starting to say, "Where..." when the boys got a little nervous and quickly backed up into the hall, giving her a brief wave as they shut the door.

From Antica's side, the door completely disappeared, leaving the girl to wonder if she had imagined the boys and the doorway as she continued to make her way downriver.

"I don't know why I got so nervous," Kip said, immediately regretting not talking more to the girl.

"Me neither," Preston answered. "We're probably supposed to meet people in these magical places."

Next, again peeking into the lush garden, the boys were delighted to find the peacock currently present. Entering, they were even more delighted to find him to be perfectly friendly. Climbing a tall ladder propped in a tree to reach fruit resembling apples—though larger, being more the size of cantaloupes—they fed him a treat while stroking his neck and back feathers. Closing his eyes and almost purring, the bird seemed to enjoy the petting nearly as much as the giant apples.

As the peacock strode away a short while later, the boys again returned to the hall, deciding to give the woodsy realm another try, mainly because it had felt so peaceful and serene.

The feeling they got after stepping inside the forest setting and propping the door reaffirmed that this was where they were meant to be, as though it was somehow a good fit for them. They hadn't gotten as good of a feeling from Antica, which was why they both had instinctively backed up. It might be right to go to the watery world some other time, but not right now.

As they wandered about the clearing, Kip and Preston both got the strong idea that something important was about to happen, and that they should be patient while waiting for whatever it was. Plucking a grass stem and placing it between his thumbs, Kip tried to make it whistle, but couldn't quite manage it. Preston had a little more luck, but the whistle came out rather short and blubbery.

"I can show you how to do that," a voice from behind them said.

Turning, Kip and Preston saw a man that looked to be in his early thirties just coming out of the forest and into the clearing.

The man was carrying a good-sized oblong pack on his back, the strap of which was fitted from shoulder to waist. Lifting the strap over his head, he lowered the pack to the ground as he said, "Hello, I'm Varjo."

As the boys each in turn gave their names, Varjo proceeded to show them the correct way to make a blade of grass whistle.

“Wow, you’re a good teacher,” Kip remarked, as he had learned very quickly and easily how to make a long whistle.

“That’s my job,” Varjo replied, “well, sort of. I’m more of a trainer than a teacher.”

“What kind of training?” Preston asked.

“Use of weapons,” Varjo answered. As both boys’ ears perked up, with a slightly sad and forlorn-sounding sigh, he added, “Unfortunately, I have no one to train right now.”

Based on the man’s downcast mood, Kip and Preston didn’t quite know how to respond. However, they wouldn’t need to yet because Varjo had something else to say. “I don’t suppose...well...I might as well ask because I sort of felt like I needed to come here today for some reason, possibly because I was supposed to meet you...by any chance, would either of you, or both, be interested in some training?”

Kip, literally thinking he might be dreaming, while looking sideways at Preston, asked in a loud whisper, “Are we in a dream world?”

Knowing that they were not dreaming, Preston responded to Varjo’s query. “We’d love some training. But we can’t pay you, or not much, just from our allowances.”

“I already get paid, whether I train or not,” the man responded. “Plus, this is what I am meant to do. The *Book of Wisdom* says that idleness is a sin, and I quote, ‘Slothfulness casts into a deep sleep, and an idle person will suffer hunger.’”

“We have a book that says exactly the same thing!” Kip said excitedly, remembering well their recent bible lesson.

Having looked up and memorized a couple of quotes on his own after the lesson, Preston recited Proverbs 15:19. “‘The way of a sluggard is overgrown with thorns, but the path of the upright is a level highway.’”

“That is in our book as well,” Varjo answered, smiling to find he had so much in common with the visitors.

“What is this place called?” Kip asked.

“Kivetel,” Varjo responded, as though it were a perfectly normal question. Indeed, many people visited Kivetel from other places, so this was a fairly common question.

As Varjo began unpacking weapons from his pack, the boys quickly realized that their training was going to be much different than what they might receive at home, mainly because the weapons looked very strange, at least, compared to those Kip and Preston were familiar with.

One of the first things unpacked was glinting and full of light, so much so that the boys at first thought it might be an oddly-shaped and powerful flashlight. However, upon seeing it more closely, they realized it was more like a mirror, about the size of a teacup saucer but triangular in shape with the corners slightly rounded, and thicker than a saucer at about an inch thick. The object was mirrored on both sides with a slight bowl-like curve to it, as a saucer might have, which made one side convex and the other concave. A second mirror weapon unpacked was nearly identical to the first, but was a bit larger. While definitely reflective, the shiny surfaces were not exactly like those of traditional looking glasses, being somewhat cloudy, to the point that a person’s reflection would appear slightly blurry and dull.

Varjo next unpacked what appeared to be several coils of colored rope, each approximately a half-inch thick. As he handed Kip and Preston each a coil, the boys were surprised to discover that the ropes felt very soft and velvety, and not at all like any utility ropes they were familiar with. The rope weapons evidently came in sets of three, containing one each of red, gold, and blue. The lengths varied, but seemed to range between fifteen and twenty feet, with the longer ones slightly thinner than the shorter ones.

Two daggers came out of the pack next, and were set aside with the mirrors and the extra ropes.

The final two objects that came out of the pack looked like small wooden flutes, about seven or eight inches long each. However, having a taper that made one end noticeably wider than the other, the instruments also resembled tiny clarinets. One was curved and the other straight, with the straight one being slightly smaller than the curved one.

While trying not to act too surprised about the array of objects, the boys were basically speechless in wonder because, at this point, they

couldn't quite imagine how these items could be used as weapons; except that they obviously were.

*So I'm guessing*, Preston's brain pondered, *that the people of Kivetel have somehow learned to use music, light, and color as weapons*. His assumptions would turn out to be perfectly correct.

"Let's start with the ropes," Varjo said, "so that there will be less chance of a beginner getting hurt."

While they couldn't quite see how the soft ropes could be much dangerous, Kip and Preston helped the man carry a fairly large fallen log from the forest out into the clearing.

Imagining that they might end up using the rope like a whip, or by throwing and tying like a cowboy might rope a calf, what actually happened when Varjo demonstrated was much different.

The closest Kip and Preston could come to describing it later to Em and the aunts was that the movements were similar to those of a rhythmic gymnast, if the gymnast were to combine the apparatuses of both ribbon and jumprope into one routine.

Indeed, very much like a rhythmic gymnast, anyone using a color rope would need to use the whole body; and the rope had to rest on the body periodically in order to be effective, almost as if it were drawing energy from the user, though they couldn't particularly feel any drain. Varjo explained that it was the various coiling and uncoiling motions that made the rope function in certain ways, along with warmth drawn from the body. Light was somehow also a component, along with darkness. When the sun was fully out, the ropes felt lighter in weight. When a cloud passed in front of the sun, the ropes felt heavier. Neither was deemed better, as Varjo explained things, because each had a purpose. The heavier rope enabled them to be more precise in their blows; the lighter allowed for more speed.

In his initial demonstration, using one of the gold ropes, with a few graceful moves, Varjo managed to cut several deep slices into the log with the rope that, in addition to producing power, also gave off sizzles and sparks as it swirled through the air. Changing to a red rope, he then moved to a wide and leafy shrub; and with a few precise motions (that almost resembled a solo ballet dance), the rope snaked out to bind the shrub, very snugly, to the point that the width was reduced to less than half of its formerly spread-out state.

Backing away from the shrub and releasing the rope with a couple of deft wrist and elbow motions, Varjo said, “All three colors of rope work for all purposes. But gold is better at cutting and disarming an enemy. Red is better at binding an opponent.” With this, the trainer made a swift and somewhat complex midriff and shoulder move that resulted in both boys being bound together.

Though held fast, the hold was fairly gentle; and while they were somewhat startled, Kip and Preston were not frightened because they somehow knew they could trust Varjo, who released them nearly as quickly as he had bound them.

“And while it might seem a bit odd compared to the other two,” Varjo went on, “the blue rope is more of a utility item, for climbing and lifting things; though it can be used as the others, as a weapon. Masters of ropes generally carry all three, and sometimes no other weapons of any kind. The colors can be of varying shades; you may have noticed that this red is a little darker than the other one. Ropes of other colors exist too—mainly orange, emerald, and purple—but are often outlawed or limited as to persons allowed access to them because they can be used as dangerous psychological weapons, ones that can bring on various illnesses and even death by working on the victim’s mind. Also, more than just rope weapons are fashioned from colors,” he added, “such as blankets and spears. They’re not common because ropes are easier to carry; however, one can occasionally come across them because they have different purposes. For example, a blanket weapon can be used either to smother or burn someone up. But the ropes are just more practical and easier to master than, say, clubs or spears or scarves.”

“Wow, this is just amazing,” said Kip, who had finally found his voice.

Preston agreed earnestly, nodding as Varjo continued. “The color weapons are somewhat mysterious. The various artists who make them don’t even know all of their secrets. You see, the makers gather most of the materials from nature, just as a potter might use various colored clays, and as a textile maker might use certain plants to dye threads and yarns. But the natural world is very unpredictable and mysterious, which is why the weapons can turn out to be this way as well. But nature is where a lot of the energy comes from. If you’ve ever held a

hand-made pot in your hands, you'll know what I mean when I talk about the energy of a piece. Even holding it without looking at it you can feel the energy. And the power does have something to do with the colors used; though, as I said, it's all somewhat of a mystery as to how the weapon artists do their work. It's similar for the music and light weapons, though they are more technically and mechanically crafted than the color weapons, for which more artistic techniques are applied."

"If you hold a handmade blanket, you can get that same feeling, like a piece of pottery," Kip said, in thinking about the lovely Native American blanket at the foot of his bed at Doyle Mansion, one he had picked out with his parents on a trip to a Navajo reservation when he was eight. "And you don't have to be looking at the colors to feel the energy. It's just there, like warm and comforting."

"In addition to colors and natural materials," Preston said, "I imagine the artists transfer some of their energy and good vibes into the objects they create."

"True," Varjo agreed. "But you still have to have good materials to work with. Only God can create something out of nothing."

The boys were starting to get the idea that, although many things about Kivetel might be different, God was probably the same here as in their world.

Picking up the straight flute-like weapon next, Varjo said, "These can be made of wood, metal, pottery, and even pond reeds or bamboo. And while they can be played like a grass stem, you don't have to bring it to your mouth to use the weapon. In fact, it's a good idea for a beginner not to bring it too close to the face, especially when directing the sound after it's captured."

Capturing sound in the instrument turned out to be a display just as graceful and acrobatic as the one Varjo had demonstrated with the ropes. With the flute first in one hand, then the other, held at first close to the body, then at a stretch, while spinning very fast and changing directions several times, he made a series of scooping motions, as though dipping water from a creek, before reaching high to scoop air from the sky as one might use a butterfly net. Within about twenty seconds, he had evidently captured enough breezes to make the instrument function.

While holding one hand over the end of the flute, and covering the mouth and finger holes with the other hand, he instructed the boys to stand farther back from the log before he released the energy from the instrument by uncovering the end and using a fingering motion on certain holes, as one might when playing a flute. The stream of high-pitched musical notes issuing from the flute seemed to serve as a stream of energy, which, when directed at the log, split the wood as a lumberjack might with an axe, though the split happened a little more slowly than it would have from an axe hit. Later, when telling Em and the aunts about this, the boys would end up describing the split of the log as a slightly fast version of slow motion.

Though somewhat muted, the musical sound from the flute felt very alive, and could be felt inside the body, almost like the feel of bass music vibrations, except that the flute was obviously much higher in pitch than any bass instruments.

Varjo had turned slightly to one side, in order to protect himself from a ricochet of the energy, which there definitely was, as evidenced by a *whooshing* sound and a temporary flattening of the grasses behind him in the clearing.

In order to use what remained of the stored musical energy, he made a cut in another section of log before handing the flute to Preston to examine. Kip was given the other flute to hold and look at as Varjo explained, “Higher notes equal cuts and stabs, with the highest and sharpest being the most precise, while lower pitches equate to more blunt forces like hammer hits or hard shoves.”

Knowing better than to try to use the weapons without instruction, after briefly looking the flutes over, and getting a feel for them in their hands, the boys handed the instruments back to their trainer.

In preparing to give a demonstration with one of the mirrors, Varjo said, “I don’t want you touching these just yet because the light weapons are more powerful than the others, and more dangerous. I’ll need to assess your skills first, in order to determine if they would be safe for you to use.”

Next, after instructing them to stand even farther back than they had when he used the flute, he checked the position of the sun before passing one hand over the surface of the mirror several times, as though polishing it. Then, after catching light with the weapon in a manner

similar to how he had caught breezes with the flute, while keeping the mirror angled toward the ground as he directed the energy, with a single move, Varjo blasted what remained of the log to pieces.

Kip and Preston could easily see that the mirror had been somewhat more difficult for their trainer to manipulate than either the flute or ropes.

Varjo next explained that the convex side was used for more precise hits, like stabs and slices, while the concave was for broader and blunter hits. “Like a huge hammer,” he said, this being what he had used to splinter the log.

“And like the lower notes on the flutes,” Kip correctly surmised of the concave side.

Nodding in confirmation, Varjo said, “And it’s actually called a tuz stone, though you can call it a mirror if you like. And this is a súlyo,” he added, indicating the curved musical weapon. “Same with the straight one, but larger versions are called súlyo horns. However, to simplify things and lessen confusion, we can call them all flutes during your training.”

This sounded good to Preston and Kip, who were already feeling a little overwhelmed by what they had seen and heard so far.

“Artists and craftsmen make the rope and music weapons,” Varjo went on, as he stowed the mirrors back into his pack. “And magicians make the light weapons. These particular ones are mid-size of the more common mirrors that are made. Of the less-common sizes, there are smaller mirrors that fit easily into pockets, and larger ones that are really too bulky to carry around, with even some being so large that they are difficult to move around.”

“Those are probably used like cannons,” Preston remarked.

While Varjo wasn’t familiar with the term, cannons, he could pretty well guess what Preston was referring to.

“Now, please show me a little of what you can already do,” Varjo requested, moving back in order to give them some room.

Though they felt a little self-conscious, and slightly inadequate because of what they had seen so far of their trainer’s skills, the boys proceeded to demonstrate a few karate, judo, and aikido moves, while explaining that they were currently focusing on aikido in their classes at home.

They needn't have felt self-conscious or inadequate because Varjo was used to working with beginners. In order to put his new students at ease, he expressed interest in the various techniques and styles, while also praising their skills.

Indicating the daggers, the boys next told him they hadn't trained with any daggers, but had used swords, after which, they showed him a few sword moves using sticks found in the fringe of the woods.

They also explained archery to him, in detail because he seemed rather confused at their initial description.

"Oh, we have that here too," he eventually said in realization from the details, "but it's called sokor. The device you describe as a bow is a nyyl, and the projectile placed into the nyyl is an orra."

"That's interesting," Kip replied.

"As far as swords, daggers, and hand-to-hand moves," Varjo told them, "we do some of that in Kivetel. But we more focus on the three types of weapons I showed you because light, color, and wind are so readily available. We can produce, use, and even repair weapons fairly easily based on what's abundant in nature. If a gold rope becomes damaged or loses effectiveness, it can often be fixed by connecting it with something gold in color, such as a pile of harvest leaves. For a blue rope, we might toss it high into the sky several times to pick up celestial colors. Wind, of course, is always available for use in the flutes. And with the instruments themselves being made of natural materials, they can be easily repaired using simply what we find surrounding us. With the mirrors, energy can be stored in them for use even at night. Plus, some are specially designed to pick up starlight and moonlight. Also, especially in battle, it's often better not to have to carry heavy items like swords, or awkward weapons such as a nyyl."

With a few explanations out of the way, Varjo began their training with drills to practice moves they would need to learn before working with the actual weapons.

While they didn't say anything, the trainees felt like they were learning a form of martial arts that was more like dancing than fighting; however, this was fine with them as they both recognized that what they were learning would not only make them more graceful, but also help with coordination, speed, and strength.

Though neither pupil was wearing a watch, after spending what they judged to be well over three hours total in Kivetel, Kip and Preston suddenly realized that those at home might be getting worried about their long absence.

As the boys quickly helped to clean up the area by tossing bits of the splintered log into the woods so that the pieces could decompose on the forest floor, which would happen more quickly than if they were left in the clearing, Preston told Varjo, “We’d like to come back tomorrow, if that’s okay.”

“That would be fine,” the trainer replied.

“Could we bring my sister, if she wants to come?” Kip asked.

“Yes, I’d be happy to train her too,” Varjo answered, as he gathered his pack and started to head off through approximately the same spot in the woods from which he had arrived. “Actually, girls are generally better at ropes than boys,” he threw over his shoulder as he departed.

Glancing back a couple of seconds later, Varjo just glimpsed the boys disappearing through the door to the mezzanine hall, after which, the door vanished instantly as they closed it. Since doorways to other realms weren’t particularly uncommon in Kivetel, he didn’t think much about it as he strode toward his home situated about a ten-minute walk from the clearing.

Back at Netherwind, finding the aunts and Em in the kitchen, Kip and Preston were shocked to discover that almost no time had passed while they were gone.

“You just barely went upstairs like fifteen minutes ago,” Em said to the nearly speechless boys. “We just barely added the yeast to the pizza dough and started kneading.”

Smiling knowingly, Aunt Fiona said, “I’m guessing you just had an adventure in another land.”

“Kivetel,” Kip answered.

Nodding, Aunt Fiona replied, “I’ve been there, though it’s been years now. They have black unicorns, instead of white ones.”

“Actually, unicorns in our world are golden, not white,” Em said, having discussed unicorns with Vini a couple of times.

Aunt Eugenia was nodding. “This is true.”

“Oh, that’s right,” Aunt Fiona said. “I seem to remember reading somewhere that real unicorns are not much like ones in storybooks.

I've just never seen one, so I don't have much to go on. I never saw one in Kivetel either, but a little boy named Varjo told me about the black ones. I don't think they were actually called unicorns there; but what he described to me sounded a lot like what we think of as a unicorn, a creature with a single horn, resembling a horse with possibly lion-like features."

"Varjo is our trainer!" Preston excitedly announced.

Kip was nodding as he said, "He's in his thirties, and has kind of light brown hair."

The boys then launched into the rather confusing story of everything that had happened to them while they were gone, the story being confusing because it was somewhat difficult for them to describe the weapons to the others.

At a pause in the story, because they basically had to stop at one point to catch their breath, Aunt Fiona said, "It's been so many years now that I met Varjo, since I was a teenager. Maybe the boy I met was the father or grandfather of your trainer."

"Or," Aunt Eugenia interjected, "perhaps people age differently there than they do here."

"That's much more likely," Aunt Fiona had to admit.

The aunts had no problem with Kip and Preston returning for more training, as they couldn't imagine it would be any more dangerous than the activities they normally engaged in.

With the kitchen still bustling with bread making, after grabbing a handful of pretzels and an apple each, in order to get out from underfoot, the boys headed to the treehouse for a while.

On the walk there, Kip said, "How funny that we learned something in Kivetel that Aunt Fiona and Aunt Eugenia were stressing to us at bible study, about not being idle."

"It's funnier to be learning to dance," Preston joked, "except that it doesn't really feel funny when we're doing it."

Kip had to agree. "It feels right actually, like it's something we need to learn."

"Yes," Preston said, "but we probably don't need to tell Em that what we're doing is like dancing."

"She wouldn't make fun," Kip said. "She's not like that."

"I know, but still..." Preston said.

“...we should keep it under wraps for now,” Kip stated, basically finishing Preston’s thought.

With the pizza dough needing to rise for a couple of hours, and the bread dough stored in the refrigerator because it needed to rise overnight, Em decided to go jogging, after which, she helped Mrs. Boyle reorganize a linen closet.

When done with the closet, Em remembered something in one of the staircase drawers that she wanted to look at more closely, this being the small decorative red box that Lizzie had said was not one of the items she had placed there. In being unable to open the box, Em took it to the parlor where the aunts were playing cards.

Aunt Fiona, right away, recognized what it was, a Chinese puzzle box, though she had never seen this one before. “No, it’s not mine,” she said.

Aunt Eugenia then explained what the box was for. “People put their treasures inside, like coins or jewels. Each box has hidden compartments, usually two.”

She also knew how to open the puzzle box, though it took her nearly twenty minutes to do so because, as she explained, “The owner of the box is usually the only one who knows the secret as to how to open it because each box is made individually, although people taking their time can usually figure out which places on the box to press and in what sequence so that the little hidden compartments will open.”

With her diligence, a small drawer in one end of the box eventually did pop open. Inside was a key that looked like a regular house key, very like the one Em carried that fit the locks of the front and back doors at Doyle Mansion.

Showing Em a couple of times how to again open the little drawer, Aunt Eugenia said, “I’ll leave you to figure out how to access the other compartment, if there is one.” In truth, while the puzzle box was interesting, the task to open the first compartment had been somewhat tiresome, and not at all how Aunt Eugenia wanted to spend any more of her afternoon.

Em herself would end up waiting to puzzle over opening the second compartment in the box, as she too felt like she had better things to do with her time, though she did find herself over the next few days fairly frequently wondering what the key might unlock.

After dinner, they all gathered for storytelling, including Heike and Pizzo who had finished exploring for the day and were now munching on a big bowl of popcorn and peanuts. The puzzle box had reminded Aunt Eugenia of something she was excited to tell them about from her youth, which was another genie tale.

“This was around Christmastime, and after I met the first genie,” she began. “While Millefiori was a flower genie, Shumi was a game genie, and he loved games and puzzles of all kinds. When I met him during Christmas break, he was engaged in playing a game of chess with a very interesting and unique chess set that was basically a fairytale chess set. The pieces of the set were all fairytale characters, and the set was actually rather large, with the game pieces being much larger than the tiny genie; but not as large as a person, more like a foot or two high each. One of the kings was a wood troll, and the other was a giant. Of the two queens, one was a nymph and the other a mermaid. The rooks ended up being an enchanted rowan tree and a magical pomegranate bush. A winged horse and a mystical azure ram were the knights. And, let’s see, that just leaves the bishops, which were a sorcerer and an oracle. Oh, and I think all of the pawns were enchanted frogs and rabbits. And instead of being black and white, the chess set was all multicolored, though on one side of the board the figures were a little darker than the other side, to mimic a traditional chess set. But as it turns out, all of the game pieces were real creatures that had been bewitched and imprisoned. They were all frozen in place, unable to move themselves around.”

With everyone fully held by her story, Aunt Eugenia went on. “Shumi was playing against a little implike creature, a ballybog I’m pretty sure, who was all muddy looking and nasty and shapeshifting and mischievous. This one was devious too, and just downright mean. I think his name was Nudor. For years he had delighted in capturing other creatures, especially magical and fairytale creatures. Using his magic, Nudor managed to shrink them down to imprison them in a kind of frozen state, and he used some of his prisoners to make himself the chess set. He had others frozen too, like a huge collection of captured beings, and they were kept in a cavern. When Shumi first discovered this, by coming across the chess set in the forest near the ballybog’s home, he tried to use his own magic to release the creatures.

Unfortunately, it didn't work. But he was very clever, and challenged Nudor to a game of chess. If Shumi won, Nudor would release all of the prisoners. If Shumi lost, he would become part of the collection. Well, the ballybog had never managed to capture a genie, so he basically couldn't resist the opportunity to get his hands on one, and he accepted the challenge."

Heike and Pizzo were both basically on the edge of their seats by this point in the story; and while they definitely wanted to know what happened next, they were halfway covering their ears in fear of hearing of Shumi losing the game and becoming trapped like the other poor creatures.

"They each played one turn every day," Aunt Eugenia continued, "so Shumi had some time to strategize. I remember I lent him a book my uncle had given me on how to play chess, and we talked about some of the moves in the book. Well, to make a long story short, he won. And the ballybog had to honor his wager because he was afraid of what Shumi might do to him otherwise with his powerful little genie stick. Oh, I forgot to tell you about genie sticks," she added. "They're the magic wands the genies use; and they look just like sewing pins, except that they are all different colors. I imagine they are actually made from regular pins because genies love pins because they are very useful. Actually, genies like all kinds of useful things."

All of the story listeners were greatly relieved that Shumi had won the game, especially Pizzo and Heike, who were smiling broadly as they continued to munch popcorn and peanuts. Being so delighted, Pizzo ended up throwing peanuts at Em and Preston, mainly because he hadn't thrown anything at them lately, and he didn't want them to feel left out.

"And as far as the Genie Diaries," Aunt Eugenia continued, "I think I forgot to tell you that they contained stories in different handwritings, which meant the little books were shared by the genies. One even had empty pages, as though waiting for more of their adventures to be recorded; and this was how I found out that they didn't even have to be present to write in the diaries. I had put the ones I found in my jewelry box and when I was putting away a bracelet one day, I saw the book with the empty pages open inside the jewelry box; and a tiny quill was hovering over it, just scribbling away, all on its own."

“So they could magically write in the books from a distance?” Em said. “That’s amazing.”

“They have very powerful magic,” Aunt Eugenia said nodding.

As far as Em going with the boys to Kivetel, she told them, “Not right now, maybe later.” In truth, she had plenty to keep her busy; plus, she wanted to hang out with Weatherly some, so she just wasn’t all that interested. Even though she did think the weapons Preston and Kip described sounded interesting, she could always come to one of their practice sessions later to see them. Right now, she was more interested in weeding, hitting tennis balls, and helping Ms. Small in the kitchen.

Early the next morning, heading to the mezzanine, in thinking about Em preferring to weed and bake bread, Kip told Preston, “It’s probably a good idea for someone to stay behind anyway, in case the door ever gets shut accidentally while we’re inside.”

Arriving in Kivetel, they discovered that several logs had been dragged into various places of the clearing. Varjo soon joined them, coming through the trees as he had before. However, the boys were in for something of a surprise in discovering that roughly three weeks had passed in Kivetel since they had left the day before.

“You seemed so keen on the training,” Varjo told them, “I felt sure you would come back. So I came every day since you left, and I was worried that something had happened to you.”

After a few moments of surprised silence, Kip scrambled to say, “It hasn’t even been a full day since we left.”

Varjo was only slightly surprised. “I should have known time would pass differently here than at your home. Other visitors to Kivetel have said that time is different where they are from.”

“We should have known too,” Kip said.

“Exactly,” Preston agreed. “When we got back yesterday, only a quarter of an hour or so had passed. So of course, overnight at home, a lot of time passed here.”

“I think you might have met my Aunt Fiona,” Kip next ventured to say. “Well, she’s actually my great-aunt. But she said she met you, unless it was maybe your father or grandfather.”

Only briefly looking confused, as he tried to recall, Varjo answered, “I remember when I was very young, there was a peach and biluu vine orchard here. I used to come and pick peaches and biluus, and I did

meet a girl named Fiona who was a few years older than I was at the time.”

“So even though time passes more quickly here than where we’re from,” Preston said, “people here must age more slowly because Aunt Fiona is in her seventies.”

“That must be correct,” Varjo surmised, “because, as far as how we measure our growth and aging years, I just turned thirty-eight last month. And none of my ancestors was named Varjo. Please tell your great-aunt hello for me.”

“Will do,” Kip replied.

“But as far as the days you come for training,” Varjo said, “we’ll have to work out a signal of some sort.” After thinking for a few moments, he added, “I think I’ll leave a message kite here. You can send it to me, then just wait for me, and I’ll come as quickly as I can, probably most days fairly quickly. I did manage to get one other pupil since I spoke to you last. If I’m training her, I can likely still come fairly quickly because she comes to my home for her lessons. She’s sister to a boy I was meant to be training, but he’s fallen ill and can’t train.”

“We don’t know what a message kite is,” Preston said, looking questioningly at Kip, who also shook his head, having never heard of one either.

“Our magicians make them,” Varjo answered. “The kite will find me. Let’s see, do you have things like carrier pigeons in your world?” With the boys nodding, he added, “The kite works like that, except it’s not a live creature. But it can carry a message. In this case, the kite itself will be the message—that you have arrived and are waiting for me. I’ll get you started with a few drills; then I’ll go home to get the kite, so you’ll know what it looks like.”

Not quite an hour later, the boys were smiling because the kite Varjo brought looked very much like toy kites they were familiar with from home, diamond in shape, with a long tail and sporting bow-like ribbons, though it was smaller than most kites, approximately the size of a regular sheet of notebook paper. It also didn’t have a string attached, since it evidently flew on its own, without needing holding or tethering.

“I’ll leave this tied by its tail to a tree limb, so you can find it easily,” Varjo told them. “Simply untie it and toss it into the air and it will find me.”

On a break, Kip remembered to tell Varjo that Em had decided not to come for now.

“What a pity,” Varjo answered. “As I mentioned, girls are better at ropes than boys and I was looking forward to training her.”

During the week, Kip and Preston settled into a stringent regimen of training fairly quickly, coming early and staying in Kivetel full days, bringing sack lunches so they wouldn’t have to come home, or rely on their trainer to feed them, which they felt was especially important because Varjo insisted he wanted no pay at all for the training he was providing.

Varjo also brought his lunch most days; and his other pupil often joined them during her scheduled sessions, this being ideal because it was beneficial for all three students to occasionally have different training partners. Linna was about the same age as the boys; and as Varjo had described, she very rapidly surpassed Preston and Kip in rope skills.

Upon returning to the manor each day, since they were very tired and because so little time had passed at home, the boys generally took a nap, which helped to fortify them for passing basically another full day at home, during which they often practiced archery or fencing skills. Since they were keeping so busy, they never even thought about exploring other doors on the mezzanine, an activity which would definitely keep, since a person could only handle so much excitement and busyness at one time. While they were often sore, both felt they were making so much progress that the little physical aches and pains were well worth it.

They also never thought about bringing weapons home for training. For one thing, they were getting quite enough practice in Kivetel. Also, Varjo wasn’t sure how the weapons might perform in another realm and was worried something might go wrong, so he had suggested that this would not be a good idea.

The boys wholeheartedly agreed. “Prudence is a virtue where we’re from,” Kip said.

“It is here too,” Varjo answered.

At one point, Preston invited Varjo to visit their home, but he declined, saying, “We’re warned from a very young age, mainly by our tutors and parents, not to enter doorways to other places.”

Because the boys had worked so hard all week, they took Saturday off to mainly hang out in the treehouse.

Em had had a busy week too, working in the garden, jogging, writing poetry, hitting tennis balls, baking, and going twice with Weatherly to swim at the community pool in town.

“Vini will be happy about the pool nearby when she comes next week,” Em told Weatherly, “so she can keep up with her swimming skills for her water polo team.”

“I’m looking forward to meeting her,” Weatherly replied.

Piszo and Heike had spent most of their week exploring and visiting with various local critters, both regular and magical. They also spent some time retrieving tennis balls for Em when she was practicing her serve, and were very good at dodging, so she didn’t need to worry about accidentally hitting them. As it turns out, Eleta and Zapor liked to help retrieve balls too, along with giving her pointers.

As far as all of the physical activities, everyone took Sunday off, enjoying a church service in the morning, then a leisurely afternoon of lunch, reading, prayer, and strolling through the gardens at home.

Monday morning started another busy week of training for Kip and Preston, while Em went jogging and helped Mrs. Boyle with some of the cleaning, before settling in to write and read the bible in the afternoon.

On Monday evening, Em spent some time trying to open the second compartment of the puzzle box. She was pretty sure there was another compartment because the tiny drawer only seemed to take up a little less than half of the inside of the box. Being unsuccessful after nearly an hour of trying, she gave up and placed the box into her sock drawer.

*Out of sight, out of mind*, she thought, in relief at having a break from the struggle. While she did admire how cleverly the little box was designed, it was frustrating not to be able to open it. Of course, it wasn’t actually *her* box, so she did think it possible that she wasn’t meant to open it.

Even with the box out of sight, as she was reading a short while later, she still found it on her mind, not necessarily about opening the

second compartment, but more about the key, which she had decided to carry in her pocket for a bit, as she tried to figure out what it might unlock. In comparing it to her Aunt Fiona's house keys, it hadn't matched up. Mr. Michaels had shown her his cottage key as well, and it wasn't a match. Nor could it have belonged to Dwyer cottage because Em had noticed that the lock on the front door was one that took a skeleton key. Having always had a good memory for details like this, she didn't need to double check. And at this point, she didn't know what she might try next. The key was certainly a puzzle, and perhaps even more of one than how to access the second hidden compartment in the box.

## Chapter Seven

### Messages, Dreams, and Visions

That same Monday evening, Vini was starting to pack for the trip to Netherwind with Charlie and Ben; they would be leaving Thursday morning. Charlie would be driving them because, while Ben had his driver's license, he didn't yet have a car. Slated to take Driver's Ed in the fall, Vini didn't have her license yet; and she wasn't planning to get a car until her college years, or possibly after, depending on certain factors such as which college she decided to go to and where she might be working at the time.

The two weeks at camp had been both uneventful and eventful. It had been uneventful in that work in the hippotherapy program had gone smoothly, as had many of her other usual camp activities such as swimming, hanging out with Charlie in the kitchens, a few crafts, games, and two fishing excursions. The time at Camp Burberry Wiffle was eventful in that she had never had so many dreams and messages from God all within such a short amount of time. Also, her automatic writing had really picked up, which seemed odd to her because, only a few months before, Vini never would have imagined that she could even have such a gift. In her mind, she had started calling it auto-writing, for short. From both the auto-writing and her dreams, she had gotten so much information that she hardly knew what to do with it all. She was still engaged in her research as well, but had lately been getting much more information directly from God, rather than from books. While this was awe-inspiring, and Vini felt very grateful, she also felt a little intimidated, and slightly overwhelmed, with everything God was telling her and showing her.

At Doyle Mansion on Tuesday morning, Vini helped Violet get caught up with everything in preparation for Vini being gone for the next five weeks. Dave would be helping with some of the cleaning, though he was going to be busy too since both Sam and Ben would be out of the picture for the next few weeks. Fortunately, Mr. Corrigan—

the former gardener of the estate, back from a few of his world travels—was planning to help out while the twins were gone. Sam had said he might come once in a while; but because he was lifeguarding six days a week, and spending his free time with his girlfriend, he was reluctant to.

Packing a few more things on Tuesday evening, Vini noticed that the light streaming through her bedroom window and hitting her crystal prism was really bringing the walls of her room to life, with swirling and dancing spots of colors in various shapes and sizes. Sitting down on her bed to enjoy the display, she soon recognized a message from God in the light patterns, first, in the shape of a peacock with his tail fully raised and spread. As she continued to watch, seven spheres rose from the tail of the bird, each representing one of the seven colors of a rainbow.

She had already gotten a similar message while at camp in a dream, so this was reinforcement. Of course, peacocks and rainbows were nothing new to her, having been keys to helping her find dragons; but the seven spheres were something different. In her camp dream, the same talking peacock that often appeared in her dreams told her to find the spheres. Since the bird hadn't told her to cancel her trip, Vini felt sure she was meant to engage in this quest while at Netherwind. Actually, with the dream indicating that the spheres were in multiple locations, this likely meant several quests, which Tulko would, of course, be happy to take her on, because he was always willing and eager to take Vini on important errands, especially since he knew God was leading her.

With the sun lowering, and the prism light-show on the walls ending for the day, Vini finished packing. She made sure to pack the thimble that could correctly measure dragon tears for healing draughts. She was also taking her rose-colored glasses and her pin-on watch. Though she had yet to discover what was magical about the watch, in feeling that it would definitely be important one day, possibly on a quest, she wanted to have it easily accessible. All of these items fit easily into a small belt pack she had started wearing when out on jaunts with Tulko.

At the same time Vini was packing her magical items, Ben was packing something special too, namely, the single-blade pocketknife that had come out of the magic pillowcase, which was what his brain

had started calling it, being unaware that the pillowcase was actually a bagical.

He had already figured out three things that the magic pocketknife could do, the first being that it could change sizes. He had one day at work needed to cut a small branch. Not having pruners handy, he tried the pocketknife, which ended up being too small but which grew in his hand to a larger size as he sawed at the branch with it. This had quite startled him, though he was actually more delighted than startled. Next trying it on a much larger branch, the knife grew to almost the size of a machete, and became serrated to make the job easier. As soon as he finished cutting the branch, the knife shrunk back down to its original size again. He had been afraid to approach a large log in worry that the knife might actually become too large to lift.

The knife could also hide. Sam had wanted to borrow it on a particular morning to cut a price tag from a new t-shirt, and Ben had told him, "It's on my desk."

"It's not there," Sam said, coming out of his brother's room.

Peeking into the doorway from the hall, Ben said, "I can see it, on my desk. It's right there."

However, Sam definitely could not see it. Thinking his brother was pranking him, in somewhat of an annoyed tone, Sam said, "We're getting too old for these kinds of jokes—that's like six-year-old stuff."

In needing to leave for work, Sam decided the issue of the knife wasn't worth pursuing further, so he simply went to the kitchen to use scissors to cut the tag from his shirt.

In his room after Sam left, Ben said to the knife, "So you can hide if you want to. Good for you." The knife obviously hadn't been invisible, since he could see it from the doorway; but it could somehow hide from certain people, which, in Ben's opinion, was a pretty nifty trick.

The knife could also be used like a key to open just about any lock (the exceptions probably being magical locks). Ben had discovered this when accidentally locking himself out of the house one day. On a whim, he had tried his knife in the door, thinking that since the blade was thin and sharp, it might be able to turn the lock. The blade had slipped in as though it were a key, evidently molding itself perfectly to the lock, which then turned quite easily. Ben had then tried it in the lock on the top drawer of his desk, and it fit there too. It also unlocked

the padlock on the tool shed in the back yard. *How fantastic!* However, he quickly realized how dangerous a tool such as this could be in the wrong hands. People might be tempted to break into other people's houses, or rob stores. Reasoning that the knife had come into his possession because God felt he could be trusted, Ben resolved to be very careful with the use of this truly special gift.

Ben had gotten a message of his own, indicating that he needed to take the knife with him on his trip because it would somehow end up being important; but he definitely needed to leave the pillowcase, and keep it secret, for now. Like Vini, he had been hearing from God a lot lately, particularly during and after praying, but more in the form of ideas placed into his brain, rather than how she often got her messages. In hearing her talk about how God was speaking to her—through clouds, tapestries, clocks, dreams, gargoyles, and other such things—and in pondering this, Ben felt that God might be taking things easy with him, in knowing that he might be scared by the more overtly-supernatural things.

Some people were simply more easily spooked than others, even by dreams, which could often haunt a person for long periods of time after having them. And perhaps this was why Jelzey was more low-key than other protectors, though Ben knew she often kept to smaller sizes more for his safety than for anything else. However, even as a flaming-bright creature, she wasn't as flashy as the gryphons or Tulko; it simply wasn't in her personality to be such. For as many magical things as he had encountered in the past couple of years, Ben still had trouble getting used to things like the sudden appearances of thunderbirds and wind horses, or having things thrown at him by Pizzo. In heading to Netherwind, he certainly wasn't going to be getting away from any of that. Even aside from the presence of the protectors and puck trolls, from what he had been hearing, the manor had at least as many magical goings on as Doyle Mansion, and possibly more. So he would simply have to try to get used to gargoyles coming to life and spirits flitting about the halls.

Charlie was packing on Tuesday evening as well. While stuffing t-shirts and jeans into a duffel bag, she pondered several visions she had had at camp. With regard to seeing future events in reflective surfaces, she was starting to figure a few things out, which was making the gift

much easier to live with. While some of the visions were troubling, she was at least starting to understand what she was supposed to do with the information she was receiving. In some cases, the visions were a guide to lead her in the right direction, such as deciding to take the trip to Netherwind, which was definitely meant to be. Other times, they were meant to act as a warning, to help her or someone else avoid danger, or sometimes to avoid making mistakes. One of her recent visions was simply practical information pertaining to the future. As she had been staring into the side of a large stainless steel soup pot, God had shown her that Lyydu, like all thunderbirds, had the power to make it rain, which was going to be incredibly useful in the future during a prolonged period of drought. The rain, of course, would allow not only for water to drink, but also for the growing of food and other vegetation so that humans and many other creatures could survive.

When her visions were repeated, which happened regularly, they often included more detail with each repetition. A repeat vision in her bedroom mirror of a unicorn imprisoned somewhere and starving was a good example of this. Again, as in the previous vision, there was hope in the situation. And she felt almost as though the hope was leading her, as the scene suddenly shifted to a place not too far from the trapped unicorn, where she saw dragons, of all different colors. At that point, the vision ended rather quickly. The dragons were something new; they certainly hadn't been in her previous vision involving the trapped unicorn.

In thinking over some of the details after, while what she had seen in the mirror was clear, the images had since turned somewhat fuzzy in her brain. She definitely remembered both land and water, but more like a sea than a river or lake, as though the unicorn might have been trapped on an island; if not an island, then a coastal place for sure. And she never, never could have imagined so many dragons in one place, not in a movie, not in a dream—hundreds of them. *But what were they doing there, and what was that place?*

In thinking about what the purpose of this vision might end up being, she could only imagine that having the knowledge would eventually lead her, or perhaps Vini, to the trapped unicorn and to the massive herd of dragons. While the image of the unicorn in distress wasn't pleasant, Charlie actually wanted this vision to be repeated

again, in the hopes of learning more details, such as when this event might be likely to happen. *If only a calendar could be present in the next one, or some other kind of time indicator*, she thought.

In a particular vision the previous winter, she had been able to tell that it was springtime when flash flooding was due to hit their area, which was how she and Lyydu had been able to save a man, who had been trying to drive through a low-water crossing, from drowning. The man had managed to climb out of the window of his car and onto its roof, but had been swept from the car roof shortly after. Charlie hadn't told anyone about the vision. But when it started to rain heavily in the spring, in carefully watching the news reports of specific creeks and crossings going under water, she was able to tell when she and Lyydu should act. She hadn't told anyone about the save either. The man himself thought an angel had saved him, for as fast as the event had happened and as scared as he was at the time. He simply remembered something with great wings scooping him up out of the water and setting him down about three seconds later on dry land.

As far as the trapped unicorn, while knowing a specific season might not be helpful, if she could perhaps see what the buildings of that time look like, or the clothes, she might be able to tell how far into the future she was seeing. Except that there were no buildings or people as yet in the vision; so for now, she would simply have to exercise patience. While waiting on God's timing was often difficult, it was, of course, necessary.

Boomer was going to the manor too, so Charlie was packing for him as well in the form of a few toys, his green pillow bed from the living room (the red one in her bedroom would be staying), a large tub of dog food, and his extra set of food and water bowls. Smiling, she thought how happy Pizzo would be to see the poodle because the two had become such good friends. Boomer seemed to know they were getting ready for a trip because he brought Charlie one of his favorite toys to pack into the bag.

On Tuesday night, Vini had something of a repeat dream, in that she was once more visiting the Clock of the Universe, which was again situated just down the street from her house. This time, an indigo-colored dragon (instead of a plum-purple one as in her previous dream) showed up to make some sort of adjustment to the springs and gears of

the clock. The talking peacock was nearby directing the dragon's activities, much like a choir conductor waving a pointer. Actually, it was exactly like that because the bird even had a pointer. The peacock smiled at Vini, who was sitting on a bench in front of the clock, as he flourished the pointer with gusto. The dragon shortly finished his work, shrinking back down to become a burnished dove, dark blue in color, after which, he flew off. Somehow, Vini knew he was heading to a nearby cave in order to tuck in and rest. While the dream was interesting, she couldn't particularly make anything of it at this time, so, getting up early in the morning, she simply recorded a few notes in her journal in order to remember the details later, if needed.

Since she was up early, Vini had some time before getting ready for work, which she spent mostly pondering. However, her mind was not particularly on the clock dream, but more on the spheres. Just before getting the first inkling of this new quest, she had been praying to God, to ask Him, *What's next, after unicorns and dragons?* So this was the answer; she was sure. Find the seven spheres. Having been so busy lately, she hadn't had a chance to do any research on the subject yet. On a whim, since she had her journal out already, Vini decided to try auto-writing; and she smiled broadly as she wrote because her gift was working perfectly.

"The seven spheres will be needed in the future, in battling great evil as we draw closer to the Endtimes. Each sphere has a different function. They are actually keys that unlock certain things."

*The words come so much more easily when I'm not distracted,* Vini thought, having noticed this at camp too. When her mind was occupied, or when there was a lot of noise, the auto-writing didn't flow. And while she missed Preston, she was glad to have her little brother out of the house for a bit because he was often loud, though she had recently come to realize that at least one reason he was loud, his words anyway, was because he didn't feel people really listened to what he had to say. With this in mind, Vini was trying to get better about actually listening to him. *We all need to be heard,* she thought.

However, a dog suddenly barking next door was certainly a distraction, enough so that her hand wrote nothing else in the journal. So this was the end of the auto-writing, at least for the time being.

Although nothing else had come to her, with her powers of discernment, she could tell that what she had written so far about the spheres was true. *How exciting*, she thought. *I wonder what the keys unlock*. Vini was a big fan of keys, especially mysterious ones, having previously used one to find the huge library hidden under Doyle Mansion, and another to unlock the box containing the zippered bible, which had led her to unearthing some of the secrets surrounding unicorns.

Vini was startled out of her thoughts by the realization that she needed to get ready for work and get going.

The sun was just coming up as she began her walk down Paloma Drive. Since Dave and Violet always rose early, they never minded if she came to work early, which she often did in order to get a lot done before breakfast even. This allowed her to fit in a lot of research time while at the mansion.

As she did laundry in the basement, Vini pondered a couple of confusing dreams from camp, having to do with musical instruments, art, and mirrors being used as weapons. She had first gotten the idea about colors and mirrors being used in this way from reading Anei's journal, and in talking to him. Then she began having dreams, which she at first thought were just fanciful, mainly because of the content, as it was hard to think that strings of colors reaching out from paintings, to form ropes that could bind and lash, could be real. The same was true of music leaping out of lutes and horns to crush enemies in her dreams, or pocket mirrors being wielded like daggers.

However, Vini knew how useful mirrors could be, especially in thinking of how they were often added to survival kits such as those carried by hikers. If a hiker ever became injured or lost, a mirror could be used to signal to searchers. Of course, light would have to be present so that the mirror would have something to catch. But a mirror could even catch moonlight and starlight. Vini smiled in remembering a story her grandfather once told her, about how he used tiny pieces of mirror to catch raccoons because they were attracted to the shininess of the

mirrors. The raccoon pelts were very valuable, and this was the only way he had at the time of earning money.

So there were real components to what she was dreaming. She also knew it was important not to discount the impossible, because nothing was too hard for God. After all, the bible was full of impossibilities. Some scholars speculate that it was sound that had caused the walls of Jericho to fall. And Jehoshaphat, when threatened by foreign armies, had commanded his people to sing, instead of fight. Trusting in God and praising Him had been exactly what was needed to save them.

Having only brought a limited number of books with her to camp, Vini hadn't found much on mythical or magical weapons made from mirrors, art, or musical instruments. She did have several pages of auto-writing notes on the subject, done at camp during some of her less-distracted times; except that she had trouble making anything out of what she had written because it was mostly technical stuff about properties of light and mirrors, and music being based on math. Vini had never been great with numbers, her brother being better at both math and science than she. Her notes also included a lot of details as to how art was very emotional, and how certain colors could evoke particular emotions. Art could also be both powerful and subtle at the same time, and very subjective, with the mixing of colors being truly an art form in and of itself. Sighing, Vini thought, *This is Louetta's domain, not mine.*

*Are the weapons another quest on top of the one for the spheres?* she wondered. *Or are they somehow related to the spheres?*

In thinking about everything together, it all seemed way too mixed up, which was making her feel overwhelmed. *The weapons must be something separate*, she decided, and she immediately got the feeling that this was correct.

She definitely had enough information on the art, music, and mirror weapons to do some research, or as a starting point for more auto-writing later. For now, she needed to focus on the spheres, and trust in God that things relating to the weapons would become clearer as she went along. She could feel God leading her in all of this, as He had with finding unicorns and dragons. She also felt that He was leading her to Netherwind; and she was sure that the trip would prove

enlightening somehow, possibly in ways relating to more than just the seven spheres.

After finishing folding a load of sheets and towels from the dryer, Vini headed to the downstairs library to pick out a box-load of books to take with her on the trip. Though Netherwind had two libraries, she knew they were not as large as those at the mansion, and she wanted to make sure she had enough materials for her research.

A short while later, when Violet joined Vini in the library, the box had become two boxes.

“I’ll help you carry these upstairs later,” Violet offered, after which, she told Vini about something that had happened while Vini was at camp.

Jessica Clancy, a woman Violet had known for many years through her nursing career had asked Violet and Otto to her home, so that Otto could have a playdate with her grandson, also a young toddler. Evidently, Jessica had an ulterior motive for asking Violet over and immediately tried to get her to join what Jessica was calling a “Gifting Club” that was supposedly especially designed to help women.

“I was supposed to give her five thousand dollars to join the club,” Violet said. “Then, as soon as I convinced ten other people to join the club, each giving five thousand dollars, I would get fifty thousand. Each of the ten people I had recruited would then need to get ten people to join, so they could also have fifty thousand dollars. When I said no, Jessica got really angry, telling me, ‘I know you have five thousand to spare; you live in a mansion. So why wouldn’t you want to make fifty thousand? Just answer me that!’ So I did give her an answer, which she didn’t particularly like. I told her that it’s not only illegal to do what she was doing—mainly because none of the people getting fifty thousand ever pay a dime in taxes on the forty-five thousand in earnings—but it’s also immoral.” Violet sighed as she went on. “I cut it pretty short after that and left; but I could have gone on and on about how predatory most of these pyramid schemes are, and how people end up disappointed, not to mention financially victimized from basically only the people at the top making any real money. From what I’ve seen over the years when people I’ve known have joined businesses that operate like this, no one wins. And the bottom-feeders often end up turning into predators themselves, even preying on friends and family,

in order to suck others in so they can make money off of them, which is horrible, and ungodly, in my opinion.”

“I agree,” Vini said. “It’s wrong to prey on anybody, especially for monetary profit.”

“Someone has to be at the bottom,” Violet replied. “Everyone can’t reach the top. For one thing, not everyone is cut out to be a salesperson. Plus, even if everyone in the world joined, there would still be people at the bottom. It’s just not a moral practice, for the profit to be so unbalanced. People just have to be wary, especially if someone wants an investment like that because it’s definitely illegal.”

As it turns out, the issue didn’t end with Violet saying no to Jessica because someone at Violet’s church was involved with the “Gifting Club” as well. Muriel Jones was evidently one notch higher up on the ladder than Jessica, and was very upset at Violet for not joining the club, even to the point that she was snubbing her and badmouthing her at church. “So, it’s been bothering me a little,” Violet added, “but I’m just going to have to let it go. I can’t be part of their schemes, or approve of them, so I’ll just have to live with the shunning, snubbing, and whatever else Muriel might say or do.”

“Unbelievable!” Vini cried. “I can’t believe a godly woman would act like that; and over something like money, how sad.”

Violet was nodding as she said, “Well, thanks for listening; I feel better just venting.”

“God would never approve of anything like that club,” Vini said. “So we have to go with pleasing Him, not others.”

“Exactly,” Violet agreed. “We can’t be a friend to the world and be a friend to God. We have to choose, one or the other.”

“And you’ve made the right choice,” Vini said, particularly in knowing that everything she herself was doing was leading up to the Endtimes, which meant that they might be closer than we might imagine. In fact, she was sure the Endtimes were gaining on us, being not anywhere near as distant as some people might think and hope.

As they made their way upstairs with the boxes of books, Vini heard the hall clock chiming, and she counted seven chimes. Knowing it was nine o’clock, she smiled in recognizing a message from God. She also inwardly chuckled at the fact that He often sent multiple messages to her about the same thing, because He knew she wasn’t

always as observant as she should be; though she was getting better about recognizing the ways in which He was speaking to her.

Charlie was just arriving in the kitchen to do some cooking. In addition to making a few things for Dave and Violet, she was stocking her home freezer for her dad. While Mr. Orr was himself an excellent cook, he had been working a lot of overtime lately, which meant he hadn't been able to spend as much time in the kitchen as he would have liked.

While Vini was cleaning out a couple of the kitchen cabinets, and unloading the dishwasher, the girls talked.

To Vini's surprise, Charlie had cut off contact with a boy named Austin whom she had met the previous summer while attending a camp at a culinary school; they had mainly been communicating by email because he lived some distance away.

"He had a girlfriend all this time," Charlie said, "even last summer when we first met, and when he was flirting all over the place with me at camp. I can't believe it."

"What a jerk," Vini replied.

"I feel sorry for his girlfriend," Charlie added. "I doubt he'll ever be true to her. If they get married, he's likely to cheat. I can just imagine if he ever owns a restaurant, he'll probably have affairs with half of the waitresses."

"I wouldn't doubt it," Vini answered.

"I wish you had met him with me last year," Charlie said. "With your gift of discernment, you would have been able to tell me right off that he was up to no good."

As she headed off to dust in the parlor, Vini's mind was mulling over quite a lot. Violet and Charlie both confiding in her made her think. *Other than doing research and hunting down the spheres, am I maybe supposed to tell someone about the information I'm getting? And maybe ask for help?*

She had ended up taking Ben along to find the remains of Noah's Ark just after Thanksgiving last year. But that had been the only time she had asked someone for help, or invited another person to join her on one of her godly errands. Vini knew the value of teamwork, especially from being on the water polo team and from her work at camp. Perhaps God giving her so much information, a good portion of which she had

no idea what to do with, was Him telling her to ask for help, or at least share what she was learning with someone else.

Not doing everything by herself was starting to sound very good to Vini. *A team approach might be good*, she thought. *I have access to help, in the form of protection, supporters, and plenty of people who want to be involved.*

She also suddenly realized that, while she sometimes felt intimidated by everything God was sending her way, she shouldn't feel like this because it was all pretty amazing stuff. And He must think she was the right person to take charge of the information (otherwise He wouldn't have given it to her), which also likely meant that He probably didn't expect her to go it alone, because there would definitely be others who could understand certain things much better than she.

Pausing while dusting and closing her eyes, she said a short prayer. *Dear Lord, What is Your will? Please show me the way. In Your name I pray, Amen.*

Opening her eyes again, through the window, she could just see Ben arriving in the garden. He didn't come into the house to say hello, but set to work right away, pruning the dragonfly topiary, which was only one of many chores he needed to get done on this day, since they would be leaving for Netherwind early the next morning. Renewing her gusto with the dust rag, Vini ran through her own list in her mind of things she still needed to get done today, so that she could leave on the trip with a clear conscious.

## Chapter Eight

### Laurelstone's Big Secret

At right around the same time Vini was busy dusting the parlor, Em and the boys were heading to Laurelstone for the day, on a leisurely walk, across fields, around a pond, and over a small footbridge crossing a creek.

Kip and Preston had just gotten back from a full day of training in Kivetel and were missing their usual nap, but Weatherly had called and said that she wanted to show them something very important at Laurelstone. As they walked, the boys recalled their exciting training of the last couple days; they had started working with the mirrors. They had also started calling Varjo, sensei, as this was what they were used to calling their martial arts teachers at home. This was fine with him, though he did state that the word “okato” in Kivetel meant basically the same thing, teacher or trainer.

Em herself had been busy early in the morning, in that she had gone to the mezzanine to check out a few of the other doors. Of the twelve in the hall, they basically only knew what was behind four of them; and she had suddenly gotten the idea (while having a poppy-seed muffin at breakfast) that it would be good to know something about the other doors.

Some she found couldn't be opened because they were either stuck or locked. With so many doors, she wanted to make sure she could keep track of which was which, so she began making a list in her notebook, starting by numbering down one side of the hall, then up the other, because this seemed the most orderly and efficient way to make the list.

In order to be thorough, she decided to investigate all of the doors, even the ones behind which she knew what to expect. As she looked inside the lush walled garden, Em smiled to find the peacock present. However, intent on her task, she didn't stay to visit with him.

A desert scene greeted her behind another door, containing vast dunes of sand being blown about by stiff winds, and not much else as far as she could tell from the brief look inside.

Behind another door, she found a huge room, like the size of a small warehouse, full of colored ropes and musical instruments hanging on the walls, and bins of something she couldn't quite see because she didn't particularly want to step inside for a closer look at the time. There were also padded mats covering large sections of the floor.

At the end of the hall, she stepped into the Garden of Stars to enjoy a few moments under the stars, remembering to leave the door cracked as she did so. In seeing a shooting star, to go along with what her "Saving Up Wishes" poem promoted, she decided to save the wish.

Back in the hall, as the portraits of Lizzie and Edna waved to her, Em waved back before continuing with her list. Having been warned by Kip and Preston about the wet and slippery rocks, she was very careful when peeking into Antica's doorway. Noticing the door to Kivetel propped, she didn't look inside, since she knew what was in there, and because she didn't want to disturb the boys' training.

Another door opened up to an art gallery that seemed to go on for miles and miles, with an abundance of paintings lining the walls and various sculptures on plinths dotting the long hall. She could also see a case of porcelain figurines and a large shelf of pottery from her position by the door.

Five of the doors couldn't be opened. While all of the doors had locks, she didn't particularly think about trying the mystery key she was carrying in her pocket because she just didn't happen to remember it.

Her list of doors ended up as such: 1. locked 2. locked 3. Peacock Garden 4. locked 5. Desert 6. Colored Ropes, Flutes, Bins, and Floor Mats 7. Garden of Stars 8. locked 9. Antica 10. Kivetel 11. locked 12. Art Gallery.

The list-making helped her to feel settled and happy, in the same way that organizing and rearranging things often did. And she actually found these activities as enjoyable as most people found adventure. Feeling so contented with everyday stuff was part of the reason she didn't particularly want to do training with Kip and Preston, or even spend a lot of time exploring the various lands beyond the doors. She would much rather stay grounded, doing down-to-earth things like

writing, helping Ms. Small in the kitchen, or gardening, the thought of which reminded her that she needed to get out to the gardens to plant more rows of radishes and cucumbers before the summer got too hot. Mr. Michaels staggered his planting times so that they would have ongoing fresh veggies; however, he basically couldn't plant anything after the Fourth of July, which was fast approaching.

Em stayed busy in the garden for nearly an hour, until it was time to round up the boys for the trip to visit Weatherly.

The leisurely trek to Laurelstone took basically twenty minutes.

Greeting her cousins and Preston as they entered the side door to the laundry room, Weatherly led them to one of the smaller rooms on the second floor containing a stained glass window. The room was set up like a study with a large desk and chair, a small sofa, and one bookcase filled with books and knickknacks.

While Kip, Em, and Preston might not have thought anything could be more exciting than discovering doorways to other realms, such as the Garden of Stars and Kivetel, what Weatherly began describing to them was absolutely amazing.

"Time travel," Kip said, in a somewhat stunned manner.

Em and Preston were also rather shocked.

"I almost can't believe it," Em ventured, except that she actually did believe it. They all did. Having come across so many magical things in their lives so far, their brains never truly questioned the possibility of time travel, or imagined that Weatherly might be pulling their legs, as many others might have thought.

And indeed she was not pulling their legs, even when she said that they would be traveling through the study's stained glass window, which was about four feet wide by seven feet high and which seemed rather large for such a small room. This was a room and window they hadn't seen on their tour during Weatherly's birthday party.

Unlocking a drawer in the desk, Weatherly retrieved a small object, which she showed to Kip, Em, and Preston.

"This is the device that activates the window, which is the portal," Weatherly said. The device was small and perfectly round, and looked a lot like an antique boulder marble, though at about an inch and a half in diameter, it was slightly larger than a traditional boulder marble.

“I’ve been calling it the Laurel Stone,” she added, “because the color is a lot like the stone of the house, except that the device is a little darker. But I imagine the house might have been darker at one time, before it got sun-bleached from being in the sunbelt of the country all these years.”

The Laurel Stone did indeed resemble the green stone of Laurelstone, though the tiny sphere also had little swirls of blue and gold mixed in with the green; and if the Laurel Stone had been an antique marble, it would have been one of the more milky ones, rather than clear like a cat’s eye boulder.

“I know I need to take a time-travel trip because the window has changed,” Weatherly explained. “The scene is usually a rose arbor with a stone bench sitting under it, but it changes. The Laurel Stone activates the window when I draw close to allow entry. And when I step through the portal, I end up in a place very similar to whatever is being displayed.”

The window, at present, showed a grouping of trees as if in a small wood. However, they could see a housetop in the background, not too distant, so they were probably just seeing a woodsy neighborhood. One of the trees contained a small treehouse.

Weatherly had evidently already taken a good many trips.

“They are errands for God,” she said. “A few months ago, I started getting messages, mostly after I had been praying. God led me to this room and the desk. I had found the key in my mother’s jewelry box a few weeks before. I didn’t know what it went too, but I was carrying it around with me, hoping to find something the key would unlock.”

As Weatherly paused, Em suddenly remembered the key in her pocket, and it briefly flitted through her mind that she might try using it on the locked mezzanine doors sometime.

“When I saw the window change the first time,” Weatherly continued, “right in front of my eyes, I just somehow knew exactly what to do. It’s like God was telling me. After I step through each time, He also tells me what to do, like a quiet voice in the back of my mind. That’s the best way I can describe it.”

“God often does speak in a quiet voice,” Em said, “and we have to be listening in order to hear it. Of course, He could speak booming loud

if He wanted to; but I imagine He probably speaks to most of us somewhat quietly, so as not to frighten us.”

“The window hasn’t changed since you guys have been here for the summer,” Weatherly went on, “or I would have invited you sooner. John has gone on a few adventures with me, but I mostly go by myself. But I think it would be nice to have company because some of the errands would definitely be better with at least two people. Since John is taking summer classes, and working part time, he has a lot on his mind and mostly doesn’t feel like going right now.”

In preparation to go through the window, she added, “The Laurel Stone creates a field so that the portal can be entered.” In order to demonstrate how easy the entrance process was, she passed her hand into the stained glass, where it disappeared entirely from view. Withdrawing her hand, she crossed the room to set the stone on the desk. Returning to the window, she then placed her hand flat on the glass to show them that they couldn’t enter without the device. Retrieving the stone, she said to Kip and Preston, “Em and I will go through first, and you two follow us closely because I’m not sure how big the field is; so if you’re not close enough, you might get left behind. When John has gone with me, we usually stick close together.”

While the window was large, as far as stained glass windows go, it was really only of a size to allow two to go through at once, so the boys scrunched up very close behind Weatherly and Em.

Weatherly was evidently in the habit of saying a short prayer before stepping through the window on each of her time-travel trips. “Heavenly Father, please show me the way, and help me to do Your will. In Jesus’ name, Amen.”

The bottom of the stained glass window was basically only about eight inches from the floor, which made it easy for the girls to step through. Kip and Preston followed basically one step after, so close in fact that they lightly bumped into the girls on the other side; but this was better than anyone being left behind, so no one was particularly troubled by the bump.

They arrived in the woody area not too far from the tree with the treehouse. Em, Kip, and Preston were somewhat surprised when the window they had stepped through disappeared, vanishing before their eyes and barely giving them a chance to notice that it looked like the

room they had just left, almost as though someone had taken a snapshot framing the desk, couch, and bookcase of the study. But, of course, it was a snapshot in stained glass.

“Don’t worry,” Weatherly told them. “We just have to remember the spot, and come back here when we’re done with our errand. As long as we have the Laurel Stone, the window will appear again when we near this spot and need to go home. But I’ve noticed on other trips that if I’m not done with my errand, the window won’t appear. It’s like the device somehow knows whether I’m done, or if I need to stay.”

Slipping the stone into her shorts pocket, Weatherly said, “I have to have it out at first for the window to work—it’s like it needs skin contact and I think some light—then I always store it in my pocket once I step through the portal. But I always make sure I don’t have a hole in my pocket. I wouldn’t want to lose it and get stuck wherever the window leads, since there wouldn’t be any way to get home from a different time period.”

They had been right in thinking they would be entering a neighborhood because they could see several houses, though they were spaced nicely apart, probably on about one-acre lots each.

Through the trees, they could see several cars in driveways that they were able to recognize as being not too old as far as models—a sedan, a pickup truck, and an SUV—so they evidently had not traveled too far into the past, probably no more than eight years or so, they guessed.

This was a quiet neighborhood, not on a main road, though they did hear distant traffic and a dog barking a little ways down the street. Based on the position of the sun, and the fact that it wasn’t too hot, they felt it was somewhat early morning and probably late spring or early summer. The bright green leafiness of the trees had lent to the conclusion of an early season, rather than a late one.

As in her other time-travel trips, from the small voice in the back of her head, Weatherly knew exactly what they needed to do. And since no one else was around to question or hinder them, they could get right to the task.

“We need to move that rock on the ground under the treehouse,” she told the others.

Moving confidently forward, she started to wrestle with it herself, only to discover it was larger and heavier than it looked, almost like a

small boulder. The boys quickly took over, and it basically took all of their muscle working in tandem to accomplish moving the stone. They ended up flipping it (which was easier than dragging), and a total of seven times, to get it moved to a position well away from its original spot under the treehouse.

“That’s good enough,” Weatherly advised. “Now, we need to hide, and fast.”

With this warning, they all scurried back to a spot near where they had arrived and crouched behind a thick privet hedge.

From their position, they were well concealed but still had a good view of the treehouse. They had evidently hidden just in time because two girls, who were maybe eight or nine years old each, were fast approaching. Reaching the treehouse, the pair began to climb the steps, which were basically pieces of two-by-four fastened securely to the trunk at about two-foot intervals.

The treehouse was the type that was simply a platform surrounded by a short safety railing. The structure did not have a roof, but was still a treehouse because the branches above it basically acted as a roof.

As the time travelers watched, one of the girls suddenly fell over the railing, and the onlookers gasped in shock as she landed on the ground with a thud.

With Kip and Preston on the verge of running out to help, Weatherly and Em urged them to stay put, because the fallen girl got up rather quickly. Plus, the other girl was swiftly climbing down from the treehouse to rush to her friend who was crying and holding her left wrist. Right away, the pair headed off to a nearby house.

“That was Charlie,” Kip said, astonished, “the girl who fell!”

Em and Preston had also recognized her. Even as an eight-year-old, Charlie had very distinctive features (such as her nose and chin) that made her easy to recognize.

“She would have hit that big rock if we hadn’t moved it,” Preston said. “That’s exactly where her head landed.”

While Weatherly didn’t know Charlie, she definitely knew how important it was for them to have been there to move the stone. “Another errand complete,” she said, with satisfaction.

With Weatherly leading and pulling the time-travel device out of her pocket, the group moved about ten feet from the spot behind the

hedge. As the window appeared, they quickly stepped through into the small study at Laurelstone.

As Em and Preston took seats on the couch, with Kip and Weatherly sitting cross-legged on the rug on the floor, they noticed that the window now displayed the rose arbor and stone bench. Though made of glass, the roses were absolutely lovely, all different colors and very lush looking.

“I forgot to tell you that no time passes here during the trips,” Weatherly said, “at least, not that I ever notice, maybe a few seconds at most, even if I’m gone for hours. One time, I was gone for two days.”

Kip was just about to say something when the door to the study opened quite suddenly, by John, who was dropping in with a tray containing a plate of fresh-baked oatmeal cookies, glasses, and a pitcher of milk. Taking a break from studying, he had decided to make cookies. And he had actually been just starting down the hall toward the study door when the group was leaving on the trip to the treehouse. So it was quite true that no time had passed while they were gone. John left quickly after depositing the tray on a small table beside the couch.

Through a mouthful of cookie, Preston said, “I thought angels, not time travelers, protected people from accidents.”

“They do,” Weatherly replied.

“But God lets us help sometimes,” Em correctly surmised. “We’re supposed to be His servants too, like the angels.”

“My mother used to talk to me about angels,” Weatherly recalled, smiling. “She knew a lot about them, and knows more now, I’m sure. She called them watchmen, the angels God assigns to protect us. She used to quote Psalm 91:11 to me. ‘He will give his angels charge of you to guard you in all your ways.’ And my mother explained that the quote means that angels protect us from more than just accidents. They sometimes watch over people in hospitals, to make sure doctors don’t make mistakes. She also said angels can put certain people in your path to help you; and they can give you that weird and ugly feeling in your stomach when danger is near, so you can get yourself clear of the situation.”

“I’ve never heard any of this before,” Kip said.

Taking a sip of milk, Weatherly added, “The Book of Daniel mentions watchers, but I think they are the same thing as watchmen.”

What followed was a short discussion regarding the commonly-held theory that future time travel would not be possible, only past time travel. “The window has never led me into the future,” Weatherly said, “so I think the theory is probably true.”

As they were finishing off the oatmeal cookies and milk, Em noticed that the window had again changed, to a scene of an alley in a city, looking out onto a main street with storefronts and cars.

“Another trip,” Weatherly said, excitedly, “if you’re game.”

They were all game, of course, because who could resist a chance to travel through time and do some good in the world?

Upon stepping through the window and into the alley, Preston was amazed to recognize the town square of his own hometown, where he had lived since birth, though it looked very different. Tipton’s Dry Cleaning was already there, but there was no Golden Dragon Chinese Restaurant next to it, as it would be in his time. Instead, the spot held Starshine Records and Magazines. “I’m guessing we’re in maybe the fifties or sixties,” he said.

“The cars look like those in the fifties to me,” Kip replied.

They speculated that since they were wearing plain shorts and t-shirts without logos, they were not oddly-enough dressed so as not to fit in; however, they still tried to keep mostly out of sight so as not to draw too much attention. “I always try to dress as simply as possible on these trips,” Weatherly said.

With it being very warm, obviously summertime, they were glad to be wearing shorts.

Again, Weatherly knew exactly what to do. “There are some men having a meeting in that building over there,” she said, pointing to the large storefront of Hal’s Paint and Hardware. “Then, they’ll be heading to a big city for some sort of rally. We have to take the tire irons and baseball bats out of the trunks and back seats of their cars, and hide them.”

As they started across the street and, as discreetly as possible, began gathering the items, Weatherly said in a low voice to Em, “It’s not stealing if we’re just taking the stuff and hiding it.”

“Agreed,” Em said, also quietly.

The task wasn’t too difficult because no one, it seemed, locked their cars. In addition to baseball bats and tire irons, they took several short

pieces of pipe and rebar from the cars, making several trips into alleys to hide the items behind dumpsters, under tarps, down basement stairwells, and a few other convenient spots.

While they were not exactly sure what might happen if they didn't complete their task, they decided that whatever the people might be planning to use these items for—other than obvious things like fixing flat tires and playing baseball—couldn't be good. Plus, the time travelers were definitely going to do what God was commanding. Any sane person would. It was never any kind of good idea to disobey God, because He always knows what's best for us.

At one point, when two men came out of the paint and hardware store, Em faked tripping and falling in order to distract the men from what Kip and Preston were doing, which was unloading several items from the trunk of a red 1951 Cadillac.

Em's skinned knee and palm were worth it because her ploy worked to allow the boys to finish, as one of the men helped her to her feet and the other was distracted by her loud, "Ouch! Oh golly! Silly me, I tripped over my own feet."

Getting up and brushing herself off, she said to the man who had helped her, "Oh thank you. I'll be more careful next time."

At Weatherly's urging, the foursome next swiftly returned to the alley where they had arrived, to quickly step through the window to the study as soon as it appeared.

Again, no noticeable time had passed. They had left when the hall clock started chiming eleven, and it was still chiming eleven when they returned.

Making their way downstairs to the kitchen, they all had lunch, turkey sandwiches and oranges, before Em and the boys started the walk back to Netherwind.

As they were rounding the pond, in thinking about how no time had passed at all at home on their two trips through the window, and how very little time passed on their visits to Kivetel, Preston suddenly realized something. "It was probably a good thing that Varjo didn't come to our world for a visit," he said, "because the time thing might have really messed him up."

Kip had been thinking exactly the same thing. “If he comes through the door, he might suddenly age here, like really fast, and maybe even die.”

“Or at least be damaged before he could get back through the doorway,” Preston said.

“Unless it’s the reverse,” Kip mentioned thoughtfully. “He might grow younger, and fade out of all existence.”

“I wonder if something could be found to protect him,” Em pondered, “like some sort of talisman. There seems to be no end to the magic God creates in the universe.”

She was, of course, correct. With God being all-powerful, without limit or end, His magic is always completely endless.

Since the trip to Laurelstone had taken so little of their time, they were all back at Netherwind well before one, at which point, the boys headed to their room for an afternoon nap, being basically pooped from the full day of training, walking to and from Laurelstone, and the activities of the two time-travel trips.

Em wasn’t at all tired; and her brain was clicking away, mainly over the mysterious key, for some reason. On a whim (not noticing a cucumber seed stuck to the frame of a painting on the wall nearby), she tried the key on an unlocked closet in the downstairs hall, and was surprised to find that it both locked and unlocked the door.

*Why would a key hidden in a mini treasure box unlock a closet door, she pondered, especially one that doesn’t have anything valuable in it, other than a couple of raincoats and a step ladder?*

On another whim, she hurried upstairs to her bedroom, trying the key in that lock as well. And it fit!

Racing back downstairs, she tried it on the front door, for which it also worked. *Wow! she thought. A magic key that unlocks any door! Amazing! How is this possible?*

But, of course, she quickly realized she had already answered the question earlier. Smiling, she reminded herself, *There are no limits to God’s magic. And by now, I should be getting used to expecting the unexpected.*

While it briefly flitted through her mind to try the key in the five locked doors on the mezzanine, she suddenly thought better of the idea

because a little voice in the back of her mind was telling her, *Don't try to open them at this time.*

*Okay*, she answered the little voice. She would definitely heed the warning, even if it was only from her own brain; except that it was actually from a tiny thistle seed her nose had just inhaled.

*And don't tell anyone about the key for right now*, the little voice told her next, as she sneezed.

In the evening, Kip and Preston were still pretty tired, so they went to bed right after dinner, which left Em on her own with the aunts in the parlor for the evening.

Since the boys weren't present, and Heike and Pizzo weren't around either, Aunt Eugenia held off on storytelling, instead deciding to give Em some valuable advice about boys. "Now this is something my own mother shared with me," she said. "If you want to know how a boy is going to turn out, take a look at his parents because that's likely how he'll turn out; not always, but most of the time. If his parents are successful, he's likely to be. If they're alcoholics, or in a lot of debt, or wrecks in other ways, he's probably going to be like that too."

Aunt Fiona had some pretty good advice for Em as well. "When you start dating and eventually think about getting married, make sure that you both think the same things are important. You should both be focused on God, for sure. But aside from that, make sure you both prioritize the same things. Whether it's career, or a family, or travel, or whatever, you should both value the same things because it will make things much easier."

"Okay, thank you," Em said. While the words of wisdom were good, she didn't think she'd have any use for the advice for quite a while. For one thing, there hadn't been anyone in particular at her middle school that she liked; plus, she was worried about starting high school in the fall. And in keeping busy with hobbies and chores, she had enough to focus on without adding the complication of a boyfriend to the mix. However, she did store the advice in her brain, in recognizing that it would probably come in handy, someday.

Following the advice-giving, the aunts launched into a fairly lively discussion, some of which Em found very interesting, about several things the pair felt were very wrong with the world of today.

Aunt Fiona's complaints were mainly focused on the smaller sizes of everything, and the over-packaging of products. "It used to be you could get five hundred tissues in a box," she said. "Then it was three, then two-twenty, then one-seventy, then one-fifteen; now it's all the way down to fifty-five. It's so sad, to waste making a box for that few tissues."

"There are less paper towels on rolls now too," Em chimed in, "and toilet paper is skinnier."

"I can't find three-hundred feet of kitchen plastic wrap anymore," Aunt Fiona said.

Things that were touted as "New and Improved" were the subject of Aunt Eugenia's rant. "I hate those stinky anti-bacterial cleansers," she complained. "They ruined perfectly good products that had been around for decades by making them into 'anti-bacterial' crap. And in doing so, they've killed off the good bacteria in our homes, which is making us sicker than ever."

Practically going into a rage over newer dishwashers, Aunt Eugenia said, "They're trying to make machines smarter than people. It's all run on sensors now, instead of a timer, so you can't get the dishwasher to run short, even on the 'light' setting. So if the sensors don't like the water quality, or the temperature, or the type of soap, the machine just runs and runs, for hours. And there's no override so you can't shorten the cycles. It's just insane, and stupid, if you ask me. I should be able to control my dishwasher run-time. But no; can't have that."

"Plus, things don't last the way they used to," Aunt Fiona said, specifically thinking about her new vacuum cleaner that was made mostly of plastic, unlike her favorite metal one that had finally given out after forty-three years of use.

Em went up to bed as the aunts were just starting in about how much they hated the television commercials featuring people with food all over their faces, or dropping food, or shoveling it in, as well as being messy in other ways too.

"As if unappetizing stuff like that is going to sell food," Aunt Fiona said. "It's all just disgusting."

"I agree," Aunt Eugenia replied. "They're just teaching kids to be ill-mannered slobs. And that's not okay."

Em was reading the bible in bed when she heard a tiny knock on her door. It was Pizzo and Heike, wanting to show her a hidden compartment, about two-foot square in size, they had discovered in a wall panel on the third floor. Puck trolls often found things like this because they were experts at discovering secrets, especially in old houses. Since this was like a second home to Em, they felt she deserved to know about it. And if she ended up behaving herself for the next couple weeks, they might even show her a hidden passage they had found.

While the compartment was empty, Em was very happy to know about it. “Thank you for showing me this,” she said, thinking it might be very useful to know about someday.

## Chapter Nine

### The Seven Spheres

Vini, Ben, and Charlie bringing Boomer all met at Doyle Mansion just before daylight on Thursday morning because they intended to leave very early. As Vini and Charlie were loading boxes of books and luggage into the trunk of Charlie's car, Ben was saying goodbye to Jelzey, who had come to see him off. Busy doing work for God, such as calming volcanoes and stirring up geysers, she wasn't going to be around much for the rest of the summer. Beme was staying in the area to protect Sam. With Tulko and Lyydu both planning to stick close to Netherwind, they could protect Ben, along with the gryphons and gargoyles. So Jelzey definitely felt she had a little more freedom than normal. She stayed small, about the size of a large pea, when Ben was saying goodbye to her. Small was really the only way the firebird could ever get close to her charge without risk of burning him. But despite not ever having physical contact, like a hug, there was no denying their affection for one another.

"I'll miss you, Sweet Girl," Ben said. "But I know you have important work to do. And I'll see you later in the summer."

Violet was going to the manor too in a separate car, just for the day, to bring Otto for a surprise visit, and to deliver ten large boxes of food, both fresh fare from the garden and cans, along with a cooler of frozen food. She was doing this not only because of the extra people that would be staying at Netherwind, but also because she knew it might be possible for the puck trolls to literally eat Aunt Fiona out of house and home.

When they arrived at the manor roughly an hour after leaving, Pizzo and Heike greeted them and immediately began frolicking with Boomer in the grass by the carport. Aunt Eugenia and Aunt Fiona both laughed to see them all rolling around, wrestling, and playing chase.

Lyydu made himself known to the gargoyles and gryphons right away, all of which were glad to have help from the thunderbird as far as

protection duties so that they could take off on adventures once in a while, like little vacations. Eleta was currently gone, but Lyydu already knew her. He had also known of Zapor and Folto, but had never officially met them. Tulko was not around at present, but would be arriving later in the day. Lyydu, of course, had known the wind horse for some time, and considered him to be a good friend.

Kip and Preston hadn't known that Violet and Otto were coming, so they had already gone to Kivetel; but Aunt Fiona encouraged Violet to stay until they returned, which was not usually later than around nine-thirty each morning.

Preston had been calling home regularly, so his parents knew about the training and were okay with it. Aunt Eugenia assured Violet of this, since Violet had felt responsible to check on him while at the manor. With Aunt Eugenia keeping eagle eyes on things, and because not much ever got past her, Violet had already been pretty well assured not only of the safety of the kids, but of all other aspects of their life at Netherwind going smoothly as well.

While Em had thought she was starting to feel okay about the adoption plans, for some reason, probably because she was not expecting to see Violet so soon, she ended up feeling very angry and ugly inside, almost like a feeling of hatred. While happy to see Otto, and hugging him tightly, Em ended up being somewhat rude to Violet, only half-heartedly returning Violet's hug and acting rather sullen. After helping to unload the boxes of food, Em excused herself to go up to her room where she scolded herself severely before praying for help in getting through Violet's visit. Feeling better right away, she headed back downstairs to help the aunts and Mrs. Boyle finish laying out a buffet breakfast for everyone.

Aunt Fiona was laughing a bit at the food stores Violet had brought; but she was very thankful in noticing not only the quantities put away by the puck trolls, but also by two growing boys.

One of the first things Vini noticed at Netherwind was the stained glass, which had been on her mind since her previous visit to the manor in the spring, particularly because some of her research pertained to this. She had been looking forward to seeing the windows again; and when told that Laurelstone had even more stained glass, she said, "I wonder if we could possibly arrange a visit while we're here."

“Oh for sure you’ll be going to Laurelstone,” Em said.

Em, Kip, and Preston had already been planning to let Charlie, Ben, and Vini in on various secrets, like Kivetel and the Laurel Stone. They were also anxious for everyone to meet Weatherly and John.

Violet right away asked if she was supposed to have brought Kip’s trombone so that he could practice. He had forgotten to take it with him; and she had forgotten today, only remembering on the drive to the manor.

“No,” Aunt Eugenia said. “He forgot it on purpose, and he has mentioned that he probably won’t want to be in band in the fall.”

This was fine with Violet, as it would mean less running around for her and Dave, as far as going to practices, performances at games, UIL events, and whatnot.

Mr. Michaels was at breakfast to welcome Ben, who had expressly come to help get the manor’s overgrown gardens in shape. While managing the corn and soybean crops with a couple of local lads, and tending the vegetable garden, Mr. Michaels had very little time for things like pruning hedges and weeding flower beds, which was why it had been so wonderful to have Em’s help. So he was very thankful that Ben had come. Focusing on the farming was important because the sale of the crops was crucial. Mr. Michaels was doing his best to keep the plantation from breaking up in the form of parts of it needing to be sold off to pay taxes and other bills (which had happened once when two hundred acres were sold). But it was a tricky business because he knew he really needed a lot more help to work a lot more of the land in order to gain some security for the estate.

While Vini was planning to do research and go after the spheres, she had mainly come to Netherwind to clean. Charlie would be doing the cooking for everyone, and in her spare time, would be helping Vini with the cleaning. This was how they had been planning to earn their room and board while at the manor.

Since Vini and Charlie would be cleaning while there, Mrs. Boyle was going to have four weeks off. Aunt Fiona had arranged this as a surprise for Mrs. Boyle and had bought her a plane ticket to go see her sister in Oregon. This had also been arranged with Mrs. Boyle’s sister who was expecting her.

While Mrs. Boyle had known that Ms. Small would be off while Charlie was there, she never thought she'd be off; and she was overjoyed because she had long wanted to take a trip see her sister. She just hadn't in recent months felt like she could get away, in needing to stay close to her employer (and longtime friend), while Fiona had been undergoing cancer treatments and was now still recovering.

Violet had helped to arrange all of this. And while both Charlie and Vini insisted they didn't want money—because the work would be payment for their stay, and they were planning to do some fun things while at the manor—Violet would be paying Charlie and Vini an approximate equivalent as to what they would have made at home if Vini was housekeeping and Charlie was taking on her normal catering jobs. Aunt Fiona had offered to contribute but Violet had told her no. This had allowed Aunt Fiona to buy the plane ticket for Mrs. Boyle. Aunt Eugenia was actually the one planning to pay Charlie. Because Fiona was still a little wan and thin looking, Aunt Eugenia had been most anxious for Charlie's gourmet cooking and baking so that Aunt Fiona could get properly fattened back up again. Ben didn't want any money either—because he was glad to come and help, and it was a nice little vacation for him—but Violet had already decided she would be paying him as well.

During breakfast, Em was a little nicer to Violet, at least a little more polite.

At about the same time Heike and Pizzo came in from playing outside with Boomer to polish off the remaining breakfast fare, Kip and Preston arrived back from Kivetel to find everyone having coffee in the parlor. Otto seemed more interested in playing on the floor with an empty shoebox than in spending time with his brother and Preston.

A short while later, as Violet was getting ready to leave, Em managed to give her a better hug. When Em was hugging Otto, he ended up spitting up on her shoulder.

"It's just like being at home with him," Em said good-naturedly.

Violet was very happy to hear Em use the word "home" when referring to Doyle Mansion.

After walking with Violet and Otto to the carport to see them off, Em ran upstairs to change her shirt, after which, she joined Charlie, who was already exploring the kitchen and pantry.

While Vini was unpacking in the bedroom that she would be sharing with Charlie (which was next door to Em's room), Ben was getting settled in down the hall next to the room Kip and Preston were sharing. After unpacking, he immediately headed to the gardens to begin work.

Anxious to begin her quest for the spheres, Vini consulted her notes, mainly the ones from a lengthy auto-writing session the night before, which included a lot of specifics pertaining to the spheres. Closing her eyes as she plopped down on the bed with her journal, she said a short prayer of thanks to God for the blessing of the gift of auto-writing, especially because she would have had great difficulty finding this much information in just doing regular library research. When journal writing, she had started underlining certain words to help her find key information later. She was also occasionally making extra notes, both as reminders to herself and in order to tie in other things she had previously learned. Opening her eyes, she took a deep breath and began reading.

“The seven spheres look and feel like stones and range in size from a large marble to a smallish orange, when in their original sizes, as far as how they were created. But magicians and sorcerers have the ability to change the spheres' sizes. A magical resizing trunk can also accomplish these sizing changes. [Note to self: This is the first time I have heard of a magical resizing trunk, so this might end up being another quest.]

“All of the spheres are basically keys that unlock certain things such as powers and knowledge. As already discerned, these seven keys correspond to the seven colors of the rainbow; and a magical peacock helped to create the spheres, aided by a magician. [Aside note: Magicians generally work on the side of good, while sorcerers generally work on the side of evil. This is true in the present and has been true in the past, with very few exceptions.]

“The same peacock that helped to make the original burnished doves helped to create the seven spheres, which are named as follows: Gift Key, Time Key, Realm Key, Sage Key, Truth Key, Mage Key, and Mind Key.

“The Gift Key is red and unlocks special gifts inside human beings, the gifts being ones God has already bestowed on certain people, but that the individuals might not have been aware of until touching the sphere. As is the case with many magical things, some mystery surrounds the Gift Key, especially because some people touching the stone never end up with a gift. So does it really unlock a person’s gift; or does it activate a portion of the unused part of the brain to allow recognition of the gift, as well as the knowledge of how to use it? Perhaps trusting is the key factor. All human beings have gifts, but they must trust in God in order to make full use of them. A non-trusting person might never discover his or her gift, if they don’t believe. Then they might not end up with the power to fly, or read minds, or become invisible, or whatever, even if they touch the Gift Key a hundred times, and even if they had an inkling as to what their gift might have been to start with. [Note: Wow! Can someone really become invisible? That’s amazing! Reminder to self: I shouldn’t doubt, not ever!!! I also shouldn’t be surprised because, with God, all things are possible.]

“The Time Key is green and works on the basis of light, light principles, and is connected to the ‘faster than the speed of light’ factor in time-travel theories. There must be light in order for the key to work. But this can be a small amount of light, such as starlight or moonlight, or even a lamp or a candle. In knowing this, certain evil beings might shroud an area to keep the key from working. The Time Key is as mysterious as time travel, as far as exactly how it works, but the sphere basically unlocks various magical portals that are passageways through time to allow certain people to time travel in order to perform errands as directed by God. The sphere’s proximity to a portal must be six feet or less to activate the doorway. Entry doorways, of which there are currently four in the world, are fixed and constantly present. Destination doorways always have a time limit, which can vary, and are continually being set up by a mysterious being under God’s direction, like the time travelers. This being exists outside of time. [Note: I thought only God was outside of time, but maybe this is a gift given to someone, or maybe this is just the way God created this being. I guess unicorns might also be outside of time; I don’t know. It’s all very hard to understand.]

“The Realm Key is indigo and serves to unlock various other realms. It works on a concept involving triangles and the flow of energy (often called Chi) along the straight lines of the triangles. The Realm Key manipulates the energy running along the sides of the triangle, raising it from two dimensional (like flat lines drawn on paper), to three dimensional (the lines lifted from the paper with more added to form a 3-D shape), then extending into the more complex dimensions, of which it is speculated there are anywhere from seven to sixteen, by various theories. The energy that is raised up in complex lines acts like the cuts of an elaborate key to unlock the realm so as to allow entry and exit. Triangles, sometimes formed simply by streets or fences or other common straight-line human creations, are often indicators of doorways to other realms. Users of the Realm Key must be inside of a triangle containing one of these doorways, and must be within thirty feet of the doorway, in order to activate the key which will then open the passage. While triangles are indicators of an entrance to another realm in the vicinity, the triangle will always be large enough for a person to fit inside while holding the key. So a triangular-shaped jewelry box could not contain a doorway to another realm; however, a triangular-shaped coffin could. [Note: Demon Pockets are a mystery that may never be completely solved—as to whether they are strictly in the brain, or if they are real places. Either way, they are in unique sorts of realms, ones that can be unlocked by the Realm Key, but that usually don’t need a key to be unlocked, which is why many people are drawn into Demon Pockets without having access to any kind of key.]

“The Sage Key is yellow and allows users to see future events, but not by looking into it like a crystal ball. In just holding the sphere, a person will see the vision of the future in their mind’s eye. This is not to be confused with the gift of prophecy given to some individuals naturally, or from being revealed when a person touches the Gift Key. The Sage Key is like the other six spheres in that it is a device that anyone may use, not just those having a propensity toward the gift of prophecy. It is simply a tool; all of the spheres are tools.

“The Mage Key is blue, and is much lighter....”

Vini’s review of her notes was interrupted by Charlie who was in the hall and calling Vini downstairs. Em had evidently phoned

Weatherly to tell her of the arrival of the new visitors, whereupon, Weatherly had invited them all to Laurelstone for a tour of the house and to have lunch. Em would be going with Vini, Ben, and Charlie, while Preston and Kip would be staying behind, to practice archery, and then perhaps have a nap. Neither had been in the habit of taking naps since they were little boys; but with training so hard each day, they felt they pretty much had to.

Kip was on the phone when Vini came downstairs, because Weatherly had asked to speak with him after talking to Em. Hanging up the receiver, he told Preston who was nearby, "Weatherly wants to come to Kivetel to train, so she'll be going with us tomorrow morning."

"That's great," Preston answered. He had been slightly disappointed when Em hadn't expressed much of an interest, so he was thrilled that Weatherly would be training with them.

"I told her to be here really early," Kip said, as they were heading outside to begin archery practice.

Aside from brushing off and washing his hands, Ben wasn't dirty enough from work in the garden to need much cleaning up, so they set off walking right away.

Boomer was coming too, to spend time with Pecan, Laurelstone's border collie, who was actually a mixed-breed dog, but was mostly border collie, and recognizable as such. Pecan was named so because he liked to eat pecans, crunching them up, shells and all. And he was rarely seen around the house because he was most often out helping to manage the estate with Mr. Blessing who had adopted him from the local animal shelter about four years previous. Today, however, in knowing that Boomer was visiting Netherwind, Weatherly had arranged a playdate for the pair.

As the group left, they passed Pizzo and Heike playing badminton. Of course, they couldn't use the racquets, but were tossing a badminton birdie back and forth across the net. Eleta, back from her latest adventure, soon joined in, as her small self in order to match well with the size of the puck trolls; and she ended up playing for both sides, which was no trouble for her because she was extremely fast.

The newcomers found trekking across the fields great fun, as they admired the lovely scenery and wildlife, particularly the flock of

peafowl of which two of the peacocks had their fans spread in beautiful display.

On the approach to meet Weatherly, who was waiting by the side door, they took in some of the gardens, but didn't linger because they were all most anxious to meet their host, and see the stained glass windows. Weatherly led them to the chapel first, and they admired more of the gardens along the way.

After the visit to the chapel, they all trooped inside the house for a tour to see the rest of the stained glass. In the library, which was nearly as large as Doyle Mansion's upstairs library, Vini was thrilled to discover a window featuring a peacock and seven spheres, all seven of which were situated in specific settings. Though somewhat stylistic, Vini was able to recognize right away that these were the keys she was looking for, especially because they corresponded to the colors of a rainbow. And in studying the details of the window, she felt the settings were clues to the locations of the spheres.

Weatherly, in noticing Vini taking notes in her journal, said, "Some people have speculated that the seven circles might mean the seven seals in the Book of Revelation."

Pondering, Vini thought this was a good guess, since she felt it likely that peacocks were going to be part of the Endtimes. But for now, she took the window to mean the seven keys, which she knew would also come into play closer to the Endtimes. And it suddenly came into her brain, *This isn't just a quest to find and keep safe the spheres, but to learn how to use them, so that the information can be passed on to future generations.* Tailing slightly behind the others, she made a few more notes in her journal before leaving the library.

Lastly, Weatherly led everyone to the small study to see the rose arbor window, which hadn't changed since the group got back from their trip to the fifties. With Em smiling and watching in anticipation of their surprised reactions, Weatherly next showed Ben, Vini, and Charlie the Laurel Stone, and let them in on the big secret.

Vini instantly recognized the stone as the Time Key. She also somehow knew not to take it or ask for it. For the time being, the sphere was probably safest where it was. In her messages from God, she was never told to take all of the keys into her possession. She

definitely needed to find them, and make sure they were all in safe locations, but she didn't necessarily need to take them.

Weatherly, Em, Preston, and Kip had already discussed that they wouldn't tell Charlie (or anyone else) that they had moved a rock so she wouldn't hit her head during her fall from the treehouse when she was younger. For one thing, God didn't say they should tell anyone, so they all felt the information was best kept secret. And for another thing, they all knew people were not supposed to advertise services done for God, whether good deeds in general or specific appointed tasks. Despite letting a few others know about the Laurel Stone, they felt they shouldn't advertise their specific time-travel adventures.

Vini at this time would also be keeping a few secrets, such as her knowledge that a certain being, outside of time, set up the destination points for the time travelers. Aside from being wary of disclosing too much, she also kept silent because she knew very little about Etowa, who had indeed set up the doorways in the downtown alley and the one near the treehouse, these being moves in his game with Boko, though Etowa did often set up destination doorways aside from the game, whenever and wherever God commanded him to. Etowa sometimes also placed seeds to give time travelers direction, but not always because certain individuals like Weatherly were able to hear instructions from God very clearly, a gift having come along as a result of her intimacy with God and from developing acute brain listening skills, the brain being exercised in this regard through prayer and intense study of Scripture. In truth, all people have this gift; but many never tap into it. Still others simply disregard the voice they hear in the back of their heads, intent on going their own way, which can often lead to trouble. It isn't just our conscience that we hear, or our own thoughts and ideas; often, it is truly God.

The Time Key being inside the manor reinforced to Vini that the peacock window likely contained clues to the whereabouts of the keys because the green sphere in the stained glass (near the center of the window) was depicted inside a house resembling Laurelstone in shape.

Before heading to the kitchen for lunch, at Vini's request, the group swung by the library again so that she could have another look at the peacock window in order to take a few more notes. *So one is in a cave, another in a tree*, her mind mused as she scribbled.

After enjoying a lunch of fried chicken and fruit salad, the visitors headed back to Netherwind, picking up a few peacock feathers along the way, as well as Boomer, who had had a blast running hither and thither with Pecan in both exploration and play.

When they got back, Vini once again delved into her notes relating to the spheres.

“The Mage Key is blue, and is much lighter in color than the indigo Realm Key, more like a deep sky color, rather than a midnight blue. It relates to magic, specifically in understanding how to use magic, giving the user (most often a magician) insight. But like the Gift Key, believing is probably a significant factor in success. Also, there might be a question of overuse. A magician once lost all power in relying too much on the Mage Key; his complacency toward actual magical work basically caused a complete melt down. Laziness is never good, no matter what the endeavor. Making potions, creating magical objects, and other such undertakings never work out well when people are lazy because there truly are no shortcuts in the world.

“The Truth Key is orange. It reveals truths and allows one to see through deceptions, especially those of Satan and his many followers. The key unlocks truth, such as that many things of this world have been corrupted by Satan. Much of the world is truly corrupted, and not at all what God intended. This includes man, animals, philosophies, governments, etc. There is some speculation that the key, in the right hands, might be used to force others to tell the truth. [Note: At present, my gift of discernment isn’t telling me whether certain speculations such as this are correct or not. Perhaps the timing isn’t right for me to know. God’s timing is always perfect, so I’m sure that if I’m meant to know, the answer will be revealed at the right time.]

“The Mind Key is violet and can unlock thoughts in the minds of others. This is a valuable weapon as it allows the user to learn the plans of an enemy basically by reading the mind. And the power of the key not only unlocks thoughts, but also feelings, so that even if someone isn’t thinking any particular thoughts, a user of the Mind Key can still discern what the person’s mood or intentions might be, or if the person might have ulterior motives. This function of the key is even more powerful than what people with heightened abilities to discern are

capable of, so using the Mind Key might be a good idea even for someone with this natural gift. The obvious danger is that someone might be tempted to abuse this tool, in order to read minds for personal or trivial reasons. [Note to self: None of the spheres should ever be used lightly, just as calling unicorns should never be done for anything other than super-good reasons.] Some believe that the Mind Key simply unlocks something in the user's brain that allows mind reading, a power all people might have if able to tap into the unused portion of the brain; however, this is pure speculation. Another speculation (one more likely to be true) is that the key can be used in reverse, to plant thoughts or feelings in others. This would probably take years of training by a person able to use a lot more of their brain than most other people. Another theory is that the Mind Key, in the hands of certain individuals who might be able to unlock more of its secrets, can be used to cause certain thoughts to come to fruition with regard to actions. In other words, a person using the key might be able to make his or her own thoughts come to life, like thinking an event or sequence of events into being, or maybe like the concept of a self-fulfilling prophecy. If applied to a target, the theory could mean that a person might be forced to carry out certain actions from thoughts being planted by someone using the key.

“[Note from research: Some theologians are convinced that when the Endtimes come, when Christ actually arrives, all seven of the spheres should be destroyed.]”

Taking a deep breath, Vini closed her journal. *So I just have to determine the locations of the keys, and go and collect them*, she thought, *all except the Time Key, which needs to stay in Laurelstone, for now*. And it wasn't just good reasoning that was telling her to leave the Time Key in place, but her powers of discernment as well.

Reasoning also told Vini that she had already had an encounter with another of the spheres—the Realm Key that she had found on the sailing ship, Harvey's Ghost—and this prompted her to open her journal to add a brief note. “The spheres might well have multiple names, such as Weatherly calling the Time Key, the Laurel Stone. I had thought of the Realm Key as a pearl, and can imagine it having a name like the

Indigo Pearl. But who cursed the Realm Key to make it a lure into a Demon Pocket?”

While Vini knew the Realm Key was a cursed object, she didn't know that Boko had placed it aboard Harvey's Ghost, after having a sorcerer curse the sphere, but before the ship was shrunk down by the same sorcerer. Boko also sized up the sphere before placing it on the ship. In knowing that the contents of Harvey's Ghost would be shrunk down with it, Boko had made the Realm Key slightly larger than the cannonballs so that Vini, when dusting the ship, would notice and touch the sphere.

With the Realm Key being both cursed and huge in its current state, again due to good reasoning, Vini knew that it would need to be both uncursed and resized to be of any use to anyone in the future; and, of course, in trusting completely in God, she knew that both of these things were going to be possible.

Smiling, she recalled the indigo sphere in the peacock window, situated in a frothy sea beside a sailing ship. And this led her to wonder how old the window might be, and who made it, and if all of this was predestined.

*Of course it was, her mind confirmed. God is always in control of everything.*

Consulting her notes as to the spheres' locations, she added the specifics for the Realm Key. “The Realm Key is in the Demon Pocket in the sea where we were trapped on Harvey's Ghost.”

Vini then decided on the first excursion relating to the spheres, which she thought would likely be a fairly quick trip.

Always one to ease into things, she never would have imagined that her quest for the spheres would begin the same day she arrived at Netherwind. *I should be learning by now to expect the unexpected*, she reminded herself, as she silently called to Tulko who was very nearby. He was waiting for her near the croquet lawn as she came outside to meet him.

It took a mere three minutes or so of casual flying to reach the Washington Monument, where Vini scooped the Mind Key out of a little niche in a stone very near the top; and she did this so quickly, they were gone in a flash. Two people who saw Tulko and Vini for a split second thought they had seen an angel, which was fabulous because one

was an atheist who would very soon change his ways of thinking and accept Christ.

The violet sphere was about the size of a large walnut. As she slipped it into her belt pack, Vini noticed that it had small speckles of blue and orange that caught the light to sparkle brightly in the sun.

On the return trip, Tulko took her on a scenic tour over the Smoky Mountains and a couple of long rivers, so they could take their time going back.

While they flew, Vini's mind pondered the quest for the spheres. Obtaining the Mind Key had almost seemed too easy, and she was a little wary of this. However, she knew she would probably end up wishing all of the spheres were this easy to obtain, especially since the Realm Key was going to be tricky to retrieve from the Demon Pocket. Indeed, at this point, she had no idea as to how she might actually find it under the sea, or lift the heavy key to carry it out of the pocket, which was probably going to be dangerous if the experience on Harvey's Ghost was anything to go by.

As Tulko landed in the gardens at Netherwind, Vini's mind told her, *One down and six to go, well, five actually, because I'm leaving the Time Key in place for now.*

Em was in the solarium reading the bible and writing, and had observed Vini and Tulko leaving and then coming back about twenty minutes later. Deciding it was too hot, Em headed to her room a short while later. Mornings were definitely a better time to visit the solarium, which had only one ceiling fan in addition to windows to help keep it cool. Passing the parlor, she happened to overhear another conversation between the aunts that was about her—they were discussing her moodiness.

Pausing in the hall, Em heard Aunt Fiona say, "Yes, she's high strung sometimes, and emotional; but she wouldn't be such a fabulous poet without all those emotions."

"I agree," Aunt Eugenia replied. "Some of the best artists and storytellers are emotional wrecks much of the time. I feel badly for them sometimes because they don't seem to find much peace in the world."

What stuck in Em's mind as she headed upstairs was the word "fabulous" because she never thought she was fabulous at anything, let

alone poetry; and it very much surprised her to hear someone say this. While she knew that her aunt had read some of her poetry over the years, Aunt Fiona had only ever given her mild compliments.

*She probably doesn't want me to get a big head*, Em decided, especially in knowing that a lot of artistic and creative people could be very full of themselves, which was something that was definitely not pleasing to God, because He never likes pride or arrogance in any form. And no one really has a right to be proud of themselves because every good thing is actually from God, His doing, and no other. Unfortunately, many people, in using the gifts and skills God has given them, and in enjoying things they've created from God working through them, run the risk of developing a prideful attitude, which God truly hates. *It's an abomination to Him*, Em reminded herself.

Flipping open the bible as soon as she entered her bedroom, she immediately came upon the perfect quote, Proverbs 25:27, to fit with what she was thinking. "It is not good to eat much honey, so be sparing of complimentary words."

Reading for an hour or so, Em then decided to go jogging before dinner, noticing as she left her room that Vini had started cleaning down the hall.

After a wonderful dinner of enchiladas, hearty salad from the abundant garden fare, and flan for dessert, everyone gathered in the parlor for a bible study and storytelling. The bible study was about Jehoshaphat; and the storytelling was about Snickare, a carpenter genie. Snickare lived in an old toolbox, and his favorite thing to do was help to build houses for the homeless. He also helped Mrs. Higginbotham, the owner of the Garden of Dolls, fix up her house.

In bed later, Em dreamed about the industrious little genie carpenter, building and fixing, and it made her smile in her sleep.

## Chapter Ten

### Art, Mirrors, and Music

Weatherly arrived bright and early on Friday morning to leave with the boys to begin her training. Her brother and father were both okay with her going to Kivetel, believing that she would be just about as safe doing this as any other activity. After all, she had taken gymnastics classes for about three years when around ages six to eight, and karate a couple of summers back, and had not gotten injured. And in knowing that the training trips wouldn't take too much time, since time passed very differently in Kivetel, she wouldn't be missing much at home, though John did caution her to rest after training each day, perhaps taking a nap in Em's room before walking home.

After cleaning for about four hours, Vini took a break to hear Kip and Preston describe a few details about their training. The boys had already returned from Kivetel, had a nap, and were enjoying a snack (because it wasn't nearly time for lunch) when Vini joined them in the kitchen. Charlie also took a break from cooking to listen to the pair talk about Kivetel and the various weapons they were training with.

In listening carefully (because she was getting better about listening to her brother, and Kip), Vini realized very quickly that this was the answer to her prayer as to what to do with the information she had received about magical weapons. She would need to share everything with Preston—her notes and the books she had found pertaining to color, mirror, and music weapons—because he was the proper person to take charge of it all. Since he had always been good at math and science, Vini felt sure that he would be able to make something of the information; and she thought it might even help him with his training, to know something of the science behind the weapons he was using. He might even be able to grasp something that was still a great mystery to Vini, namely the concept of septessence, which was a heavenly element like quintessence, but connected to art in some way.

Vini declined a visit to Kivetel when the boys offered, but she did sit down with her brother in the afternoon to share a few things with him. “I understand some of the basic concepts,” she told him. “But how light can be used as a weapon in connection to a mirror, other than to temporarily blind someone, is a mystery to me. And it’s not just the technical stuff that’s confusing; other things mixed in make it a muddle, like how a mirror can’t capture darkness, only light, yet a dark creature can still use a light weapon. And there’s a lot of what people over the years have used mirrors for, like sewing pieces of mirror into clothing, and what it all means.”

“It is all very interesting,” Preston said, looking over a few of his sister’s notes.

“I think you should definitely look into mirror lore, philosophies, and traditions,” Vini added, “because I’m pretty sure there’s something to them that might be important.”

“Okay, thank you,” Preston responded as she handed over several books and a pile of notes copied from her journals.

“Color is also a lot more complex than people might imagine,” Vini said, “at least more than I ever thought, even from knowing Louetta and her art. It might be good to talk to Louetta sometime about colors.”

“I will,” Preston replied, his mind turning back to a recent training demonstration, which he proceeded to describe to his sister. “While we were blindfolded, Varjo had us hold two pieces of pottery that were identical except for color. One felt warmer, the other cooler. But it was opposite what our eyes might have thought because the red pot was cool and the blue one was warm. Also, the blue one felt heavier; but he showed us on a scale that it weighed exactly the same as the red one. So I know there’s definitely a lot of scientific complexity to colors, especially in Kivetel.”

With Vini very engrossed in what he was saying, Preston described a couple of other demonstrations such as one in which the playing of different types of music evoked certain emotions that equated to energy. In another lesson, Varjo showed them how light, specifically a flame, has no shadow, which was something Preston already knew, but the demonstration was still interesting.

“I think my notes are pretty well organized,” Vini said. “If you have any questions, just ask. But I truthfully don’t know if I’ll be able to answer them, since technical stuff just isn’t my thing.”

“Oddly enough,” Preston added, “Varjo just told us he’s setting up for us to do some classroom training. So I could just ask him if I have questions.”

“Good idea,” Vini answered.

Heading to his room with the notes and books, Preston felt very thankful for the information because it was like adding a missing piece to his training. He had already figured out that he couldn’t just deal with physical and practical applications to truly someday become a master because he needed to understand certain things behind what he was learning, technical and scientific things. He had already made a couple of visits to the libraries at Netherwind, but felt somewhat intimidated by the walls of books, like it was all too much to deal with and he wasn’t sure exactly where to start. But with what his sister had given him, he now felt like he had a good starting point. Smiling, he thought, *We make a good team; and she’s listening to me a lot more lately, not just tuning me out.*

Preston and Kip had decided to add Saturdays to their training time in Kivetel, when they had nothing else planned early on those days; and on their first Saturday, they did start with a classroom session, though in an informal setting—a table with benches situated at the edge of the clearing. Weatherly had decided to come on Saturdays too; and they all found the information interesting and fairly easy to understand, especially with Linna helping Varjo explain some of the basic concepts, which were things she had learned in her earliest years of schooling.

As far as home study, Varjo felt it would be safe for them to take books from Kivetel back with them, but perhaps still not the weapons because he thought they might react oddly crossing into another realm. His students agreed to abide by this rule, being all extremely conscientious about safety.

At training, Kip ended up getting rather frustrated because he couldn’t quite seem to get the hang of a rope maneuver that Preston had already mastered. And since Weatherly appeared to be making a lot more progress with the ropes than he had when first starting, Kip was also sulking a bit, until Varjo reminded him that girls are generally

better at ropes than boys. To all of his students he advised persistence and patience. “And specialties are common,” he added, “because most people end up good at only one discipline, or possibly two, but seldom all three.”

Spending more time with Kip than the others on this day, Varjo told him, “I have noticed that you are already better at the musical weapons than Preston, and you are gaining on Linna, which is fabulous because she actually started learning when she was a little girl.”

“I play the trombone,” Kip said, “so maybe that’s why I’m getting the hang of the flutes so fast. They are much different instruments, of course; but still, I really like music.”

“Then the flutes will probably be your specialty,” Varjo answered.

Upon their return to Netherwind, Weatherly declined the offer of a nap in Em’s room and staying for lunch, explaining that on the days she came for training, she would likely head back to Laurelstone as quickly as possible, to make sure she stayed caught up with chores and such at home.

Speaking of chores, both Kip and Em received a scolding from Aunt Fiona about neglecting some of theirs while engaging in other activities; and they knew she was serious because she called them by their whole first and middle names.

“Emerson Rae,” she began, “if you think you’re putting one over on me, you can think again. Twice this week you didn’t empty the dishwasher, and the front porch needs sweeping. And you, Kipling Clark, you didn’t fold the laundry or clean the bathroom, and your bedroom is a mess. If you have to skip a day of your other activities, do so, but don’t neglect your chores. Now, let’s get everything caught up with by lunchtime.”

As Em and Kip immediately scurried off, Aunt Eugenia had a few words for Preston along the same lines, “You can do all the fun things you want while you’re here,” she said, “as long as you keep up with chores.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Preston said meekly, but earnestly, before hurrying upstairs to pick up in the bedroom while Kip cleaned the bathroom.

Although Mrs. Boyle (when home) kept up with most of the cleaning (mainly what Vini and Charlie were now doing), everyone still had to pitch in, especially in cleaning up after themselves, so as not to

make more work for others. Even the aunts kept very busy with dusting, sweeping, laundry, and such.

At lunch, Em shared with everyone that she had made a list of the mezzanine doors, showing the list first to Aunt Fiona who said, “When I was growing up, which was when I spent a lot of time on the mezzanine, seven of the doors didn’t open. So you’ve gotten into two more. Let’s see...so the Art Gallery is new...and the Weapons Room.”

“Weapons Room?” Em questioned, in genuine surprise. Although the boys had spoken many times about the weapons of Kivetel, in not having seen them herself, her brain hadn’t connected the contents of the gigantic room with their training. Plus, with her mind on other things lately, she had basically been tuning out a lot of what Kip and Preston had been saying. Also, she hadn’t really thought about the room much since having the one look inside.

They all decided to go up to the mezzanine and have a peek at the Weapons Room; and as they entered the hall, the portraits of Edna and Lizzie said hello to the visitors, and especially the newcomers whom they hadn’t yet met because the initial tour of the manor for Charlie, Vini, and Ben hadn’t included a trip to the mezzanine.

Vini immediately took note of the state of cleanliness of the hall, which wasn’t all that bad because the sister portraits had been doing some cleaning. *Just maybe a light dusting and doing the floors once a week*, she thought. Since the doorways were entrances to magical realms, she likely wouldn’t do any cleaning inside the rooms, and probably not even the one containing the weapons, as everything inside looked pretty well dust free.

“This is a massive stock of weapons,” Kip marveled, when finally able to find his voice after being astounded by the hundreds of ropes and flutes lining the walls. Assessing several bins full of mirrors, they thought it likely there might be well over a thousand of various shapes and sizes.

“These are very similar to the ones we have been training with,” Preston remarked, taking one of the red ropes from its hook.

“This is obviously not just a regular room,” Aunt Fiona stated, “since the size looks like over half the footprint of the house.” In not being able to access all of the rooms of the mezzanine, she had always

wondered if a few ordinary rooms might be mixed in with the magical ones. At this point, it didn't seem likely.

"It's like a mini warehouse," Ben commented.

"It might be pretty important to keep all of this safe somehow, like extra locks or alarms" Charlie said.

Aunt Fiona was shaking her head as she explained, "Most people looking in will see a normal-sized room with a bed, a desk, a dresser, and a couple of chairs. So there's no need to worry."

"Also, Vini speculated, "most people wouldn't know these are weapons. They'd probably think this was a performance hall of some sort, with color ropes and musical instruments all over the place."

"It does kind of resemble a theatre-in-the-round," Em said, as she could well picture people using the mats to practice tumbling or other stunts that might then be performed on a central stage in the huge room, with seating all around.

With Preston and Kip thinking of how they were not allowed to take weapons home from Kivetel (which both aunts thought very wise), they decided to perform a test to see if these weapons could be taken into the manor from the Weapons Room.

Since nothing odd happened when Preston brought the red rope he was holding into the hall, or when Kip followed with a flute, the group then decided to head downstairs so that the weapons could be tested outside. However, before leaving the hall, they took a quick peek into the rest of the doorways, just to check the contents, which were the same as when Em had numbered and listed them in her notebook; and the same five doors still didn't open.

Though Em briefly thought of trying her magic key, she was reluctant to. For one thing, something was telling her not to let the others know about it quite yet.

Ben, too, although he thought of his pocketknife, was leery of using it, also feeling the timing wasn't quite right to advertise it, even amongst friends.

Outside, under Preston's expert manipulation, the rope worked to make several deep cuts in a large branch Ben had just pruned from a maple tree.

Vini smiled at the demonstration. While she had watched him practice martial arts before, she never imagined her brother was so graceful. Indeed, the twists and leaps appeared very balletic.

What Kip did with the flute was nearly as graceful, and perhaps more lyrical, particularly in the way he captured the air with the instrument before releasing a stream of high-pitched musical notes that were also a powerful and concentrated burst of energy, the force of which split the branch as though someone had, in slightly slow motion, brought down an invisible axe.

After the demonstration, Kip and Preston immediately returned the rope and flute to the Weapons Room for safekeeping.

Being caught up with work in the kitchen, Charlie went jogging with Em in the afternoon.

When they finished their jog, Charlie stopped in the garden to get a few veggies, which she dropped off in the kitchen before heading upstairs to take a shower. She was very thankful to have so many fresh ingredients to work with, not only because her culinary creations turned out very healthy and tasty, but also, she had grown accustomed to having access to the abundant fare from Doyle Mansion. Dave and Violet had set aside specific sections in both the garden and greenhouse exclusively for Charlie, which she was making use of, though she never would have imagined that she might enjoy gardening, since cooking was more her thing. But as it turns out, she really was enjoying the planting and tending, as well as the harvesting and eating, of course.

Reading in her room, Em briefly thought again about trying her key in the locked mezzanine doors. However, a small voice in the back of her head answered her thought, warning her not to. *No, not right now because it's not the right time. And this is a lesson to be learned. Be satisfied with what you have already; don't go seeking more and more.*

Vini was cleaning in the small library when she sensed Tulko outside, and heard him calling her to the garden, where he swiftly whisked her up to the roof for a pleasant surprise.

Anei was visiting the manor. As it turns out, he had been visiting Laurelstone when Vini was there for the tour and lunch on Thursday; but he had been a little shy of Ben and Charlie so he hadn't talked to her.

“Plus, I didn’t want to interrupt,” he told her. “But I do have something important that I want to tell you, Lavinia.”

“How did you know my full name is Lavinia?” Vini asked the gargoyle, in knowing that she had never told him this. Nor did anyone ever call her by that name.

“How do gargoyles know anything,” he responded. “God tells us, which is also how I know of your quest for the spheres. Some people call them stones. And I know a lot about Laurelstone because it’s where I used to live.”

“I remember you told me once that you lived on top of a manor house,” Vini replied. “I never dreamt it was Laurelstone.”

Anei was able to tell Vini a little about the peacock window. “It’s nearly as old as the house; and the man that made it had possession of the Prophecy Stone, also called the Sage Key, which is how he knew where the seven stone spheres would end up at the time you would be seeking them.”

“Now it’s all starting to make perfect sense,” Vini answered, “the messages from God, and why I was destined to come here this summer.”

“Me too,” Anei said. “I hadn’t visited for a while, but was called here.”

Anei next proceeded to give her specifics as to the location the Gift Key, which was represented in the peacock window as being near a large dog. “The dog is the fourteen-hundred-pound metal statue of Lewis’ Newfoundland dog, named Seaman, at the Seaman Overlook at the Lewis and Clark Interpretive Center in Washburn, North Dakota. The sphere is in the dog’s mouth.”

In addition to being thrilled to know the exact whereabouts of the Gift Key, Vini was excited about the chance to obtain even more information from Anei. Having her journal handy, she was already taking notes, as well as asking questions.

In wrapping up their conversation a few minutes later, she asked, “Is the bell featured in the peacock window the Liberty Bell?”

“Yes,” Anei said, nodding.

“Okay, I thought I recognized it,” she replied. “But with stained glass, things often look a little skewed, so I wasn’t sure if that was the famous crack or not. Well, thank you. This is so helpful.”

“You are very welcome,” Anei answered.

Vini smiled and waved goodbye to the gargoyle as Tulko took her back down to the gardens where she ran inside to get her belt pack and dagger, having decided to go after the Gift Key this very day. She was excited as she bounded up the stairs; from the information Anei had provided, almost everything was clear about the locations of the remaining spheres.

Just before heading back outside, Vini stopped in the kitchen to ask Charlie if she wanted to go on the excursion, because Lyydu was currently nearby in the pecan grove.

Being well aware of Charlie’s fear of heights, Vini already pretty much knew the answer would be no; but she still wanted to ask.

Charlie rarely went on these types of adventures, though she knew Lyydu would keep her perfectly safe. She just didn’t like flying, or any other type of heights. She wouldn’t even go up into the treehouse with Em, Kip, and Preston when they had taken her on a stroll to see it. They understood very well why she declined, though they of course didn’t tell her that they knew she had once fallen from one.

Em saw Tulko and Vini leaving for their trip as she was heading outside to hit tennis balls.

The flying pair reached the overlook and the magnificent six-foot steel statue in less than five minutes.

The Gift Key was about the size of a small apricot. Vini didn’t think she was stealing because she was just doing God’s work. And she thought the dog’s mouth a pretty clever hiding spot for the sphere. Not only was it tucked well inside, if anyone had ever noticed it (which would have been difficult from the ground), they might have thought it represented Seaman’s favorite toy. Plus, in being fairly high up, it seemed very unlikely anyone would have ever taken it.

Vini was basically in awe of this likeness of Seaman. While she had seen quite a few of Aunt Eugenia’s bronze sculptures, the largest of which was about three feet high, she could only imagine what it must have taken to create a dog this large out of steel. She also giggled in imagining Pizzo bringing the dog to life, which she felt wouldn’t be wise, as Seaman might end up flattening half the town in just romping around in playfulness.

No one was close by as Tulko sidled up to the statue to allow Vini to fish in the dog's mouth and take the sphere. Slipping it into her pack, she noticed that the Gift Key had little swirls of orange and purple mixed with the overall color of deep red.

At church on Sunday, several kids around their same ages invited Vini, Ben, and Charlie to a youth bible study held each week during the summer on Wednesday evenings. Since the visitors' own church youth activities were something they enjoyed very much at home, they definitely wanted to attend.

Em, Kip, and Preston had basically decided they were plenty happy with the bible studies they were already having at the manor with the aunts, so they likely wouldn't come, though they were also invited.

In knowing that Charlie's car could only carry five people, Aunt Eugenia had offered to let Ben drive her car while the group was visiting Netherwind, for anyplace they might want to go. However, since they were all busy with so many varied activities, this likely wouldn't be necessary, unless they all decided to go somewhere at once, like swimming at the community pool or shopping in town.

Weatherly generally checked the arbor window each morning, and she was excited at church to tell Kip, Em, and Preston that the scene had changed. "So it's time for another trip," she said, "if you feel like going."

They definitely all felt like going. Weatherly felt she might also invite Vini, Charlie, and Ben sometime too. But for now, the little voice in her head was telling her that Em, Preston, and Kip were the right companions.

In addition to the invitation, Weatherly described something they needed to bring with them from Netherwind. Again, the little voice was telling her. And thank goodness Em had told everyone what she knew about the other doors on the mezzanine because the item was one of the mirrors from the Weapons Room.

When the Netherwind group returned home from church, Charlie was met with a rather messy discovery, in that her white poodle had basically turned into a chocolate poodle, the chocolate actually being mud. Now that Boomer and Pecan knew about one another, they had been spending quite a bit of time together, including time swimming in the various ponds on the sister estates. On this day, after finishing a

swim, they had gotten out of one of the ponds on a side without rocks and vegetation, a mud pit basically, in which they decided to roll around a bit as they might on the bank of any pond, as was their usual custom in order to dry off.

Immediately after lunch, just as Em, Kip, and Preston were setting off to Laurelstone, with Ben's help, Charlie set to giving Boomer a bath, which he was none too pleased with, having already gotten plenty wet for the day. Indeed, he thought his mistress and her friend completely crazy because, *Why would a dog who had just had a nice swim need a bath?*

After assisting with the bath, Ben asked if he could help Charlie in the kitchen because he was interested in learning some cooking skills. And he rather sheepishly told her, "My uncle said that in order to make myself appealing to girls, I should learn to cook." With Sam having a girlfriend, Ben had been thinking a lot about girls lately, though he didn't think it likely he would have time for a girlfriend in the near future, as busy as he stayed most of the time.

Charlie replied that she'd be happy to teach him some cooking skills. "And they might even be useful aside from attracting girls," she said, "if you like to eat good food, that is."

"I surely do," he answered, following her to the kitchen.

Vini, meanwhile, was doing a little cleaning on the third floor, and in a bit of a hurry because she had something planned later with Tulko.

At the same time Vini was hurriedly cleaning, the time travelers were preparing for their trip through the window, which currently displayed a scene of a large tree with a cottage nearby. As Weatherly finished saying her usual prayer, they quickly stepped through the portal.

The group actually ended up on the grounds of Netherwind, very near Heritage Oak, the largest tree on the estate, which was almost as large as they would know it from the future. The plantation at present was planted mainly with cotton and had several barns and corrals which they didn't recognize from their own time. The manor house had evidently not yet been built; but even without Heritage Oak, they would have recognized the grounds because the terrain of hills and large rocks was very distinctive. There was actually a smaller house very near where Netherwind would come to stand, about double the size of the

cottage situated by the oak. The cottage would not be there in the future, nor would the herd of cows they were passing on their way to the house, which was where Weatherly was leading them.

In fact, she marched right up to the house and boldly knocked on the door. A rather short and pudgy man answered very quickly, and equally quickly delighted the visitors with his jolly and good-natured personality. He was a magician, which was probably why he was not at all surprised when Weatherly explained, rather calmly, that they had been directed by God to travel back in time to give him a weapon from the future, so that he could study it in order to design and make more of them. “A lot more of them,” she emphasized. “For some reason, I think we’re going to need a huge quantity of them in the future.”

“Probably for use closer to the Endtimes,” he said, after which, he introduced himself as Mr. Lindon, before inviting them all in for a cup of tea.

“And what a silly name for what’s to come,” he said, leading them to the kitchen to take a seat at the table while he gathered cups and prepped the teapot by adding leaves before placing the kettle on the stove.

Having never heard anyone else say that the name “Endtimes” was silly, Em said, “I don’t understand. Why is it silly?”

“Because it’s not the end of everything,” Mr. Lindon answered. “It’s not even the end of the earth because the earth is going to be remade when our Lord and Savior comes again. But it is the end of a certain time in history, so I guess it might be appropriate to call it the Endtimes. I just think it’s funny.”

As the magician was examining the mirror, which was one that could easily fit into a pocket, Preston said, “Mirror weapons were probably originally designed in another realm, but evidently someone in our world is or has been capable of making them.”

As it turns out, a set of color rope weapons had already been delivered to Mr. Lindon’s cousin, who was also a magician.

“So I figured I’d eventually have a task too, of designing something for the future,” Mr. Lindon told them. The cousin magicians were evidently very close friends of the families residing on the sister plantations; and through marriage, would actually be distantly related to Aunt Fiona who, of course, was not born yet.

“Speaking of the future,” Mr. Lindon went on, “I’m truly excited to be helping to design two houses that are going to be built in the next ten years or so, one right here, and the other on a neighboring plantation. As a matter of fact, I’m meeting with the architect this afternoon. This is our third meeting, and we’re in the process of adding a lot of magical details to the houses.”

“That sounds exciting,” Em replied.

“It is; it definitely is,” Mr. Lindon said, nodding his head and raising his eyebrows in a somewhat mysterious and inviting fashion, almost as though he was hoping they would inquire as to some of the details.

However, the visitors all knew not to ask too many questions because they might be tempted to give information as well as receive it.

In being careful not to change anything about the future, they didn’t want to accidentally tell their host any details they might know about, such as that they were using a magical portal from one of the two houses to travel back in time to deliver the mirror.

In seeing them off a short while later at the front door, Mr. Lindon added, “I’ll be taking a trip to Europe next month to bring back gargoyles, which I understand are also going to be very important to the future.”

“Well, have a very nice trip,” Weatherly said, with Kip, Preston, and Em nodding and waving as they all headed toward Heritage Oak to return to home.

They were just approaching the tree when a demon, perched in one of the higher branches of the oak, leapt down to confront them. At nearly six feet in height, and with a wingspan of nearly eight, the creature was very foreboding moving towards them.

The time travelers reacted swiftly, with Kip grabbing a fallen tree branch and Preston picking up large rocks to pelt the demon. Weatherly and Em followed suit with more rocks, which slowed the advance of the creature, as well as distracting him, after which, Kip ran forward wielding the branch like a martial arts fighting stick. After deftly delivering several hard whacks to the demon’s wings and knees, Kip retreated, mainly to avoid being hit by more rocks that the others were continuing to throw.

Kip was on the verge of moving in for another branch assault, when Em squealed in fright as a second demon leapt from the tree, this one even larger than the first. While they might have been able to hold off a single demon with nothing more than sticks and stones, this would not be the case with two.

Fortunately, they would not have to go it alone or weaponless because Mr. Lindon, having heard the commotion as he was leaving his house for his meeting with the architect, was running towards them.

Reaching their position, he quickly tossed the mirror weapon he had stowed in his pocket to Preston, who dispatched the first demon with it in less than four seconds.

They wouldn't need to worry long about the second one because a gryphon suddenly swooped in, startling everyone, especially the monstrous demon who, after being flattened, was rapidly torn to shreds by the claws and beak of the furred and feathered protector. This gryphon wasn't either Zapor or Folto, though he somewhat resembled Folto in coloring and markings, which was appropriate because he was actually Folto's father, Maboro, who had been summoned by divine command all the way from South Africa. Folto in this time was still a somewhat young gryphon, perhaps the equivalent of a teenager, and had not yet been assigned to protect anyone.

Finishing the shredding, Maboro simply gave a short nod to the startled onlookers before taking off in a golden streak across the sky to return to home.

Since the time travelers were all a bit shook up, Mr. Lindon offered for them to come back up to the house. However, feeling a need to be getting home, they declined, after which, they hurried to a spot near the portal where they stepped through as soon as the window appeared.

Mr. Lindon watched as the stained glass window appeared and disappeared, and he was amazed because he had been working with a glass artist to create several magical windows for one of the two houses he was helping to design. Still feeling astounded as he headed off to his meeting, he wondered if perhaps this doorway through time was one of the windows his magic would help to bring into being. He had already heard of a device called a Time Stone that could allow people to travel through time. *Maybe this event is somehow connected,* he pondered.

While the time travelers had been somewhat careless in allowing Mr. Lindon to see their exit, it didn't change the future, especially because Etowa was involved—the magician and glass artist designing the portal being one of his game moves.

Back in the study, still shaken, they all sat down for a bit.

“I can't believe we never thought to take weapons with us on trips like this,” Preston said. “I know we wouldn't be able to carry swords or a bow very often because they would be too conspicuous. But we could take something small, like a dagger, or even some of the ropes or mirrors.”

“That's a good idea,” Kip replied. “I would imagine a rope or a flute could safely travel through time, like the mirror we just took.”

“And they wouldn't stand out at all,” Em said, “because most people wouldn't even know they are weapons. But since I don't know how to use them, I'll just make sure I'm with someone armed when I go through the window.” She could now see the value of getting some training, if nothing more than the basics. “I think I will go with you all to Kivetel a couple of times,” she added, “first to watch, then maybe to learn a little.”

Since Weatherly would need access to the weapons, they discussed keeping some at Laurelstone. “We have a safe room,” she said. “But aside from that, there's a hidden nook right in this very room.” She then proceeded to show them a wall panel behind which was secreted a storage compartment about three feet square that was currently empty. “See, plenty of room in here.”

“Oh my!” Em suddenly said in start because the window had once again changed.

This time the scene was mostly of a red curtain, but they could see beyond the curtain to a large room with rows of seating facing a small stage area set up with chairs and sheet music stands.

“It looks like a concert might be about to happen,” Kip said in a whisper, as though someone in the room they were viewing might actually be able to hear him.

They pondered going to get some of the magical weapons before going in, but Weatherly had a better idea. Excusing herself from the room, she returned a few minutes later with two daggers complete with

belts and hilts that she had procured from display cases in the library. “We can take turns wearing them under our clothes,” she suggested.

On this day, Em and Preston would wear them.

Upon stepping through the window, they arrived behind the red curtain in a spot where several tables and a couple of broken chairs needing repair were stored. The room was basically a small performance hall and was fairly fancy with chairs upholstered in lush green velvet and marble floors covered in ornate rugs. Large paintings and tapestries adorned the walls, and the ceiling was hung with four enormous chandeliers.

Peeking out a window draped in heavy silk, they saw only carriages, no cars, and women strolling by wearing gowns, long gloves, cloaks, and fancy headdresses.

“It reminds me of a Jane Austen novel or movie,” Em remarked.

“Or a Sherlock Holmes mystery,” Kip said, in noticing a man walking by wearing a very tall top hat.

“A stovepipe hat,” Weatherly told him. “We need to move a row of chairs from one side of the aisle to the other,” she added, “to make the seating seven wide on this side, and eight on the other. We’re basically changing the center aisle.” While the task might have seemed strange, Weatherly never questioned the instructions, or delayed in acting, because she knew God’s ways were often mysterious, and sometimes very difficult for human brains to understand.

Em seemed to understand perfectly what they were doing. “This will make some people seating themselves shift to the side with eight to find enough seats, so a person who was meant to sit next to someone else will end up where he or she was meant to be.”

The travelers were very glad that no one was around because they were not at all suitably dressed for either the time or the occasion of a fancy concert.

No sooner had they finished moving the chairs, and were just slipping back behind the red curtain, when two members of the orchestra arrived in the hall to take their seats on the stage. A couple of minutes later, as more musicians arrived with a contralto soloist wearing an exquisite blue dress, the main doors to the hall opened and several audience members came in and began to select their seats.

As the room filled, the time travelers stayed hidden behind the curtain because the window hadn't yet appeared. They also stayed to listen to part of the concert. "I guess we might still have something left to do," Weatherly said in a whisper.

Em had been correct to assume Jane-Austen times, because this was Bath, England. The soloist had a lovely British accent. Though they couldn't actually see her performance from their vantage point, they could see the men in the orchestra, who were all wearing wigs, which the travelers thought a little funny.

After two songs, while the audience was applauding, the window suddenly appeared, so they hastened to step through.

Back at home, Weatherly related something that had just come into her brain. "We moved the chairs so that two people could for sure meet because they were destined to get married; and so that two other people, very important to the world, would eventually be born."

She was correct; but what she didn't know was that the two people at the concert were the great-great-great-great grandparents of Vini and Preston (on their father's side), their ancestors mainly being from England and Scotland.

As they were again seated in the study, Preston remarked, "This all seems a little too easy. I mean, the tasks, not the demon attack. That wasn't particularly easy. But I wonder if we might ever end up doing something harder or more exciting than making deliveries, rearranging chairs, and moving rocks."

"God might reserve harder things for people more grown up than we are," Em speculated.

"Or until after we get more training" Weatherly pondered, except that she was thinking of a fight she and John had ended up engaging in on one of their escapades, against a couple of thieves who were after an item she and her brother had been sent to find and take into safekeeping.

After telling the others about the adventure, she said, "So it's not all completely tame; some of it is pretty exciting. And it's all important, or else we wouldn't be called to do it."

"So maybe we're just not quite ready for a lot of excitement," Kip said, "because God is not going to get us into something we can't handle."

“Plus, someone has to do the mundane stuff,” Em chimed in. “We can’t all be doing only the fanciful things, like riding on wind horses and sword fighting.” And while she didn’t share this with the others, she was thinking that the mundane things were actually the ones she enjoyed the most.

As Kip, Em, and Preston were on their way back to Netherwind, Vini was getting ready to go after the Mage Key.

According to the peacock window, the sky-blue sphere was in a tree; but she couldn’t distinguish which tree from the stained glass, only that it looked like an oak. Anei hadn’t known which tree might contain the key; in fact, his response to her query had been, “There are a lot of oak trees in the world. Your guess is as good as mine.”

Vini had no intention of guessing, nor would she need to because she had another clue in that Anei had told her the Mage Key had once been kept at Netherwind inside a small silk blue box. While the sphere was no longer in the house, she felt the box might be. In not having come across it in her cleaning efforts so far, she looked around in the attic, inside boxes and trunks, before deciding to ask Aunt Fiona if she knew of a small silk blue box, probably just about the right size to hold a tangerine.

Having just arrived back to the house, and passing the parlor, Em overheard Vini asking this question. Popping her head inside the door, she said, “I know exactly where that box is.” With this, she led Vini to the staircase. Opening a few of the drawers, Em soon found what she was looking for, which she remembered specifically because Lizzie had indicated the silk box was not one of the items she had placed into the stair drawers.

As Em handed her the box, Vini hurriedly said, “Thank you,” before speeding up the stairs in search of Pizzo, who was not hard to find because he and Heike had been hanging out in the attic and in various rooms on the third floor most of the day.

Shrugging and thinking, *Whatever floats your boat*, as Vini rushed off, Em made her way to the kitchen to see if she could help Charlie for a while.

Pizzo smiled and nodded as Vini asked him if he knew where she might find a grimmpt, a creature that was basically a magical bloodhound, but one resembling a little pig and capable of sniffing out

things from much greater distances than a bloodhound, even from as far as halfway around the world.

Heike and Pizzo both rode on Vini's shoulder as Tulko flew them to a nearby farm, where they found the little piggy, who was bright purple with streaks of blue, snuffling around in a zucchini patch. Vini knew from her research, and from encountering one before, that grimmpts loved zucchini.

The puck trolls didn't particularly want to go with Vini on her trip, though she offered; and although the pair was some distance from Netherwind, they didn't want a ride back. In truth, they had been traveling the countryside a lot lately; and whenever they ended up far from the estate, they had been getting various magical animals to take them home, the most recent time involving a ride on the tail of a zipakola water lizard. And it was amazing how fast the creature could run on land, covering nearly twenty miles in less than ten minutes.

Edging up to the grimmpt as the puck trolls wandered off, Vini got him to sniff the box, before hurrying to mount Tulko because she knew how fast grimmpts could fly.

And sure enough, it didn't take more than about four seconds for him to raise his tiny wings and take off.

This grimmpt seemed even faster than the one that had led Vini, Ben, and Pizzo to the resting place of Noah's Ark; and as he flew, with his shiny hooves flashing like bright copper in the sunshine, the purple and blue of his skin turned to a dark peach color with a greenish sheen.

They ended up on something of a wild ride because the grimmpt first sought out red grapes in a vineyard in California. Then it was on to a vegetable garden on a farm in Missouri where he devoured over half a patch of dill and several sweet potatoes before taking off again. As fast as they were able to fly, grimmpts were not much particular as to where they obtained their food from, so they tended to zip around the country a lot, after whatever smelled best to them at the time. Since there were no oak trees near either the vineyard or the vegetable garden, Vini knew these were simply stops along the way to the location of the Mage Key.

After the dill-and-sweet-potato stop, the little pig had evidently had enough food for a bit because he then led Tulko and Vini to an oak tree very near the pecan orchard at Netherwind.

Dismounting, Vini had a laugh—and even Tulko was snorting in amusement—because the key had practically been right under their noses the whole time.

Though this oak tree didn't have a name, it was nearly as large as Heritage Oak. The grimmpt took off as Vini began to climb the tree in search of the key. "Thank you," she called to the pig as he streaked across the sky and out of sight in a mere two seconds.

Tulko was a little wary of Vini climbing. He certainly could have helped by flying her around the tree to have a look at possible hollows and nooks and such. But Vini felt like climbing; she hadn't climbed a tree for many years, and had almost forgotten how much fun it could be.

She found the Mage Key, which was about the size of a fig, tucked inside a wide crack in a burl. As she climbed down, Tulko hovered close by; in case she slipped, he would catch her. She didn't slip.

Neither Vini nor Tulko saw the watchman nearby, hovering beside another tree, just watching, as instructed, in order to gauge Vini's progress on her quest for the spheres. The watchman smiled as he departed in a soft flash. She was making good progress.

Zapor and Lyydu on the roof of the manor did see the watchman, but they didn't approach or let on that they saw. In general, magical creatures didn't have much contact with angels, though both gryphons and thunderbirds of the past, including some of Zapor's and Lyydu's ancestors, had acted as messengers for the angels from time to time.

As Vini was returning to Netherwind, Charlie happened to be by herself in their bedroom, where she saw a repeat vision in the dresser mirror of the trapped unicorn, and the multitudes of dragons near the location of the unicorn. This time, she was able to tell that it wasn't just the unicorn that was trapped—the dragons were as well.

## Chapter Eleven

### The Halcyon and the Mermaid

On Monday, Vini was up super early cleaning. She had decided to wait until later in the week to go after another sphere. Since she was moving along so fast—four down, three to go—she didn't see a need to hurry. Plus, Louetta was coming for a visit late Tuesday afternoon and was planning to stay the night, so Vini was a little distracted both in looking forward to the visit and in getting a room ready for her.

Em was also up early because she had decided to go with Preston, Kip, and Weatherly to Kivetel, though she wasn't dressed for training, as Weatherly noticed and pointed out.

"Oh, I'm just planning to watch," Em said, as they made their way to the mezzanine.

Once inside Kivetel, she was extremely fascinated by the kite messaging. "Neato!" she exclaimed.

Varjo and Linna were happy to meet Em.

They all had a classroom lesson first, before physical training, as this was now going to be their usual routine. During the lesson, Kip and Preston took turns telling Varjo about the weapons and the enormous room Em had found in their world.

"So you can train even there, if for some reason you can't come here," Varjo answered.

"Since the weapons look slightly different," Preston added, "my guess is that they were probably designed there." He then shared that they had delivered a mirror to someone in the past, a magician, likely the one who created the mirrors in the Weapons Room.

Varjo didn't seem surprised that they had access to a time-travel device and portal, though he knew of none that existed in his world.

"Do you think it would be safe for us to take some of the weapons with us when we travel through time?" Kip asked. "In certain situations, we're going to need a way to defend ourselves." (While Kip

thought that it would likely be safe, especially since they had already traveled with a mirror, he wanted his sensei's opinion.)

After a few moments' thought, Varjo answered, "I can't think of any reason why the various weapons can't travel through time. But if you somehow end up in another realm, they might not work, because the properties of that world might not allow for them to. Things like gravity, magnetism, and even climate could affect their functioning. That's partly why I've been reluctant to have you take any home with you, along with the safety issue. I guess just be as careful as you can when you time travel. If the weapons seem to act or react strangely, don't use them."

During their physical training, Kip found himself making good progress with the flutes; and he was pleased to be excelling in this specialty, as it was definitely turning out to be his favorite.

Preston was doing well with the mirrors, even more so than Varjo might have expected, with them being the most complex and dangerous of the three types of weapons.

As far as Weatherly's training, Varjo had noticed that she was favoring the blue ropes, but needed to be skilled in all three colors, so he set her and Linna extra exercises with the gold and red ones.

While watching, Em noticed how very serious Weatherly was, seldom smiling and not talking as much as the others. But this was typical of Weatherly, who had been a serious person for as long as Em could remember, even when they were very little girls. Weatherly also often didn't laugh at jokes; but this was more because her brain took longer to work them out than other people, and not because she didn't think the jokes were funny.

Another of Weatherly's personality quirks was gullibility, a trait Kip had often exploited over the years. He could easily tell her he'd seen a camel in the bathroom, and she'd believe him. But the teasing and pranks were a big part of why Weatherly had never grown as close to Kip as she had to Em; she simply didn't trust him.

When not watching the training, Em strolled about the clearing; and she ended up making friends with something akin to a squirrel—but much larger, more like the size of a large Pomeranian—living in a den at the base of a tree near the pond. As she fed him nuts she found on the

ground that looked a lot like triple-sized hazelnuts, he tossed the shells back to her as a kind of game.

As the training wrapped up for the day, Em said, “I might join in the next time I decide to come. I’ll be sure to wear different clothes.”

After lunch, taking Charlie’s car, Ben and Vini took a trip to the community pool in town so that Vini could swim to keep in shape for water polo in the fall. At the same time, in order to keep in shape for volleyball, Charlie went jogging with Em. The pair also hit a few tennis balls around upon returning from the jog, with Charlie using Aunt Fiona’s old racquet.

In the evening, everyone attended one of Aunt Eugenia’s storytelling sessions. She began with a tale about a sly fox convincing a gremlin that his shadow was actually God following him around, which then compelled the gremlin to change his ways—to fix things, instead of breaking them.

Next, Aunt Eugenia told a supposedly true story of when she was on her own just after college, and she found she needed to move some big rocks around in the back yard. Since she couldn’t afford to hire help for this task, and because the rocks were too heavy for her to manage by herself, she simply prayed to God for help. The answer to the prayer came in the form of God sending a bigfoot to help her move rocks, and the lesson in this particular story was that God often makes magical things happen when we pray. The listeners, of course, realized this might simply be a tall tale. It was nevertheless fun to hear; and Aunt Eugenia kept a perfectly straight face when describing how she baked cookies for the bigfoot, who often came to help her move heavy objects over the years. “Before he moved up to Washington State, that is,” she said, “because the trees are taller there, and bigfoots like tall trees.”

While listening to the stories, Em had absentmindedly pulled her magic key from her pocket and was fingering it. Sitting next to her on the couch, Vini noticed, and something caught her eye—the key had a bagical symbol on it. As soon as Aunt Eugenia finished the bigfoot story, Vini told Em, “That key has been in a bagical, a magical bag.”

“But I found it in a Chinese puzzle box.” Em countered, in slight confusion.

“It’s still been in a bagical,” Vini said, “that’s what the little symbol means. Bagicals can come in many forms, the types of bags I mean,

and are very rare. They either alter things put into them to make them magical, or they can produce magical things on their own from keeping some of the items put into them.” Remembering an example Professor Fulhausen had mentioned when attending tea at Doyle Mansion, Vini added, “Like someone could put in a cowboy hat, a flower, and a photograph of a bridge, and the bag might produce a magical golf ball.” She then shared something she had learned from an auto-writing session. “Magicians create bagicals; and it always takes three magicians to make a bagical, each having a particular skill needed to contribute to the project.”

Hearing all of this provided Ben with an answer as to how his magic pocketknife came into being, but he didn’t mention that he had a bagical at home.

Vini, too, was keeping the secret of her bagical, the one that had once held the dulcimer she had purchased from a Renaissance Fair. She had given the dulcimer to a friend, but had kept the bag, which she later discovered was a bagical.

Vini was up again early on Tuesday morning in order to get a lot of cleaning in. Though Louetta wasn’t due to arrive until late afternoon, it never hurt to get an early start. Charlie helped by cleaning on the third floor for about an hour before heading downstairs to start breakfast.

Em was starting to really feel connected to Charlie. Mid-morning, as she was helping in the kitchen, she told Charlie how much she admired her. “It’s not just the cooking; you’re so good at other things too. In fact, I’m planning to come to all of your volleyball games in the fall. I might just end up being your biggest fan.”

In hearing this, though she was smiling, Charlie shook her head slightly because she had heard something similar from Em only the day before. While listening to music in the parlor after returning from Kivetel, Em had said she was the “biggest fan” of the artist, someone named Tuscan Jeep that Charlie had never heard of.

Feeling a need to comment, Charlie’s reply was, “Just remember to be more a fan of God than of any human being.”

“See, that’s what I mean,” Em said, earnestly. “You’re good at being wise too.”

To this, Charlie didn't have a response; but she did hope Em would end up remembering what she said the next time she might be tempted to overly admire anyone, celebrity or otherwise.

Vini, Ben, Charlie, and Em all took an early afternoon trip to the pool. When they got back, they kicked a soccer ball around with Preston and Kip while waiting for Louetta to arrive.

In having just gotten her driver's license, and in taking things rather carefully, plus stopping to check a map several times, Louetta ended up being a little later than planned. But she still arrived well before dinnertime, thoroughly enjoying a tour of the manor after dropping her overnight bag off in her room. Pizzo, of course, was overjoyed to see Louetta and rode on her shoulder for most of the tour.

After dinner, Vini briefly called her mother to check in. Unfortunately, Mrs. Aberdeen had some slightly distressing news for her daughter in that she had found out from another mother that the high school water polo program might be cancelled. Both the varsity and junior varsity teams hadn't won enough games, it seems. At least, that was the word through the grapevine as to the reason. Vini hadn't particularly noticed that they won less than half of their games because she just had a lot of fun playing. Having been on the junior varsity team for two years, she had been looking forward to moving up to the varsity level in the fall.

In relating the news to everyone in the parlor, the aunts certainly had something to say about the issue of competition, specifically, as to how bad it was that winning was such a focus, when the sportsmanship and health factors of the game should be treated as much more important. Though it wasn't quite the same as a physical sport, when playing Scrabble, Aunt Fiona and Aunt Eugenia often helped each other make good words; and while they did keep score, it didn't particularly matter to them who won.

"Honestly, what are people really striving for?" Aunt Eugenia remarked, shaking her head with dismay.

"And think of what we are really teaching kids," Aunt Fiona fumed, scornfully. "If you don't win, it's not worth trying, not worth the school putting time and resources into; to heck with learning good skills, or having a variety of sports to choose from."

And it wasn't just sports in the public schools the aunts were disgusted with, because they both felt the schools fostered a completely unhealthy competitive academic atmosphere too.

"Grading systems have always been a problem," Aunt Eugenia said. "A recorded letter or number often has little to do with intelligence or common sense, or even actual learning."

Since there was still plenty of light in the garden, Kip, Ben, and Preston went outside for a while to spar using practice swords. While Kip and Preston had discovered a whole rack of real swords in the rear of the Weapons Room, Aunt Fiona had said they couldn't use real swords until they achieved more skill with the practice ones.

While Em was again helping Charlie in the kitchen, Vini and Louetta spent some time on their own in the larger library, which was where Vini had been spending most of her free time, since there was more room to spread out than in the smaller library. As Louetta was admiring a couple of paintings, Vini shared a few details about her quest for the spheres, in specific, telling her friend that she was going to need to find a way back into the Demon Pocket they had been trapped in while on Harvey's Ghost.

"Oh, Albert can probably help you with that," Louetta said, after which, she related that her brother had recently discovered that the halcyon who had helped them escape from the pocket was his protector. "Sima is her name. She's a shy little thing, so we don't see much of her."

Louetta phoned her brother right away, so that Vini could talk to him. Although he was busy working two summer jobs, at a restaurant and in a lumberyard, Albert did have some free time in his schedule. Since the main problem would be the travel time to and from Netherwind, of several hours each way, Vini told him she would arrange for magical help in this regard, probably from either Tulko or Lyydu. With Thursday afternoon looking good in his schedule, Albert accepted Vini's invitation to stay Thursday night at the manor. Since Aunt Fiona had already invited him to Netherwind at the same time she invited Louetta, Vini didn't think this was overstepping as far as Aunt Fiona's hospitality.

Departing early Wednesday morning, Louetta left a small package with Vini, which was something secret wrapped in a paper bag that

would eventually end up being a surprise for Pizzo. As the little puck troll was seeing her off, Louetta told him, "I'll see you later in the summer."

Pizzo ended up running after the car a short ways in order to keep waving to her as she drove off.

Em helped Vini with some of the cleaning before settling down to read the bible a bit and then heading up to the sewing room to work on little fleece coats she was making for Heike and Pizzo for the upcoming winter.

In the late afternoon, she hit tennis balls, which was when she saw Vini and Tulko depart on an outing, just for fresh air and fun because Vini was anxious for a break from being camped out in the library for nearly three hours straight.

The flying pair returned just as Charlie, Em, and Boomer were heading out on a stroll to the pecan grove.

Ben, Charlie, and Vini left the manor just after dinner to attend the Wednesday evening youth bible study in town, where they engaged in a rather intense and lengthy discussion that stemmed from 2 Corinthians 6:14. "Do not be mismatched with unbelievers. For what partnership have righteousness and iniquity? Or what fellowship has light with darkness?"

The debate was over how to apply this when an unbeliever was either a close friend or a family member, since severing a connection or limiting contact with the person would be very difficult, and even possibly heartbreaking.

In support of separating from unbelievers, no matter how difficult or heartbreaking, a group member named Darrell Rich looked up 2 Timothy 2:23-26, reading it aloud to everyone. "Have nothing to do with stupid, senseless controversies; you know that they breed quarrels. And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kindly to every one, an apt teacher, forbearing, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant that they will repent and come to know the truth, and they may escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will."

Charlie didn't particularly think the quote applied. "I don't see how it's stupid or senseless to try to convince a family member to believe."

“I meant that unbelievers’ arguments are generally senseless and stupid,” Darrell answered, “what they often give in response to someone witnessing to them. They say there are errors in the bible, when there aren’t. They say there isn’t proof that God exists, when there is. And they don’t have anything to back up their claims.”

“Although we are supposed to witness to others,” a girl named Clarissa Bailey interjected, “if someone’s heart is hardened, just move on, no matter how terribly sad it might seem that they are lost. The bible says that as the Endtimes draw near, brother will be pitted against father, mother against daughter. Families will be torn apart; there’s no getting around that. We have to move on if we can’t save someone because it’s not our job as believers to keep trying, again and again, if the person’s heart is hardened. We should spend our time on other people, more likely to believe and be saved.”

“I agree,” Darrell said. “We should give testimony to unbelieving family and friends, and hope they hear something in it. And we should pray for them, and set a good example by how we live. But otherwise, we shouldn’t keep company with them because our time is better spent elsewhere.”

After much conversation, the consensus of the group was that, as heartbreaking as it might be, we shouldn’t keep much company with unbelievers.

Ben, Charlie, and Vini were rather subdued on the drive back, in thinking that the youth here were pretty serious compared to their own bible study groups at home. But while they mostly kept silent, Ben did say, “I thought that quote about senseless controversies meant not to quibble over little things, like the neighbor’s dog occasionally pooping on your lawn, or who might have a bigger slice of pie at dessert.”

“It could mean that,” Vini answered. “If you’re reading your bible and that verse just jumps out at you, it could very well be that God is speaking to you about something like that. But since the end of the passage talks about the lost, I think Darrell was right to use it as he did, especially because a lot of people who are lost do tend to try to engage Christians to argue over small things. His examples were good too because people are definitely wrong to say the bible contains errors.”

“I’d be too scared to doubt the bible,” Charlie interjected, after which she quoted one of her favorite verses, Jeremiah 23:29. “““Is not

my word like fire, says the LORD, and like a hammer which breaks the rock in pieces?””””

The aunts had held an evening bible study as well for those at the manor; and it was a lot lighter and livelier than the one in town, in that they played bible charades before reading a psalm together and ending with a group prayer. Em, Kip, and Preston were fine with not going to town, as they felt like they were doing what God intended for them in attending church on Sundays and having bible studies at Netherwind. And this wasn't just because it was what they had grown accustomed to; they were also learning quite a lot.

Em went for training in Kivetel on Thursday morning. She started with a rope, then had a go with a flute, but found she didn't enjoy either much. While determined to give it a chance, she already knew this wasn't her thing.

Linna, on the other hand, was doing marvelously. The group had started training in trees and on boulders in another clearing less than a mile from the one they generally used, this being so that they could have practice with different angles and elevations. Being swifter and more nimble than the others, Linna was able to scamper up and over the boulders better than the rest of the trainees. She was also able to climb in and out of trees with incredible ease; in fact, they might have been tempted to compare her with a monkey. And she was just as accurate with the weapons from any location, it seemed.

Marveling at her skill, Preston and Weatherly both complimented her, to which she replied, "It's not me; I have no talent on my own. In Kivetel, all gifts come from the One Above." She then recited something both Kip and Em recognized from the bible. "...he makes my feet like hinds' feet, he makes me tread upon my high places." Looking it up later, Em discovered the quote to be from Habakkuk 3:19.

On Thursday afternoon, as Vini was preparing to go after the Realm Key, in remembering that she didn't always have to go it alone and in recognizing that there's safety in numbers, she asked Ben and Charlie to come along. Having basically taken over full gardening duties at Netherwind so that Mr. Michaels could focus on the crops, Ben was glad for a break. Charlie, having never been in a Demon Pocket, was somewhat curious. Plus, she wanted to help, if she could. Vini was very thankful for their support, as she was not at all looking forward to

returning to the watery nightmare that she, Ben, Albert, and Louetta had been trapped in on Harvey's Ghost. But she knew she must return because her quest for the spheres was important.

Vini had asked Folto if she wouldn't mind going to get Albert, as well as taking him into the Demon Pocket. She didn't mind at all; in fact, she was looking forward to a bit of adventure. Eleta was back from one of her jaunts, so she would be able to help Zapor and the gargoyles keep watch on things at the manor.

Folto retrieved Albert in less than twenty minutes total, so they were able to be on their way quickly.

Tulko, carrying Vini, had rounded up his sister, Dara, to take Ben. Charlie of course was riding Lyydu, and was clinging incredibly tightly to his feathers. Lyydu didn't mind because he knew how frightened she was to fly. Plus, she would have had to have the strength of Hercules to actually pull feathers from a thunderbird.

Sima was as beautiful and ethereal as Vini and Ben remembered. About the size of a common seagull, she had long tail and wing feathers that curled and twisted in the wind, giving her the appearance of a floaty creature that might have emerged from a fairytale. The soft glow she was emitting, noticeable even in daylight, also lent to her wispy appearance.

A common characteristic of halcyon was that the birds would appear as a different color to each person seeing them. To Charlie, Sima looked icy blue. Ben saw a pale mossy-green bird. Vini thought she looked gray like an elephant's skin. Albert always saw his protector as various shades of white; today, he thought she looked much like a cream-colored pearl with peachy hues.

Being mainly designed as traps, Demon Pockets often contained multiple doorways that generally didn't need any sort of key to unlock them, so Sima could easily lead them into the one they had been trapped in before. But she still had to find a doorway, which ended up being not all that far away, Vini was surprised to discover, as they rose nearly straight up into the air.

Because Simi was extremely graceful and had a surreal look about her, she appeared to be flying somewhat slowly; however, this obviously wasn't the case because, within seconds, as the other protectors followed, the group was very high up, so much so that Vini,

Albert, and Ben actually caught their breath from the exhilaration of it. Charlie had her eyes tightly closed.

Netherwind and Laurelstone far below appeared as barely specks on the landscape, as Sima continued to ascend toward a narrow crack of light that had appeared in the skies above them. As they approached, the crack widened slightly to allow the group to enter.

No sooner had they entered the crack than Sima, Folto, Lyydu, Dara, and Tulko swooped down into a watery realm that was currently very stormy. Hovering above a violently-tossing sea in the pelting rain, they were a little less than a mile from a rocky shoreline full of steep cliffs that they were barely able to see in the dense gray of the storm.

While it was well known that demons had the ability to raise storms, Sima, of course, was able to calm them, particularly sea storms because helping sea travelers was the main function of halcyon.

The calm came upon the area almost instantaneously, which left the visitors to the realm able to see demons everywhere, hundreds of them, hovering over the sea and perched on cliffs along the shore.

None immediately attacked because they were very wary of the thunderbird, wind horses, gryphon, and halcyon. However, a good number did tail the group as they made their way across the waters.

Good at remembering geography, Albert swiftly led them to the approximate spot where Harvey's Ghost was when Vini had thrown the cursed sphere overboard. Sima could actually sense the object and hovered directly above its position in the water to indicate the location.

Vini had made a plan. While Lyydu and Folto were holding off demons, Tulko and Dara would create a whirlpool in the sea, the center of which would be shallow enough for her to swim in. Sima would help by calming the swirling waters of the center just enough so that Vini could remain safe while searching for the Realm Key. Her swimming skills were certainly going to come in handy, along with her ability to hold her breath for about three minutes under water.

Vini was wearing her swimsuit under her clothes. Slipping off her t-shirt, she left her shorts on because it would have been too tricky to take them off while atop Tulko. They were lightweight enough not to drag her down, she decided. Vini then handed her belt pack, dagger, and t-shirt to Charlie, who donned the pack and dagger before tucking the t-shirt under the belt of the pack.

As Folto sidled up to Tulko, Vini next climbed aboard Folto to sit behind Alfred. With Dara's protective aura shielding him, Ben would be fine while the wind horses were creating the whirlpool. However, Vini was going to need to jump; and she couldn't do this from a wind horse traveling mind-blowingly fast without risking injury. So she would dive from Folto once the whirlpool was created.

Ben found the ride exhilarating, but did end up a little dizzy very quickly. So he tried to focus on the center of the whirlpool, and not on the objects whizzing around him, which were really not moving at all since it was Dara that was in motion. She and Tulko both were basically a blur as they snorted, pawed, and churned the water with apparent ease while flying as though chasing one another in circles.

In less than two minutes the pair had created a massive whirlpool, the center of which was about thirty feet in diameter and only about ten feet deep. Sima immediately calmed the center so that Vini could jump in, which she did as soon as Folto had lowered to about fifteen feet above the surface of the water.

The walls of the whirlpool, rising nearly twenty feet above the sea like a sea twister, were helping to keep the demons in check. Plus, Lyydu and Folto had started flying in circles around the perimeter of the whirlpool to keep the nasty creatures at bay, while Dara and Tulko continued to move in slow circles to keep the water moving.

The sea was not too cold, which Vini was thankful for, as she dove beneath the surface. Sima stayed low not only to keep the water calm for Vini but also to provide light for her search area, which ended up being almost like a gentle spotlight. Vini hadn't thought ahead of time about the darkness, so she was happy to have the help. The sphere itself was catching Sima's light, which enabled Vini to find it on her second trip under.

While the presently-oversized Realm Key was heavy, it was not a problem to lift it in the water. Vini had intended to signal to Folto to fly low so that she could hand the sphere off to Albert; however, in surfacing, she was very surprised to find herself face to face with a mermaid, who had swum into the whirlpool. Above the roar of the swirling waters, the mermaid quickly introduced herself as Lutani.

It was a common practice of demons to engage other not-so-nice creatures to help them; and a kraken of these parts, woken by the

demons, was fast approaching. The kraken actually hated demons; but because he was angry about being disturbed, he would end up attacking anything he could get his tentacles on in the area. And based on his size, the monster was not likely to be hindered by the whirlpool.

However, Lutani had called a leviathan, a creature more even-tempered than krakens, as well as slightly larger.

While the kraken might have been likened to a ferocious version of a giant squid, they couldn't liken the leviathan to anything, except maybe a gigantic underwater dragon—with eyes piercing the gloom like amber spotlights, heavy armor, a thrashing tail, and webbed feet sporting claws as thick as large tree trunks and as shiny as onyx. The monster also had an enormous wake.

Within only a couple of minutes, the leviathan was able to head off the kraken and drive him away.

Vini, slightly stunned and speechless, found herself remembering one of Professor Fulhausen's lectures in which he had mentioned that mermaids and mermen were some of God's special helpers, with powers to summon and control creatures such as leviathans and sea serpents.

While Albert, Vini, and Ben had seen the kraken before (though not the leviathan), Charlie's first sight of a sea monster fairly astounded her; and here was not just one sea monster, but two!

The demons, it seemed, were even more fearful of the mermaid than of Folto and Lyydu, and continued to keep back, though they were plenty mad that their plan involving the kraken had been thwarted.

Charlie and Albert could see the mermaid in the water below, talking to Vini, who was treading water, while holding onto the sphere.

"You must leave it here," Lutani advised Vini. "The person who can break the curse on it has not yet been born. Right now, it's too dangerous for any human to have the Realm Key in his or her possession."

With Vini simply looking confused and slightly shaking her head, Lutani stressed, "It needs to stay where it is. One of the reasons you were here before was to leave it here. It's safer in this spot than it would be in your realm. I will keep watch on it until it is needed in the future."

Vini's gift of discernment was telling her that Lutani was telling the truth. For the time being, the Realm Key needed to stay exactly where it was. With this realization, she dropped the sphere, watching as it quickly sank to the bottom of the sea.

Lutani had more to say. "Whoever comes for it in the future can just call my name, and I will come and retrieve it, so no one will have to go through the whole rigmarole of a whirlpool."

"Do you know exactly when this will be?" Vini asked.

While Lutani did know, she smiled but didn't answer, because she was wise enough not to tell anyone too many details about the future, for fear of changing what was meant to happen.

At Vini's silent call, Tulko stopped circling to pick up his charge as Dara also broke off maintaining the swirl of the whirlpool.

After waving goodbye to Lutani, who was already diving under the water to depart, Vini cringed slightly as she and Tulko rose to join the others because Folto was in the process of shredding a demon in mid-air that had gotten too close to the visitors.

Only a moment later, Lyydu ripped the wings off another that had advanced to within just a few feet of the thunderbird.

With the demons growing bolder, and being so vast in number, Vini decided not to take the time to don her t-shirt, pack, and dagger. Instead, the group quickly departed, led by Sima, who took them high into the sky to find the crack of light marking the Demon Pocket exit.

As they were just slipping through the crack, Charlie reflected on the adventure. Although she had never been inside this Demon Pocket before, as the others had, the area had seemed familiar to her because it looked a lot like her vision of the place where the unicorn and dragons were imprisoned. And it wasn't just the appearance of the watery realm, but a feeling too. But at this point, many things were still a mystery to her, such as how far into the future the events of the vision might take place. Also, who was keeping the creatures imprisoned was still a puzzle. If the location was indeed the Demon Pocket or someplace similar, then possibly the demons; but she had gotten a sense of something else evil in the place of her vision, something possibly worse than demons. At this point, she would simply have to wait for a repeat of the vision, or possibly several, in order to obtain more details. *Waiting is always the hard part*, she reflected.

Sima disappeared so quickly after guiding the group through the crack and into the skies above Netherwind and Laurelstone that no one even had a chance to thank her for her help. But this was simply her manner; she liked to keep things low-key, and didn't particularly ever want thanks.

When they got back to the manor, while Vini was showering and changing, she had a nagging feeling that she had missed something, or forgotten to do something. It definitely had something to do with the trip, but the unsettled feeling wasn't because she hadn't brought the Realm Key back as she had intended. It was something else that she needed to do, or perhaps remember, or maybe write down. She just couldn't quite put her finger on it.

*No, it's not something I need to write down,* she told herself after considering. *It's something that I saw, but that didn't quite register because it all happened so fast.* Still unable to recall, sighing and a little frustrated, she thought, *Hopefully, I'll remember later.*

During the time the group was gone, something ugly had happened between Em and Zapor. In seeing Tulko take Vini places, Em had gone up to the roof to ask Zapor to take her to Laurelstone to pick up some material Weatherly had offered her for making more clothes for Pizzo and Heike. Em didn't really need to go because she had plenty of material to work with for now, but she thought the extra variety might be nice.

"If you could just drop me off, I'll walk back," Em told Zapor.

When he said no, she basically lost her temper, to the point of actually yelling at him. "You're just being mean! It would be so easy for you to fly me there!" Fuming as she left the roof, she added, "Fine! I'll walk. And don't worry; I won't ask you to take me anyplace ever again!"

Aunt Eugenia had been on the small balcony outside her room, and had overheard the conversation. She came inside and downstairs to talk to Em, who was just about to set off for Laurelstone.

"But it's not fair!" Em insisted, as Aunt Eugenia met her in the hall on the first floor. "Tulko takes Vini places all the time."

"Zapor is not an errand boy," Aunt Eugenia said. In knowing that the gryphon was big on politeness, and that Em wasn't always the

model of politeness, Aunt Eugenia could well imagine his refusal to be something like a tough-love approach in helping his charge to grow up.

Hearing the hall conversation thus far, Aunt Fiona poked her head out of the parlor. “He’s here to protect you,” she said, “not cart you here and there.”

The aunts next counseled Em about the whole maturity thing, and about how she shouldn’t get angry so easily, which at first made her even angrier because she felt she had gotten better about getting angry.

Deciding not to go to Laurelstone after all, she stomped up to her room where she flopped down on the bed, more angry at herself than at anything else because the aunts were basically right. She shouldn’t have gotten angry. Praying to God and asking forgiveness, she suddenly had a revelation. She hadn’t realized it before, but she was actually jealous of Vini having a wind horse.

*Not only should I not get angry, she reminded herself, I shouldn’t covet anything anyone else has, or be jealous because I don’t have certain things. But what girl wouldn’t want a wind horse? Who wouldn’t want something as cool as that?*

*Maybe someone who already has a gryphon as a protector,* a little voice in the back of her mind answered her.

Heading back downstairs, and finding the aunts in the parlor, Em said, “I’m sorry I got angry. I just saw Tulko helping Vini, and I guess I felt envious because I don’t have what she has.”

Smiling, Aunt Fiona quoted from James 4:2-3. “You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly....”

“In other words,” Aunt Eugenia said, “we might have the wrong motives when we ask, so God might wait to grant our requests until our desires line up with His.”

“And He’s certainly not going to give us what we ask for if it’s not in our best interest,” Aunt Fiona added. “Maybe you’re not ready for a blessing like a wind horse. Think of how easily someone might abuse that gift, perhaps someone who might not be either mentally or spiritually mature enough to handle it.”

“Exactly,” Aunt Eugenia agreed. “If we were mad at someone, and had a wind horse, we might be tempted to ask the horse to attack the

person. And this would be wrong of course because we must let God take care of our enemies.”

“Or if we wanted something,” Em said, “think how easy it would be with the help of a wind horse to steal the thing.”

“Very good example,” Aunt Fiona said.

While she was still a little miffed that Zapor wouldn’t do a simple favor for her, Em did understand everything the aunts had told her; and as she headed back up to her room, she mused, *God’s blessings for us must be on His timing, not ours, because He always knows what’s best for us.*

Lying on her bed, she took up her bible to read. Letting it fall open in her hands, her eyes were immediately drawn to Proverbs 16:1. “The plans of the mind belong to man, but the answer of the tongue is from the LORD.”

Thinking about the quote, Em realized it perfectly fitted the situation. She had a plan in her mind, but it didn’t happen the way she expected, so she got peevish. Then, after she got angry, the words from the aunts were “the answer of the tongue” from God.

*How embarrassing, she thought. I didn’t get my own way, so I basically threw a tantrum. I need to learn to react better in the future, when things don’t work out how I imagine they will, because there’s basically no excuse for a tantrum at my age.*

They all played board games in the evening, after a wonderful dinner of homemade pizza and fruit salad.

Folto took Albert home super early Friday morning so that he wouldn’t be late for work at the lumberyard.

Going to train for a second time in Kivetel, Em ended up sitting out and watching the last half of training. She had definitely decided this was not her thing, and she likely would not come again; except she might go with Weatherly and Linna on a planned visit to an art museum, in order to see some of the art of Kivetel.

As the group was taking a break, Preston cracked a joke. “A man who was a martial arts expert joined the military; unfortunately, every time he saluted someone he knocked himself out.”

When Weatherly, in taking her usual long time to work out a joke, simply looked puzzled, Kip said, “Boy, you’re really thick aren’t you?”

The remark hurt Weatherly's feelings, and later she confided in Em that she would probably skip training on Saturday in order to have a break from Kip.

"Boys are just insensitive sometimes, and he didn't really mean it," Em answered. "So don't let him spoil your training."

Though Weatherly didn't reply, she did decide she would take Em's advice and not neglect her training just because she didn't want to be around Kip.

## Chapter Twelve

### A Special Delivery

Back at the manor late morning, while Kip and Preston were having their usual nap, Mr. Galloway and his helper, Frank Wharton, arrived for a surprise visit in a truck Mr. Galloway had recently bought for use on his newly-purchased farm. Frank, who had just graduated from high school, was planning to study agriculture at a local college in the fall, while continuing to work on Mr. Galloway's farm.

The visit wasn't a surprise to Aunt Fiona who had helped to arrange it. She had been recently talking to Vini's mom and Ben's uncle, and had suggested that the pair might like the use of their bicycles for the rest of their stay at Netherwind, after which, Vini's mom had arranged for Mr. Galloway to deliver them. Mr. Galloway had then coordinated with Violet to bring more garden fare to the manor, along with some of the produce Frank had recently harvested from the farm, which was evidently thriving.

"I'll come and pick the bikes up at the end of the summer," Mr. Galloway told Vini and Ben.

"Thanks Mr. G," Vini and Ben said simultaneously, with Vini also giving Mr. Galloway a big hug.

Charlie helped Frank and Ben unload the boxes of food. "Even with having a stand at the farmers' market," Frank said, "and donating a bunch to the food bank, we still have lots extra."

Mr. Galloway and Frank were not only doing the residents of the manor a good turn in making their delivery, they were also anxious to have a look at the plantation, which they had heard much about from Violet, who not only regularly trotted across the street with Otto to share news with the Galloways, she had also visited the farm on a couple of occasions.

Mr. Michaels and one of the kids that helped him were happy to show Frank and Mr. Galloway around.

“You don’t need to be shy about saying it,” Mr. Michaels told the guests, “because I know we’re not making the most of the plantation at present.”

Mr. Galloway hadn’t wanted to say anything, though it was obvious to him that Netherwind was far underused based on its potential.

“It simply a matter of having limited resources right now,” Mr. Michaels said, almost apologetically.

“I’d offer to share equipment with you,” Mr. Galloway said, “but the distance is a bit far, so I don’t think it would be very practical.”

Charlie used some of the new ingredients Mr. Galloway and Frank had brought in making lunch for all of them, and Frank quite frankly said it was the best food he had ever eaten. “My mom’s not much of a cook,” he added. “In fact, she’s such an activist that she hardly has time to do much of anything at home.” His voice held a note of sadness as he said this.

Blushing a bit because of the compliment, Charlie said, “It’s the good ingredients that make the food good.”

“Well, we’re definitely going as organic as possible,” Frank said, “so that everything is healthy as well as tasty.”

Mr. Galloway talked about the sorghum and wheat they were growing on the farm, as well as the large garden and nearly three acres of pumpkins. “The pumpkins are not just for people and animals to eat,” he said, “but for donations to churches and youth centers, so they can have pumpkin patches in the fall for pictures and gatherings.”

Charlie’s mind at this point was fairly spinning with thoughts of making pumpkin pies, tarts, cookies, and such.

“The farm has apple and plum orchards too,” Frank said excitedly, “and we’re planting peach, apricot, and pear trees. And, just for fun and beauty, we’re putting in a few mimosa and maple trees too.”

Three barns were located on the property, including the one containing an entrance to the triangle tunnel, which led to both Doyle Mansion and the fallout shelter behind Mr. Galloway’s house.

“We have pigs, chickens, and a couple of horses,” Mr. Galloway added, “and I’m thinking about getting a few goats because Mrs. Galloway has positively expressed an interest in learning how to make goat cheese.”

“I’d like to learn that too,” Frank said.

“We kept on six of the farmhands,” Mr. Galloway further explained. “The other three evidently didn’t want to stay when the farm was sold. Only four live on the farm, but the bunkhouse can easily handle fifteen, so we can hire more, if we need them.”

“But we might not need to,” Frank said, “because some of the kids from that Christian troubled-youth center have been coming to train with the farmhands. The skills are good for them to learn; plus, they like the money they’re earning.”

Vini was smiling the whole time she listened to Frank. Mr. Galloway had certainly had an impact on his young protégé in just the few months they had known each other. When they had first crossed paths, Frank was a vandal and an atheist whose future looked rather bleak. But thanks to Mr. Galloway’s influence, Frank had done an incredible turnaround. Not only had he accepted Christ, his future currently looked very bright; and this was all obviously meant to be because Frank had discovered that he absolutely loved farming.

Frank helped with the dishes after lunch and told Charlie, “I found out I can do a lot of my classes online, so I’ll still have time to work on the farm the whole time I’m in college. And the work will count as an internship when I get into my junior and senior years.”

While Frank was helping with the dishes, Ben, Em, and Aunt Eugenia accompanied Mr. Galloway on a stroll through the gardens behind the house. In admiring the flowers and hedges, Mr. Galloway also noticed the dandelions that seemed to be invading the croquet lawn from a huge field just beyond the lawn that had so many dandelions it looked like a sea of bright yellow. “I do constant battle with them,” he told Ben.

“I’ve been keeping them away from the gardens,” Ben replied, “but letting them grow pretty much everywhere else.”

“Charlie has used some of the dandelion greens in salads,” Em commented. “They taste really good.”

Ready to leave, Mr. Galloway found Charlie and Frank sitting on the tailgate of the truck. Frank was playing the harmonica, which he often did on breaks from work.

“The music has a nice effect on the plants at the farm,” Mr. Galloway said. “It seems to make them grow faster.”

“Like how some people talk to their plants,” Frank said. “I play to mine.”

As the pair departed, waving, Charlie found herself admiring Frank very much. *Green thumbed and musically talented; not a bad guy*, she thought.

In the afternoon, Em helped Charlie bake brownies to include a separate batch just for Pizzo and Heike. The puck trolls had been spending a lot of time in the attic lately, and in various rooms accessed by the rear staircase. They were just mainly having fun exploring and finding new indoor and outdoor picnic spots each day, as well as a bunch of secret compartments and passages, so many in fact that they were having trouble keeping track of them all.

Em helped with cooking dinner as well, but messed up by over-salting the pot of chili; and she was very upset with herself. “I’ve completely ruined it,” she lamented.

Charlie was actually smiling as she said, “Part of the joy of being in the kitchen is in not being perfect in the kitchen. Plus, we can fix this. There are lots of little fixes for little cooking mistakes.”

To fix the over-salted chili, they ended up adding chunks of potato to the chili. “They will absorb the extra salt,” Charlie explained, “then we’ll fish them out and probably discard them because they’ll be too salty to eat.”

“Wow!” Em gushed. “You’re a genius.”

“Actually,” Charlie answered, “I learned this from my dad, and I think he said his mother taught him.”

Em and Charlie tried the potatoes when they fished them out of the pot about forty-five minutes later, finding them very tasty. “You know,” Charlie said, “mistakes in the kitchen sometimes turn into the best recipes—chili potatoes, for instance.”

“Mistakes also make us think on our feet,” Em said, “so we can be creative and become problem-solvers.”

Jelzey was in the garden, paying a visit to Ben who was happy to see her. He took a break to sit in the grass by the croquet lawn, with his friend hovering beside him (at about the size of a small teacup), and he told her about the visit to the Demon Pocket. Jelzey was happy that he was safe.

After relating a few other tidbits of news to her, he fell silent and the pair simply relaxed, enjoying the view of the field of dandelions.

At one point, Jelzey sighed contentedly. Dandelions were her favorite flower; and she was always on the lookout for an orange one among the yellows, a phenomenon much rarer than a four-leaf clover among three-leaf ones. It was said that anyone finding an orange dandelion in a patch of yellows could have a wish granted by a genie. Jelzey knew exactly what she would wish for, but she wouldn't be sharing the information with anyone.

Just before the firebird left to be off on her next job, she and Ben saw a rainbow in the distance. Though it was cloudy in the direction of the bow, the area around Netherwind was sunny.

"I guess it's raining over there," Ben remarked.

*But not here*, Jelzey thought, as she departed, heading in the direction of the rainbow. A few moments later, she was leaving a steaming path through a light drizzle on her way to stir up a geyser in Iceland.

Vini had seen the rainbow too, from a window inside the manor, and this reminded her of a recent entry she had made in her journal while auto-writing. "The more rainbows we see, the closer we might be to the Endtimes, because this represents a promise by God, not to destroy the earth again by flood. But in the Endtimes, the world will be destroyed and remade by fire. Dragons are related to rainbows, and hold great fire; and they are going to help with remaking the earth. God often uses other creatures to bring about His own ends, to accomplish His plans. Regarding rainbows representing a promise of God—He always keeps His promises. So rainbows can be both beautiful and somewhat terrifying, as related to the Endtimes drawing ever closer."

Mr. Michaels was packing an overnight case because he was set to leave early in the morning, on a weekend outing to tour part of the countryside in pursuit of his hobby of visiting and photographing headstones in lonely graveyards. He had whole albums of the photos, and had shared them with Em, who was very interested.

As they looked through them, he told her that his brother had had a similar hobby. "He took a picture of the same tree each day for twenty-two years, which was interesting, to see how it changed over the years, but a little boring, in my opinion."

Though his brother had passed away, Mr. Michaels still had the albums containing the tree photographs, which were kept in Netherwind's larger library because Mr. Michaels didn't have room for them in his small cottage.

"I don't think it's boring at all," Em said, as they flipped through a couple of the tree albums. "Look, a scrub jay; such a bright blue."

"And a squirrel in this one," Mr. Michaels added.

Later, in looking at the albums further, Em noticed a lot of changes over the years, such as bird nests and fallen branches from storm damage, and she got the idea that Mr. Michaels' brother was probably a genius. *This is sort of like waiting on God's timing*, she thought. *Maybe we should all have a hobby like this, to teach us to be both patient and observant.*

Finished with work for the day, Ben hung out in the kitchen with Charlie and Em to help make cornbread and a cucumber salad to go with the chili. Pizzo and Heike were there too, polishing off the chili potatoes while eyeing their pan of brownies, half of which was empty already. They were trying very hard to save the other half for the next day, but they didn't know if they could make it that long without having at least a couple more of them.

"You look quite handsome in an apron," Em remarked to Ben, who blushed a little at the comment.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to embarrass you," she added. "But I definitely think more boys should help out in the kitchen."

"Well, I definitely want to learn more," Ben said.

"You can help me make orange scones and soft pretzels in the morning, if you want," Charlie offered.

"Okay," he replied.

"I'll be starting before dawn because I'm taking Vini to the pool tomorrow morning too," Charlie added, "and I want to make sure we go early enough to be back in plenty of time for lunch prep."

"I'll be here super early," Ben agreed.

"Me too," Em said, as she also wanted to learn how to make orange scones and soft pretzels.

## Chapter Thirteen

### Hiding Places

Mid-Summer 1956

Because it seemed like a good place to start, Frances intended to ask Zapor when he returned from his important and secretive travels about Laura, and what connection this person might have to Folto. However, she didn't end up doing this because the answer as to how to begin investigating basically fell into her lap just two days after she heard Folto pining away over this mysterious Laura on the balcony.

While rummaging around in the attic for her old skates to give to a girl down the street, in an old trunk, Frances found a keepsake box containing a tiny teddy bear, a cloth picture book, and a pair of baby booties. From this find, she decided to do some further investigating. Her mind called it investigating, rather than snooping, because she knew she was never supposed to look through other people's things. However, since she was fairly burning with curiosity, at a time when her parents were both out of the house, she decided to look in their bedroom.

In the bottom of her mother's jewelry box in the top drawer of the dresser, Frances found a snapshot of a baby that she didn't recognize. Then, moving on to the closet, in a box filled with paper odds and ends, such as toddler crayon drawings by both Annabelle and Frances, she found the birth certificate of a Laura Elizabeth Harrison. The date on the certificate was what stunned Frances more than the revelation that she had had another sister because it was exactly the same as Frances' birthdate.

*So I had a twin sister*, Frances thought, as she quickly replaced the contents of the box and left her parents' room to seek out Annabelle who was upstairs.

"Did you know about Laura?" Frances asked her sister who confessed that she did.

“I can’t believe no one ever told me,” Frances whined.

“Mom and Dad thought it would upset you,” Annabelle replied, “so Charles, Edward, and I have been keeping the secret too.”

“So everyone knows but me,” Frances said with a sigh. “Do you remember her at all?”

“Barely,” Annabelle admitted, “and it’s really fuzzy. She died just before your first birthday. Crib death, they said. You were fraternal twins,” she added. “Laura’s hair was darker than yours and really curly.”

“So the double gryphons make sense now,” Frances commented, “if one was supposed to be Laura’s protector, Folto, I guess.”

“That sounds right,” Annabelle agreed.

Later, in knowing where their father kept a small album of photos of Laura in a drawer of his desk, Annabelle showed Frances. At present, the girls had decided not to tell their parents that Frances knew about Laura. However, Frances was anxious to at least learn a little something about her twin, from the photos of the little toothless and curly-headed girl, and perhaps from hearing a few stories, which Folto provided over the next couple of weeks.

Frances was particularly delighted when Folto told her that Laura used to giggle in her sleep. “You used to frown in yours,” Folto said. “You were always more serious than Laura.”

“So you and Zapor kept watch over us even when we were babies,” Frances remarked. “But no one in the family knew about you until later.”

“Correct,” Folto responded. “You weren’t ready to know about us until later.”

Smiling, Frances agreed. “We have to be ready for God’s blessings, before receiving them.”

Frances also loved the story of how she and Laura took their first steps. “You walked first,” Folto said. “And Laura was so mad that she couldn’t walk yet, she basically forced herself to. I remember she pulled herself up, to the coffee table, to the couch, over and over again. Then she’d try to walk. And I think she fell about twenty times before she managed a totter. But she never gave up. She basically exhausted herself. When she finally managed it, she was so happy. And I think she might have grown almost as tall as you,” Folto added, “if she had

lived. It's hard to tell. But I think you would have been very different from one another because her personality was so different.”

Strangely enough, Frances didn't feel sad, as she might have thought she would in learning about a twin sister who died very young. Instead, she felt sort of happy to know about Laura, and especially in thinking that she would eventually get to meet her again someday, in heaven.

In addition to helping with the bus boycott efforts, Frances was squeezing in a good bit of research this summer, often bringing home books borrowed from the library at Doyle Mansion. And she was quite enjoying learning about creatures such as firebirds and dragons, though she did still plan to seek out antique bookstores and possibly visit other libraries in order to add to the information.

Shortly after their discussion about Laura, Frances and Annabelle were saddened to hear of another car lot riot, though it was odd that a different riot across town was thwarted because someone had stolen all of the baseball bats and tire irons from a group of cars arriving at one of the carpool lots in order to try to shut it down. Unfortunately, it was easy for the violent men staging these incidents to find more. They were also evidently using short pieces of metal pipe and construction reinforcing bar.

In hearing the story of the missing items from a fellow carpool driver, Annabelle thought it was pretty funny that the men stirring up trouble couldn't find their smashing equipment, so they had to leave, rather sheepishly, because they hadn't made any sort of back-up plan.

But it certainly was not funny that the violence seemed to be escalating. In just the past week, several cab drivers were beaten up for charging bus rates for taxi rides, and two had ended up in the hospital.

The damage to the cars seemed to be getting worse too, with the slashing of tires and bashing of windshields and headlights, anything to keep the cars from continuing to be used for the boycott efforts.

When one of Mr. Templeton's cab drivers, a Mr. Tanner, tried to stop an attack on another driver, he ended up injuring one of the attackers, a local banker named Mr. Mabbott. And while many of the area police were willing to turn a blind eye to the violence against cab and carpool drivers, they wouldn't neglect to pursue justice for someone like Mr. Mabbott.

Upon discovering that the police were after Mr. Tanner, Mr. Templeton hid him in his fallout shelter, which was better than the Templeton house because the police actually came and searched the house looking for Mr. Tanner shortly after the incident.

In having become friends with Mr. Templeton, Mr. and Mrs. Doyle offered to hide Mr. Tanner at Doyle Mansion. But this wouldn't be necessary because Mr. Templeton was in the process of hiring a lawyer for Mr. Tanner. Both the lawyer and Mr. Templeton would accompany Mr. Tanner to turn himself in, and would at that time remind the police that it was their responsibility to keep Mr. Tanner completely safe while he was in their custody. Since there were plenty of witnesses of the incident to say that Mr. Tanner was defending himself, including a prominent business owner who wasn't afraid to speak up, Mr. Templeton felt it likely that things would turn out okay.

The very next week, Doyle Mansion did end up being used as a hiding place, but for a different reason than the bus boycott. Gerard's older sister, Margret, was married and had already left the home. But a good friend of hers, a girl named Bethel, showed up at the door in need of help. She had been badly beaten by her father for befriending a Negro boy at college, and had come to the mansion because she knew that the Doyle family would be likely to help her. After pleading with Mr. and Mrs. Doyle not to take her to a doctor, she simply asked for them to hide her for a short time, which they did, after getting her as cleaned up and bandaged up as possible per their limited medical abilities. Thankfully, Bethel didn't have broken bones, though the swelling, bruising, and welts were probably going to take a long time to heal up.

For nearly a week, with the exception of a few trips to a bathroom, Bethel hid in the slide-tunnel, specifically, the small landing area at the bottom of the slide. And it was a good thing she stayed hidden because not only did her father come looking for her at Doyle Mansion, the police did too. But in searching the house of the "sympathizers" the police never found her because the entrances to the slide-tunnel were well hidden.

During the week of hiding, Mrs. Doyle helped Bethel contact her aunt who was living in Ohio. Bethel would be going to stay with her,

and would be finishing college somewhere in the Northern part of the country.

Gerard ended up accompanying his parents and Bethel on a rather clandestine early-morning trip, to a bus station nearly a hundred miles away, where Mr. Doyle purchased a bus ticket for Bethel, and gave her a little money. Mrs. Doyle had already packed up a good amount of food in a grocery sack, as well as clothing in a small suitcase, for Bethel to take with her on her journey.

Staying with her until she boarded the bus, the family soon sent Bethel, who was tearful in saying her goodbyes, off to her aunt.

Though the rioting and violence seemed to quiet down some during the remainder of the summer, Mr. Templeton's cab drivers continued to get tickets. Several of his cabs were also damaged. However, he ended up getting a big monetary donation from a man who owned a chain of bakeries; and this enabled him to sustain his business until things further settled in the South.

Frances often thought of Laura during the remaining weeks of summer, in wishing she could remember her. But, of course, she would simply have to wait to see her twin again.

After hiding Bethel, the Doyle family started thinking about better hiding places for people. Several extended family members were into real estate, so there were other houses available in which to hide people, if needed. However, Mr. Doyle really wanted someplace at Doyle Mansion that would be better than the landing of the slide-tunnel. While Bethel had been fairly comfortable in there, the slide-tunnel would not work for more than one person. So he started making plans to build a safe room in the mansion, specifically for the purpose of hiding people.

This was just around the time that a boy puck troll named Turo came to live at Doyle Mansion. Turo and Deena would end up being Pizo's parents; and they would have their own parts to play in helping to hide a few people over the years, inside murals and paintings mostly.

Frances didn't realize until the end of the summer how very much she had changed in recent months, being no longer timid, though she would always be fairly reserved and introspective because that was simply her nature. In helping with the boycott efforts—which she would continue to do even into the fall—she not only felt like she was

accomplishing something, but that she could do even more things like this in the future. Of course, the protection of gryphons could make anyone feel pretty strong. But it wasn't just Zapor and Folto that gave Frances confidence and the ability to stand up for what was right. She also knew that God was always with her. So even when Zapor and Folto were not around, though she was sometimes afraid, she still felt strong. And she needed to do things like this. Somebody had to.

## Chapter Fourteen

### Truth Stranger Than Fiction

#### Present Day

Saturday at Netherwind was filled with the usual things that kept its various occupants busy such as training, cleaning, laundry, baking, jogging, and writing, along with a trip to town for Vini and Charlie to go swimming, and another for the aunts to buy milk and eggs. Boomer also got another bath, as he wasn't just dirty this time, but smelly as well. In the early evening, Ben and Vini took a bike ride around the countryside.

When Sunday rolled around, they were all looking forward to simply relaxing after church and lunch. However, Weatherly had noticed that the arbor window had changed again, a fact she informed Kip, Preston, and Em about at church. So just after lunch, toting a small bag of ropes, mirrors, and flutes from the Weapons Room with them, the three made a trip to Laurelstone. While Weatherly was still a little annoyed at Kip, she was trying to be forgiving, especially because she felt it was important to have his help on this mission.

As they were leaving the manor, Em noticed Zapor on the roof. And while she wasn't all that angry with him, she still found it somewhat hard to believe that he wouldn't take her places. In dwelling on the thought, she ended up giving him a dirty look that she didn't particularly care if he saw; and she felt he probably did see because she knew that gryphons have incredibly good eyesight.

Of Weatherly's two small daggers, Em carried one, well secluded under her loose blouse. But they decided to leave the other at Laurelstone for now because they were so well armed otherwise—Preston choosing a mirror, Kip a flute, and Weatherly a blue rope to take with them.

Stepping through the window, they arrived in an alley beside a bakery in Philadelphia.

Their task on this trip seemed a relatively easy one. They were to move an object hidden inside the Liberty Bell from its present location to another, the object being a stone ball that reminded the time travelers of various minerals (such as malachite and jasper) they had seen in rock collectors' display cases over the years. Made into shapes like cubes, spheres, eggs, and pyramids, and with light shining upon them, the stones were often very exquisite. This one was a deep orange color with small splotches of gold and magenta dotting it. The time travelers didn't know that this was the Truth Key; and they also weren't particularly reminded of the Time Key, though the two spheres did somewhat resemble one another, being similar in make-up, though not in color.

They procured the stone ball from the underneath of the Liberty Bell in quite a simple fashion, with the boys creating a distraction for the tourists in the area by giving an impromptu demonstration of some of their aikido moves. While Em kept watch, Weatherly moved in close to the bell; then she ducked down in order to reach inside to grab the ball, which was stuck fairly high up to the inside of the bell with something that reminded her of silly putty. Wrapped tightly in thick paper very much resembling the weathered copper of the bell, and because the ball itself was no bigger than an ordinary plum, it evidently hadn't been noticed over the years. Or, if it had, perhaps someone simply thought it was a rough spot in the metal of the bell.

Strolling nonchalantly away from the immediate area of the bell, with Em and the boys following as casually as possible, they unwrapped and admired the lovely stone before Weatherly slipped it into her pocket as she said, "The ball was placed inside the Liberty Bell during a time when the bell traveled across the country for people to see. The tour was meant to inspire people."

"The inscription from Leviticus is certainly inspirational," Em said, having noticed and memorized it while Weatherly was procuring the stone. She then recited the quote, closing her eyes to picture the words on the bell in order to be completely accurate. "PROCLAIM LIBERTY THROUGHOUT ALL THE LAND UNTO ALL THE INHABITANTS THEREOF"

"Now, we need to catch a bus to Washington D.C.," Weatherly said, looking around for a bus terminal, which was a mere half a block from their current location.

In worrying about how to pay the bus fare, because they only had money from the future, Weatherly suddenly remembered that she carried a very old twenty-dollar bill in her pocket that her grandfather had once given her. She carried it as a kind of good-luck charm, and as a way to remember her grandfather. The bill was a Series of 1934, which was plenty old enough not to be noticed as out of place because the clothing of the people milling about looked a lot like the style of the seventies. While Weatherly hated to part with the keepsake, needs must; so she did, paying for four round trip tickets.

On the bus ride, Kip was able to see the date of July 20, 1977 on a newspaper a man sitting across the aisle from him was reading.

In Washington D.C., after asking a couple of people for directions, they found what they were looking for less than a mile from where the bus had dropped them off. And while none of the group had ever seen a picture of this landmark, the sign outside the building made it clear they had reached their intended destination of the J. Edgar Hoover FBI Building.

Per Weatherly, they needed to place the stone ball on the third floor, outside a specific window. “There will be a crack in the stonework under the sill, just the right size to fit the ball,” she said.

“Couldn’t we just hide it somewhere on the first floor?” Preston questioned, dubiously eyeing the height of the third floor.

“No,” Weatherly replied, as they circled the building to the rear to find the right spot. “It has to be in that exact spot.” Since she was hearing the little voice in the back of her head very clearly, she wasn’t about to take any kind of shortcut. “But don’t worry,” she added, “I’ll make the climb myself, so you won’t have to.”

As it turns out, no one was going to have to climb because a set of suspended scaffolding, like one a window washer might use, was ready and waiting for them in the rear of the building, currently lowered to the first floor, but directly under the window they needed to reach on the third.

They decided that Preston and Weatherly would perform the task. No one was currently around, which was remarkable for such a normally-crowded place, so they were easily able to figure out how to work the scaffolding to reach the third floor, place the stone in the crack, and descend, all without being noticed by a single person.

As soon as the pair reached the ground, the time travelers made their way back to the bus terminal, where they caught the next bus back to Philadelphia.

Exiting the bus, the four made their way to the alley beside the bakery. But just as they were nearing the spot to return home, at the exact moment the window appeared, a woman who had just had her handbag snatched cried out for help from the sidewalk in front of the bakery. Preston responded to the call and, along with one of the bakery employees, set to chasing down the thief, who actually ran right into a foot-beat policeman. Thus, the woman got her handbag back and the snatcher was arrested.

Meanwhile, back in the alley, at the very moment Preston disappeared around the corner, Weatherly heard the voice in her head, rather loudly this time, telling her not to wait. "We have to go now!" she urged Kip and Em. "We can come back for him."

This would turn out not to be the case, however, because the window changed to the arbor scene just after they arrived in the study; and it didn't change back.

After about a half-hour of waiting and hoping for the window to change once again to the Philadelphia alley, they definitely started to panic. Weatherly had been silently praying the whole time, asking God to help them figure out what to do. In realizing they would have to tell an adult what happened, they decided to go to Netherwind. While John was at home, they felt it best to tell Aunt Fiona and Aunt Eugenia, who were much more adult than John, based on their ages and life experiences.

They ran the whole way, with Em in the lead and not even out of breath when they arrived because she was so used to running.

However, as she was just bounding up the front steps, and slipping on a pumpkin seed (thankfully only a slight stumble), she had the idea that she needed to tell Vini first. After all, Preston was her brother.

Vini had been planning to go after the Truth Key in Philadelphia this very afternoon, but had gotten sidetracked by a rather lengthy auto-writing session. She had sat down in the larger library intending to read for a half-hour or so; and when entering a note, the writing had just started to flow. Several pages later, she had to pause because her hand was beginning to cramp. Reading a bit of what she had written, she was

very intrigued because she hadn't even realized what she was writing for the past ten minutes or so. It was almost as if her brain had shut down while her hand kept going. The information was actually a little mind-boggling, about sorcerers and their role in the approach to the Endtimes.

She was still reviewing her lengthy journal entry when Em rushed into the room.

Vini listened carefully as Em, as calmly as possible (but with a squeaky note of stress and alarm in her voice), told the whole story of what had happened. Kip and Weatherly had followed Em as closely as possible on the trek from Laurelstone, but were so out of breath by the time they arrived in the library, they basically weren't able to contribute anything to the story. But that didn't particularly matter because Vini had gotten enough information to both think (which she did very quickly) and act. From Em's story, Vini had immediately recognized the object that had been moved as the Truth Key.

Telling the others not to worry and that she'd be back with Preston shortly, Vini made her way up to the attic and onto the roof, to call a unicorn. On her way up the stairs, she actually smiled as she thought, *So this was the reason for the delay in going after the Truth Key, because it wouldn't have been at the Liberty Bell when I looked for it, having been moved in the past by the time travelers.* As usual, God's timing was perfect; and Vini could see His hand in everything, guiding her along her journey, even in the smallest of her daily activities. However, she did think it odd that two of the seven spheres ended up in Washington D.C. *How strange.*

A unicorn with eyes like those of Mrs. Doyle appeared a mere second after Vini's call.

*Somewhere in the vicinity of the Liberty Bell, July 20, 1977,* Vini's mind told the unicorn as she mounted, though she wouldn't have particularly needed to say anything because, having received divine instructions, the unicorn already knew exactly where to go and when to arrive.

Aunt Fiona was in the parlor while the unicorn was on the roof; and just as the creature vanished, a flood of thoughts came into her mind. She had been feeling rather tired lately, and slightly depressed over not having as much energy as she used to before having cancer, and in

wondering why God had allowed this horrible disease to attack her. However, she suddenly realized that the cancer was meant to be because if she hadn't gotten sick, Em, Kip, and Otto never would have gone to live with Violet and Dave; and no one at Netherwind would likely have ever met anyone connected to Doyle Mansion. Plus, she hadn't had the time or energy for years to put into exploring the various realms of the mezzanine. Now, the magical floor was being put to good use, as it was meant to be. She also likely would never have met any puck trolls, who were completely delightful, as well as mischievous. Aunt Fiona smiled in thinking of Heike, only the day before, throwing a cherry tomato at her in the kitchen. While puck trolls didn't often throw things at elderly people, Heike knew the tomato was soft enough not to hurt; and she wanted to get Aunt Fiona's attention. They were running low on cottage cheese, which both Heike and Pizzo absolutely loved. Once she had Aunt Fiona's full attention, Heike then threw a pencil and a pad of paper on which she had started the grocery list, topping the list with Cottage Cheese, followed by Strawberry Gelato and Peanuts, two other puck-troll food faves.

*The kids were definitely meant to live with Dave and Violet, Aunt Fiona's ponderings positively decided. They're meant to do something important and wonderful that their life at Doyle Mansion is contributing to. So having cancer was worth it for the future of this family.*

Preston was just coming out of a diner when Vini showed up. The unicorn had dropped her off in an alley very near the Liberty Bell and directly across the street from the restaurant Preston had just emerged from. Bounding across the street, Preston gave his sister a big hug.

Vini was very proud of her little brother, because he hadn't panicked when he realized the others had had to leave without him.

"Instead of panicking, I prayed," he said. "And I somehow knew that you would be the one coming to get me. It's like the thought was just suddenly in my brain right after I prayed."

Vini was smiling as Preston added, "But I was getting a little hungry, so I talked to the manager of that diner over there. I told him I was waiting for some friends that were late, and I asked him if I could sweep or wash dishes to earn a sandwich. He had me wipe off the tables and sweep the front walk; then he gave me a sandwich and a

piece of cherry pie. Man that was some good pie! They sure knew how to make pie in the seventies.”

Preston wasn't at all surprised to discover that Vini's trip had a two-fold purpose. “Before we go home,” she told him, “I need to get that sphere you guys moved from under the Liberty Bell.”

Instead of taking a bus to D.C., they were going to fly, by wind horse because Valo happened to be in the area. Though Vini wasn't expecting him, especially not in the seventies, she could sense him nearby, which prompted her to call silently to him as she and Preston ducked into the alley where the unicorn had deposited her.

Valo was slightly smaller than he would be in the future; but he was still very recognizable to Vini, both in presence and appearance.

“We won't actually know each other until the future,” she told him, “but I need your help.”

He would, of course, help her because any person who could sense and see him, and who knew his name, would be worthy of his help. However, after the events of this day, when they did come to know one another in the future, Valo had a little trouble keeping it under wraps that he had met Vini before. But he definitely knew to keep this meeting a secret from the future Vini, so as not to influence any of her actions. Wind horses, like regular horses, were very smart, perhaps even more so in some areas than their earthly counterparts.

The flight to the FBI building took about eight seconds, and Valo had actually taken things kind of slowly.

Having the help of a wind horse, they didn't need to use the suspended scaffolding because Valo simply flew them right up to the window sill, where Vini loosed the sphere from the crack in the stone. As her fingers made contact with the Truth Key, her brain was suddenly flooded with a massive amount of information that was connected to one of the occupants of the building. But even though her brain had the information, it would take her some time to process what she had just learned because, in addition to being somewhat complex, it was rather astounding. She immediately slipped the sphere into her jeans pocket for safekeeping.

Another astounding thing happened as Valo was flying them to a secluded city park to land. As they were nearing the park and descending, Vini saw a man who looked exactly like Professor

Fulhausen walking along a sidewalk in front of a laundromat. They lost sight of the man quickly as they landed amongst the dense trees of the park. *But it couldn't be him*, her mind decided, *because he would be much older in our time if it was*.

*Thank you, my future friend*, Vini silently told Valo, as she bid him farewell with a pat on his rump. She had already told him this was a one-way trip, and that she and her brother would be calling a unicorn for the ride home.

With a soft whinny goodbye, Valo was off, leaving only a colorful streak behind as an imprint, the streak disappearing about a second and a half later.

A unicorn appeared a mere second after Vini called, and this one had eyes like the late grandfather of Vini and Preston. Just as the creature disappeared carrying the pair, a man sitting on a bench on the far side of the park had a revelation relating to both the present and the future. He had recently lost his job and had been unable to find another, and he was starting to think his wife and kids would be much better off without him. He had a good insurance policy; maybe he could just get hit by a bus somewhere and leave them in better shape financially. However, he suddenly had the thought put into his brain that losing his job was meant to be because if he hadn't, he wouldn't have taken a better job in North Carolina that would be offered to him in a mere three weeks' time. And if the family hadn't moved to North Carolina for the job, his son would have been murdered in D.C. five years into the future. The man actually had a spring in his step walking home to tell his wife they would soon be moving to North Carolina.

Preston found his first time-travel trip on a unicorn to be a lovely experience. It was definitely not like stepping through the window portal at Laurelstone, especially because he felt no movement at all, though the creature was definitely moving. He could see movement all around, in an array of colorful light streaks, swirls, and occasional flashes that reminded him of the Garden of Stars, but perhaps a daytime version because more light was present. *The Garden of Stars*, he thought, *but just as dawn is breaking. This is the garden in fast motion*, he decided, though he felt very relaxed and was able to breathe very deeply as he enjoyed the ride.

As they suddenly found themselves on the roof of Netherwind, Preston's mind told him the journey had lasted about three minutes.

Not even five minutes after Vini disappeared up the stairs—leaving Em, Kip, and Weatherly somewhat bewildered because she hadn't explained what she was planning to do—she and Preston were walking down the stairs together.

Preston was then literally tackled by his time-traveling companions who were anxious not only to hug him in relief, but to tell him they hadn't meant to leave him behind.

He understood completely, as he had already figured out the reason he had been meant to stay in Philadelphia, to help his sister find the object they had moved, though at this time neither he nor Vini mentioned the sphere to the others.

With Charlie calling everyone into the kitchen to have soft pretzels, the time travelers speculated that God might have allowed Preston to get stuck because He wanted them to use their brains.

“So we could learn some good problem-solving skills,” Em speculated.

“Everything does happen for a reason,” Weatherly agreed. “There are truly no accidents, and there is no such thing as luck.”

Weatherly was off home as soon as she finished her pretzel.

Vini returned to the library at the same time, where she sat and took a deep breath. While feeling relieved and very thankful that she hadn't panicked upon discovering that Preston was left behind on a time-travel trip, she did wonder a bit as to why she hadn't felt more alarmed. It's like she had been on autopilot when figuring out what to do, and then taking the steps needed to get him back. She definitely realized that God had been leading her, though it still amazed her as to how much she was able to accomplish with His help, and how much He thought her capable of and was giving her to do.

Fishing the Truth Key out of her pocket, she placed it on the table in front of her.

After another few deep breaths, Vini found her mind settled enough to review exactly what had happened when she first touched the sphere.

The first thing her brain had to sort through involved something that had happened the previous year at an elementary school near her home, in the fall, when a young boy named Bobby Wilson who had been

kidnapped was found, thanks to a strange incident involving fingerprints taken from another child for a school program set up in most states to identify children who might have been abducted, then enrolled in schools elsewhere.

Evidently, the FBI had been investigating the issue of print doubles for some time, even acknowledging that, because it was considered impossible for two people to have the same fingerprints, some sort of supernatural force must be at work, this possibly even being Satan himself creating some sort of deception.

What Vini mainly learned from the Truth Key was that Bobby Wilson—a.k.a. Bobby Hamilton because his last name was changed to Hamilton after he was snatched and adopted by a family that had no idea he was a stolen child—had found a way to time travel. As an adult (quite a few years into Vini's future), having learned he was kidnapped as a child, Bobby traveled back in time to plant his fingerprints at the elementary school, to set in motion being found by his mother and an FBI agent so that he could be returned to his original family. Bobby also traveled back to the seventies to get the FBI involved in the issue of print doubles early, because the phenomena was definitely something more than people traveling through time and planting fingerprints. And they couldn't deny certain supernatural aspects of the issue. Satan was definitely involved; Satan and sorcery.

Vini also learned that at a certain time in her future, print doubles were going to be prevalent, and responsible for some pretty horrible things, such as innocent people being convicted of crimes they didn't commit. Bobby had actually been in the building when Vini was taking the sphere into safekeeping.

(Something Vini didn't learn from the Truth Key was that Etowa was involved in Bobby's knowledge and movements, a fact Bobby himself would never become aware of in his lifetime, as very few human beings would ever learn of either Etowa or Boko.)

Vini was about to discover that a user of the Truth Key didn't have to be touching the sphere in order to see through a deception. She had initially thought she might have seen Professor Fulhausen's father or maybe his uncle in D.C. This was not the case. Sitting on the table in front of her, the key was somehow telling her that she actually saw Professor Fulhausen, not one of his ancestors.

In wondering if she could find out more information from auto-writing, she picked up her pen and opened her journal. However, the only thing her hand ended up writing was, “Professor Fulhausen is older than he looks.”

In reviewing her previously-written and somewhat short entry relating to the Truth Key, Vini realized several important pieces of information were missing. So she added a note. This time, her auto-writing gift did work to add even more information to what she had already figured out.

[“Note from information obtained during and after the D.C. trip: The Truth Key reveals the truth behind certain mysteries, even if someone is not investigating a particular mystery. If an answer lies nearby, and a person is either in contact with the sphere or in close proximity to it, the answer will come into the user’s brain, very quickly, like a flood of information. The word ‘blast’ might be a better way to describe it. Use of the key takes some getting used to because information is dispensed all at once, as though someone is being told a story, but instead of getting the information gradually, the whole story will flood the brain. A sudden memory or knowledge implant might be a good way to describe it. Unfortunately, there’s no way to slow down the information being imparted by the key. It is truly an all-at-once thing regarding whatever deception is being exposed. While overwhelming sometimes, this can be a good thing in allowing someone to have the entire story to work with right away, rather than having piecemeal or gradual information.]”

While Vini was in the library, Em was in her room, pondering something that had happened just before Preston and Vini had come down the stairs from having arrived by unicorn on the roof. A thought had come into her brain about the day that she almost went to Laurelstone, but didn’t, not only because Zapor wouldn’t take her, but because she didn’t feel like it after talking to the aunts and spending some time in her room to calm down. Whether Zapor had flown her there or not, if she had gone, she would have walked back. Boomer would have been tagging along; and on their way past one of the ponds, they would have tangled with a water moccasin, a common poisonous snake of the South, but one not brightly marked so as to be as noticeable

as the coral snakes and copperheads also often found in the area. In accidentally cornering the snake against a shelf of rocks forming a small cliff along one side of the pond, both Boomer and Em would have gotten bit by the snake, whose strike was incredibly fast. And they would have been too far from Netherwind to have gotten help quickly enough to survive; thus, they both would have died.

*What an eye opener*, Em thought, lying on her bed and thanking God for looking out for her, and Boomer. So it was definitely meant to be that Zapor didn't take her, which was basically the reason she decided not to go after all, in being cranky about his refusal, and in getting talked to by the aunts after.

Suddenly remembering that she had forgotten to sweep the widow's walk, she jumped up from her bed. This was something Em had volunteered for at Netherwind, and something she did at Doyle Mansion too, because Vini had difficulty going out onto widow's walks, ever since Mrs. Doyle had met her end falling from the one at the mansion.

*I don't want to shirk my chores*, she thought, racing to the kitchen to grab a broom and head to the second floor, where she climbed out of the window of one of the guest rooms, which was the way the walk was normally accessed, since there was no door like there was for the balconies, and because people couldn't fly to reach places like rooftops and widow's walks like magical creatures could. Saying hello to the gargoyles (who didn't answer back), Em made short work of the sweeping, finishing in about five minutes, after which, she sat for a while in one of the two Adirondack chairs on the walk, to gaze at the clouds. Remarkably, she thought one looked just like a unicorn.

When Vini returned to the library after dinner to gather her notes and books to take up to her room, she found Piszo on one of the tables poring over a giant bible. While this was rather a funny sight, it was not so strange, as Vini knew that he loved to read the bible. However, he hadn't brought his mini bible to Netherwind, the one Mrs. Doyle had given him that was about the size of an ordinary deck of playing cards.

Having missed reading the bible during the first couple weeks of his stay at the manor, Piszo had lately been coming to the library to read the large one that Aunt Eugenia had placed on a table for him. Heike had been reading it some too, having found out from Piszo that the bible was even more exciting than most adventure and fantasy books because

the stories were all real. In fact, the bible was a book of history, but one containing amazing and even unexpected things such as a person getting swallowed by a whale, people being brought back from the dead, sea monsters, sorcerers, and all kinds of other fantastical things.

Coincidentally, Em was writing a poem about this exact subject, having been inspired at church two Sundays previous by a woman she had been chatting with who was a visitor. The woman had stated that she never understood how her father, whom she described as a bible-thumping preacher, could love stories about elves, dragons, and fairies so much. The bible, of course, held the answer to her question, in being full of such fanciful and magical things.

She finished the poem just before bedtime.

### The Magic of the Bible

For anyone who might wonder why  
Christians tend to believe they can fly,  
Not just on their own but on horses with wings,  
And in magic airships with prophets and kings,  
Or on enormous eagles soaring most high:

The answer is in our Written Guide,  
In all the wondrous stories inside;  
Tales to surprise more than any great fable,  
How unlikely—Our Lord born in a stable!  
And according to song, the Babe never cried.

With gardens and rainbows to adore,  
Tales of night hags, sorcerers, and more,  
It's easy to see why we love magic things,  
Such as trolls and elves and tiny sprites with wings;  
There are krakens and mermaids off every shore.

In some tales, our futures look quite bleak,  
When tyrants and wizards find their peak.  
Some of the stories make us tremble with fear;  
But some hold warm fuzzies, like when the deaf hear,  
Or like when the dumb gain the power to speak.

Prisoners of hope, believers are,  
Ever followers of our True Star,

In bondage to One riding a horse most white,  
Accompanied by a host blindingly bright.  
So a swim with sea monsters isn't bizarre.

With mud on the eyes, a blind man sees.  
Slaves can rise to rule as they might please.  
The righteous defeat an army with a song.  
Mouths of hungry lions are shut all night long.  
An angel moves a ton stone with perfect ease.

Water from stone is in great supply;  
Food of angels rains down from the sky.  
A man survives being swallowed by a whale;  
Evil ends up destroyed by locusts and hail.  
Angels and dragons are seen to soar on high.

Fanciful things—water turned to wine,  
A talking donkey, pearls before swine.  
Tax paid with a coin from the mouth of a fish;  
Get all things good simply from making a wish;  
Two loaves and five fish on which thousands can dine.

With a single word, the dead awake;  
Some of the tales can make our hearts break.  
Better than yarns because these stories are real,  
And teach lessons, like don't envy and don't steal.  
Escape a furnace without blister or bake.

The magic of bible history;  
It's not myth or even mystery.  
The answer is in the twinkling of an eye—  
A Good Book given to us by the Most High.  
For those who wonder, read for yourself and see.

## Chapter Fifteen

### Sorcerers and Dragon Hunters

On Monday afternoon, when Weatherly got home from training, immediately after a nap, she again noticed the window in the study had changed, so she called Em, asking her to come by herself to Laurelstone.

Arriving about a half-hour later, Em expressed surprise that Preston and Kip had not been invited as well, to which Weatherly explained that she had gotten the idea from the voice in her head that this mission was meant just for her and Em.

The scene in the window was a river scene; and they noticed a couple of women in the distance wearing what appeared to be either robe or tunic-style dresses of light colors, with hem lengths to the knees and arm lengths to the elbows.

Realizing they were going to need to dress the part, Em's sewing skills came in very handy. Heading to the sewing room, they picked up an old set of sheets along the way from a linen closet. Weatherly's mother used to quilt, and had all kinds of material stored up in the sewing room for this purpose. Using the sheet set and scraps from the quilting trunk, it only took Em a little over an hour to fashion suitable clothing for them both, which was concealing and loose enough to hide the daggers they both wore.

Stepping through the window, they were fairly astounded at what they were being asked to do this time, which was incredibly important. They were to help with baby Moses being left in the basket in the river for Pharaoh's daughter to find.

The basket made of bulrushes with the baby inside had already been placed among the reeds fringing the river. Peeking out from bushes behind which they were hiding, the girls could see it. However, the basket needed to be moved to a slightly different spot on this particular day, about forty-five feet downriver, in order to be noticed at the right time.

“But I thought Moses’ sister, Miriam, was secretly watching the basket so her brother would stay safe,” Em whispered. “So will she try to stop us from moving it?”

“When God tells us to do something, He makes a way for it to happen,” Weatherly quietly answered. “Maybe God will tell her we are helping and that it needs to be moved. She might hear His voice like I do. Or maybe He will make her fall asleep for a couple of minutes. Then she’ll wake up and move downriver a bit to see the basket being found.”

Baby Moses was currently asleep and made no noise as Em and Weatherly dragged the basket downriver a short ways to the place the little voice in the back of Weatherly’s mind was telling her was correct. They saw no one else during their task, not even Moses’ sister.

Returning to the study and taking off the robes, the girls now understood why the boys were not supposed to be along on this trip, because they might have stood out too much if anyone had chanced to come upon them at the river.

On Tuesday after lunch, Em found herself feeling guilty about having given Zapor a dirty look the previous Sunday, and just in general at having been mad at him for a pretty silly reason. It was hard for her to believe that she had been so childish; after all, he was protecting her, and doing a fabulous job in keeping things like demons and hobgoblins out of the area. She also felt like he might have even known there would be danger from a snake, and that his actions would prevent the encounter, so this might have been the reason for his refusal to take her to Laurelstone.

In wanting to be nicer to her protector, Em decided to bake some cookies for him, chocolate chip cookies with toffee bits. However, she ended up disappointed in herself when she accidentally over-baked the cookies. They weren’t burned, but they were definitely dried out, hard and crunchy, instead of soft and chewy as they were meant to be.

“Oh, we can fix this easily,” Charlie said, putting half a dozen of the cookies into a plastic zipper bag with two slices of soft sandwich bread.

She was right. A couple of hours later, the cookies had softened up.

“You’re a kitchen genius!” Em marveled, immediately taking the cookies on a little plate up to Zapor on the roof. He was basically by himself because Folto was off somewhere and the gargoyles were

keeping mostly to themselves, as was normal practice for them. Tulko and Lyydu were also not around.

“I messed up most of the batch leaving them in the oven too long,” she told Zapor. “But Charlie helped me fix these. The rest are too dry and hard, so we’ll probably just have to throw them away.”

“I don’t mind dry and hard cookies,” Zapor told her. “In fact, I like cookies to be crunchy. So if you feel like bringing those up later, I’ll definitely eat them. Meanwhile, why don’t we share these?”

Sitting down, they enjoyed the treat together, while gazing out over the rolling hills of the plantation. Very pleased with Em’s gesture, Zapor enjoyed her company very much.

In returning to the kitchens a short while later, Em was only able to bring four more cookies up to the roof because Pizzo and Heike had already wiped out the rest of the batch. It seemed they didn’t mind dry and crunchy cookies either.

Em next headed off to Laurelstone to see Weatherly, whom Em decided would have probably finished having her usual after-training nap by now. Pizzo and Heike were going along to pick out some material for clothes from all of the interesting scraps in the sewing room, which also had stores of bric-a-brac like ribbons, lace, and zigzag trim. Boomer came too, giving the puck trolls a ride, who were delightedly clinging to his fur and collar as they bounced along.

From everything they had to choose from in the sewing room, and with as quickly and enthusiastically as Em seemed to be able to make the tiny garments, it seemed Pizzo and Heike were destined to have the best wardrobes of any puck trolls in existence.

After filling a good-sized bag with the choices, they all took a stroll outside amongst the gardens, with the peacocks and peahens milling about them.

Suddenly, and rather oddly, the peafowl flock left all at once, flying, with some of them taking off almost like rockets, straight up, which not only startled Weatherly, Em, Boomer, and the puck trolls, the breathtaking sight also enraptured them.

The sudden departure was due to the appearance of two strange men who had been walking across the fields and who were now passing the stables on an approach to the manor. Outsiders sometimes walked through the grounds of the plantation, which generally wasn’t a

problem; however, this time, the occupants of the garden somehow knew that these men were evil. But while Em, Weatherly, Pizzo, and Heike could sense the danger, they didn't know that this was a sorcerer and one of his servants, this one trained as a Dragon Hunter.

Being this close to the house and not expecting trouble, Em and Weatherly didn't have any weapons with them. But they did have puck trolls, which were an even better defense when dealing with the likes of sorcerers.

Em immediately grabbed up Boomer, as Pizzo got to work. They had been very near the chapel, which was perfect because Pizzo was very quickly able to bring the closest stained glass window to life. As a colorful swirling light show filled with sparks, sizzles, and pops played out before their eyes, in less than ten seconds, the window was ready for entry. Em jumped in first holding Boomer tightly, followed by Weatherly carrying the puck trolls.

This window was a landscape scene featuring a cherry tree in blossom next to a small river, with a lovely golden cross set on a hill in the background. Inside, though the setting was as serene as the depicted scene, things looked rather weird as far as perspective, with the pieces of glass giving odd shapes to the objects inside, as compared to what they might have been inside a painting, if it were lifelike, and not something done by a surrealist such as Dali or Escher.

As the escapees stood beside the cherry tree looking out, they saw the men approach the chapel and come to stand before the window. However, the sorcerer and Dragon Hunter would not be able to enter because nothing connected to evil could invade anything touched by a puck troll's magic. Pizzo's gift was divine, which made it immune to evil penetration. As the pair sized up the window's occupants, Pizzo gave them a rather defiant look, shaking his little fist at them before gesturing for them to move on, which they did, rather rapidly, just as both Lyydu and Zapor landed on the lawn very near the scene.

Having been able to sense the men, who were giving off distinctive evil auras, the thunderbird and gryphon had taken to the skies to search for the source. Though they had found what they were looking for, the protectors didn't kill the sorcerer or hunter. Magical creatures rarely killed human beings, even evil ones, unless God directed them to,

because this was best left to angels, godly warriors even more fierce in battle than creatures such as thunderbirds and gryphons.

While not feeling quite as threatened as they might have if an angel had arrived, the sorcerer and hunter didn't want to risk agitating the protectors, which was very wise because the men might well have been ripped to shreds if they had tried to stir up any trouble because magical creatures were not forbidden to kill humans; they simply did so sparingly, mainly when feeling their charges might be in danger.

Initially speeding away at a fast trot, the sorcerer and his servant slowed to a steady stride as they reached the eastern boundary of the Laurelstone property, marked by a dry-stack stone fence, which the pair scaled before heading toward a series of caves nearby.

The fact that they hadn't been able to access the group inside the window was of little consequence to the men because this was not their primary target, though the sorcerer would have loved to have gotten his hands on a couple of puck trolls, in knowing that the little creatures were more clever and powerful than most people might expect. If he could have captured them alive, they would have made interesting research study; and if he could have killed them, all the better, to rid the world of the little menaces, who always worked on the side of good, with no exceptions, unlike his own kind in working on the side of evil, of which there were occasionally defectors to the side of good, though none currently alive that he knew of.

And there was something about the two girls, something the world—the sorcerer's world that is, in which he was sworn to serve Satan—would have been much better off without. Upon reflection, the sorcerer felt he was probably sensing a couple of God's anointed. *Annoying creatures*, he thought sourly, *doing God's work, building His Kingdom directly in the midst of my Master's domain*. If so, the protectors made perfect sense. There were probably watchmen nearby too; and how maddening, to think that angels might be swarming the area he and his trainee were hunting in.

Once the evil pair was out of sight, the escapees exited the window. After saying goodbye to Weatherly, under the escort of Zapor and Lyydu who were circling in the skies above to keep watch, the Laurelstone visitors set off to return to Netherwind.

Coincidentally (or more likely by divine design, since nothing in the universe really is coincidence), Vini could have told the group hiding in the window that one of the men was a Dragon Hunter. She would have known how to recognize him from an auto-writing session that took place about the same time Em left with Boomer and the puck trolls for Laurelstone. For one thing, Dragon Hunters generally carried a distinctive piece of gear, a bag made of a silvery type of netting magically designed to prevent burnished doves from shapeshifting into dragon form. Dragon Hunters also most often bore a large mark on the neck—paisley in shape but longer, extending from just under the chin and down past the collar bone—which might have been likened to a tattoo, except that the mark changed color depending on how advanced the hunter had become, both in skill and in numbers of captures. The one with the sorcerer at Laurelstone bore a mark green in color, indicating his status as a novice. Weapons carried by the hunters were less obvious, as most simply carried a vial containing a poison that could penetrate the armor-like feathers of a burnished dove in a certain spot on its back where the feathers were weakest; however, this was only used in cases where it was impossible to capture the creatures alive. Some dragons were stronger and more resistant than others; thus, they would need to be killed if they couldn't be netted and taken to a holding facility.

Vini also learned from her auto-writing session that sorcerers were much harder to identify because, like magicians, they had no signifying marks and most often simply looked like ordinary human beings. Various other hunters were also difficult to recognize. Unicorn Hunters, for instance, bore a small hidden mark, the description of which was generally unknown.

This was the first Vini had heard of either Dragon Hunters or Unicorn Hunters, and she found the information very disturbing. As the group was making their way back to Netherwind, she was in her normal spot in the larger library, reviewing what she had written in the impromptu auto-writing session. While a lot of the information sounded outlandish, she knew it to be true.

Dragon Hunters were evidently employed and trained by sorcerers working for evil. A special elixir kept older Dragon Hunters youngish, so that fewer new ones would need to be recruited and trained. And

some of the ones that had been alive for a very long time were either insane or almost so, having lived through and seen so much in their lifetimes. However, they were afraid of dying, in knowing that hell would await them. Some sorcerers also took the elixir to keep from aging. The hunters sometimes found dragons simply by looking for burnished dove feathers, which were easy to spot, being metallic looking, and often found near caves in which the dragons liked to sleep. Both hunters and sorcerers tended to promote the false idea that dragons were bad so that if others came across them, they might be tempted to kill the creatures.

Preston was also in the larger library at this time, furthering his own research—using a couple of books from Kivitel, as well several from the Netherwind libraries—and taking his own notes in a spiral binder. He had discovered quite a lot about the weapons since his sister had first broached the subject and shared her notes with him. Magicians most often made the weapons, as Preston had suspected from the journey into the past to deliver the mirror. He had also learned that light weapons could be made from more than just mirrors. With light being basically the fuel, non-mirrored glass could also be used, including stained glass, or even a piece of sea glass, anything that could catch light. Metal was sometimes used as well, fashioned into light discs, which were like ninja stars, but with the captured light being what was actually thrown, rather than the metal apparatus. Light dust, contained in a field, had also been created for use as a weapon, though much training was needed to control it, both in keeping it contained and when directing it at specific targets. While the dust could be used to blanket a wide area in order to attack a great number of opponents at once, this was not a common practice, nor was it advisable due to the risk of unintended victims, which might even include the user.

The mirror weapons were also called light catchers in some books, which Preston felt was apt, since they could be made from such a variety of materials, though mirrors were evidently the most common. Even a miniscule amount of light could be used as fuel, even faint moonlight. Some mirror weapons were specially designed to store great amounts of light until ready to use. But this was a lot like carrying a bomb, so users needed to be very careful.

The mirrors were the most effective of the three types of weapons in combatting dark forces, which Preston found commonsensible, since the nature of light was to overcome darkness; and this prompted him to look up one of his favorite quotes in the bible, John 3:20-21. “For every one who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does what is true comes to the light, that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been wrought in God.”

In researching the flutes, which were sometimes called wind catchers, Preston was surprised to find a warning related to Satan. Users of the music weapons were to be wary of deception. Evidently, many theologians believe Satan was originally partly made of heavenly musical instruments. Now fallen, corrupted, and a great deceiver, he might choose to use musical weapons to his own benefit. We might think music is innocent and good, but we might well be deceived. And we might think a musical weapon is working for us, but this could be a deception. This information was confusing, as Preston, at present, couldn't see how a musical weapon might work against a user. *Maybe like a gun backfiring*, he thought. *Or maybe someone could become too dependent on it and forget to hone other fighting skills. Or possibly Satan could just take over the weapon, with his command of music, his own expert skills.* Percussion musical weapons had also been made, for use like cannons; but these were too large to carry, so they weren't for personal combat.

Finding out about rope weapons of secondary colors was extremely fascinating. Green, purple, and orange ropes evidently corresponded to emotions, having crippling effects on people. In the right hands, certain green ropes could cause depression, even causing a person to commit suicide in some instances. Purple ones, if fashioned into something like blankets or a sarcophagus, into which an opponent might be placed to be completely shrouded, could cause instant death. Orange ropes were known to trigger explosive anger, often causing an enemy to turn on the nearest person, generally, one of his own.

The various forms of color weapons were very interesting. For instance, a bowbrush (short for rainbow brush) could be used as a stabbing or slicing weapon like a knife or a sword, but evidently a somewhat bristly one.

As far as the color weapons' connection to art, Preston pondered a couple of his sister's notes pertaining to septessence, as the magical element behind the making of color weapons. This was all still very mysterious, especially not having a magician on hand to ask questions of. Even Varjo didn't know exactly how the weapons were made, though he had had some contact with the makers over the years. "Septessence makes production of the art/color weapons possible," Vini's notes said. "Artistic magicians are masters of septessence. Also, rope weapons can be made using color from anything, such as from a plant or a piece of art; and this is how the weapons can be recharged during combat, using colors from clothing, a flower, or even the sky. Also, certain ropes can be used for practical, everyday applications. For example, magicians have made climbing ropes, generally silvery-blue in color. Golden-brown ropes might tame a wild horse. This could be extremely important as we draw closer to the Endtimes because it's likely that few cars will work in the future; and the ones that work might be easily broken or rendered useless in other ways by demons, fallen angels, sorcerers, etc."

Preston hadn't known that cars might not work in the future; this was all very interesting.

Feeling somewhat stiff and sore, and like he had overdone it in training, he got up to stretch and stroll about the library. In doing so, he distracted Vini. "Sorry," he said.

"No worries," she replied. "I need a break anyway." Vini hadn't felt annoyed by Preston for quite some time. They had been talking more lately, and enjoying one another's company; and she felt as though they were becoming better friends, in addition to loving each other as siblings.

"You look a bit tired," Vini remarked, as he took his seat again.

"I have been feeling somewhat weary," he responded, "and like maybe I'm ready for a break from training." In truth, Preston had been struggling somewhat with mastering his next step in mirror training; and the challenge of it was frustrating him, as well as tiring him out. "I'm not bored," he added, "but think I might like to do something else for a while."

“Be careful about taking too long of a break,” Vini counseled, “because it might be like someone learning to play the piano. People who stop don’t often pick it back up again.”

Preston was smiling because Varjo had said something similar, though he had used the example of a person trying to learn a form of basket making that evidently took decades to master. Thinking of their conversation, Preston recalled more of his teacher’s words of advice. “A lot of trainees when feeling either too challenged or burned out take a break and never start up again. It happens all the time,” Varjo stressed. “So I recommend no more than a short break, a day or two only. You said you won’t be able to come after your school starts again. I think you should consider that your break. Then come back over this Thanksgiving break you mentioned. Based on how our time passes here, it’s like I won’t see you for years. But I’ll still expect you to have made progress when I do see you. I know the mirrors are hard; they took me a long time to master too. But it’s good to push yourself.”

With Vini again stressing that he should be careful about stopping, Preston said, “But I’ve sort of been wondering what it might be used for. I probably have enough skills with my normal martial arts training to take care of myself, or defend others, if needed. So I’ve been wondering if maybe I don’t need to work so hard, and if I’m possibly meant to put some of my energies into something else, and if all of this is just ‘striving after wind.’” (Preston had recently been reading Ecclesiastes.)

Vini smiled in recognizing the reference, as her brother added, “I mean, am I just ‘striving after wind’ or will all of this be useful and important someday?”

Vini had an exact answer to this question, and knew the truth in it not only from her research but also from her gift of discernment.

“In the future, as we get closer to the Endtimes,” she said, “lots of mechanical things like guns and computers aren’t going to work. Many theologians believe this, and I think it is correct. Something will happen to render a lot of the things we are used to completely useless, probably something like demons and sorcerers destroying everything, or figuring out how to disrupt with magnetism or magic. So we will need to know how to sword fight, and how to make weapons from color and music and mirrors. The world will be simpler, though I’m sure the

magic behind making things like color ropes and mirror weapons is probably not simple. But those things don't have the moving parts that can break easily like missiles and such, so they are going to be very useful. And people will need to know how to use them. In the future," she went on, "things like planes won't be able to work. Transportation will be simpler—probably horses instead of cars. There might be gliders, but they would have to be launched from high places since planes won't be able to take them up. We will have to learn different means of combat, to fight the evil sorcery that's coming."

Charlie, entering the library to bring them a snack of homemade applesauce, had overheard the last part of Vini's speech. "Growing food in the future will be the same," she said. "Eventually, we will have to revert to simpler things, like maybe oxen plowing fields." (She had learned this from a couple of recent visions.)

"I believe your training will be vital to the future," Vini stressed.

In further conversation, Charlie also recommended only a couple days at most of rest from training. "Because you won't be able to come after school starts," she said.

"You're right," Preston agreed, "though I have talked to Aunt Fiona about coming some weekends. She thinks it's a good idea because she wants the mezzanine to be put to good use. And Eleta has offered to bring me, and Kip."

"I think it's a good idea too, and I don't think Mom and Dad will mind," Vini said. "Plus, if you don't have something productive actually scheduled on weekends, you'll end up in the treehouse with your friends, reading comic books and probably not doing much archery, aikido, or other training."

Knowing himself too well, Preston had to agree with her there.

"But there's one thing that I think is most important about your training," Vini said. "Since we don't know exactly when the Endtimes will happen, we need to learn all of these things to pass on to generations to come. It could be thousands of years from now, so we have to be prepared and be able to pass things on. You'll need to teach your kids and grandkids the things you are learning in training. And you'll need to teach my kids and grandkids."

"Mine too," Charlie agreed. "And you'll need to be a master in order to be a good teacher."

“So whenever you’re sore and tired,” Vini continued to advise, “remember it’s all going to be necessary, and worth it.”

Charlie was nodding, as she said, “Unfortunately, the future is going to be about survival, not comfort.”

After getting up early on Wednesday morning and cleaning for about three hours, Vini was again in the library reviewing more of her notes, mainly ones pertaining to sorcerers, which were destined to be even more of a threat to the cause of good than demons.

There were basically three kinds of sorcerers, the first being general magic users that were most often simply called sorcerers, and two specialty types—necromancers who specialized in communing with the dead, and conjurers whose focus was poisons and potion making. All three were thought to be rather scarce in the world of today, and in something of a remission, with the few remaining likely in hiding while recruiting and training others, based on various skills and gifts, both natural ones and ones bestowed on individuals by Satan and his fellow fallen angels. And the sorcerers were not only training others to be sorcerers, but assassins, spies, and various types of warriors and hunters as well, with the main goal being to foster as much evil as possible in the world, while suppressing everything good within their reach. Additionally, sorcerers were thought to be helping Satan to make other foul creatures such as megahobs, which were basically super-sized hobgoblins.

Related to the information Vini had shared with Preston about mechanical things not working in the future, it was believed that sorcerers would be the ones largely responsible for this, using both non-magical and magical means such as heat, magnetism, and even gremlins, possibly swarms of them, to break equipment or disrupt the functions of things.

With very few known exceptions, sorcerers were entirely evil and spent their lives serving Satan. Being extremely powerful, those with command of sorcery were often proud of their accomplishments. And as it does with many other human beings, power and pride almost always lead to a fall into the service of Satan.

Vini’s research produced less information about magicians, who generally worked on the side of good, with only a handful of evil ones recorded in all of time. Magicians had less power, as far as magical

abilities, than sorcerers; but this actually gave them an advantage because it forced them to be more creative. Nine times out of ten, a magician could outthink and outmaneuver a sorcerer during an encounter. Also, having less power equaled less of a chance to ever abuse power. This generally helped to ensure that magicians would stay on the side of good, which ultimately gave them more power because, with God on their side, they basically couldn't lose.

A note in one book talked about trends in calling prophets and magicians, sages and mages, respectively. The trends evidently came and went throughout history; and this reminded Vini of dragons sometimes being called sky serpents, and unicorns being called horned lions.

While many things about her research were ringing true, the part about sorcerers being scarce was not; and this error was confirmed by a simple auto-writing note. "Sorcerers are more numerous than most people imagine, but are not currently noticeable because they are tucked away in remote places and hiding in other realms."

With this rather disturbing statement rolling around in her brain, Vini decided to take a break from reviewing her notes in order to go after the final sphere.

## Chapter Sixteen

### A Snoil, a Dove, and a Magician

The Sage Key was in a cave somewhere, and Vini asked Ben if he wanted to go with her to find it. He was definitely ready for a break from hedge pruning.

According to Aunt Fiona, there were lots of caves in the area. Since this was true of many places in the world, Vini realized that the sphere might not be nearby. However, she knew how to go about finding the right cave based on a dream from the night before. Answers to puzzling questions often came to her in this way. In this case, the peacock that frequented her dreams had told her to find a snoil, who could lead her to the Sage Key.

In all of her research, Vini had only come across one mention of a snoil, as being a creature much like a grimmpt, basically a super-good sniffer-outer. Unfortunately, the book didn't include a picture or drawing, so she had no idea as to what a snoil might look like. So, once again, she needed to ask Pizzo for help. He was on his own for the morning because Heike was helping Em with matching material to clothing patterns, and picking out ribbons to trim particular dresses. They were also doing a fitting, to make sure that the patterns Em was making as she went along were correct for Heike's size and shape.

Vini and Ben found Pizzo hanging out in the kitchen, in order to help Charlie by taste testing everything she was making, while throwing raisins at her whenever he felt like exercising his arms.

He could definitely help them find a snoil, as he indicated by nodding and sliding down one leg of the stool he had been sitting on. (Vini had never had any doubt he could find one.)

Evidently, as Vini and Ben learned from Pizzo's pantomiming, there were lots of snoils around, but people didn't very often notice them because they liked to burrow into soft dirt, often under shady evergreens and in garden compost piles, in order to hide and sleep for long periods of time.

Piszo found a snoil under the hedge separating the tennis court and the garden. Vini had already called Tulko, who had then rounded up Dara, so that they could be ready to go.

The snoil looked exactly like a snail, but one roughly the size of a bowling ball and the color of dirty snow. At first, the creature merely sat, looking at them with its pale blue eyes perched atop its antenna-like tentacles.

According to the dream peacock, Vini would simply have to show the snoil one of the seven spheres to trigger the creature seeking out another. Evidently, since snoils didn't like to enter houses, he likely wouldn't seek the Time Key at Laurelstone, or any of the spheres Vini already had in her possession at Netherwind. And since very few creatures would willingly enter a Demon Pocket, he wouldn't likely seek the Realm Key either. She had the Mind Key in her pocket, which she showed to the snoil before pocketing it again.

After a couple of minutes of the snoil not moving, with Vini getting slightly impatient, Piszo gestured for her to stay calm and simply wait.

When another couple minutes of nonmoving had passed, in being more than a little frustrated that this was a snail-like creature and not a flying piglet, and with Piszo continuing to urge her to wait, Vini said, "Are you kidding, Piszo! I mean, really! How do we get him moving?"

Piszo responded to this by throwing a dirt clod at her, after which, he modeled patient behavior by sitting on a large stick (as one might sit on a log) and twiddling his thumbs.

Vini and Ben each took seats on nearby large rocks, where they too twiddled their thumbs while waiting.

About five minutes later, when the snoil finally started to move, it was just a crawl.

As Vini sighed deeply and audibly, Piszo stood up. With his hands on his hips, he shook his head, before also shaking one index finger at her very emphatically, which reminded Vini of a scolding she got once as a little girl by her kindergarten teacher.

When the snoil actually did get going a couple of minutes later, he ended up being faster than a hockey puck on ice.

"Sorry, Piszo," Vini said, grabbing up the little troll to place him on her shoulder so that he could go with them. "You're right. I should have more patience."

With the snoil basically already out of sight, Ben and Vini sprinted to reach and mount Dara and Tulko who took off flying right away to catch up to the snoil who, in less than five minutes of zigzagging a path through the fields, made it to the entrance of a cave tucked into a rocky hillside only about three miles from the manor.

Waiting outside as Ben, Vini, and Pizzo entered the cave through the roughly two-foot wide opening, the snoil soon meandered off in search of soft dirt to burrow in. Since those who had followed him were in the right spot, he didn't see a need to wait while they found the object he had led them to.

Inside the cave, which was simply one room only about fifteen feet in diameter, a couple of natural chimneys allowed the searchers to see well enough to quickly find the glowing sphere tucked into a little niche about eye level in the stony wall farthest from the cave's entrance. About the size of a large grape, the Sage Key resembled a tiny version of a pale gold sunset with orange swirling accents that had just a hint of a greenish sheen.

Since they were so close to Netherwind, in exiting the cave and deciding to explore a bit more of the hillside, Ben and Vini told Dara and Tulko that they would walk back to the manor. Pizzo was game for more exploring too and stayed on Vini's shoulder, waving to the horses as they streaked away.

They found a second cave about two hundred yards from the first, the entrance simply being a wide crack between two boulders, just large enough for an average-sized person to squeeze through. Although neither Vini nor Ben were experienced spelunkers, with most of the caves in the area not being very large or sprawling, they felt they would be safe enough exploring, as long as they didn't wander into one too deeply, which wasn't likely since neither had thought to bring a flashlight. Inside, this cave didn't have any natural ceiling openings, so they couldn't see very well. In what they could see from the low light of the entrance, they found nothing of interest, so they exited fairly quickly.

Skirting large rocks while hugging the hillside, they found a third cave only about fifty yards from the second; and Vini was very excited to discover a burnished dove feather resting on the ground outside the opening, which was just wide enough for one person to walk through at

a time, while ducking a little since the entrance was only around five-foot high. The pale blue feather with flecks of green and dark blue had an intense metallic sheen, which made it very recognizable as belonging to a burnished dove.

This cave had a single natural chimney that was fairly large, allowing a good amount of light in, which enabled them to see the dove, sitting on a pebble-strewn stone ledge, with its head tucked under its wing, sleeping contentedly.

Piszo was smiling, while putting his finger to his lips in a shush gesture. Ben and Vini had already planned to be very quiet, as they didn't want to disturb the dragon's slumber. Ben was smiling too, in reminiscing how a dragon had saved his life earlier in the year, basically bringing him back from the dead.

They left the cave fairly quickly and discovered something of a surprise outside, in the form of Professor Fulhausen, along with a companion, whom the professor introduced as Jeremy Palladino.

"Most people call me Mr. P," he said, shaking hands with Vini and Ben.

While the professor knew Vini, he had only met Sam, so Vini introduced Ben, though she did so somewhat warily, while not moving too far from the entrance of the cave. Having just written about Dragon Hunters in her journal, her brain was wondering if the professor might be one, or his companion. It might be easy enough for someone to cover the identifying neck mark with make-up, or even a deception of some sort, since evil often came in deceptive forms. Vini wasn't able to sense Dara and Tulko in the area, which meant they were unlikely to come if her mind called out to them; but even without their powerful assistance, she wasn't going to let anyone either capture or kill a dragon if she could help it. Vini also introduced Piszo, whom she placed on the ground next to her, so that she could move freely to defend if necessary.

Sensing Vini's uneasiness and seeing her guard-like stance, the professor told her straight away, "I am the current Protector of Dragons."

While Vini had never heard of this title, she could discern the truth in his words.

As it turns out, Mr. Palladino was a magician, as well as a long-time friend to Professor Fulhausen, and was helping him guard the cave containing the blue dragon.

“A Dragon Hunter has been sighted in the area, in company with a sorcerer,” the professor said. “If we happen to encounter them, I brought along a magician to help me counter the sorcerer.”

“So you know more dragon secrets than you ever let on,” Vini said, in recalling from his lectures that he seemed to know vague things, but not specific truths, such as that dragons and burnished doves were one and the same.

When Vini also mentioned that she saw him in the seventies in Washington D.C., and at first thought it might be his father, but then realized it wasn't, Professor Fulhausen replied, “You definitely saw me because I am my father. Well, I had one like everyone, but he's been gone for nearly a hundred years. I've just been taking an elixir to stay young, the same one the Dragon Hunters and sorcerers use. I've moved quite a few times over the years so as not to draw too much attention to myself. After I was my father, I was a favored uncle for a while. I went bald during that time, shaving my head to make myself look different.”

“I would think it might be dangerous for people to live forever,” Ben commented. “I mean, how would you stay sane?”

“Your assumption is correct,” the professor replied, “many of the oldest Dragon Hunters and sorcerers are insane. But I won't take the elixir forever like they do. I just need to right now because my replacement won't be born for several decades. After that, I can just live out my normal life, while protecting and training her.”

“Oh, the new Protector of Dragons is going to be a girl,” Vini exclaimed. “That's interesting.”

In thinking that he might have already given away too much, the professor said nothing further on the subject. However, he did have a comment about Pizzo. “So, I'm assuming this is a gnome.”

His mouth falling open in shock, Pizzo immediately threw a toffee he had been carrying in his pocket at Professor Fulhausen, hitting him in the center of his forehead.

“Ow!” the professor exclaimed.

Pizzo had nothing against gnomes—they could be very useful creatures—but to be mistaken for one...*What an insult!* With this

thought, he threw a stick which struck an arm (another “Ow!”), and he would have thrown a rock had Ben not placed himself between the indignant Pizzo and the professor.

“He’s a puck troll,” Vini said, trying not to laugh.

“Sorry, little guy,” Professor Fulhausen hurried to say, while rubbing his arm. “Many apologies. It’s just that I’ve lived a long time, and I’ve never seen a puck troll. And I’ve been looking for magical beings since 1919; that’s when I graduated from high school. So you and your fellow trolls must be experts at hiding, possibly the best hiders in the world.”

Giving the professor a look that expressed, *Well, maybe*, Pizzo decided to stop throwing things, at least for the moment.

Vini and Ben recognized the buttering-up, even if Pizzo didn’t. However, there would be no time for further pleasantries because the group outside the cave suddenly came under attack by three demons, one rather large, at nearly ten feet in height, the other two around six feet tall each.

While the professor and Mr. P might have been prepared for a run-in with a sorcerer or a Dragon Hunter, not being armed with anything that could combat demons, they had no idea as to what to do in this encounter; and even though demons were considered to be lesser creatures than sorcerers or dragons hunters, they could be even more deadly. Fortunately, the others of the group were prepared.

Staying as calm as possible, Vini immediately withdrew her dagger. Slightly behind Vini, Ben and Pizzo threw rocks to slow the advance of the beasts. Ben was also fishing in his pocket for his pocketknife which, when retrieved, quickly grew and changed shape to become an actual sword, with which he advanced on the largest demon.

One of Pizzo’s hits actually managed to knock one of the smaller demons to his knees, which Vini swiftly advanced on. Standing very near her, Mr. Palladino wielded a six-inch cross he had been carrying in a small shoulder pack. With the cross blinding him, the kneeling demon shielded his eyes and looked away, allowing Vini to move in to stab the creature, once to the shoulder and twice to the back, which quickly dissipated him.

Turning, Vini was surprised to see Ben with a sword, since she knew he hadn’t brought one with him. While he was managing to keep

his opponent at bay, with the demon swiping at him with its long wings (and making hard contact several times), Ben hadn't yet managed a hit with the sword. However, when Mr. P advanced with the cross, the demon was forced to take notice. In backing away from the dreaded object that was burning his eyes and skin, the creature ceased his wing assault, which allowed Ben to move forward. With three expertly-placed blows, the demon quickly dissolved into near nothingness, with a small puddle of grimy sludge being the only remnant of the foul beast's existence.

Wielding a fallen tree branch, Professor Fulhausen was facing off with the final demon, with Pizzo helping by pelting the creature with rocks around the size of apricots.

This might have been one of the smaller demons, but he was extremely vicious, in swiping at the professor with the long claws of his hands, while kicking rocks back at Pizzo, who was forced to dodge and take cover. Throwing a small log, the beast also managed to knock the cross out of Mr. P's hand.

Moving forward to help, Ben and Vini quickly realized they weren't going to need to. While no one had seen the blue dove waddle out of the cave after being awakened by the noise of the fighting, they couldn't help but notice as the creature shapeshifted into dragon form to stand towering over them.

Smart enough to get out of the way, Pizzo had already started running, as Vini and Ben also retreated to a safe distance, with the professor and magician quickly following suit; and not a moment too soon as the dragon gave an ear-piercing war cry while springing into action, not only letting loose a great blast of fire from his throat, but also knocking the demon flat with a wing swipe before pouncing on him and ripping him in half with razor-sharp talons.

While Vini had seen Folto and Zapor dispatch demons in a similar manner, based on the dragon's size, this was much more intense. Her stomach turning, she looked away. In looking back again a few moments later, she saw the dragon nuzzling the shoulder of Professor Fulhausen with the side of its head, while making a gentle cooing sound. Vini felt this was further evidence that the professor had been telling the truth, as she didn't think it likely a dragon would cuddle up to anyone on the side of evil.

About a minute later, as the dragon shrunk back down to again become a burnished dove, Vini picked him up to carry him back into the cave where she gently placed the creature on the stone ledge, while saying, “Thank you for helping us. Now, sleep tight and sweet dreams.”

“So, you’re not afraid to handle a dragon; that’s good,” the professor complimented as Vini rejoined the group outside.

In feeling they had been gone from the manor long enough, especially since it was going to be a three-mile or so trudge to get back, Vini and Ben said their farewells to the two men, with Vini scooping up Pizzo to ride on her shoulder for the trip back to Netherwind.

As she walked, Vini’s mind was on the spheres. With five in her possession, she was going to need to find a safe place to keep them. *Probably, the subbasement library at Doyle Mansion*, her mind reasoned. Being locked all of the time, and with access to it limited, it was probably the safest place. And Vini did have a locked metal cabinet in the library, exclusively for her use. However, for something as important as the spheres, she didn’t think the cabinet was quite secure and safe enough. *Maybe in the future, I can talk to Dave and Violet about getting an actual safe.*

They had a late lunch upon their return to the manor. With Charlie out hitting tennis balls with Em, the kitchen was empty. Grabbing a quick bite, and some food to take with him, Pizzo was soon off in search of Heike.

While they were eating, Vini remembered to ask Ben about the sword. “I know you weren’t carrying one. So where did it come from, and where did you put it after the demon attack?”

Smiling as he fished in his pocket, Ben placed the knife on the table in front of Vini who was seated across from him.

She instantly recognized the bagical symbol. In being silent for a few moments while her brain was working, she suddenly thought of the zippered bible. Having been temporarily in Ben’s possession, when he gave it back to her, Vini noticed the bible had changed, not only bearing a bagical symbol, but also, some of the brackets inside had begun shifting around to draw her attention to certain passages, in addition to the ones originally marked in brackets.

“Do you have a bagical?” she asked slowly.

“I do,” he admitted.

“I should have realized,” Vini said, more surprised at her slow reasoning than at his answer. “Since the zippered bible was at your home; I should have figured out that was how it got changed.”

“I put it in the bag for safekeeping,” he answered. “But I didn’t know at the time it was a bagical. Then, when I figured out I had a magical bag, something was telling me to keep it secret.”

“I have one too,” Vini said in a lowered voice. “And I believe both are best kept secret, for now.”

(If Pizzo had remained in the kitchen, and if he had felt so inclined, he might have let Ben and Vini know of the bagical that he knew about, at Mrs. Ellis’ house, only a couple of miles from Doyle Mansion.)

“But I wonder why the bible wasn’t more changed from being in the bag,” Vini speculated. “The brackets move around, which is very helpful in drawing my attention to certain verses; but I can’t tell that anything else about it has changed.”

Ben actually had the answer to this question, which Vini discerned was correct. “The Word of God doesn’t change,” he said. “It is immovable and timeless, so the bible couldn’t change, no matter how much magic might be applied to it.”

Next, attempting to pick up the pocketknife in order to look at it more closely, Vini discovered that she couldn’t lift it from the table. “It literally weighs a ton,” she said.

Ben was confused only for a moment. Easily picking it up with two fingers, he said, “I guess it feels connected to me, so it won’t let others handle it.” He smiled in having just discovered another of the knife’s tricks.

“It can hide too,” he told Vini, “and change sizes, though I didn’t know it could become an actual sword. But I should have known because the blade can change from smooth to serrated if I need to saw at something.” Finally, in a lowered voice, he said, “And it can be used to unlock just about any door, like a magic key.”

As they were finishing their lunch, Ben remembered that he had a dime at home that had been in the bagical; but he didn’t tell Vini at this time, mainly because he didn’t know what tricks the dime might be capable of. Thankfully, he had kept it separate from his other change. It was in his sock drawer, rather than the jar of change on his desk; and

he made a mental note to put it somewhere even safer upon returning home.

Vini was pondering something silently too. Having learned from auto-writing that there were presently only six bagicals in existence, with two being so close at hand, she wondered where the other four might be.

In her room a short while later, thinking about other magical objects and, in particular, what her pin-on watch might be capable of, the answer came to her as she picked up her journal to do some auto-writing. (She didn't notice the tiny zinnia seed stuck to the page as she wrote.) "Certain individuals are sensitive to the effects of crossing into realms in which time is passing differently. This can also be true of time travel. The watch functions as a talisman to protect such a person from any adverse effects, which can include any number of symptoms such as extreme fatigue, stomach aches, vomiting, insomnia, depression, irritability, and even in rare instances unnatural aging. The watch can also stop time for a total of five seconds within a certain range believed to be approximately two hundred square feet, but only if the wearer of the watch is accompanied by a magical white hummingbird, a very rare divine creature capable of discerning if stopping time is wise in a given circumstance, mainly, if it is in accordance with God's overall plan."

Ben, Charlie, and Vini left just after dinner to go to the Wednesday evening bible study, which would turn out to be as serious in tone as the previous week's meeting.

The youth pastor was always on hand in his office during the bible study sessions; however, he generally didn't join in the discussions unless asked to because this was supposed to be a youth-led group, with the members taking turns picking the subject matter. On this particular evening, a girl named Amber Foster wanted to talk about whether or not suicide was an unforgiveable sin. "I couldn't particularly find anything in the bible about that," she said. "But if we can't ask forgiveness for it after, because we're dead, then it makes sense to me that it's unforgivable."

"It's definitely a sin," Darrell said, "because every life is a precious gift from God. But a person might sin in other ways just before dying unexpectedly, say, in a car accident, and before having a chance to ask

for forgiveness. That doesn't mean he or she will end up in hell, separated from God."

"We're all meant to contribute something special to the world while we are here," Ben offered, "and suicide can really mess that up. It messes up God's plan for our lives."

After considerable discussion, the consensus of the group was that suicide was not an unforgiveable sin, mainly because no scripture in the bible supported that supposition. However, there would be consequences because it was definitely not what God intended, so the person committing suicide would have to answer to Him.

The issue of doctors helping people with horrible illnesses die was a whole separate discussion, which they agreed to table for another time.

Amber next mentioned how nice it was to be able to talk about these kinds of things here, since people often couldn't in schools. "Not even in some homeschools," she said. Amber was homeschooled, and in a Christian home, but was part of a homeschool coop that included students that were not; and the parents of those students regularly objected to Christian subjects being brought up when the kids all got together for various classes and other activities.

"You would think in a school setting," Darrell remarked, "they would want a variety of opinions, to make sure all beliefs are heard, so that kids can get full information."

"When others voice their beliefs, it is called free speech," Vini said. "When Christians do it, it's often called a rant."

"Or we're called intolerant," Darrell said.

"We shouldn't have to be tolerant of anything that directly contradicts the Word of God," Ben interjected.

"Agreed," Amber replied. "Unfortunately, it means we'll probably be persecuted all our lives for it, if we're brave enough to speak up."

"We can't be a friend to the world and a friend to God," Ben said, "because the world is Satan's territory, not God's. However, we should strive to handle everything with a spirit of gentleness. We shouldn't allow ourselves to get overly angry; and as mentioned last week, we shouldn't be overly argumentative."

The final thing Amber wanted to talk about was slightly lighter fare—whether or not angels have wings. "I thought of it because of Hebrews 13:2," she said. "Do not neglect to show hospitality to

strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.’ So if some people have unknowingly kept company with angels, it made me wonder if maybe angels don’t really have wings, because having wings would give them away as being angels.”

This was something Vini’s youth group at home had discussed, specifically, the wings possibly being only symbolic, or how people might see angels because of the way human brains and eyes worked. She had also thought about the issue because of a dream she once had. Her own opinion was that angels did have wings that were sometimes visible, sometimes not. In her dream, she thought she saw the wings of an angel at one point; then later in the dream, she didn’t.

And this brought up a short discussion of the watchmen.

“For certain people who are supposed to accomplish certain things, God has angels watching out for them,” Charlie said. “Since they might need to stay close at hand, instead of hovering off to the side somewhere, it would make sense for the wings to be hidden sometimes, so the angels can more easily blend in with humans.”

In the end, the group decided that since most people would never see an angel in their lifetimes, they would all just have to wait to find out what angels really looked like.

“And they might look vastly different from one another,” Ben said. “Think of cherubs; then think of what a tall archangel might look like in contrast.”

An odd thing happened on Thursday. Preston, Kip, and Weatherly had invited Em to join them for training. She declined, telling them that she wanted to focus on more down-to-earth stuff, instead of having her head in the clouds, which the trainees didn’t think quite fit as a description of their time with Varjo and Linna, but, whatever.

As they were passing through the doorway to Kivetel, Kip told Weatherly and Preston, “She’s always been this way. When we were little, she didn’t even want to go see Santa at the mall at Christmastime because she wanted to stay home and help set up the tree and bake cookies.”

It was a very good thing Em stayed behind because Preston, last through the door, forgot to prop it or crack it. So they basically got stuck in Kivetel, for almost a full week of Kivetel-time.

On Thursday afternoon at the manor, Em got to thinking that she hadn't seen Kip, Preston, or Weatherly. She usually saw at least one of them when they returned each morning—generally no later than nine or nine-thirty depending on how much of an early start they had gotten—if not Weatherly saying hello before heading home, then the boys heading upstairs to take a nap before lunchtime. Even on the odd days she didn't see any of them returning, she definitely saw Kip and Preston at lunchtime.

But Em had spent the entire morning reorganizing the sewing room (because Aunt Fiona had told her she didn't think Mrs. Boyle would mind), then she had a hurried lunch in order to race back up to the third floor to finish the project. So she still thought she might have just missed seeing Weatherly and the boys.

However, at around two-thirty, she decided to head to the mezzanine to show the portraits of Lizzie and Edna three of the little dresses she had made for Heike, and Pizzo's fleece coat, which Em had just added the tiny buttons to. The sisters had once made clothes for their Barbie, Skipper, and Ken dolls, and they loved seeing the ones Em had crafted for the puck trolls.

In seeing the door to Kivetel closed, and getting a funny feeling, Em decided to peek inside. The sun was just coming up in the clearing, which was empty; of people, that is, because she did see her squirrel-like friend loping across the field.

Edna and Lizzie said they hadn't particularly noticed whether or not the group had returned from training that morning.

"The days here all seem to run together sometimes," Edna told Em.

"Plus, we were dusting door frames and sweeping at the other end of the hall," Lizzie said, "so we might not have seen them."

"I'll go check bedrooms, downstairs, and maybe the treehouse," Em said, propping the door, just in case. "If they are still inside, it's only been eight or nine hours, so they can't have died of old age yet."

She hadn't even reached the end of the hall when the trainees emerged from the door, all three looking very subdued, tired, and ready for a super-long nap.

"It's too long to tell right now," Weatherly wearily told Em.

Other than Preston saying, “Thanks for propping the door,” Kip and Preston said nothing at all, as they headed to their room to tumble into their beds.

It wasn’t just that the story was too long. With fatigued minds as well as bodies, they basically didn’t want to remember all of the things that had happened during their week-long stay in Kivetel, which was filled not only with their usual training, but with other events as well, including a brief encounter with a sorcerer.

*But seeing the black unicorn was pretty special, Kip’s mind told him just before he fell deeply into sleep, even though the reason it was there was somewhat sad.*

## Chapter Seventeen

### Masterpieces in Multiples

The next morning, the three were still not ready to talk about their experiences. But having just spent so much time in Kivetel, they did stay home from training all of Friday, with the plan that they would go back on Saturday. After doing a few chores, Kip and Preston hung out in the treehouse most of the day, while Weatherly stayed home, mostly reading in her room and doing a little housework.

Em had the idea to keep a few ribbons in the drawer of the hall table in the mezzanine. From this point on, anyone going inside one of the rooms would hang a ribbon from the handle, as well as propping the door, in case the door were to be closed accidentally. Then, others entering the mezzanine could notice if a door with a ribbon was shut and could then prop the door. They would simply have to remember to remove the ribbon after leaving a room, which should be a simple thing.

Charlie and Em spent the morning together cooking, weeding, and jogging. Vini, after an early bike ride with Ben before cleaning for a couple of hours, decided to hang out in the larger library. In taking a break late morning from gardening, Ben offered to look for books for her containing information on sorcerers and magicians. This ended up being very helpful because the libraries at Netherwind were organized differently than the ones at Doyle Mansion.

Most of what she ended up finding out from the books pretty much coincided with her auto-writing and previous research, though she did make some interesting discoveries. As far as assistants of sorcerers, in addition to Dragon Hunters and Unicorn Hunters, there were also Magician Hunters, which were specialty wizards trained as assassins to kill magicians; in this case, no capturing was ever involved.

Something she found very interesting was that true magicians (as opposed to simply performing ones) used a combination of science and magic for their work. Their understanding of the complexities of both, as well as how to combine the two, evidently came directly from God.

With most magicians being servants of God, He would of course provide them not only with materials to do their work, but also an understanding of how to use what they had been given. Also, being more careful than sorcerers in their work, and reverent to God, magicians were blessed, which was the main reason why they were so often victorious over sorcerers.

“Magicians use more than the three dimensions, and direct at more than the five senses,” Vini told Ben, “which is why users of magical creations must often be trained to use more than their five senses, and more of their brains than they ordinarily use.” She assumed the book she was getting information from was referring to things like the color ropes, or possibly the use of a bagical, or maybe the spheres. But again, the technical stuff was well beyond her understanding.

“Well, you don’t need to understand everything you’re reading,” Ben counseled when he noticed she was becoming a little frustrated and confused. “Just be aware of it. We all have certain gifts, but we can’t master everything. As long as the magicians understand what they are doing, that’s probably all that matters. And some of the stuff you’re reading is probably written by magicians who are trying to record some of what they do, while not giving away all of their secrets.”

Charlie, Em, Vini, and Ben all took a trip to the pool Friday afternoon. Upon returning, Vini found out from Preston, who had talked to their mother while the group was gone to town, that the high school water polo program had definitely been cancelled.

“Oh well,” Vini said. In having been forewarned, and in feeling that it was probably meant to be, she actually wasn’t all that disappointed.

She would still swim to keep fit. She had briefly pondering playing soccer, since she had enjoyed it in grade school, but had talked herself out of this rather quickly in realizing she would have more time for research and preparing for college if she gave up taking part in team sports. When it suddenly came to her that the cancellation was a blessing in disguise, Vini wondered if a unicorn had maybe just passed by to impart this idea to her. *Now I can focus on other things*, she thought, *so it’s really a good thing, for me.*

Plus, she couldn’t be unhappy about anything right now because she was greatly looking forward to a fun event the next day, which would

end up being something of a surprise for Heike and Pizzo. She, Charlie, and Ben were planning to take the puck trolls to a showing at an art gallery of four artists, of which Louetta was one and would be showing a dozen of her paintings.

Just after breakfast on Saturday, they found Pizzo and Heike sliding down the banister of the longest flight of the servants' stairs, and landing on pillows placed at the bottom.

At the showing, the trolls would ride around in the purse Louetta had specifically modified for taking Pizzo with her places occasionally. She had modified it again to include two cut-outs on the side, instead of just one, so that Heike could see well too, and so they would both have plenty of fresh air while inside the purse. This was the item Louetta had given Vini in secret on her visit to the manor.

It was nearly a two-hour drive to get there, and Vini counseled Pizzo and Heike in the car that they wouldn't be able to be out and about at the showing. "And you can't bring any of the art to life either," she said.

They thought she was crazy for even mentioning this. Of course they knew that most people didn't know about puck trolls. After shaking their heads at each other, and rolling their eyes, they simply gave her a short nod of agreement that they wouldn't be out or bring anything at the showing to life. They might have thrown some of their car snacks at her, but they wanted to make sure they had plenty for the trip back to the manor.

Carefully carrying the purse, Vini made sure Pizzo and Heike got to see everything at the exhibition, the work of all four artists, one of which was a sculptress whose style was slightly reminiscent of Aunt Eugenia's.

Charlie had just gotten a smartphone, a present from her dad, and took a few pictures. She actually didn't use the phone much, mainly only for her catering business. Vini and Ben didn't yet have cell phones, as they didn't particularly need them, and preferred to spend their money on other things.

At one point, Pizzo and Heike were so still and quiet that Vini actually checked on them, hoping they hadn't been smothered, or fainted, from the somewhat stuffy atmosphere of the crowded showing.

They were fine, simply mesmerized, with dreamy looks on their faces and eyes like full moons.

In seeing how much they were enjoying the art, Vini thought she might take them to other art galleries in the future. Maybe Tulko could take them to the Louvre, or the Met. However, before mentioning this possibility to the puck trolls, she would have to think about whether or not God would approve of a wind horse performing this kind of task. She would pray about it, and wait for God's answer.

Louetta was very excited and happy because one of her paintings had already sold for twelve hundred dollars. Plus, there was evidently interest in another by two individuals.

"So they are kind of like bidding against each other on it," she said. "Oh my, my stomach is full of butterflies." (They would end up hearing from Louetta the next morning that seven of her paintings sold, the highest going for twenty-three hundred dollars.)

In saying goodbye to her friends an hour later, she specifically told Pizzo, "I'll see you in a couple of weeks back at the mansion."

He nodded and gave her a big smile.

The puck trolls were still in a state of bliss, and quiet, all the way back to the manor. And they arrived having eaten less than half of the remaining snacks. Carrying the leftovers to the kitchen, Vini pondered, *I guess the old saying is true, "Art is food for the soul." Or in this case, for puck trolls.* They also hadn't eaten much at lunch when they stopped at a drive-in. "*Will wonders never cease?*" she thought, recalling another fitting cliché.

Kip, Weatherly, and Preston had gone back to training in the morning. Arriving in Kivetel, they found Varjo already in the clearing, kneeling and praying aloud. "Praise him for his mighty deeds; praise him according to his exceeding greatness! Praise him with trumpet sound; praise him with lute and harp! Praise him with timbrel and dance; praise him with strings and pipe!"

While Kip recognized this from the bible as being part of Psalm 150, Varjo said, "It's one of the Poems of Praise in our *Book of Wisdom*, written to praise the One Above, the One Who Made All, God, the One Who Watches All, the Lord, Father Creator, and the One Who Rules All.

"He has many names in our *Holy Bible* too," Weatherly remarked.

Linna arrived shortly after this, and they all began their exercises for the day.

Em had spent the morning hitting tennis balls, weeding, and writing poetry, all the while deciding she was having a pretty wonderful summer.

Preston, Kip, and Em gathered for a short bible study with the aunts after lunch. During their discussion, which involved possible ways Satan deceives, Em was shocked to find out that some people don't think Satan exists.

"Oh yes," Aunt Fiona stressed. "He wants people to think he doesn't exist. He has fooled a lot of people."

Em spent the rest of the afternoon in her room, writing a poem, which she presented to the aunts shortly before dinner.

### The Greatest Myth

I was once luminous but lost much of my glow,  
When I fell from heaven to the earth far below.  
Working from a list, Every Soul from Great to Small,  
My plan was very simple, to collect them all.  
Mankind would find me most difficult to resist,  
Because I would convince them I didn't exist.  
Wandering to many lands West, East, South, and North,  
From remotest corners, I drew dark spirits forth;  
Servants to help in promoting my evil cause,  
They would work untiring, without even a pause.  
Assembling this group, I gave them my final words,  
Before sending them out in their great evil herds.  
"We must convince human beings of every station,  
I am a figment of their imagination.  
If we deceive them into believing this lie,  
The Christ they will also likely choose to deny.  
Once deceived, we will collect their souls. Take them all,  
From the greatest of great, to the smallest of small.  
And we won't just convince them to believe our lies,  
They'll also doubt miracles seen with their own eyes.  
Everywhere on the earth is fully my domain,  
While hunting for souls, from no place you should refrain.  
Convince those basking in both the moon and the sun,  
There is no pleasure or vice from which they need run."  
Still bright enough to act as a tall beacon light,

I helped draw mankind to a place darker than night.  
Singing a song of temptation with notes most sweet,  
To indulge all fleshly pursuits, I did entreat.  
My lyrics were simple: “Live for the now with all zeal.  
Don’t bother to fret; heaven and hell are not real.”  
Teachers, even preachers have fed people these lies,  
To fatten souls up for their ultimate demise.  
While my pleasing singing the fools did surely hear,  
If they looked for me, I did swiftly disappear.  
Wrenching many souls from the bosom of the Lamb,  
Through the ocean of their tears, I gleefully swam.  
Once a soul’s claimed, the Father won’t hear the weeping,  
So far from heaven are these souls in my keeping.  
If any dare try escape, I won’t hesitate,  
To feed them with more greed, pride, jealousy, and hate.  
Attacking again and again, unrelenting,  
Weak minds and wills, I will keep from repenting.  
I know I must stay hidden, though I have great might,  
Because I can’t deceive if I’m out in plain sight.  
As myth to mankind, my evil they won’t resist.  
Why should they reject something that doesn’t exist?  
Once they are all caught, my joy won’t ever waver;  
Their torture and pain I will endlessly savor.  
While their souls burn forever, my hunger will feast,  
Quenching the vast hole in the belly of the beast.  
Fires endlessly burning, steady, scorching, and slow,  
What a grand substitute for the loss of my glow.

After reading it, Aunt Eugenia suggested Em might consider submitting it to a magazine.

“Maybe someday,” Em replied. “For now, I just wrote it for God, and to share with you guys.”

Returning to her room and randomly flipping open her bible, the first line of Isaiah 52:8 jumped out at her. “Hark, your watchmen lift up their voice, together they sing for joy....”

Em took this as God telling her he was pleased with her, and it made her feel very warm and reassured inside.

She next landed on Isaiah 55:12, which also made her feel very contented. ““For you shall go out in joy, and be led forth in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall break forth into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.””

Wandering around outside just before dinner, Em ended up helping Mr. Michaels gather a few watermelons that were ripe, two of which Charlie would end up making various salads and pickles out of for an afternoon picnic they were planning for the next day after church. The weather had been nice lately, not too hot, so an outdoor party in the shade of various large trees was likely to be enjoyable.

“...a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted...” Mr. Michaels said, quoting part of Ecclesiastes 3:2 as they trudged up to the house with the melons.

On Sunday after church, as she was helping to gather chairs for the picnic, Em noticed that the manor had visitors. Professor Fulhausen and Mr. Palladino had arrived in a small yellow car to tell Vini and Ben that the sorcerer and Dragon Hunter were no longer in the area.

Greeting the men with Ben and Vini out front, and waiting for a small break in the conversation (while trying to calm Boomer who was extremely excited about having guests), Em invited the professor and magician to their picnic. “It’s only about an hour from now,” she said, “and while you’re waiting, you could visit with Aunt Fiona and Aunt Eugenia in the parlor.”

The visitors gladly accepted the invitation, and were delighted to meet the aunts, as Em introduced them all, very carefully and somewhat formally, in order to get the names of the guests exactly right.

At the picnic, Heike was wearing one of the new dresses Em had made for her, a yellow flowered creation, which everyone admired. Between bouts of eating, she and Pizzo played *Hide and Seek* in the hedges and flowerbeds, along with a few games of *Bean-Bag Toss*.

As it turns out, Mr. P was the friend Professor Fulhausen had once mentioned as having had an encounter with an albino puma, an extremely rare and enormous magical creature that was much like any cat in that it liked to toy with its prey before killing it. Mr. P thrilled everyone with the tale of having survived only by drugging the puma using berries magically enhanced to induce sleep. “Mind you,” he added, “I didn’t have a wind horse to whisk me away from danger, so I had to use my wits.”

Neither the professor nor Mr. P had ever seen a wind horse until meeting Tulko a short while earlier in the garden. While fascinated, they weren’t shocked, as both had heard of the creatures before.

Oddly enough, the berries used to drug the puma had been placed at Mr. P's disposal only a few days before by Etowa, who was being proactive in predicting a move by Boko which would lead the cat to the magician. Etowa had also been responsible for removing the sorcerer and Dragon Hunter from the Netherwind area, by planting a false lead as to the location of another dragon in a different state. Unfortunately, Etowa could do nothing about something the sorcerer left nearby, a creature just about as bad as a Dragon Hunter, and one actually more dangerous to human beings. But, as divine design would have it, his help wouldn't particularly be needed to deal with the additional threat.

At one point during the picnic, Aunt Eugenia pulled Em aside to compliment her on being such a wonderful host, so polite and helpful, in not only inviting the professor and magician to join their party, but also in waiting on everyone by refilling glasses and fetching things from the kitchen. Being a little embarrassed, Em didn't reply, especially since she knew this was Aunt Eugenia's way of telling her how proud she was of her growing up some, in both attitude and actions.

While enjoying a plate of cookies, Pizzo and Heike ended up throwing a few sugar cubes at people; but they didn't throw cookies, because only a fool would throw cookies instead of eating them.

Professor Fulhausen was thrilled when Jelzey made a brief visit to the garden. Though he loved firebirds, he had never seen one. Ben stayed close, not only to put Jelzey at ease, but to be sure the professor in his exuberance of gushing and admiring didn't accidentally get himself burned by getting too close. While Professor Fulhausen had put on in one of his lectures that he thought firebirds were related to dragons, he very well knew they were not. "Sometimes the information I spout is just a smoke screen to lead people away from the truth," he said, "because people who are meant to discover the truth end up doing so anyway, no matter what I say."

While the professor and Ben were visiting with Jelzey, Vini was talking to Mr. P, specifically telling him that some of her research into the subject of magicians was pretty confusing, mainly the parts about science, extra dimensions, and the senses. (At this time, she didn't tell him that part of her information came from automatic writing.)

Able to tell Vini was fishing for information, Mr. P's answer was pretty short. "What we magicians do is pretty intricate, yet perfectly natural because we rely on and trust in God, and His guidance."

In thinking about his response, she realized that what he said could and should be applied to a lot more than just using magic. *Everything would be more natural, and go much more smoothly, if we all just relied on and trusted in God.*

Vini hadn't been surprised at the limited answer, since she knew magicians rarely gave away secrets. However, nearing the end of the picnic, Mr. P ended up telling her, "When you are doing your research, you might look up sextessence sometime."

While Vini knew about quintessence, the mysterious and heavenly fifth element, and had pondered septessence, connected to art and the seven colors of the rainbow, she had never considered others that might be in the sequence, like sextessence relating to six, and octessence to eight.

*This is an incredibly valuable clue!* she realized, as she quickly said a short prayer to God, thanking Him for providing the information. And He had indeed been responsible for prompting Mr. P to say those exact words, which had simply popped into his head and out of his mouth before he even had a chance to think about them.

Mr. P also related that, while he had no children, going back five generations, the men in his family had all been magicians. "Grandfathers, uncles, pretty much all of us," he said. "We pass things down; but we are also getting new information all the time from research, experimentation, and just careful listening to God. He is guiding and directing everything; and there is nothing over which He doesn't have control, and interest. His hand is everywhere, even as small as in the choice of our morning bowl of cereal, or how many strokes we make with a toothbrush. He is in larger things too, of course, such as earthquakes and political decisions. We can't understand everything; but that's because we're not meant to, being just people, and not gods. Most magicians are male, by the way," he added, "though there have been a few female magicians, but very few."

Smiling as she listened, Vini got the idea that Mr. P was trying to draw attention away from having mentioned something he thought maybe he shouldn't have, namely, sextessence. But the distraction

wouldn't matter because the ideas of both sextessence and octessence were now firmly rooted in her brain, along with the notion that they were possibly related to dimensions and triangles as well, this idea having just popped into her brain for some reason.

However, in realizing she was giving herself a slight headache from all the thinking, she pushed the ideas back a bit, in order to relax and focus on the fun of the picnic.

In the evening, feeling like she wanted to be by herself for a bit, Em decided to visit the Art Gallery on the mezzanine. In having only peeked in before, she hadn't noticed a bin of hand mirrors, like those used in barber and beauty shops, sitting near the entry.

After carefully propping the door, she wandered around admiring the various works. Her Aunt Fiona, in being wary of certain objects crossing realms, had said that she would never remove any of the art from the gallery, which Em thought very wise. After strolling down the main hall for what seemed to be a quarter of a mile, with still no end to the hall in sight, Em thought, *This must be the largest gallery in the world. Well, why not; it is magical.*

Stopping directly in front of what she was sure was Degas' *Seated Dancer*, her brain told her, *Oh, I get it; this gallery is full of reproductions.* However, staring at the painting, she was suddenly confused.

Running back to the bin of mirrors and grabbing one, she rushed back to *Seated Dancer*. Standing with her back to the painting and looking at it in the mirror over her shoulder, she said aloud, "This is the way it looks in the art book. I'm sure of it."

Pondering the oddity of the reversed painting as she was returning the mirror to the bin and leaving the gallery, she thought, *So if I was looking at the real painting, wherever it might live, I might only have to step through it to end up here.* This made her think of Pizso's magical abilities related to art. *Maybe every painting is a doorway that ends up here.*

In knowing people weren't supposed to touch art, Em never even considered touching any of the paintings in the Art Gallery to find out if they might be doorways, though they might not have worked as such if a puck troll had never brought them to life. However, she would eventually discover that she was largely correct to think of them as

something like doorways, especially with what Vini would shortly be discovering about septessence.

On Monday morning, while the trainees were in Kivetel, in deciding it was time to share a particular secret they had discovered while exploring, Pizzo and Heike rounded up everyone else, leading the party to a particular section of the winding servants' stairs located between the second and third floors.

Making everyone stand on the small second-floor landing, Pizzo motioned for them to stay put and well back, against the wall. He then climbed the stairs in front of the group and scaled a sturdy post at the corner of a right-hand turn where another section of stairs climbed higher. Giggling in anticipation of everyone's reaction, Pizzo flipped the finial atop the post to one side (on a small hidden hinge) at the exact moment Heike twisted a spindle on the railing of the next section up of the stairs. As she completed a full three-sixty turn of the spindle, the entire section of stairs below the puck trolls did a slow flip, completely upside down, while rotating to rest at the bottom of the stairs in a position against a section of wall that wouldn't have been accessible without a staircase unless someone was suspended from the ceiling with ropes and a harness, or maybe scaling the wall using suction cups that could stick to wood paneling.

The new set of stairs was pretty much identical to the original stairs, except for not having a railing because the railing was now underneath. From their higher position, Pizzo and Heike were able to make a leap down onto the top of the moved stair section. For the others, the back of the flipped stairs had handhold and foothold notches built in to help with climbing to the top, which was what the trolls indicated the group needed to do.

Pizzo and Heike led the way down the flipped stairs. Pushing on a piece of trim (that was actually a lever) in the wall panel, they opened a secret door leading into a room roughly fifteen by twenty feet in size, the contents of which shocked everyone, including Aunt Fiona. In fact, her legs were shaking.

The hidden room might have been a safe room for people except that it was currently acting as a safe for a fairly good-sized treasure, most notably, twenty-two paintings including a Rembrandt, four by P.D. Grayson, three Picassos, a Monet, and two Halebiden watercolors. The

other paintings were not recognizable to anyone of the group, though Aunt Fiona speculated they were also likely masterpieces. (And her speculation would turn out to be correct.)

In addition to the paintings, six marble sculptures occupied the room, each on its own plinth. Aunt Fiona immediately recognized these as being by Pansy Winnow, a sculptress who had died very young. Extremely skilled, but not having completed a large body of work, her creations were considered very valuable.

A large set of shelves and a glass display case held what appeared to be rare coins, books, signed baseball cards, and two stacks of vintage comic books that were first editions. Showing Preston later, his eyes just about popped out of his head in knowing just the comic collection to be worth millions. The room also contained a separate case containing nearly a hundred Fabergé eggs.

“I always knew my parents and grandparents collected art,” Aunt Fiona said. “It’s all over the manor. But I never knew they collected masterpieces and hid them away. This is astounding!”

The room was ventilated, as evidenced by a slight draft of air, several grates on the walls, and the fact that it didn’t feel at all stuffy.

A single peacock feather also occupied one of the shelves; and oddly enough, it didn’t seem out of place amongst all of the treasures.

However, unlike the other items, which they were reluctant to touch without art handling gloves, Aunt Fiona, somewhat casually and automatically (as though being guided by an unseen force), picked up the feather and handed it to Vini, who smiled happily when accepting the gift, though she had no idea how very special this particular feather would turn out to be. The peacock of Vini’s dreams would end up showing her what to do with this special feather. She simply had to look into the eye to see certain events of the future. Of course, there were limitations to this; but the feather would eventually turn out to be a very helpful tool for her.

Downstairs a short while later in the parlor, when Aunt Fiona’s legs finally stopped shaking, she told everyone, “The art is not just confined to that room. I’d venture to say that the staircases are all masterpieces too.”

“Or the whole house,” Aunt Eugenia said. “That would be more accurate.”

“I always knew that a lot went into building Netherwind,” Aunt Fiona said. “I just never knew exactly how much.”

“So I’d venture to say that you can do whatever you want with the plantation now,” Ben said, “without ever having to sell off land again.”

“Maybe you could buy back what was sold off,” Em suggested.

“The two hundred acres that we sold weren’t part of the main property,” Aunt Fiona said. “They were across the highway. So I think we can do without them. Even if the plantation is now secure, I wouldn’t want to go crazy with the spending. I can think of much better things to spend the money on, like equipment, and hired help.”

Later in the evening, when in her bedroom praying and thanking God for the amazing blessing of saving the plantation, Aunt Fiona realized that the struggles over the years had likely been a test. *God does always provide*, she thought, *and His will for our lives is always best. We simply need to trust, and follow.*

At the same time her aunt was praying, Em was paying a quick visit to the mezzanine Art Gallery because she thought she remembered seeing one of the paintings from the treasure room in the gallery. She was correct; one of the watercolors by Halebiden was there, in reverse, so she had been correct in assuming each item in the gallery was a mirror image of its original. As she was leaving, she noticed one of the sculptures, Rodin’s *Eternal Springtime*, being so as well.

Charlie had a vision just before bedtime when looking into the bathroom mirror, of Netherwind and Laurelstone in the future, thriving not only as plantations, but also as schools, and ones where people were free to discuss things relating to God. And with this vision firmly planted in her head, she actually smiled herself to sleep.

## Chapter Eighteen

### Sixty-Three Diamonds

On Tuesday at right around nine in the morning, Weatherly had just returned from Kivetel and was with Em in the solarium when Pizzo and Heike came to get the girls in order to show them something important outside that they had discovered on Sunday afternoon.

In truth, the puck trolls were finding out so many things, they were having trouble keeping track of them all, so they definitely felt the need to share some of their finds with others, partly in fear of forgetting them, and partly because it just seemed the right thing to do. In actuality, Pizzo and Heike hadn't made this particular discovery entirely on their own because a friendly hawk had shown them.

Leading the girls to Heritage Oak, the pucks began to climb the tree, with Em and Weatherly following suit. The trunk was slightly slanted and had a good many knots and burls to hold onto, so this was a relatively easy feat. Plus, the oak was so huge that at the point where the trunk first started turning into the crown of the tree, they found something like a natural platform that was plenty big enough for both girls to safely stand on. In the center of the platform, a huge hollow, just wide enough to fit an average-sized person, led down into the trunk. The hollow as it descended was slightly at a slant to match the lean of the trunk, and might have been a slide, except that the inside of the tree was anything but smooth. In looking down into what was basically a tunnel, the girls could see the ground and a good amount of light, as though the hollow led to an opening on the side of the tree near the bottom that one might be able to crawl up into in order to reach the platform.

If any person who was not expecting something magical were to look down into the hollow, they would simply have seen leaves blowing around amongst a few twigs strewn over the ground. But Em and Weatherly could tell that the light at the bottom of the tree tunnel was slightly different than the light surrounding them; and the leaves were

slightly larger than Heritage Oak might produce, as well as deeper red in color than any leaves in the area generally turned. Plus, in being both knowledgeable and observant, they knew this was the wrong time of year for leaves to change colors in this part of the country.

With the puck trolls staying behind for safety (in case anything were to go wrong), Em went first into the hollow, and found it easy to make her way down using a series of crags and lumps in the wood as handholds and footholds. A large root sticking up at the bottom helped to secure her footing for the final few feet.

The hollow basically led to a different land, which Em arrived at by climbing out of the bottom of another huge tree with a similar hollow, the tree itself being slightly larger than Heritage Oak and having larger leaves that were red in color like those the girls had seen blowing about when peering down into the long hole. By stooping, she was easily able to climb out of the hollow and into a wooded area that she knew was definitely not part of the Netherwind Plantation.

Stepping out a short distance and gazing over treed hills and a wooded valley, Em could see a city in the distance; and while she didn't recognize it, she did think something about the area looked familiar.

Weatherly arrived less than six seconds later. Based on a flag on a distant building and several message kites floating around, she recognized right away that they were in Kivetel. "We're not very near the clearing," she told Em, "but we're somewhat close to Linna's home. Just down that road I think, probably less than half a mile."

"So this is another doorway to Kivetel," Em said, in wonder. "How interesting."

They didn't stay, especially since Weatherly was anxious to get home to have a nap, having basically already spent a full day in Kivetel engaged in strenuous training. Plus, Pizzo and Heike were waiting for them.

"Thank you so much for showing this to us," Weatherly told the smiling pair, upon climbing back through the tree and up onto the platform with relative ease.

As Em and Weatherly sat down in the shade of the tree, the puck trolls were off to do more exploring, waving goodbye to the girls as they hitched a ride on an enmouse.

Watching them go, Weatherly thought about the fact that Pizzo and Heike had shown just her and Em this special secret, and no one else. Pizzo had been especially nice to Weatherly lately, ever since a particular day when he found Kip teasing her in the kitchen. On that day, Pizzo had thrown an apple core and a pot holder at Kip in disapproval of the somewhat mean behavior.

In knowing what good judgement puck trolls obviously have, Weatherly suggested to Em that they might not share the information of this extra doorway with Kip and Preston yet, to which Em replied, “I won’t tell if you won’t.”

Though Kip had been somewhat nicer to his cousin since they returned from the week spent in Kivetel, he still often liked to pick on her. And although Weatherly was getting better about not taking it personally, she still didn’t like it much. Also, even with Linna as a training partner, Weatherly still often felt like the “odd man out” when around the boys. So she sort of felt like this was something special and private that maybe only she and Em were supposed to know about. Plus, if she ever wanted to visit Linna on her own, this would be a shortcut to her house.

“Though I guess we should tell everyone eventually,” Weatherly ventured to say after a minute or so of thought. “It would be useful to know in case someone ever gets stuck in Kivetel again from the door getting shut accidentally.”

“Yeah, but that’s very unlikely to happen now that we’re using the ribbons,” Em offered. “So we could just wait until Kip and Preston grow up some to tell them.”

“That’s exactly it,” Weatherly replied. “They need to grow up some.”

“Boys often take longer to grow up than girls,” Em said earnestly, while marveling at her own reasoning, as though she might have been the very first person to think of this concept. (She didn’t know that boys often think just the opposite—that girls take longer to grow up than boys.)

Weatherly needed to be getting home. Rising and brushing off, she said, “John’s busy with school and won’t be around much this week, so I’m in charge. See ya later.” With this, she set off on a jog in order to reach Laurelstone quickly.

Em herself set off jogging to Netherwind less than a minute later. In thinking about what her cousin had just said, about being in charge, and in feeling very grown up and like she herself could very well be in charge of a home if necessary, Em had an idea that she wanted to run by the aunts.

Finding them in the parlor, she rather breathlessly, and in a somewhat disorganized manner because her thoughts hadn't yet organized themselves, put forth the idea that she, Kip, and Otto could move back to Netherwind permanently, and that she could be Otto's guardian, much like John was Weatherly's when their father was not at home.

"You're too young," Aunt Fiona immediately replied. "It's just not feasible."

Using the example of Weatherly being on her own a lot and being able to handle a lot of responsibility, Em said, "I can look after Otto evenings and weekends, so you and Mrs. Boyle would only have to do it when I'm in school."

"But you wouldn't have time for homework, or writing, or tennis, or any of the other things you need and like to do," Aunt Fiona countered. "I'm sorry, Sweetie. It's just not a good idea."

With a great sigh, Em slowly responded, "Okay...I just thought I'd run it by you."

Aunt Eugenia had kept silent up to this point; however, she did now have something very important to say. "Actually, it is something that I would be tempted to call a good idea. It's just not going to work at this time, based on your aunt and Mrs. Boyle not being able to devote full days to Otto, and because you need to do other things with the rest of your childhood than raise your little brother. So it is a good idea; just not a good plan."

Em could understand the reasoning behind the decision. And even before Aunt Eugenia had said her piece, Em hadn't felt angry, just slightly disappointed. "It was just a thought," she said. "I guess I was just trying to brainstorm."

"Brainstorming is always a good idea," Aunt Fiona answered, as Em hugged her.

After giving Aunt Eugenia a hug too, Em bounded upstairs to her room.

Settling in to read the bible, she was actually surprised that she hadn't gotten angry when her idea was shot down. *I guess I really am growing up*, she reasoned.

And in thinking about Violet raising Otto, Em realized she was starting to respect Violet more, and think of her more as an actual mother, to all three of them. Violet was quite different than their mother had been, as far as personality, as well as looks. *But that's probably a good thing*, Em decided, *for them not to be too much alike*. Plus, in knowing Otto already considered Doyle Mansion to be his home and Violet to be his mother, it wouldn't be fair to uproot him.

In the afternoon, Pizzo and Heike were out by the mailbox at the end of the lane sitting on the bench that occupied a spot about ten feet from the mailbox. The bench had been placed there about fifteen years previous because Aunt Fiona's late husband used to walk to check the mail; then he'd often take a short rest before walking back to the house again. Aunt Fiona herself, when feeling tired, did the same thing when checking the mail because it was a rather long walk from the house to the road and back again.

On a whim, the trolls decided to climb the mailbox post in order to look into the box, which was fairly large by mailbox standards because it had been made especially to hold small packages. While they weren't expecting anything in the mail (though Louetta had sent Pizzo a card earlier in the summer), the pair thought it might be fun to look inside, before taking a slide down the post.

Coming out of the mailbox, they noticed a man sitting on the bench. Pizzo and Heike were startled not only to see a person on the bench, but also because the man looked a lot like Sam or Ben, but a good deal older, like maybe thirty or forty years older than the twins at their present age. But at this point, they didn't really think it could be either of the boys, just an older person that looked like them.

The man was evidently familiar with puck trolls because he said hello to the pair as they slid down the mailbox post and slowly approached the bench.

The odd thing was that it seemed perfectly natural for Pizzo and Heike to climb one leg of the bench and sit next to the man, who began to tell them a story, one not too long, about a person of legend who was called a Diamond Girl.

“Every time she cried,” the man said, “every one of her tears turned into diamonds. As soon as they fell from her eyes, they were already diamonds. Anytime she was happy and cried, the stones were blessed, and could bring good fortune to anyone they came into contact with. However, anytime she was upset or angry or very sad, the diamonds from those tears were cursed, and ended up causing bad things to happen, like accidents, illnesses, and even death.”

With the trolls looking at him with eyes of wonder, because they had never heard this legend before, the man finished by saying, “Some of the cursed diamonds were once hidden in a Chinese puzzle box. It would be a very bad thing if someone who didn’t know they were cursed were to ever find them, so I hope that never happens.” With this, the man rose, and stretched, before wandering off down the road in the direction of town.

After sitting only for about a minute, as the information sunk in, Pizzo and Heike lickety-split slid down one leg of the bench and set off trotting toward the manor. In thinking about Em’s puzzle box, they didn’t want to waste any time in getting to the house.

Puck trolls, of course, were extremely shrewd, which was why so many of them could read the parables of the bible without needing anyone to explain what the stories meant, the meanings being something many people, even some scholars, often struggled with.

Realizing the story of the Diamond Girl was likely told to them on this particular day for a reason, with their brains chewing on this, Pizzo and Heike turned their trot into a sprint. They would need to hurry, to get the cursed diamonds away from everyone and to hide them. When a rabbit loping alongside them gave a little tilt of her furry head, like an invitation, the trolls quickly jumped on.

Reaching the house at least twenty times faster than they would have running, they hopped from the rabbit, giving her a pat, just before she streaked swiftly away, not wanting to stay too long under the watchful and somewhat hungry eyes of Zapor and Folto, or the gargoyles, which tended to spook animals like rabbits and squirrels, if not all other creatures as well.

Pizzo and Heike were right to worry and to hurry because Em had just spent the good part of an hour working on opening the second

compartment of the puzzle box, which, instead of a being a drawer, was simply a cavity accessed by a flip-open hinged panel on the side.

Dumping the contents of the cavity onto her bedspread, she gasped, because she was sure these were diamonds, sixty-three of them in all as she counted them, and probably worth a massive fortune.

Climbing the stairs as quickly as they could, Pizzo and Heike sensed something was very wrong in the manor, from the ugly feelings that had just started in their stomachs.

Em was admiring the diamonds, which were lovely, though not exactly like ones that might be put into jewelry, being mostly ovals that resembled squashed tomatoes in their shapes. They were cut and polished, but were oddly symmetrical on both sides, cut the same top and bottom, as though they could be put into a ring or a necklace either way. *There wouldn't be an upside down*, her mind told her.

She ended up thinking this might be a new trend in jewelry, one she wasn't familiar with. Maybe people could have them reversed every few years or so, or reset when passing them down to someone else in their family. *So it would make it like a new ring, or earrings*.

Several of the stones were near-perfect spheres, like pearls, which Em thought also might be a new trend. *Maybe they are even called, pearl diamonds*.

Most of the diamonds were around the size of a small pea, but three were very large, like small marbles, and Em imagined their value might be in the millions.

Fingering the stones, she didn't even realize her stomach was starting to hurt, or that she was getting a headache. But this might have been so even with diamonds that were not cursed, as they often had the power to bewitch people, who then might not notice certain things happening, either around them or to them, even important things.

By the time Pizzo and Heike made it up the stairs to her room, Em had just finished putting the diamonds back into the box for safekeeping. She did, at this time, finally notice that her head and stomach were hurting, but was distracted as the door to her bedroom (which she had left cracked) suddenly swung open.

Rushing into the room, Pizzo and Heike immediately started trying to wave her away from the puzzle box; however, Em didn't particularly understand their gestures.

After scaling her bedspread, so fast it both shocked and unsettled her (mainly because it reminded her of bad dream she once had where large spiders were running up the covers), Pizzo grabbed the puzzle box, while Heike started slapping her hand, actually quite hard, to get it away from the box.

“Ow!” Em cried.

Snapping the cavity compartment tightly shut (because Em hadn’t quite gotten to that point), Pizzo carried the box, which was rather large for him, to the edge of the bed where he tossed it down to Heike who had already slid down the covers to the floor. As soon as Pizzo himself reached the floor, he hoisted the box onto his back and scurried through the open door and out into the hall, with Heike quickly following.

“Hey!” Em yelled, scooting herself off the bed. “Bring that back here, you little thieves!”

However, she didn’t pursue because she realized rather quickly that her little friends had just saved her from something terrible. After taking only three steps toward the door, she doubled over and threw up on the floor.

And she actually felt physically horrible, as though she might throw up again at any moment, for nearly two hours. She also had a splitting headache.

Eating only a light dinner, she sipped ginger ale afterwards to further settle her stomach as everyone (except Pizzo and Heike who were off finding a good hiding place for the diamonds) gathered in the parlor to hear Em’s story of finding the diamonds that made her sick in the puzzle box, and the puck trolls making off with the box.

After thinking for only a short while, Aunt Eugenia’s brain hit upon something she had heard of in her younger years that she thought might be related to this “A Diamond Girl likely produced those diamonds,” she said, “which means they are probably cursed.”

With everyone except the aunts looking rather confused, Aunt Fiona shared that she too had heard of Diamond Girls, but had thought they were probably only myth. “It’s a super rare gift,” she said, “given only to girls and never to boys. So there are never Diamond Boys, only Diamond Girls. From birth, every tear a Diamond Girl cries turns into a diamond, either blessed or cursed, depending on the emotions that produce the tears.”

“Diamond Girls are probably put forth as being mere legend to protect the girls,” Aunt Eugenia offered. “Imagine how many evil people would want to exploit them.”

Em was already feeling much better—the soda was definitely helping—and she listened with interest as the aunts talked of other powerful and amazing gifts sometimes given to people, such as prophecy, healing, and control over fire.

“It’s said all people have gifts,” Vini interjected, “but not all people are able to tap into them.”

“Some people might just be lazy,” Kip speculated, “and don’t want to put forth the effort it might take to nurture a gift.” (He was specifically thinking of his music. While he had decided to give up the trombone, he doubted he would ever give up music entirely because he was able to recognize that he truly did have a gift with the musical weapons.)

“God might not allow use of gifts if people’s intentions aren’t good,” Charlie said. “But I guess since we know that some gifts are used for ill purposes, He must in some cases.”

“But people eventually pay the price for misusing God-given gifts,” Vini said.

Piszo and Heike brought the empty puzzle box back to Em while everyone was in the parlor. With the diamonds no longer inside, the box could do her no harm.

After thanking them for helping her, Em added, “Sorry I yelled at you.”

Piszo and Heike told no one where they had hidden the diamonds. Unfortunately, they hadn’t been able to destroy the stones. While Piszo knew that lava could destroy diamonds, there was none in the area. Dragon fire also could have done the trick; but he hadn’t wanted to wake the dragon sleeping in the nearby cave. However, the stones were very well hidden, so it was doubtful anyone would ever find them again without the puck trolls’ help.

Ben wouldn’t know for many years why Piszo and Heike were giving him such funny looks while they were all visiting in the parlor, the answer being that the trolls were now almost certain that he was the man on the bench, but an older version, of course. They were also fairly

certain it hadn't been Sam telling them the story because something in the man's voice had been more like Ben's than Sam's.

In the future, Ben would indeed travel back in time. Hearing the story in the parlor was how he first learned about Diamond Girls, and this would later help him figure out that he needed to put the magic key (produced by his own magical in the future) into the Chinese puzzle box, along with the diamonds, and place the box in the stair drawer for Em to find. For Em's part, she would later know that she needed to give the box to Ben, to take back in time for her younger self to find. Ben would travel back in time again, to a point a few weeks after placing the box in the stairs, to let Pizzo and Heike know about the legend, which would nudge them to help Em and to hide the diamonds, which actually had been produced by a Diamond Girl that Em would meet in the future. Ben would place the stones into the box using special gloves and doing so very quickly so as not to bear any ill effects from the cursed diamonds. This was all necessary to make this day's sequence of events happen, in order to let everyone in the group know about Diamond Girls, the information being something that would be crucial to the future in various ways.

The cursed diamonds were not the only dangerous thing the puck trolls would end up helping with on this day because several of the residents of Netherwind were about to encounter the creature left behind by the sorcerer, which was a megahob.

Outside in the garden an hour or so before sunset, Aunt Eugenia, Preston, and Kip were enjoying the fresh air that came with the cooling of the day. Ben was just returning from a short bike ride with Vini, who headed in to the larger library to do a little research. Ben and Aunt Eugenia ended up sitting in lawn chairs watching Pizzo and Heike play a game of croquet, while Kip and Preston sparred with wooden practice swords on the far side of the croquet lawn.

Following the stained-glass-window incident, the sorcerer had specifically left the megahob in the area to sniff out the puck trolls, and destroy them, if possible.

Although much larger than regular hobgoblins, megahobs possessed much the same skills as their smaller counterparts, such as fierce fighting ability and expert camouflage. The megahob was currently

impersonating a huge rhododendron bush, nearly the size of a small elephant, very near the tennis court.

In glancing in that direction, Ben immediately noticed the out-of-place bush, not just because of its size, but because there were no rhododendron bushes in the garden. (Megahobs were evidently not too smart; this one was simply mimicking his favorite shrub.)

Instantly on his guard but trying not to draw too much attention, Ben remarked in a low voice to Aunt Eugenia, “Don’t make any sudden moves, or let on that you notice anything wrong, but tell me what you think of that bush over there.” He was fishing in his pocket for his knife, as casually as possible, as he said this.

In addition to being able to tell that the bush was not part of Netherwind’s garden family, Aunt Eugenia could see the megahob for what he was, and she replied in a low voice, “It’s a hobgoblin; but I’ve never seen one that big before.” Indeed, this one was about the size of a minivan.

Slowly rising from their seats, intent on warning the others, Ben and Aunt Eugenia were too late because the megahob had started to move, in a speedy streak toward the croquet lawn.

As he ran, the creature lost the ability to hold his camouflage (because it took too much energy to maintain), so those playing croquet and sparring were easily able to see the enormous beast barreling towards them. He looked much like a regular hobgoblin, lumpy and greenish gray, sporting glowing orange eyes, super-long claws, and pointy ears full of gnarly tufts of hair. This one also had something of a beard, although this was a characteristic uncommon to most hobgoblins. Surprisingly fast for his bulk, the megahob reached the croquet lawn in less than four seconds where he met a series of whizzing croquet balls expertly thrown by Heike and Pizzo that not only just about knocked him silly upon contact with his head, but that also considerably slowed him down, which gave Kip and Preston plenty of time to act.

After hearing of the demon attack outside the cave, the boys had started carrying weapons from the Weapons Room with them. Dropping their wooden swords, they swiftly advanced on the megahob. Preston didn’t have a mirror with him, but did have a gold rope; and Kip had a flute.

Ben had managed to draw his knife, which had again turned into a sword. However, in observing the demeanor and obvious preparedness of Kip and Preston, at this time, he opted to stay well back and out of their way, where he and Aunt Eugenia simply watched with amazement the battle that played out. Pizzo and Heike, too, were almost mesmerized by the dance-like movements, not only full of grace but of strength reminiscent of the most difficult of martial arts skills. Some of their moves reminded Aunt Eugenia of Tai Chi, but in fast motion. As the weapons were expertly applied, sizzles and sparks issued from the rope, while the flute let loose a long series of lilting notes similar to a soft version of a battle song, soft because the sounds of horns and percussion instruments were missing, but uplifting in nature in that the song might well have been likened to a hymn.

When Boomer bounded across the lawns from the house toward the scene, Ben and Aunt Eugenia had their hands full in trying to head off and catch the excitable poodle, so they missed several of the expertly-placed rope slashes that brought the megahob down, and the final flute strike that killed the creature.

Hobgoblins, like demons, weren't made out of much earthly matter, so when dead, their bodies tended to simply dissipate. After several seconds of festering and bubbling, this one basically melted into the lawn, leaving only a wide patch of greasy-looking residue that would end up washing away fairly easily with the next hard rain.

Preston and Kip weren't even all that shook up after the fight. Of course, for as much time as they had spent in Kivetel, they had probably about the equivalent of two years of training packed into this one summer so far, so they had been well prepared for the encounter.

As they all headed inside pretty quickly, deciding they had had enough excitement for one day, Ben resolved to make time in his schedule for a little training, either in Kivetel, or maybe just by asking Kip and Preston for a few lessons here.

Feeling completely well by the next morning, Em spent the day weeding, sewing, and reading the bible; and she ended up going with the group to the Wednesday evening bible study in town.

A potluck dinner had been added to this meeting, for which Charlie had made a casserole, a cobbler, and homemade ice cream. This was the final summer bible study because the church was having a concert

the following Wednesday night; also, the members of the youth group wanted to end early enough to allow everyone time to get ready to go back to school. While the Netherwind visitors hadn't yet decided if they would attend the concert, they were definitely planning to go to the church barbecue picnic scheduled the same week, but on Saturday.

Surprising everyone, Frank arrived at the bible study just as they were finishing their potluck meal and beginning the discussion. He had been attending Mr. Galloway's church, but didn't feel comfortable going to the youth group meetings, mainly because, having just graduated from high school, he was kind of hovering between youth and adult, which made it slightly awkward to fit into one or the other of the groups. But he had felt comfortable talking to Charlie and Ben on his visit to Netherwind; and having heard Vini mention about coming to the meetings here in town, he had just felt like taking a drive.

He was evidently working on bringing his family to Christ, and didn't mind sharing this with the group when he was introduced. His father had been listening to him, but traveled a lot, so it was hard to spend time with him. His mother evidently was a complete atheist, and an activist. "I think she's just involved in those things because they are trendy," Frank said. "But I've learned enough to know that under the guise of being 'open-minded' she's actually closed her mind. My pastor says her heart is hardened. I don't want to give up on her, but I'm not sure if I can do anything."

The group was somewhat eerily reminded of their previous discussion about being mismated with unbelievers, as Frank went on. "You know, she acted kind of mad at me for getting caught after cutting Mr. Galloway's yew tree cross. I think getting caught was the best thing that ever happened to me. I know God and Mr. G have forgiven me, and I think I can do great things in the future. I never felt like this before. She also told me she wished I would have cut up a few more things before getting caught." Sighing, he finished with, "Anyway, I want to focus on my younger brother and sister, Terrence and Joyce. I think I might be able to make some real headway there."

A boy named Sean McDaniel had selected the main topic for the meeting and wanted to talk about the ways in which God speaks to us. "For me, it's mostly through the bible," he said. "But I know He speaks to us in other ways; I guess I just don't notice."

“I think a lot of us have that problem,” Vini said.

“God speaks to us through everything surrounding us,” Darrell input. “We’re just not listening. How sad this must make Him feel. So why should He answer our prayers, our cries for help, if we don’t even listen to Him?”

“I agree we’re not good listeners, and we often don’t notice things,” Vini countered, “but I don’t think this makes God sad. He knows we’re weak creatures; that’s why He’s so persistent and loving with us. He gives us repeats, if we don’t notice the first time, or the second, or even the third. He’s given me a lot of repeats, to get my attention.” Without mentioning too many magical details, she gave a few examples of how God had given her messages using things like tapestries and clocks, and even clouds.

“He can also speak to us through our gut feelings,” Clarissa added. “Like when we feel uneasy, we should listen to those feelings because it could be the Holy Spirit trying to warn us.”

“Some people get actual words put into their brains,” Ben said, “but I don’t think that’s really all that common.”

At one point, the discussion turned to supernatural experiences, which led Vini to comment, “Even some unbelievers have supernatural experiences. But when we start to believe, there’s no end to the magic, the miracles, the messages. God is definitely speaking to us, sometimes even in big and fantastical ways.”

Frank had really enjoyed the discussion; and on the drive home, he was thinking of the various ways God had been speaking to him lately, many of which he planned to share with his family, as part of his ongoing testimony to them.

Back at Netherwind, Em shared with Vini how much she admired her for being able to talk in front of others so easily. “I have trouble with that sometimes,” Em said. “I get nervous, and I’m afraid I’ll say the wrong things, especially about God.”

Vini then shared with Em that she used to be shy before she learned to roar. “God taught me to roar, so I could help get the Good News of His Son out to other people.”

Inspired by Vini’s words, Em wrote a poem before bedtime.

## Learn to Roar

We must let His truth and light be well known.

If the Lord Jesus we simply adore,  
We must decide to be quiet no more.  
Our great joy and fervor we shouldn't hide;  
To be most outspoken, we should decide.  
The Good News kept silent, we should abhor.

With help from Jesus, we can truly soar.  
His love alone brings happiness galore.  
During life's trials, He often walks beside.  
To every sinner, His mercy is shown.

Tell all on the mountains and each far shore.  
For those who are hiding, knock on each door.  
We can't wait until souls are hard and dried.  
Tell all that He comforts every tear cried.  
About Him, we simply must learn to roar.

To every corner, let the shouts be thrown!

The next morning, Em had what she thought was another good idea; and she actually called Violet to talk to her about it.

Basically, the idea (and plan) was for Em to get her driver's license early, at age fifteen just like Charlie had. She would then be able to drive herself to and from high school, instead of riding the school bus. (It was well known to everyone of Em's acquaintance that she hated riding the school bus.) The main benefit she pointed out to Violet was the time savings in not having to wait for the bus, or wait through all of the many stops. She could also help cart Kip and Otto around as needed for various activities and appointments. As far as not having a car, she would figure that part out as things went along, borrowing Violet's until able to get a car of her own, her reasoning being that Violet and Dave could always share his car.

Violet simply told Em that she would discuss the matter with Dave and call her back to let her know their decision.

The call came less than an hour later, with Violet telling Em that they both thought fifteen was too young for most teens to be driving and that they would revisit the idea when Em turned sixteen.

While the answer didn't surprise her, Em was a little surprised that she didn't feel angry, though she did sigh with slight disappointment as she told Violet, "Okay, well thanks for listening and for getting back to me so quickly."

In her room a bit later, Em did feel a little discouraged, and she thought, *Man, nothing I ever hope for works out. I always get shot down. I didn't even get to keep one of those diamonds.* She of course knew this was a silly thought because she would never have wanted to own anything cursed like the Hope Diamond.

Scribbling in her notebook, she suddenly recalled the water polo program being cancelled, and how Vini hadn't even seemed all that upset about it. *So life isn't fair for a lot of people, not just me,* she reasoned.

*Oh well,* her mind told her as she sketched a small car in the notebook's margin. *Maybe next time will be different.* She didn't particularly feel cheated, just a little down.

As she continued to scribble, a small thought suddenly popped into her head. *I wonder if there's a reason I'm supposed to ride the bus, like maybe I'll meet a good friend on it; or maybe I'll see something like a rare bird that I wouldn't have seen if I hadn't been on the bus.*

Em didn't even need a unicorn to pass by to tell her there might be a very good reason for things not working out as she might have hoped or planned. She was actually starting to think this way without any outside assistance, as though she was training her own brain. She definitely knew it to be true that when people thought positive thoughts, positive things tended to happen. She just needed a little practice in thinking this way.

She would come to find out in the future that it was actually a new bus driver she was supposed to meet, an interesting woman named Mrs. Maude who, on hot days, would sometimes stop the bus so that the kids could buy treats from the ice-cream truck, even paying for some of the treats herself for those without money. Em would save Mrs. Maude's life by giving her CPR when she had a heart attack while driving the

bus. A few weeks after the heart attack, Em would save Mrs. Maude again by bringing her to Christ.

Looking out the window of her bedroom, Em noticed it had started to rain. *Writing instead of jogging*, she decided for the rest of the morning.

Looking out again a short while later, she saw a beautiful double rainbow. *Everything's going to be okay*, she thought, smiling. *I just need to trust in God, and His plan for my life.*

## Chapter Nineteen

### Race the Sun

“Hey, Weatherly,” Kip said midway through their training on Friday. “How many ninjas does it take to change a light bulb?”

“I don’t know,” she replied.

“None, because they work in the dark.”

Preston was laughing as Kip added, “Did you get it, or do you need more time? Or does someone need to change your light bulb?”

Weatherly had actually gotten the joke pretty quickly. But instead of being annoyed that Kip was being a bit of a jerk, she smiled and said, “And you didn’t fall down earlier; you just suddenly decided to attack the ground.”

Again laughing, Preston elbowed her while saying, “Good one.”

Perhaps the fact that Weatherly’s mind was on other things made her less sensitive to her cousin’s words. Or maybe she was just learning not to put too much importance on the things he was prone to say to her. Whatever the case, on this particular day, she needed to stay focused because her brain had just worked something out about a problem that had been on her mind since the week they spent in Kivetel. The start of solving the problem would be to talk to Vini after training.

Back at the manor, Weatherly found Vini gone on a bike ride with Ben to town to pick up a couple of things for Aunt Fiona. Since they weren’t expected back for a couple of hours, Weatherly accepted Em’s offer of the use of her room for a nap. However, she didn’t sleep. Instead, she sat thinking, mostly about what had happened during the time they were stuck in Kivetel when they forgot to prop the door.

Varjo had put the boys up the first night, while Weatherly went home with Linna.

Kip and Preston ended up at Linna’s house the next night because Varjo’s small cottage was simply too small to accommodate them comfortably, and they weren’t sure how long they might be staying.

They had decided to just train every day as normal and not worry because, eventually, someone at Netherwind would notice them gone and would prop the door.

In their classroom training, Varjo had started to teach them military strategy through use of games, similar to board games, but more complex than any of the ones Kip, Weatherly, and Preston were used to, not only with regard to the rules and playing pieces, but also because things like holograms and other electronics were mixed with basic items such as pads of paper, pencils, and dice.

Weatherly turned out to be very good at the games, winning around eighty percent of the time, basically from her brain being very logical and perhaps slightly cleverer at problem-solving than her opponents. Part of her eagerness to learn and succeed was because the games were so interesting, being based on famous battles of Kivetel History.

Preston had started reading a book written by a Kivetel military veteran that seemed very similar to *The Art of War*. In addition to hoping the knowledge from the book would improve his odds against Weatherly in their classroom games, he found the information extremely interesting.

Weatherly very quickly noticed something was different about Linna's home in comparison to others in the area. It wasn't just that her brother, Lelek, was very ill, bedridden and wan in fact, having been sickly for a very long time, ever since being stung by a blue-cabat wasp two years previous. Not only highly allergic, he had developed an infection at the site, in his hip, which he never recovered from. But just as the people of Kivetel aged slowly, they also took a long time to die. According to Linna, her brother was definitely dying, worsening a bit more each day and week; and the whole family knew it—parents, cousins, aunts, uncles, and close friends like Varjo, who had known Lelek since birth, and had been hired to train him, though this had been impossible during the time since the sting.

Aside from a sick family member, which was evidently a rarity in Kivetel because illness was not common, Weatherly could tell that Linna's house was different, in that it was slightly larger and fancier as far as furnishings than other homes in the area, but not overly so.

Linna had never mentioned during training that her surname was Satu, or that she was part of the royal family of this region of Kivetel, a

fact Weatherly only found out by chatting with one of the family's neighbors. While Kivetel had no kings or queens as far as titles, only regents, meaning Advisors that Govern, the children of royal families were called princes and princesses.

Weatherly had been amazed to find this out because she never would have imagined Linna to be a princess; at least, not by the way she acted or dressed. Of course, having never met a princess before, Weatherly couldn't have known that many of them were basically just ordinary people. The family, however, seemed to be a very subtle and subdued version of royalty, especially with regard to titles, Linna's mother and father preferring to be informally addressed as Dam and Kir respectively, as opposed to the official titles of Dama Regent and Kira Regent. The wealth of Kivetel's royals wasn't what one might expect either, as most of it was used to support resources such as medicine, food, and education. Everyone was expected to contribute to society by working in some way, and everyone who contributed was provided for, with no one lacking in any common necessity.

Linna had talked about Kivetel's schooling before, which was conducted at learning centers with younger children most often attending mornings. Older ones generally went evenings, after learning practical things at home during the day—whether baking, weaving, crop growing, or even weaponry, as in Linna's case, since she was planning to join Kivetel's military. There were lots of books in Kivetel, but nothing like television. However, there was something akin to radio; and Linna had once shown Weatherly the mode of receiving broadcasts, a device resembling a smooth walnut (though it evidently came in many colors) that people often carried in pockets to pull out and listen to at their leisure. The programming was mostly music, lectures, audio books called talking books, and lessons from Kivetel's *Book of Wisdom*.

Linna liked to read to her brother, who enjoyed mystery stories best. During her time in the family's home, Weatherly read to Lelek in the evenings while Linna was at school.

On the third day of their week-long stay, the trainees had a run-in with a sorcerer in the rocky clearing where they had been doing their heights training. Sorcerers in Kivetel were ever on the move, and mostly took the role of being shysters, in cleverly rooking people out of things like food, money, and weapons. They had also been known to

thieve by attacking individuals, mainly other travelers, some of whom ended up dead if they dared to fight back, though these murders generally couldn't be pinned on the sorcerers, who were clever at disguise and other forms of trickery such as creating false alibis.

In at first seeing only Linna and Weatherly, the sorcerer might have viewed this as an opportunity to waylay two helpless girls, in order to steal whatever valuables they might have with them. However, in advancing on his prey, the man then spotted Varjo and Kip on a grouping of rocks beyond the girls' position in one of the trees. Slowing his stride in order to more closely survey the situation, the sorcerer noticed that these people were all armed with the odd weapons common to Kivetel.

Simply nodding to Varjo, while also giving him a rather defiant and somewhat threatening stare, the sorcerer chose to move on, passing through the clearing and into a patch of woods, where he quickly disappeared from sight. However, hidden in the trees, the man did watch the training for a short time, mainly out of curiosity.

He had gotten his hands on some of these weapons before; but without training, he hadn't been able to figure out what to do with them. He also knew they wouldn't work in his own realm because he had taken several home with him, presenting them to various colleagues, ones with the expertise to have been able to make the devices work, if at all possible. However, the experts had deemed them to be useless, somehow rendered ineffectual from having crossed into a realm different than the one in which they were designed to operate. The little radio devices of Kivetel hadn't been adaptable to a new environment either.

While many people from other places visited Kivetel, some even staying long-term, the sorcerers were truly considered undesirable, mainly because there had never been an instance of a benevolent one. And to the people of Kivetel, they were easy to recognize as being sorcerers, not only by the style of their robe-like jackets and the distinctive dyes used in their clothing, but also because of a certain aura about them. They also often carried staffs that were obviously something more than walking sticks. Plus, they occasionally traveled with male companions who carried sacks of silver netting and whose bodies were marked by ink, a thing rarely seen in Kivetel.

The presence of the sorcerers in the area was one of the reasons Varjo had been retained by the royal family to train their children, as well as quite a few other youngsters in the area over the years. He was also part of Kivetel's military, but in something of a reserve status, so that he could live just about anywhere he might want to, and train anyone. However, he did serve actively when needed, such as when the military had been called upon to destroy an enormous pack of tengerzors, a tengerzor being a sea monster, and perhaps the equivalent of a giant crocodile, judging from the way Varjo described the creatures when talking about the battle during classroom training.

In ancient history, a group of invaders from another realm had tried to take over Kivetel. While the invaders had a strong military, blessedly, the Northern Region of Kivetel possessed an army of colokos, which, when Varjo described them, sounded like enormous flying monkeys, who were deadly-fierce when provoked. Evidently, throughout the centuries, the colokos had remained devoted to Kivetel's Northern Region and its people, mainly because the royal families of that region had always preserved huge forests of gumcha fruit, which the colokos absolutely loved.

On the evening of their third day in Kivetel, seeing a black unicorn in a side garden of the royal family's home took Kip, Preston, and Weatherly very much by surprise. They only caught a glimpse of it trotting around because it seemed to vanish very quickly.

After the sighting, Linna briefly explained, "In Kivetel, unicorns are called alavans, and are only seen when a person is dying. And they are seen more often when that person is very close to death. At the end, exactly when the person dies, the creature vanishes."

In knowing Linna was very troubled about brother's condition, her friends didn't want to press her for more information. But they did find out a few things by talking to Varjo the next morning at training. Linna was not around because she was running a couple of errands for her parents; she would be coming later in the day.

"The shadows of most Kivetel natives are not as dark or strong as those of visitors," Varjo began. With this, he led them to the sunniest part of the clearing to demonstrate, where they could see exactly what he meant in that their three shadows were nearly twice as dark as his,

which was basically a smoky gray color and appeared to be somewhat translucent.

“Our shadows don’t start to lighten until we pass our adolescent years,” he continued, “so children’s shadows are darker than mine. But the prince currently has almost no shadow, which means he’s dying and getting closer to becoming fully a creature of light, as he will be in the hereafter.”

“Light has no shadow,” Preston mused, remembering the demonstration from their training. “So Lelek won’t have one after he passes on.”

“Correct,” Varjo answered. “The alavan is the means by which Lelek’s core, or soul, will travel into the hereafter. It’s a little hard to explain,” he went on, “but basically, while waiting to carry his core, the alavan is carrying his shadow, almost like helping to bear a burden. The lifting of the burden enables the soul to see the path to the hereafter, and know that it’s okay to depart this world. Also, people in Kivetel always know which day is their Last Day because the alavan is constantly present and is very dark, like pitch black, not just night black. On that day, that person will never see another sunrise. And it is common to our world that dying people expire when the light expires for the day, at sunset.”

While death was almost always a somber subject, the visitors couldn’t help but think that both the sight and the meaning of the alavan were truly beautiful, especially because they knew that the people of Kivetel believed in eternal life, much like they did.

Kip and Preston recalled Vini describing unicorns in their world as being connected to human souls, and likely acting as conduits, a means to connect with departed souls. Here, there was a connection as well, but it seemed the creature was more of a courier than a conduit.

Weatherly hadn’t heard much about unicorns, but did remember Em telling her that she had looked up some things about spirits after meeting Lizzie’s ghost. Evidently, ghosts didn’t have a shadow unless they were evil because spirits like Lizzie were part of the light.

*What has light to do with darkness?* Weatherly thought.

*They might repel each other, or cancel each other out,* her brain answered. *Except that light is more powerful than darkness.*

Since they hadn't ever been in Kivetel at night before, and gravity had never felt any different than at home, the visitors were amazed to discover that Kivetel had two moons. Both looked fairly small and distant, which explained why they weren't all that visible in the daytime skies like earth's moon often was.

Weatherly smiled in recalling a specific conversation she had had with Linna one evening, while sitting outside and looking at the moons and stars shortly before going to bed. She had asked Linna if she was going to have to marry a prince from one of the other regions.

Linna's response was that no one was ever forced to marry anyone else in Kivetel. "That's storybook stuff," she said. "We don't live in a storybook land. Also, children in royal families don't always end up succeeding their parents. My parents will stay regents until their deaths, unless a citizen calls for a new election, which they can do at any time; but that hardly ever happens because people are generally satisfied and don't want new governors. So if the regents reign until they both die, then after the death of whichever is last, the region will have a new election. Sometimes the successor is a member of the royal family, either a prince or princess, and that person's spouse because regents always govern in pairs; and the pair is generally a married couple. But sometimes people from entirely different families run for regent positions, and win the elections."

On the fifth day of their training that week, Varjo brought in a couple of more experienced fighters to spar with Kip, Preston, and Weatherly, in order to truly gauge their progress and push them.

Weatherly slightly strained her shoulder, and Kip got a small cut on his leg that was easily tended to, so Varjo assessed that the three were indeed making good progress, Weatherly especially, so much so that he suggested she might like to participate in an upcoming regional tournament.

While she was flattered to be asked, the small voice in the back of her head was telling her this was not a good idea, so she immediately declined, telling Varjo, "I don't think I was meant to learn these skills to compete. I don't really like competition because I think people should desire for everyone to do well, and we should help each other succeed."

"Most people in Kivetel have the same philosophy," Varjo responded. "The tournament is more of an exhibition than a

competition. But I understand if you don't want to. Aside from competition, many people are not meant to exhibit either."

Weatherly had another reason for declining. The voice in her head had grown a little louder in telling her not to draw the attention of sorcerers who might be in Kivetel. She was also being told to keep the weapons and training a secret at home for now, which was something she would need to talk to Kip and Preston about later. While certain people already knew, it would not be good to advertise that they had these skills or that they had rope, flute, and mirror weapons that would work in their realm. The longer this information could be kept from the sorcerers, the better.

As she listened to the voice in her head, Weatherly was smiling in realizing that no place was ever truly out of God's reach. But of course He could reach here too; He was not separated from Kivetel, or left behind when His children crossed realms. Not that she ever really thought He was left behind, but it was reassuring to always feel the Holy Spirit with her, everywhere.

Sitting in Em's room while waiting for Vini to return from her bike ride to town, Weatherly thought of the black unicorn. While the visitors saw the creature only once during their week there, just before Kip made his ninja joke at training in the morning, Linna had related to Weatherly that her family was seeing the alavan every day now, for long stretches at a time, which meant her brother was very close to death. "So I might not come to training for a while," she said. "I just wanted you to know." While she had been coming to training to take her mind off things, of course she wouldn't come while her brother was on the brink of death, or for a while after he died.

Varjo himself had been an hour later than usual to training on this day because he had wanted to stay by Lelek's side. This had set Weatherly's brain to scrambling as to what she might be able to do to help. By the time training was done for the day, her brain had hit on a possible solution to the problem.

Related to her idea was the issue of things crossing realms. Varjo was fairly certain the stockpile of flutes, ropes, and mirrors in the Weapons Room at Netherwind could not have come from Kivetel and still be functional, and that someone outside of Kivetel had made them. While this was probably true, Weatherly believed it likely that God had

at some time allowed at least one of each working weapon into our world somehow, maybe through a special doorway with a protective buffer, or inside a piece of art protected by puck troll magic, or some other way. And perhaps this was done by a person on a divine mission, with the goal being for more weapons to be made based on the designs of the originals. Whatever the case, the main question Weatherly was pondering was if certain things could cross into Kivetel and still work? Her wristwatch didn't function. It didn't break; it simply didn't work during training sessions. Then it started working again after she returned home each day; she just had to reset the time. Thinking about the watch being a mechanical device, like the weapons (though the weapons were much different in their mechanics, of course), led her to wonder if something without mechanics could possibly work in Kivetel, something like medicine, and, more specifically, magical medicine.

In seeing from Em's window Vini arriving back from her trip to town, Weatherly hurried downstairs to talk to her.

Relating the story of the dying prince rather quickly, Weatherly then asked if Vini could possibly heal Lelek using dragon tears.

Vini had to think briefly, in wondering if this was what God would want her to do, as far as how dragon tears should be used. After thinking, she responded, "It sounds like a good plan, but I need to pray first, to make sure it's okay with God. I promise I will help if I can. But I need to listen closely to His answer. If he tells me not to, I can't."

"I understand," Weatherly replied, as Vini hurried up to the quiet of her bedroom to pray.

Weatherly followed to quietly wait outside the closed door, and was relieved when Vini emerged smiling less than ten minutes later. "God didn't tell me not to," she said.

While Vini did have the thimble for measuring the dragon tears handy in her pocket, since Weatherly hadn't mentioned the plan to Lelek's parents, the girls felt they should talk to them first, before obtaining the draught.

However, on their way to the mezzanine, Vini did say, "Just be aware that the dove might not still be in the cave. If it is, then it's no problem. The first time I found a dragon, Zapor led me to it. But who knows if gryphons know where they are all the time. So we might not even be able to find one quickly enough to help."

They didn't say much else, mainly because, after entering the clearing and propping the door, they set off on a fairly fast run toward the Satus' home.

Arriving out of breath and being shown to the prince's chamber, the visitors heard Linna reciting a quote from the *Book of Wisdom* that Vini recognized from the bible as being part of Ephesians 5:8-9. "...for once you were darkness, but now you are light...for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true...."

As Lelek lay dying, wan and slightly transparent, his body held a soft glow. According to Linna, this was an indicator that his core was closer to becoming the being of light that he would be in the hereafter.

After a speedy introduction, Vini briefly told Lelek's parents that medicine in their world, in the form of dragon tears, might work to save the prince, though she didn't know if it would for sure because of the issue of crossing realms.

The regents were very open to the possibility of outside medicine saving their son; however, they pointed out the black alavan, now ever present and waiting, trotting around in a wide circle in the courtyard overlooked by Lelek's window.

Glancing out the window, Vini observed that the beast was very black, with a glistening coat, but one holding a dark shine, like obsidian in shadow.

"This is his Last Day," Lelek's mother said in soft sadness, "and it's already late afternoon. We only have until sunset. If time passes so much more quickly here than in your world, how can you possibly help?"

Although dragon tears had worked to bring Ben back from the dead, Vini had no idea if they might do so with Lelek, especially if a unicorn had already carried off his soul. So she was now officially kicking herself for not just bringing the tears with them. However, in obtaining them, she might not have realized that she needed to rush, so she might not have made it in time anyway.

Without spending time explaining, Weatherly dragged Vini out the door while calling to the family, "We'll be back!"

Outside, on a run toward the oak containing the doorway, which was much closer than the doorway in the clearing, Weatherly told Vini, "Just trust me."

So Vini did.

Weatherly had long since figured out that thirty minutes at home equaled roughly nine hours in Kivetel. (Setting her watch each day had helped her to work this out.)

The road to the tree was uphill and somewhat rough, but the girls managed to reach it in just under eight minutes. Climbing up through the oak, Vini was already silently calling to Tulko, who arrived in less than fifteen seconds to receive Vini onto his back as she leapt from the platform (rather than wasting time climbing down the tree). As she landed, she told him by thought that they needed to head toward the area of the caves where he had dropped her off when getting the final sphere. Waiting on the platform, Weatherly simply held her breath as the pair streaked away.

Knowing that she had only a few minutes to accomplish getting the tears, Vini was praying as they flew that the dove would still be there, and that she would be able to effectively communicate with the creature. For Ben's situation in the spring, she felt the dragon had likely known that the tears were needed because a dead body was present.

Blessedly, the dove was still in the cave, and woke as Vini gently picked him up to carry him outside so that he would have the room to shapeshift because she remembered that dragons needed to be in dragon form in order to produce their healing tears.

Vini didn't know it, but very few people could actually handle dragons in this way because the burnished doves simply wouldn't allow it. However, they knew something about her that she would not learn for many years—that her granddaughter would be the next Protector of Dragons.

After placing the dove on the ground and stepping back as it started to transform, in wondering how to ask, she reasoned, *Probably just by thought, like how I regularly talk to Tulko.* She needn't have worried because the dragon already knew what she wanted; indeed, she was just in time with fishing the thimble out of her pocket because the tiny silvery tears with swirling rainbow colors were already falling, neatly filling the thimble brimful as she reached out to catch them. She checked carefully to make sure the thimble was full because she knew the measure had to be exact or the draught wouldn't work.

Again leaping aboard Tulko, Vini left without waiting for the dragon to shift again so she could carry him back into the cave, which she would have wanted to do, to help the creature conserve energy, since food for magical creatures was so very limited. However, today, she simply couldn't spare the time. Shrinking quickly back down to dove form, the dragon understood as he waddled back inside to return to his sleep.

Weatherly had been keeping an eye on her watch (though displaying the wrong time, it was working); and as Tulko dropped Vini off on the platform of the tree, she judged that the round trip to get the tears had taken not quite nine minutes.

Vini had to be very careful not to spill the tears in making her way down through the trunk of the tree. She also couldn't take the downhill run to the house as fast as she might have liked. (If the girls had had more time to think and plan ahead, they might have brought a larger vessel with them to hold the tears, so they would have been able to travel faster without worry over spilling the dose. Filling the thimble at Lelek's bedside would definitely have been a better idea, but they only thought of this after obtaining the tears.)

Despite having to be careful, the girls made it back to the prince in right around twelve minutes from climbing out of the tree hollow.

Lelek was still alive and conscious, and faintly glowing. His father helped to raise his head as Vini approached the bed confidently to pour the tears into his mouth.

No sooner had the draught slipped down his throat and into his stomach, than Lelek lit up brightly inside, with the light exuding out of him much as lamplight seeps through a shade, starting first in his torso, then extending out his limbs and into his head. After around thirty seconds of being lit up, the radiance faded as the prince sat up, looking perfectly healthy and happy. While he was still somewhat luminous (because the people of Kivetel tended to be), Lelek's body held less of a glow than it had when he lay dying. And he bore not even a scar in the area of the wasp sting and infection.

While the others had been watching the prince, Vini had watched the black unicorn through the window. As the healing tears spread through Lelek's body, the unicorn had become lighter and lighter, not only in shade, but also in color, changing from black to gold.

Just before the creature disappeared entirely, which happened the moment the prince sat up, it had become a pale gold color, much like the unicorns she was familiar with in her own realm.

After receiving tearful and exuberant hugs from Linna and her parents, Vini and Weatherly discreetly left, in order to give the family private time to celebrate together.

Instead of using the tree to return home, they headed for the clearing, not only feeling the need to take a lengthy stroll to unwind and silently give thanks to God for saving the prince, but also because they wanted to remember to close the mezzanine door through which they had originally entered Kivetel.

Back at Netherwind, as Weatherly headed home, Vini immediately went to her favorite table in the larger library in order to do some journal writing based on a flood of information her brain had received as she watched the unicorn change colors. No one else noticed when this brain-flood happened because they were all focused on the prince, but Vini had nearly fallen down from the information rushing into her head. The experience was similar to what had happened when she first held the Truth Key, but she had been sitting on Valo at that time and so had remained steady. Standing up in the prince's room, the brain-flood made her dizzy. Thankfully, she had been able to catch herself on the window sill. Since this had been similar to the burst of print-double information she received, Vini wondered if someone who had once used the Truth Key could tap into the powers of it again later without having to have the sphere in his or her possession.

From what she had been hearing from Kip and Preston, Vini could tell even before her visit to Kivetel that it was more of an ideal world than their own. All of its residents seemed to be kindly, helpful, generous, trusting, and spiritual. There were no hungry or homeless people, and few incidences of illness or severe injury. When a need for medicine arose, there was no profit in it. Most of their doctors were volunteers, and resources were available to all people in Kivetel equally. *This was probably more like what God intended for our world, she thought, and also maybe why people there live longer lives. The environment is so much healthier.*

This made her think of Louetta's painting of an ideal world in which man hadn't fallen, except that Kivetel evidently still had some

challenges, especially with the existence of outsiders, some even unsavory, like sorcerers. But it was still probably a place closer to what God intended for the people of earth.

Skipping lunch in order to write for a full hour, Vini finally took a break for a sandwich, after which, she attended an afternoon storytelling in the parlor.

Charlie was picking burrs out of Boomer's fur because he and Pecan had evidently been on some wild adventures lately. They knew not to stray off the properties of Netherwind and Laurelstone, but the two estates put together formed quite a large roaming territory for them.

The burrs reminded Aunt Eugenia of Loblolly, the pine tree genie, who at night slept tucked into a rolled-up and stored-away Christmas stocking. As a pet, Loblolly had a Bengalburr, a creature much like a cross between a Bengal tiger and a large burr, but that was only about the size of a fancy hamster.

"Only genies can tame Bengalburrs," Aunt Eugenia said, "which are so fast and fierce, they can chew half the fur off of a black bear in about ten seconds flat. They're from Bengal; that's how they got their name. And they have catlike stealth and razor-sharp teeth."

The listeners were wide-eyed in hearing this, especially Pizzo and Heike who, despite their love for most magical creatures, were truly hoping they would never come across a Bengalburr.

"By the way," Aunt Eugenia added, "genies can also tame orclings so that when they grow up to be orcs, they won't be so mean. And orcs never hurt humans after they have been tamed. They're still disagreeable; but they end up going around doing good deeds, like helping with chores, while grumbling the whole time. But we'll leave the details about orclings and orcs for another time."

She then proceeded to tell them the story of how Loblolly had stopped a notorious pine tree thief. The Bengalburr had helped by leading the thief and a huge pack of hobgoblins working with him into an oak forest. "Oak trees harbor many spirits, and are not anywhere near as helpless as pine trees," Aunt Eugenia told them. "So the forest itself was basically able to take care of the nasty pack of thieves."

In the larger library in the evening, Vini sat thinking and reviewing her notes. The issue of unicorns here versus unicorns in Kivetel had

been somewhat confusing to her at first. But in thinking everything over, things were starting to make more sense.

When people in Kivetel see a unicorn vanish as a person dies, they don't see the creature turn golden because that generally doesn't happen. It only happened this time because Lelek didn't die. In regaining his health, his soul was then not ready to travel with the alavan into the hereafter. With the prince not yet destined to be a full being of light; in essence, the unicorn had taken back some of Lelek's light, while giving back his shadow. Why the waiting alavans were so dark and glassy-looking (even darker than a person's shadow) was a mystery; possibly, she reckoned, because they needed to be solid enough to carry a soul on its journey into the hereafter. But Vini didn't ponder Kivetel unicorns long because more important was the information she had received during the brain-flood about unicorns in her own realm.

Her eyes eagerly delving into her notes, she was completely fascinated.

“The unicorns of our world (sometimes called Soul Shadows) hold the light that we would have held, if we had been more like what God intended, not corrupted, not sinful. They are connected to human souls, one created for each person ever born. But for a person who never comes to know Christ, the unicorn connected to that person dies when that individual dies. It's as simple as that—no eternal life for either the person or the unicorn. We'll get closer to our personal unicorn when we become more like what God intends for us to be, more like His Son. And as we grow in Christlikeness, and become truly sanctified, we will tap into the powers of the unicorn. A powerful light lives inside us, just as the Holy Spirit lives in us. When we become what we were meant to be, beings of light, we will have the powers of the unicorn. We will be supernatural creatures, capable of amazing things such as time travel and defeating huge numbers of demons with our light. However, living in enemy territory, with Satan ever present, tempting, persistent, and powerful, many believers never achieve this transformation, to say nothing of the multitudes of people that end up lost, never to inherit eternal life.”

Vini's notes were somewhat messy because she had been shaking some as she wrote. For all of her research, the answer to the mystery of unicorns was pretty simple. Lost souls equal dead unicorns; we ourselves are killing unicorns by refusing to accept Christ. Only those whose names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life have unicorns that remain alive. Of course, the key to eternal life lies within the *Holy Bible*, in following the Word of God, specifically, in believing in His Son and accepting the offer of salvation.

She had written a good deal more in her journal that afternoon, pertaining to unicorns and Kivetel, but decided to wait to review the information until later because her brain was feeling slightly overloaded.

Plus, in thinking about the race to get the dragon tears, Vini was somewhat distracted, and slightly chiding herself. *I probably should have just prayed for the sun to stand still like it had for Joshua*, she thought. Flipping in her bible, she read Joshua 10:13. "And the sun stood still and the moon stayed, until the nation took vengeance on their enemies."

Of course, Joshua's was an instance of battle, and not of healing; but still, Vini believed that God would have similarly helped her, if saving Lelek was in accordance with His will. And she had already discerned that using the dragon tears was definitely what God meant for her to do.

## Chapter Twenty

### The Genie Diaries

At training on Saturday, Linna related that Lelek was fully recovered, but that he likely wouldn't be training with them anytime in the near future because he needed to make up some of the schooling he had missed while ill.

As the trainees broke for lunch, Varjo expressed concern about other people possibly entering through the doorway to Kivetel from the mezzanine. While he knew that the sorcerers likely had come in by another doorway, he was still worried about future visitors.

Preston responded by saying he felt the manor's doorway would stay relatively safe because most people wouldn't even know it was a doorway. In recalling some of what Aunt Fiona had told them about the mezzanine doors early on, he said, "Most people of our world will open the door and likely just see furniture in the room. If they are not expecting something magical to be there, it won't be. Believing is the key, and having faith."

To this, Varjo responded with a quote from the *Book of Wisdom* that Preston recognized from the bible as being Hebrews 11:1. "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

He followed this up by explaining why he had been worried. "At least some of the sorcerers' magic works here. We've noticed this by how they manage to kill people. The dead often hold strange burn marks and odd internal injuries like exploded organs that obviously could not have come from hand-to-hand combat or traditional weapons. We also think the sorcerers may have brought things in that shouldn't be here, like the blue-cabat wasps, which are fairly new to Kivetel. None were present in recorded history until about a hundred years ago, which is about the time we started seeing the first sorcerers. We don't have magicians from your world here to counter things like this," he went on, "so we have to just defend ourselves the best we can. And we're not sure at this point what might be done about things like

dangerous non-indigenous pests. I guess I'm just trying to troubleshoot things as far as our future."

"You could close off most of the doorways, and guard the others," Weatherly suggested.

"That would be tricky," Varjo answered. "For starters, we don't even know about all of the doorways. I didn't know about the one in this clearing until you showed up. I never saw your great-aunt use a doorway when she visited, when this was an orchard."

"Maybe you could limit entry to just certain people," Kip said.

"But how do we decide who has access?" Varjo replied. "I think it would be hard to turn anyone away. Plus, for the most part, people in Kivetel want contact with others. We like visitors. I'm certainly glad I met you."

At this point, there didn't seem to be a solution to reducing the risk of danger from outsiders to the people of Kivetel.

Monday began the final week of the puck trolls' visit to Netherwind. They would be going home on the upcoming Sunday, traveling with Dave and Violet who were bringing Otto for a visit that afternoon.

On Tuesday after training, Weatherly asked Pizzo and Heike if they might like to come for a stay at her house sometime in the future, perhaps for a weekend in the fall. "I'll make sure we have plenty of good food for you. And Preston has said Eleta can bring you because she's going to bring him and Kip for weekend training anyway sometimes in the fall."

To this suggestion, the pair shrugged while looking at each other, before nodding to indicate, *Okay*.

Weatherly did end up admitting that, in addition to their company, she was hoping they might find something hidden and secret at her house, as they had at Netherwind. "So I guess I do have an ulterior motive," she confessed.

The puck trolls didn't particularly care that she might want a favor from them; in fact, they were anxious to show her something pretty big they had already found at her house, on a particular day when they had been hanging out with Boomer and Pecan and had ended up at Laurelstone, specifically in the kitchen, where John had given them all treats from the pantry before going upstairs to study.

Deciding this was a good day to show Weatherly, they ended up going home with her, riding on her shoulder, with Aunt Fiona and Vini tagging along out of curiosity.

Piszo and Heike giggled for part of the journey in anticipation of seeing the people's faces when the secret was revealed.

At Laurelstone, Weatherly quickly rounded up John, bringing him to the kitchen where the others were already assembled.

In the pantry, after shoving a couple of crates and boxes around, the puck trolls revealed a heavy stone trap door built into the floor, one they were only able to raise by use of a lever built into a smaller floor stone near a wall and secreted under a shelf. Under the trap door, a flight of stone steps led to an underground chamber that had electricity and was lighted, but that also had a large bookcase full of candles, candle holders, kerosene lanterns, bottles of kerosene, and tins of matches. While the group had still been in the pantry, Piszo and Heike also revealed a smaller entrance, just puck-troll sized, in the form of a sliding wood panel set into one wall. Sliding the panel open revealed a tiny but extremely elaborate wooden spiral staircase, again just puck-troll sized, the bottom of which ended up not too far from the bookcase full of candles, lanterns, and such.

"So there must have been puck trolls living here at one time," John speculated. The explorers would soon come to find out that this was not correct. While the staircase had originally been built and used by small creatures, they were not puck trolls.

The underground chamber, constructed of stone block like that used to build Laurelstone, was roughly twelve-by-twenty feet in size, and had a wide stone passageway leading off from it, which was not lighted, as the group soon discovered. But it was no problem to light candles and a couple of the lanterns so that everyone had a light proceeding forward. The bottom shelf of the bookcase held tiny candles, holders, and even miniature lanterns, so even Piszo and Heike had personal lighting moving forward.

Venturing into the passageway as a group, everyone except the puck trolls was shocked to discover this to be a library—but in the form of a long hallway instead of the more traditional boxy shape of many libraries—lined with bookcases full of books from floor to ceiling, which in most places looked to be about ten feet high. Even more

surprising was the fact that the hallway split into a T about two hundred feet in, with both directions of the hall leading off from the original appearing in the low light to be incredibly long. This hall too was lined with shelves chock full of books. Deciding to take a right turn, at about a hundred feet down the hall, they found another passageway leading off to the left, while at the same time noticing that the hall they were standing in formed another T approximately sixty feet down the hallway.

While the subbasement library at Doyle Mansion was climate controlled, this obviously wasn't. However, the atmosphere didn't seem either too humid or too dry; and the books appeared to be in good condition. Also, the air they were breathing didn't seem stale or stuffy, which led them to believe the library was somehow naturally ventilated.

Holding libraries and books so dear, taking it all in, Vini almost couldn't breathe, even to the point of feeling faint. Leaning slightly against the wall, she and Aunt Fiona, who was also much affected by the sight, ended up helping to support one another.

They were on the verge of moving forward to explore further, when Pizzo began tugging rather forcefully on John's right pant leg in order to get his attention, while at the same time, Heike was pulling hard on the back of Vini's left shoe. The trolls then began gesturing, as though to draw everyone back the way they came, while also miming something odd, with their arms out and staggering around, as though pretending they couldn't see. This was odd because the candles and lanterns were working perfectly, enabling all to see well enough, even to the point of being able to read the titles of many of the books, most of which were rather old, and so had somewhat faded lettering.

"Are they trying to tell us we're in danger from zombies down here?" Vini asked.

To this, Pizzo and Heike stopped miming, while shaking their heads as if in disbelief and giving Vini rather scornful looks, mainly because they didn't particularly believe zombies existed.

With the puck trolls again motioning everyone back toward the first passageway, Weatherly was the one, after only a few seconds, who finally got their meaning. "No, not zombies," she said. "They are trying to tell us we can easily get lost down here. This is obviously a labyrinth."

Piszo and Heike were nodding earnestly; and from this point on, their find would be called the Labyrinth Library.

Retracing their steps, the group made it back to the entrance and up the stone stairs and into the kitchen where they all sat down at the large breakfast table for a bit, except the puck trolls who were rooting around in the pantry for snacks.

Those at the table were still basically reeling from the discovery, and John was shaking his head as he said, “I remember Grandfather said the words ‘Underground Library’ on his deathbed, but none of us understood. We thought he was confused and talking about stories he heard when he was a little boy about how his great-grandfather helped with the Underground Railroad. But this must have been what he was talking about.”

“But why hide so many books?” Weatherly questioned.

“Because of the type of world we live in,” Aunt Fiona stated. “Nazis destroyed many books. Over the years, a lot of books have been banned from public and school libraries, and other places. The bible has been banned from certain places. Plus, people are not holding onto books, or collecting them like we used to. However, closer to the Endtimes, we’ll need them because electronics aren’t likely going to work.”

Weatherly had the good idea to use string to help them explore the labyrinth. She ended up getting two large skeins of yarn, the ends of which John fastened securely to the candle-and-lantern bookcase with nails. They went in two teams—John and Weatherly as one, Vini and Aunt Fiona as the other. Piszo and Heike decided to stay near the entrance, to look over some of the books in the first part of the library, and to play on the spiral staircase by sliding down its banister. They brought down several tea towels stored in the pantry which they placed at the bottom to provide a soft landing. However, since this was a tiny staircase, meant for creatures about their size, it actually wasn’t all that hard for them to land on their feet on each of their trips down.

As each of the exploring teams took one of the passageways forming the first T of the library, they carefully loosed yarn from the skeins as they traveled. Since they didn’t seem to be walking either uphill or downhill, they surmised the maze of the library was mainly level. And each team ended up being a little surprised that they never

met the other team, which likely meant the library was absolutely huge. However, after probably about twenty turns, and just about running out of yarn, both teams decided to return, rolling the yarn into a ball while doing so. The teams arrived back at the entrance within about three minutes of each other, to another surprise.

On a bottom shelf of one of the bookcases about halfway down the first hallway, the puck trolls had made a remarkable discovery. Over two hundred Genie Diaries occupied the shelf. While the people couldn't read the interior print of any of the tiny books without a magnifying glass and better light, both Aunt Fiona and Vini knew exactly what they were. Pizzo and Heike had already begun reading a couple of them.

Instead of a label such as "Genie Diary" or "Journal" the covers held a fancy symbol done in pale silver and gold of three rings. In reading the diaries later, the group would discover that the symbol was representative of the genies' devotion and service to the Holy Trinity. Just as believers are basically prisoners of Christ (this being a good thing and our own choice), if any genies still existed in the world, they would by their own choice be held similarly in bondage, stoutly determined to serve God, and all that is good.

John had already decided they were going to need stronger string (to make sure it held when rounding the stony corners), as well as a lot longer lengths. He told the others he was reluctant to mark on the walls, as they weren't previously marked. "There was probably a reason our ancestors didn't do this," he said.

"Maybe they used to hide more than just books down here," Weatherly surmised, "and not having an easy way to navigate the labyrinth kept whatever it was safe."

"If you decide to mark anything, maybe when mapping," Aunt Fiona suggested, "I would say use something nonpermanent, like chalk."

"Maybe the house or the labyrinth itself holds a map somewhere," Vini said. "But maybe not, because I think what Weatherly said is probably right. If this was meant to keep things safe and hidden, a map might not be safe to have."

"Speaking of safety," John said. "We'll need to come up with some rules for anyone coming down here, so that no one gets lost. Like

maybe signing in and out using dates and times, so that someone else knows we're down here.”

The others all agreed that a set of rules would not only be a good idea, but necessary. Weatherly and John, of course, would allow anyone presently at Netherwind access to the books anytime, even after those only visiting for the summer left.

When bidding her guests farewell a short while later, Weatherly assured them that they could come back at any time to use the library. “Books are meant to be shared,” she said.

However, since these books were also meant to remain safe, they all agreed to keep the Labyrinth Library a secret from outsiders.

On the walk home, Vini almost felt as though she were in dream, mainly from the sheer numbers of books in the labyrinth, which she guessed equaled at least twenty times as many as both libraries at Doyle Mansion combined, and possibly more, depending on how far the labyrinth extended.

Aunt Fiona had borrowed ten of the Genie Diaries, and Vini said on their walk, almost sheepishly, “I guess everything Aunt Eugenia has been telling us about genies is true.” Vini had of course doubted some, in knowing Aunt Eugenia to be a fabulous storyteller, and because Vini had never met a genie, nor read about them in any of the books she had been using for her research.

Piszo and Heike would end up reading more in the diaries than anyone else, not only because they liked to read, but also because, in not needing a magnifying glass, they could do so more easily than others. And they would come to find out that whole armies of genies once lived in the area. The puck trolls would also eventually figure out that the genies were not dead, but hiding in a very special place, one that was currently safe for them. While horrified to read about Genie Hunters, working for sorcerers, the information in the diaries would be helpful in the future in enlisting the aid of the genies to help people survive in the coming dark times.

Reading a bit in the diaries back at Netherwind after dinner, Piszo and Heike were amazed. While they knew a lot about other magical creatures, they had not known much about genies until now. But they imagined this was because the genies worked clandestinely, like spreesprites, small fairy-like beings which the puck trolls had known

about, though they hardly ever saw them because spreepprites are very fast and tend to disappear very quickly. In fact, those who end up seeing them often talk themselves out of what they've seen, because it simply happens too fast. Spreepprites also hold a very mysterious magic that includes unknown powers and purposes, ones not usually ascribed to fairies in common tales.

That very evening, the puck trolls made another exciting discovery, that of another secret library accessed by a tiny hidden door in a wall panel not too far from where the dollhouse was set up in the small library. Inside a room about four by fifteen feet in size, with ceilings roughly five feet high, they found shelves upon shelves of extremely small books, evidently made by genie bookwrights. (With genie candle makers, millwrights, basket weavers, lantern makers, textile weavers, silversmiths, furniture makers, and many more skilled craftsmen, of course there had to be bookwrights because genies love to read.)

The room also contained several miniature table and chair sets, and a couple of tiny couches, complete with throw pillows. A shelf holding tiny candles and lanterns sat just inside the doorway. The taller bookshelves were all accessed by rolling ladders very similar to ones in larger libraries, but smaller. Just at first glance, Pizzo and Heike gauged the numbers of books to be in the thousands.

The puck trolls were a little surprised they hadn't found the library before now, especially since the door wasn't tricky to open, being not anywhere near as complex as the flip staircase; but on this evening, it was as though the books had been calling to them.

In showing the others this latest find, because it was a little difficult for the people to see inside, Pizzo and Heike took Charlie's phone in to take a few pictures.

Aunt Fiona was marveling at the phone because hers was an older, flip-open model that didn't have a nice-sized screen upon which to view pictures. "I think I might be ready to upgrade," she said.

Just in their couple of trips through the library, the puck trolls had discovered a shelf containing about thirty Genie Diaries, which they drew Aunt Fiona's attention to. The other books were much like those in any library, of great variety, including mysteries, fairy tales, history books, even cookbooks. Pizzo and Heike over the years would discover some of these to be mini versions of books written by people, including

a great many classics like *Moby Dick* and *Anne of Green Gables*. But there were also genie-written books in the library, which would end up being some of the pucks favorites to read.

Aunt Fiona immediately offered use of the library to the puck trolls, and said that they could take as many books home with them at a time as they wanted.

“You can come with Preston and me to trade books in and out when Eleta brings us for training,” Kip said.

Both Pizzo and Heike were thrilled at the prospect. They could borrow the Genie Diaries from the Labyrinth Library too; Weatherly had offered. But the reading materials in this library would likely be enough to keep them busy for a good long time.

“So Netherwind actually has three libraries,” Vini remarked in awe.

Inside the tiny library the next morning, the puck trolls found a whole shelf of miniature bibles; and Aunt Fiona gave one each to Pizzo and Heike, who absolutely delighted in the gifts, feeling that the bibles were even more valuable than the contents of the treasure room.

Sitting in the largest library, and using a magnifying glass, Vini set to reading one of the Genie Diaries, which were more than just a record of the genies’ adventures, but contained some factual information as well, some of it very troubling. At certain times in history, sorcerers had been very intent on capturing genies, in order to try to make them do their evil bidding. But genies evidently couldn’t be converted to evil, so the sorcerers ended up torturing and killing them. Genie Hunters were created, which threw many of the genies into hiding. Those who were captured suffered a terrible fate, with only a handful of those imprisoned ever managing to escape.

Since genies weren’t seen in the world today, and with nothing written about them in recent history, Vini assumed they were all probably dead. Or, if any remained in hiding, their numbers were likely very few.

When Ben and Charlie came into the library shortly before lunch, Vini shared not only some of the genie information with them, but also some of the things she’d worked out about unicorns after her visit to Kivetel. “It’s so troubling,” she finished with, “to think there are so many of these hunters, ones after dragons, genies, magicians, and even unicorns.”

With Vini sharing so much, Charlie decided it was time to share with Ben and Vini her vision of the imprisoned unicorn and dragons. She also told them she was hoping to learn more details the next time she saw the images. “Sorry I can’t tell you any more right now,” she said.

“That’s okay,” Vini replied. “This is plenty helpful to know.”

The information was also plenty troubling, when Vini thought about whose soul might be connected to the trapped and starving unicorn. If the unicorn died, she felt sure the person would die too. And with Charlie unable to tell how far into the future she was seeing, who knows when this might take place. However, like anything associated with unicorns, this situation had an element of hope connected to it. While Vini might not be able to prevent the capture of the unicorn, with more information, perhaps she could save the creature; and the dragons too.

When Ben and Charlie left the library, Vini continued thinking. Then she tried auto-writing, from which she did gain a little more information. However, what she ended up with didn’t answer as many questions as she might have hoped; and the information was even more distressing.

“If a unicorn dies, the person connected to it will die too. For all of the unicorn hunting over the years, the one in Charlie’s vision will be the first one ever captured. And that unicorn is connected to the soul of a person vital to the future. There have never been many Unicorn Hunters, compared to other hunters. This is partly because appearances of the creatures in our world have been so scarce and brief; also, the hunting hasn’t been successful, so the sorcerers have never deemed it a good use of resources to train a lot of these specialty hunters. When they finally manage the capture, more hunters will be trained, many more. And they’ve obviously figured out how to kill a unicorn, by shielding it somehow from all human goodness, thus, cutting off its food supply. If more are captured, by connection, this will be a way for sorcerers and hunters to kill humans.”

Vini knew that unless God allowed it, Satan could not directly kill one of God’s children, or give a direct order for one of his followers to do so. He also could not kill a soul, only collect those that have rejected

Christ. *But his evil followers, she thought, having free will, don't always feel they have to follow the rules. And Satan is very clever; he can probably easily make his wishes known without actually speaking the words. So this is Satan subverting the rules, like finding a loophole. All he would have to do is suggest the capturing and killing of unicorns, which would then kill humans.*

As troubled as she was over this issue, Vini decided to skip going to the concert at church in the evening with Charlie, Ben, and Em. But she would definitely go to the barbecue on the upcoming Saturday.

The next morning, Em ended up helping Vini hunt down books in the library, while discussing a few things about unicorns, wind horses, dragons, and such. Em was most fascinated by the mysteries still left to be solved such as those pertaining to genies, and gnomes, who also didn't seem to be present in the area.

Smiling, Vini posed a question Professor Fulhausen had once presented to her. "How can the Chinese dragon fly without wings?" While Vini was fairly sure she knew how the creature managed it, since Em didn't ask, Vini didn't give the answer. Plus, some mysteries people simply need to ponder and figure out for themselves.

Em never did figure it out, but pondering the question was good brain exercise; and as she sat reading in the solarium, she was inspired to write a poem, which she would later share with Vini.

### The Magic of Wonder

For everything we seek a reason,  
Because the magic of wonder is always in season.

Have you ever stopped to wonder about certain things,  
Such as how the Chinese dragon can fly without wings,  
Or how the lark tells a story when no words he sings,  
Or taken a quick look, at the end of a mystery book?

Although unknown as to where a path through fog might lead,  
Words of caution we often find difficult to heed;  
To explore everything, people always find the need.  
When life seems very bland, we seek thrilling adventures most grand.

Have you thought how a rainbow can hold colors so bright,  
When raindrops are nothing more than clear with glints of white,  
Or how a single cloud hides a thousand stars at night,  
Or why a hummingbird, flying backwards, we don't find absurd?

We wonder and wonder over mysteries galore.  
Even when we don't find answers, puzzles we adore,  
And always find ourselves craving more and more and more.  
Nothing can satisfy, our brains, unless we are asking why.

One thing we need not question, the love of our Savior,  
For through it we once again find God's blessed favor,  
No matter as to where, when, or what our endeavor.  
The cross the way does pave; through His Grace, He is able to save.

For everything we seek a reason,  
Because the magic of wonder is always in season.

The aunts were very excited in the evening. Evidently, because of a particular meteor shower, the next couple of weeks were going to be excellent for seeing shooting stars.

As soon as it was dark enough, everyone except Charlie went out onto the balcony above the carport where Ben and Kip had earlier set out extra chairs. Being very familiar with Charlie's fear of heights, Vini didn't even try to coax her into joining them by pointing out that they weren't all that high and that the balcony had a secure stone railing. With Vini herself avoiding widow's walks—because she just almost couldn't breathe even when looking at them in remembering how Kugari had thrown Mrs. Doyle from the one at Doyle Mansion—she could well understand her friend's reluctance to venture onto the balcony.

With Boomer keeping her company, seated in a lawn chair in the driveway next to the carport, Charlie decided she could see the stars plenty well enough. She did end up bringing a platter of snacks to her friends, though only as far as the door to the balcony, where Vini relieved her of the burden. With the evening being very clear, they did see many shooting stars, with Pizzo and Heike spotting more than anyone else, as indicated by their squeals of excitement and frequent points to the sky.

## Chapter Twenty-One

### Triangles and Time Key Travels

When the weekend rolled around, everyone was very excited about the barbecue picnic for which Charlie had made huge batches of coleslaw and pasta salad, along with three pies and a cobbler.

Although the churchyard was fairly large, the picnic was being held on a nearby farm so the children could ride ponies and take pictures with a live scarecrow (one of the farmers dressed up). They also enjoyed playing horseshoes and taking hayrides.

The porch of the farmhouse had an enormous triangle hanging from the eaves, generally used for calling people in to eat. Vini gasped as she suddenly remembered recently seeing another triangle. This was the thing she had tried to recall after their trip into the Demon Pocket! When first following Sima, soaring high into the air, and just as they were about to slip through the crack of light into the pocket, she had glanced at Netherwind and Laurelstone far below. And although it hadn't registered at the time, probably because her mind had been fixed on her mission, she had seen that the whole of both plantation properties put together formed one humongous triangle. She would need to check later, but she was almost sure. The county road formed one long side, with the other two sides being a combination of stone walls, hedges, and rows of trees. So this was what she hadn't quite been able to put her finger on, the fact that the two estates formed a triangle.

*This explains the existence of doorways to other realms on the properties, her brain thought, though the Realm Key obviously isn't needed for many of the doorways to open. But some of the mezzanine doors, the ones that we can't open right now, probably do take some sort of a key, she reasoned. Since she didn't have the Realm Key, she couldn't try it on any of the unopened doors. But, of course, some of the doorways on the properties weren't actual doors, such as the passageway to Kivetel through Heritage Oak.*

With the triangle of the plantation properties on her mind, she also thought of the triangle tunnel, whose corners were formed by Doyle Mansion, a barn on Mr. Galloway's farm, and his backyard fallout shelter. *The triangle could also represent the Trinity*, she realized. Vini would later discover that a somewhat fancy version of the Celtic symbol of the Holy Trinity was often used by magicians who had pledged their service to God. And she would notice that one of the stained glass windows at Laurelstone featured this symbol.

Upon returning from the picnic, Vini asked Tulko to take her up to view the plantations from overhead, where she confirmed that the properties put together did indeed form a gigantic triangle, mainly from hedges, a long row of oaks, stone walls, and several stretches of strategically-placed boulders. Even the side formed by the county road was similarly edged, so even if the road hadn't been there, the longest side of the triangle would still be distinguishable.

By coincidence, higher still than Vini and Tulko, a man from a plane was observing the triangle as well, from his bird's eye view. He didn't see the wind horse or its rider hovering below him because the pair was well camouflaged, as usual.

On Sunday afternoon, Dave and Violet arrived, as expected, to bring Otto for a visit and to pick up Heike and Pizzo, who were busy straightening up the dollhouse and packing. In addition to their luggage, and plenty of snacks for the car journey home, they had each selected four books to borrow from the Genie Library, as the residents of Netherwind had begun calling it.

As a surprise arranged by Violet and Aunt Fiona, Sam arrived with Dave, Violet, and Otto. Finished with lifeguarding for the summer, he would be staying to help Ben for the next couple of weeks, so that Mr. Michaels could have some time off to travel, to see more gravestones, and visit a few bookshops.

The whole of the household had gathered in the parlor to welcome the visitors and enjoy refreshments.

"Sadly, real books are going away," Mr. Michaels said, when describing his getaway plans. "People are just not as interested; even the ones that like to read seem more interested in staring at gadgets than at real books."

“Not all real books are going away,” Aunt Fiona reminded him, in thinking of the Labyrinth Library. In knowing how much Mr. Michaels liked to read, she had already told him about the treasure hidden beneath Laurelstone; and Mr. Michaels had already called John to arrange a visit. Also, if both men had spare time in the fall, they planned to work jointly to map the library.

After only a short visit with everyone in the parlor, Ben and Sam went outside with Mr. Michaels, in order to go over things that needed to be done while he was gone.

At a point when Kip and Preston took Boomer outside to the garden to play, and when Vini and Charlie were busy elsewhere, Em brought up the fact that she didn’t seem to be doing things as grand as other people like Vini, Preston, Kip, and Weatherly. “But I’ve just never felt like I wanted to look for unicorns,” she said, “or train with ropes and flutes. And I’m not even sure I want to do any more time travels with the Laurel Stone. So it’s like I’m just in Dullsville compared to everybody else.”

“I think you know what I’ve always said about comparing,” Aunt Fiona stated.

“I know; we’re not supposed to compare ourselves with others,” Em replied. “But I wonder if I’ll be able to find something to be successful at in life, if I’m not as adventurous as other people. I doubt I’ll ever climb any mountains. And even though I like cooking, I’m not likely to come up with great new recipes like Charlie. So it’s not like I’ll ever win any awards or anything. And even if I make the tennis team, I might not win very many matches because I’m finding out that I’m just not as ambitious and competitive as most people.”

Even Otto, Em felt, was destined to be a great success at something. Just in sitting on the floor and playing with a piece of newspaper, he had already folded the paper into a near-perfect triangle. And he shortly followed suit with a second piece of newspaper.

“God’s definition of success and the world’s definition are very different,” Dave said. “And who says you haven’t done grand things. The poetry, the clothes for the puck trolls, the gardening—all of these things are necessary to the world.”

“Don’t start putting a lot of pressure on yourself to be something you’re not,” Violet advised. “And for heaven’s sake, don’t try to fit in.

You'll only be disappointed trying to be something you were never meant to be, instead of being simply, Em—the wonderful, sweet, multitalented girl that you are.”

(Otto had just folded a third triangle, out of a napkin; and he had just decided that he quite liked this shape.)

“Even people who never become famous and never win prizes are still extremely important to the world,” Aunt Fiona counseled.

Aunt Eugenia had a few wise words for Em too. “I think poetry, while it should often be shared, should be more for God than for people. That’s just my personal opinion. And when I was sculpting, I used to imagine that I was making gifts for God. Then I let Him decide what I should do with them. I think He made me successful because I first offered them to Him. My skill, after all, was entirely from Him.”

To this, Dave added, “Galatians 1:10 says, ‘Am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still pleasing men, I should not be a servant of Christ.’”

“That’s perfect,” Aunt Eugenia responded, “and good advice. Don’t strive to please the world; please God instead. What is He telling you in your heart?”

“I always felt like Psalm 37:5 was a good rule to live by,” Violet offered. “‘Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him, and he will act.’”

Charlie was outside washing her car, and periodically squirting Boomer with the hose because he loved the water so. Inside the car, while wiping off the dashboard, she saw a vision in the rearview mirror. This was again of the dragons and unicorn being held as prisoners somewhere. In her vision, she was rising above the waters, her view becoming like one from a plane, as though she might be soaring high on Lyydu. Being so high (even though she knew she was actually sitting in a car), she had to force herself to keep looking down. As she rose even higher, the area below began to look very surreal and somehow supernaturally lit, to the point that she could actually see down into the waters, all the way to the ocean floor. Landmasses also came into view, and she saw a huge triangle, the corners marked by three landmasses and the edges formed by underwater rock formations and coral reefs.

Charlie knew where she was without even looking at an atlas because she recognized Florida, Bermuda, and Puerto Rico. “It’s the Bermuda Triangle,” she breathed.

Suddenly, she zoomed back down to the unicorn and dragons, where she saw a mermaid in the water very near where the unicorn was being kept in some sort of a shimmering dark-colored box hovering over the sea very close to the shore of a large island. Many more of these boxes were being constructed along the shoreline, presumably to hold more unicorns as more were captured. The dragons were all on the island, being held in a series of geodesic-dome paddocks, with bars made of some type of humming and sparking energy. Several similar and smaller paddocks held burnished doves. Charlie counted about fifty dragons, and probably thirty or so doves.

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught a glimpse of something bright in the skies above the mermaid and unicorn box, just a brief flash, but she imagined she saw a light-filled creature with wings hovering above the water. *Maybe an angel?* she speculated.

She still couldn't tell how far into the future she was seeing, but she was about to be given a clue. Still feeling as though she might be riding on Lyydu, she was taken to a position over Florida, where she could see several major cities in shambles, but not as though the destruction might have happened by a hurricane because some of the coastal areas looked undamaged. The cities more looked as though they had suffered explosions, with the main damage being in their centers and radiating out to the suburbs, some of which looked still habitable.

A few moments later, she discovered she was right; the cities had been destroyed by something like bombs because she saw a scene in reverse, like film footage moving backwards, of a city being restored, from several huge explosions backwards, to eventually looking whole and pristine. She then saw the seasons changing backwards very rapidly in the cities, many times over, and was marveled to witness several tall buildings being speedily unbuilt. When the reverse images stopped, the city resembled present-day Miami, which Charlie recognized from having seen pictures of the skyline.

She was next taken back out over the water and back to the island, where only four dragons were being held prisoner in a single dome paddock. No shimmering box or unicorn could be seen. She knew what this meant—most of the creatures had not yet been captured.

With a flash of sunlight on the rearview mirror, her vision suddenly ended. Feeling slightly disoriented, because she had never had a vision

quite like this one before, so high up and so much zooming around, she sat still for a while, mindlessly wiping on the dash until Boomer, barking at a blue jay, drew her out of her trance.

Charlie was reluctant to share what she had seen with Vini just yet. In knowing her friend hoped to mount a rescue mission for the unicorn and dragons, Charlie knew the creatures would actually need to be there when the mission was attempted. Since they might only have one shot at an attempt such as this, and because she didn't want to influence anyone's actions, she would wait. Though she was sad for the four dragons currently imprisoned; obviously, the timing wouldn't be right for a rescue for many years. So she had time to wait, and hopefully learn more, before disclosing additional details to Vini. Charlie would discover she was right to wait; however, it would actually be Vini who would need to learn something more before attempting a rescue, mainly, the method the hunters had used to catch the unicorn, so that future captures could be prevented.

In the kitchen a short while later, Charlie recalled a few other recent visions, ones she would also be keeping to herself in order not to influence the actions of others. For instance, she knew more details about Netherwind and Laurelstone becoming schools. She had also seen something of her future—she would live on a farm and run a huge soup kitchen, in addition to owning a restaurant and catering service. Remembering another vision made her smile. She had actually laughed aloud when seeing (in the shiny metal tea dispenser at the barbecue picnic) exactly who Vini would eventually marry. With the entire wedding party present, Charlie had seen herself too, squirming in an extremely uncomfortable dress.

Packing up a large bag of snacks for Pizzo and Heike, Charlie shortly said goodbye to the puck trolls, who left mid-afternoon with Violet, Dave, and Otto. Busy eating and reading in the car, neither of them threw things on the way home.

On Monday, Weatherly was somewhat relieved to see the arbor window change, because it hadn't lately. Not only was she reassured that the portal wasn't broken, she also knew that Kip, Em, and Preston would be leaving in less than two weeks, and she was anxious to have their help on as many summer time-travel trips as possible because she

doubted they would be able to come very often after school started again.

So as not to disrupt their training schedule, they went in the afternoon. Declining because she wanted to go jogging and sew, Em told her cousin, "Maybe next time."

The boys had adopted Weatherly's prayer before each trip, and they all said the words together before stepping through. "Heavenly Father, please show me the way, and help me to do Your will. In Jesus' name, Amen."

They ended up behind a hedge of scrubby brush, but one that did manage to conceal them from a city surrounded by a towering wall located about three hundred feet from their position. A long line of soldiers was marching along the outside of the wall.

Weatherly had made sure Kip was carrying a flute before they passed through the window because they were evidently going to need it. Again hearing the voice very clearly in the back of her head, she told her companions, "We have to wait just a little longer."

Shortly, the line of soldiers ended, with the last one finally passing out of view around one corner of the tall wall. "Just a little longer," Weatherly advised. "Then, when we hear trumpets and men shouting, you need to use the flute. Stay back here by the bushes, but direct the sound at the wall surrounding the city."

"But we're too far," Preston said. "I don't think it will reach."

"Sound does carry," Kip offered, preparing by stepping slightly back from his companions and making a few preliminary moves with the flute that resembled something a twirler might do, but with a shorter baton, of course. "But Preston's right," he added, "I won't be able to have much effect from this distance."

"Maybe it's not the power that's important," Weatherly countered, "maybe it's the sound, or the vibrations."

"If the sound reaches from here," Kip replied, "some of the vibrations will too."

"Get ready," Weatherly said.

Moving slightly out from behind the hedge, Kip engaged in a sequence of spins, twirls, and short leaps to capture enough air into the instrument to equal a series of clear notes that would last nearly two minutes, which he deftly played and directed toward the wall at the

moment they heard trumpets playing and men shouting, and as Weatherly gave him the signal. The sweet music issuing from the weapon sounded much like an unusual bird call.

For a few moments after he stopped using the flute, nothing happened. Then, they heard great cracking and rumbling noises, just before the wall surrounding the city fell.

The stones were still coming down as Weatherly was directing them back through the portal. They had been wise to leave quickly because the cloud of dust raised from the falling stones shortly blanketed the scrubby hedge at nearly two inches thick.

Sitting on the floor of the study, the travelers were astounded at what they had just done. While they hadn't actually seen the Ark of the Covenant pass by preceding the army of soldiers, they felt almost certain that they had just watched the walls of Jericho fall.

"But I thought it was simply faith that made the walls of Jericho fall," Kip shortly said, remembering his Sunday school lessons.

"God works in mysterious ways," Preston replied. "Maybe it was sound too, and vibrations, and someone He sent to help."

They had no time to ponder further because the window had just changed again, to a narrow city street at dusk.

Praying, then passing through and coming out next to the stoop of a stationery store, they could tell not only by the architecture but by the lettering on some of the buildings that they were in Germany. Having taken some German classes in school, Weatherly pointed out a butcher storefront and a millinery shop to Kip and Preston. The street was nearly deserted, with only two people coming out of the stationery store and heading down the street toward a church at the far end. Only four cars were present, parked in front of various businesses, the models looking to be from maybe the nineteen thirties or forties.

A park sat at the opposite end of the street to the church, very near the position of the travelers who were still standing by the stoop. A huge pile of books lay in the center of the park, with many more stacked on the ground and on benches nearby.

"They're going to burn the books!" Kip said, figuring this out without Weatherly having to tell him.

"It's a good thing Vini's not here," Preston said. "She'd go ballistic, probably call a unicorn, or do something else drastic."

“I wouldn’t have let her come,” Weatherly said. “She might have jeopardized what we need to do.”

What they needed to do was obtain a single book from one of the stacks, an easy feat since no one was presently around. The lighting of the pile and the adding of books to it were scheduled to take place at night, so as to have more effect, and it wasn’t quite dark enough yet. And the six German officers who had been guarding the pile until the lighting were off chasing six boys who had dared to sneak in and grab armfuls of books each in order to try to save them.

With Weatherly directing, Preston made his way to a particular stack, quickly grabbing the fourth book from the top, and returning to his friends by the stoop.

“Shouldn’t we try to save more of them?” Kip questioned as they made their way to the church to deliver the book (that Preston kept well hidden under his shirt) to a man in a small office accessed by a door at the rear of the church.

“No, that might draw too much attention to us,” Weatherly answered. “This is the book we need to save.”

After the delivery, they made their way back to the stoop to return to home. Although a crowd had gathered, no one noticed their exit because the pile of books had just been lit. Many people were crying as they watched the burning.

Preston had been so intent on hiding the book that he forgot to look at the title before handing it to the man at the church. It was a fairly old book, with gold lettering that was somewhat faint, so it would have been hard to see in the dim light.

Even without being given details, Weatherly knew the book was important, which was why she hadn’t tried to save any more of the titles. Her decision and actions were wise. If they had tried to save more, they would have been caught; and the book might not have ended up at Doyle Mansion, being used by Vini for research when she was first looking for unicorns.

They went on one more mission for the day, to help save a man working at Hoover Dam while it was being built from falling and dying. Many people died completing that project; however, this particular person was meant to save two others, from the scene of a car accident, five years into his future.

While almost no time had passed while they were away on their three missions, the time travelers were relieved that the window didn't change again after their return from Hoover Dam. Being physically and emotionally spent, they were ready for some rest.

Back at Netherwind, Kip was thinking about their travels, and in some part about their training too. Weatherly was obviously their leader, and not just because she was the one receiving instructions in her brain, but because she was good at making decisions and directing them. Preston, Em, and Kip always listened to her and never hesitated to follow her instructions. *No wonder she's better at the strategy games than we are*, he thought. *She's a natural leader*. And while he might be tempted a few times over the coming years to be jealous of his cousin, Kip would always end up looking to her for guidance, and would find himself greatly admiring her.

The window had changed again by the next morning. This time, Em would go with them in the afternoon, mainly because she didn't want to disappoint Weatherly who had been training so much, the girls hadn't seen as much of each other this summer as they had hoped and planned. Plus, the boys had been so subdued when returning from their time travels the previous day, in coming along, Em wanted to try to lift their spirits. Of course, when they described the book burning, she had felt very downcast as well. Hopefully, whatever they might be called to do this time would be a little less intense.

In being sorry to have missed seeing the walls of Jericho fall, Em was happy to discover their next trip to be biblical as well.

They were sent to obtain several pieces of wood from the remains of Noah's Ark resting in a valley high atop a cool and breezy mountain. In traveling there and back through the window portal, they didn't know the exact location of the mountain holding the ark, which would be important to the future. However, the time travelers didn't need this information to perform their task.

Once they had the wood with them in the study, the window changed again to allow them to deliver the wood pieces to a small carpentry shop in Denmark. Thankfully, the carpenter spoke English. "Oh good," he said. "I've been waiting for this. I received information in a dream that I am to make a special box to hold a very special bible."

Preston smiled as soon as the man said this in thinking it very likely that the box would end up holding his sister's zippered bible.

As the visitors left his shop, the carpenter's mind was already working, even though his hands hadn't quite started yet. *Make the box; then give it to my cousin, who will take it on a journey to another person who will give it to another who has the bible. Then that person will hide it in a tunnel for another person to find. With this much pitch in the wood, the box should protect the bible well for many years, even if the tunnel is wet.*

The next task of the travelers was to obtain the zippered bible itself, from a yard sale. Judging by the dress of the people at the sale, the time was probably the late nineteen sixties; and the owner of the bible only wanted a dime for it. Fortunately, Kip had an older dime in his pocket. In carefully checking the date before they made the purchase, they felt a dime minted in 1953 was safe.

The bible was then delivered to a woman in the early seventies who would be the one to bracket certain passages in pencil, which would lead Vini to her first unicorn. The woman marking the passages never quite figured out how to summon a unicorn herself, because she wasn't meant to. However, she did play a huge and necessary part in Vini learning to do so.

Preston, who knew more than the others about his sister's adventures, was truly amazed that he had been able to play a small part in them. However, he asked the others not to tell Vini they had gotten wood for the box, and bought the bible at a yard sale. They all agreed, in feeling that some things were definitely meant to stay just between them.

The travelers ended up next going to a wonderful place, a world where people (mostly kids) rode motorized air bikes that flew through the air as soundlessly as Frisbees. The bikes, which consumed trash for their fuel, could fold up into small cubes that fit easily into the palm of a hand. They were called kerepars, rather than air bikes or flying bicycles, which the visitors found out by talking to some of the kids.

"We don't have such nice ones where we're from," Kip explained, in asking if he could see one more closely, so that he could understand how to fold and unfold it, as well as where to put the fuel.

A wealthy man passing by evidently couldn't stand to see a kid without a kerepar and ended up giving Kip one, just handing it to him from his jacket pocket. "Here you go," the man said. "I was planning to give it to my nephew, but I can get another one easily enough."

Weatherly was actually surprised to discover the voice in the back of her head telling her it that was okay to take the air bike back with them, and she suddenly had another revelation. "This trip isn't about us doing something," she told the others when they were again alone, "but getting something and bringing it back."

The something was the kerepar, which she told her fellow travelers as soon as they had stepped back through the window. However, it wasn't for them to use right now. They were meant to give the air bike to someone in the future, a person who would study it and design something like it for use in their own world.

"Sorry, Kip," she said.

"I couldn't very well use it a lot anyway," he responded, "or people would ask questions, or someone would want to steal it. But it'll be good for our future." By this time, they were all able to see the importance of gathering things for the future, with the dark times they could feel coming.

"The bike will work in our world," she said, just receiving this information into her brain. This was another surprise, as she had been fairly sure it wouldn't, and that the person designing other ones would have only a nonworking model to start with.

"Some things can cross realms and still work," Preston said. "We know dragon tears work other places."

"So you can use it here on occasion," Weatherly told Kip, "just not a lot."

"But I thought mechanical things like this weren't going to work in the future," Em stated questioningly.

"Maybe in being from another world," Weatherly answered, "this technology might."

"Or it might not be as mechanical as we think," Preston offered. "Remember how the bikes didn't make any sound."

Em was reluctant to go on a trip the next day when the window changed again. However, they asked for her help because, for this

particular adventure, they were going to have to dress like people in medieval times.

While the group was at training, Em came to Laurelstone to begin making outfits for them, using old clothes from trunks in the attic, as well as some extra material Weatherly had on hand. The attic contained eight trunks of vintage clothing. With lots of choices, Em ended up mainly modifying.

One of the trunks puzzled her in that it contained only very small clothing, not tiny enough for puck trolls or genies, but not people-sized either. *Probably doll clothing*, she decided, though she could tell that most of the garments were too fancy and detailed to have been like traditionally-made doll clothing. *These must have been extremely well-dressed dolls.* (She didn't recognize the resizing trunk because, as yet, she hadn't heard about this particular magical object.)

Finishing just after lunchtime, she was relatively sure they would all blend very well into medieval times. She and Weatherly were wearing long peasant-style dresses, while the boys wore loose-fitting leggings under belted tunics. "There," Em said, giving Kip's tunic a slight adjustment. "You look just like Robin Hood."

The trip through the window took them to France this time, and to a bell tower where a man was being kept prisoner. Even though he was chained, each hour of every day, he had to ring the bell in order to prove he was still there, imprisoned in the tower.

However, on this day, the man needed to help several friends of his obtain weapons. "Evidently for a just cause," Weatherly assumed. Otherwise, she didn't think they would have been sent on a mission to help him.

After Em used her magic key to unlock the fetters binding the prisoner, she and Preston stayed in the tower to hourly ring the bell, while Kip and Weatherly went with the man to get the weapons from a place he had hidden them before being imprisoned. Since he hadn't shared the whereabouts of the swords and spears with anyone before he was taken into custody, his friends hadn't known where to find them.

The weapons were needed for a peasant revolt. However, after obtaining them from the cellar in which they were hidden, on their way in a wagon to deliver them, they fell under attack by several men on horseback armed with swords.

Fortunately, in having a rope and flute with them, and because they had gained a good amount of skill, Weatherly and Kip were able to knock the men unconscious without killing them. While Weatherly had found her dress a little confining when using the rope, she had nonetheless managed to be efficient.

The prisoner—holding a spear he had grabbed to fight with when they fell under attack, but which he hadn't needed because his young traveling companions had taken care of matters themselves, and in a most unusual way—was dumbfounded as he climbed back up into the wagon to continue the journey to deliver the weapons to a friend's farm.

Less than two hours later, Kip and Weatherly delivered the man back to the bell tower. While he hadn't even thought of trying to escape, because he much appreciated the chance simply to help his friends, the prisoner basically would have been too afraid to attempt to run off while under the care of these particular people.

After returning to the study, and changing back to their regular clothes, the group made a second trip, to 1968, as they discovered from a newspaper. This time, they were to keep a woman from getting hit by a car, by pulling her back from a street. As they waited on the sidewalk, since there weren't too many other people around, Weatherly ended up quietly telling them that the woman was on her way to have an abortion, and that this was why she would be distracted (with a lot on her mind and being upset) in crossing the street.

As quietly as possible, but somewhat scornfully, Preston said, "So we're saving her life, just so she can kill a baby."

"We can't always understand God's reasoning," Weatherly replied, with something of a warning tone to her voice, "but we have to obey."

"God knows things that we don't," Kip chimed in.

"I know," Preston said. "And I know we should save anyone who might be about to be hit by a car. It just seems odd."

"This is before abortion was legal in most places," Em whispered, "so she might end up dying from the procedure. I think a lot of women did because of unsafe conditions and people performing abortions who weren't really doctors."

They stopped talking when Weatherly indicated the woman was approaching. Preston and Kip made ready, as Weatherly and Em stood slightly back, which was good because there was only room for two on

either side of the woman, and the girls wouldn't have wanted to get in the way when Kip and Preston grabbed her by the arms.

Despite being warned, after he and Kip pulled the woman back from the street, Preston couldn't resist saying to her, "God loves you." Noticing she was wearing a cross pendant, which he felt likely meant she was saved, he added, "God loves all of His children, even ones that haven't been born yet."

The woman's face briefly drained of color as she quietly thanked them before hurrying on her way.

When they got back to Laurelstone, they didn't bother discussing things like whether or not Preston should have said what he did, or why God allows certain evil things to happen, or why people mess up bigtime exercising what they consider to be their rights, or whether other people should step in to try to stop abortions since the babies can't defend themselves, or the issue of free will and all of us having to live with the consequences of our actions, or anything else. Instead, they just remained silent.

The window changed again while they were contemplating; and, after murmuring the usual prayer, the group stepped through. This was another biblical mission, though Em found it hard to feel elated as she had when gathering wood bits from Noah's Ark.

On this trip, they needed to distract and delay a man who might have helped save Joseph from his brothers' treachery of selling him into slavery. And the man certainly was distracted, by the oddly-dressed young people and their strange manner of speaking. In being distracted themselves before leaving the study, the group hadn't particularly thought about altering their dress, or being as low-key as they might ordinarily have been. However, they only needed to delay the man by about five minutes, which was an easy task. And since they hadn't had contact with anyone (or anything) else, they didn't think their slight carelessness was too much of a problem.

As they sat down on the rug in the study, Em was the one who realized that they had just been given something of an answer to their questions about saving the woman on her way to have an abortion.

"If we didn't know the story," she began, "we might be tempted to save Joseph from the malice of his brothers. We might think it horrible that he was sold into slavery, and had to endure all kinds of trials and

trouble after that. But he was meant to go through all of that. Everything had a purpose. He didn't know the reasons, and we only know them because it's all recorded in the bible. So try to remember the story of Joseph," she said to Kip and Preston, "when thinking of the woman you saved from the car."

They all felt better from hearing these words. However, since they also felt somewhat tired, the time travelers were very relieved when the window didn't change again in the twenty minutes or so they sat waiting to see if it would.

Deep in thought on the walk back to Netherwind, Preston was hoping he hadn't messed things up too badly in saying what he said to the woman. He couldn't have known, of course, that he had said exactly what God intended for him to say. But he would find peace later in the day when praying about the issue.

Preston also couldn't know that what he said didn't keep the woman from aborting the child, which was her first. However, his words, which the woman remembered all her life, did keep her from aborting her second child, who would turn out to be none other than Charlie's mother.

In checking the window on Thursday, Weatherly discovered a scene that she alone was meant to enter, that of a small bedroom chamber in a convent. Upon the desk in the chamber, she found her grandfather's twenty-dollar bill, which God was evidently giving back to her. She knew it was hers because she had once drawn a small heart in pencil in one corner, shortly after her grandfather had given the bill to her. Plus, it was a Series of 1934. The bill had a small note sitting on top of it written on a scrap of paper by the resident of the room, a nun. "God told me in a dream to leave this here for you, Weatherly. Yours lovingly, Sister Elizabeth."

Sister Elizabeth, in returning to her locked room after dinner on the same day she had written the note and placed it with the bill on her desk, was not at all surprised to find them both gone, or to find that Weatherly had left her a note on another scrap of paper. "Thank you, Sister Elizabeth. This twenty is a treasure to me, not money-wise, but for the memories because my grandfather gave it to me. Love, Weatherly."

Back in the study and saying a prayer of thanks to God, Weatherly carefully folded and placed the keepsake into her pocket.

At this time, she didn't notice a bagical symbol, that hadn't been there before, amongst all of the normal artwork on the twenty.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

### The Garden of Stars

Weatherly was destined for only one more time-travel trip this summer; and just like the trip to retrieve the twenty-dollar bill, she would be going alone.

Her task, though simple, was going to be tricky. She was to travel to 1956, to get a girl called Frances, who would later become the exact Mrs. Doyle whom Vini and Preston often spoke of, and bring her to the Garden of Stars on the mezzanine of Netherwind in that same year.

At first, Weatherly couldn't understand why Preston, Em, and Kip weren't supposed to be part of the mission too. After thinking, she realized that Frances, as Mrs. Doyle in the future, might have recognized Preston as a boy she met in her younger years; and this might influence her actions toward him, and possibly Vini. Em and Kip, having never met Mrs. Doyle, were a different matter. The reason they couldn't come had to do with Zapor and Folto. The gryphons, as their younger selves in 1956, were going to be helping with the mission; and the protectors were not supposed to meet Em and Kip until much later.

The present-day Zapor and Folto would later confess to Weatherly that they had met her in the fifties, but that they had been keeping it under wraps so as to not influence any of her decisions or actions.

Weatherly stepped through the window shortly after lunch on Friday, and ended up just down the block from Frances' home, the door of which she knocked on less than five minutes later.

Frances was alone at home, as Weatherly suspected she might be, since God had arranged the timing of their meeting, as well as the adventure they would be going on together.

"This has to do with Laura," Weatherly explained. "I need to take you to a manor house on a plantation in the country. But we'll need Zapor and Folto to take us. Are they around, by any chance?"

After a mere moment's thought, Frances never even questioned. With this strange girl knowing the secret of her deceased twin, and about the gryphons, there was no reason to question, or delay.

By thought, Frances called to her protectors, who were nearby, after which, she replied to Weatherly, "They'll meet us in the back yard."

In being very familiar with the area, the gryphons knew of the two sister plantations, which they flew the girls to in right around eight minutes, landing on the roof of the larger house, evidently called Netherwind.

Feeling a slight need to hurry, Weatherly didn't have much time to notice the differences in the grounds or the house as compared to how they would look in the future. The gardens definitely looked different, as far as the placement of hedges and the plants in the beds. The tennis court had not yet been built. The gargoyles atop the manor took no notice of the gryphons, or the people, in not viewing them as any sort of threat and in somehow knowing they were on a divine-led errand.

Having already thought everything through, Weatherly had decided on a definite course of action. Roof access through the attic was safer than trying to access the side stairwells from the ground floor because there were currently about sixteen people occupying the house (by Weatherly's guess in knowing Netherwind's history).

Zapor and Folto waited on the roof, crouched low so that anyone on the ground would have difficulty seeing them, as the girls entered the trap door to the attic. Heading down two flights of the servants' stairs, they entered the side stairwell to descend one more set of stairs to the reach the mezzanine. Slipping inside, they quickly made their way to the doorway to the Garden of Stars.

"I'll be waiting for you here in the hallway," Weatherly said. "Remember to leave the door cracked a tiny bit so you can find your way out after." (They had already discussed this, as a safety issue.)

"How will I know what else to do?" Frances asked.

"You'll know," Weatherly answered, smiling. As she watched Frances disappear, leaving the door slightly ajar, Weatherly studied the mezzanine, which looked much the same as it would in the years to come, except for a high-back loveseat sofa occupying the spot that a padded bench would in the future. There was also a painting that she didn't recognize. The long runner rugs were the same; and she was

slightly surprised that in her time, they didn't show much wear as compared to the state of them here in the fifties. *They must be really good quality*, she decided. This was true, as the knots of the rugs were very tiny and closely spaced.

Inside the Garden of Stars, Frances was so astounded by the sight of the heavens—full of swirling colored lights, shooting stars, glowing planets, and multitudes of other wonders—she at first didn't notice the spirit of her sister drifting towards her. When she did, both girls smiled. Laura was coming to Frances in the appearance of a girl of fourteen, the age she would have been if she had still been living on earth.

Frances would have recognized her twin even without noticing that Laura's nose, eyes, and chin were very much like hers because she could somehow sense that this was her sister. Frances was taller, of course, being taller than most other fourteen-year-olds in the world, both boys and girls.

They didn't actually say much as they strolled amongst the stars. Frances knew without being told that this was a gift from God. Since Frances didn't remember her sister from when they were babies, He was giving her a chance to say both hello and goodbye at the same time. They would meet again, of course, in heaven. But for now, as far as Frances' earthly lifespan, this was going to be enough; she already felt at peace. In later years, Frances would discover from her research that God sometimes allows spirits to visit loved ones still living on earth through their dreams; but this would be mainly for people without direct access to the Garden of Stars.

Laura did tell Frances a little bit about heaven, though not much because she actually, at this moment, couldn't remember a lot of details. "It's a wonderful place, better than anyone can ever imagine," she said. "Everyone is busy, and happy, and doing fabulous things. But no one is famous because we are all famous, and equal with each other, and equal in the eyes of God as far as how much He loves each of us."

Weatherly only waited on the mezzanine about three minutes before Frances emerged from the Garden of Stars, though Frances would have thought she spent about an hour inside.

Coincidentally, as Weatherly and Frances were slipping through the door to the stairwell, Fiona, as a young girl, was entering the mezzanine from the other stairwell. In seeing the pair at the end of the hall, she

simply thought, *They're probably visiting from Kivetel*. And she never had another thought about the strange girls again.

One of the gargoyles ended up helping to distract a couple of the household staff in the garden so that the gryphons and girls could leave unnoticed.

*The treehouse hasn't been built yet*, Weatherly thought as they flew over the tree the structure would eventually inhabit.

Laurelstone had a flock of peafowl in the fifties too. With several of them very near that particular tree, Folto and Zapor ended up landing so that the Frances could pick up a small feather as a souvenir. Weatherly didn't particularly need one as she had plenty already.

"The eyes of God," Frances said softly, holding the feather close. She would keep the treasure all her life; and, in fact, it was still sitting in a small vase on Violet's dressing table in the master bedroom of Doyle Mansion.

Back at Frances' home, Weatherly departed quickly after giving Frances a hug and thanking the gryphons.

Taking a long nap after returning to Laurelstone, Weatherly dreamt of her mother; but this wasn't a visit from her mother's spirit. Weatherly was simply remembering some of the happy times they had spent together.

At Netherwind, on the same afternoon that Weatherly made her trip into the past to see Frances, Vini went out to the garden to get Em who was weeding.

"I was finishing sweeping on the mezzanine," Vini said, "and the sister portraits asked me to fetch you. They evidently have something important to tell you."

With this, Vini headed to the library, as Em raced upstairs to the mezzanine.

The portraits of Edna and Lizzie were very excited about something, but they wouldn't end up being the ones to tell Em what they were excited about. Instead, Lizzie's portrait said, "Go to the Garden of Stars; my spirit has something to tell you."

"I remembered something important," Lizzie's spirit said, as soon as Em entered the doorway to the garden. "I wrote the events of the murder by the train tracks in my diary. And I also wrote about how Mr. Pendleton threatened me. Then I hid the diary in the carriage house, in

one corner under a bin where they used to put broken bridles and harnesses that needed repairs. I remember it was really heavy to lift. If the bin is still there, my diary might still be under it. And it can prove that Mr. Pendleton murdered the man by the tracks, and maybe help prove that he killed me too.”

“I’ll look right away,” Em said earnestly.

“I can’t stay to find out what happens because I’m needed back,” Lizzie said. “But you can tell the portraits, and they can tell me later, since I know you’ll be heading home soon and I might not see you when I’m able to visit again.”

Running to the old carriage house, and wrestling with the still-there heavy bin, Em did indeed find Lizzie’s diary, in which she found exactly what Lizzie described—an account of the murder she witnessed, and several subsequent entries expressing fear of Mr. Pendleton because of his threats.

Preston was not around because he was helping Sam with something out in one of the barns, but Em was able to find Kip (in the solarium), to tell him about her visit with Lizzie and show him the find. “This can prove that Lizzie’s teacher killed both his business partner and Lizzie,” she said. “So I want to take it to Harold Reuters because this can for sure clear his cousin.”

Charlie was able to take them to town, dropping them off as she made her way to the grocery store to pick up a few items.

Mr. Reuters was in his office and was very happy to have the diary. “I was planning to contact you anyway,” he told Kip and Em. “Mr. Pendleton lived in a garage apartment that is still intact, though it hasn’t been habitable for years. The police found a shovel with dried blood on it in the garage below the apartment. He hadn’t gotten rid of it, or even cleaned it up. In doing away with the witness, he probably reasoned that he didn’t need to bother covering up the crime, especially since the police thought the man died by accident. Now, we can definitely get it on record that he killed his partner even without this extra evidence. But the diary will add weight to proving he killed Lizzie too.”

“That’s fantastic!” Em exclaimed, with a huge smile. Kip was beaming as well.

“I’ll be sure to send your aunt a copy of the article I’m writing about this,” Mr. Reuters said. “But don’t worry; I won’t be exposing

any magical secrets. There's enough concrete information here to make it a good story without risking the privacy or safety of Netherwind. And who would believe me?" After a small smile and a short pause, he added somewhat somberly, "Plus, in memory of Paul, I need to write something people will take totally seriously, without question."

Upon returning to Netherwind, Em and Kip hurried to the mezzanine to tell the sister portraits about finding the diary and their visit to Mr. Reuters. Lizzie and Edna were pleased and said they would relate the news to Lizzie's spirit when next she visited.

Next, with both sisters smiling broadly and somewhat mischievously because they had a big surprise for Em and Kip, Edna's portrait said, "I'm glad you're both here. Go to the Garden of Stars, and don't forget to leave the door cracked."

Inside, they found not only a surprise, but a huge one, in the form of the spirits of their parents waiting to see them. Em and Kip were thrilled, especially to find out that spirits could be hugged. Though not exactly like the way a flesh-and-blood hug might feel, the experience was very warm and comforting. Of course, the siblings were thrilled in other ways too, mainly because they had never gotten to say goodbye to their father. They had sort of been able to say goodbye to their mother, but she had been very ill at the time, not healthy and happy-looking as she was here. But their father had died so unexpectedly. Now, here were the real goodbyes. And the effect was very calming, as one might feel when waking up from an extremely pleasant dream, all rested and happy, and trying to recall the details of the dream in order to relive them for a short while.

They all had a long talk together during which Em and Kip were very surprised when their mother mentioned Violet and Dave.

"You mean you know about our foster parents?" Em said.

"Yes," her mother responded, smiling, "and we're very pleased because we can tell that they love you very much."

At the end of the visit, after lengthy goodbye hugs, Em and Kip left the Garden of Stars and the mezzanine feeling very much at peace.

Wandering downstairs, they discovered Vini in her usual spot in the library to be the only other person currently in the house. After telling her they had just been able to see their parents and say goodbye to them

in the Garden of Stars, the siblings headed outside to the grounds in search of others to share their news with.

Alone in the library, Vini started thinking about how she had never been able to say goodbye to Mrs. Doyle. In longing to see her once more, she headed up to the Garden of Stars.

Once inside, she didn't see any spirits. She did, however, enjoy strolling through the beauties of the heavens.

Leaving after only a few minutes, Vini thought, *If it's meant to be, God will arrange it, some other time.* And she felt very at peace heading back down to the library, as though she had been comforted even without meeting the spirit of a departed loved one.

After dinner, Em decided to take a walk by herself. Passing Heritage Oak, she noticed a lot of dandelions going to seed. Earlier in the summer, when Ben and Mr. Galloway were talking about dandelions, she had started to write a poem about one. Suddenly feeling inspired, she hurried back to the manor to finish it.

### The Dandelion's Journey

A city dandelion once lived right between  
A straight sidewalk and a large door painted bright green.  
Stepping onto the walk, he readied for a trip;  
Slipping on his shoes, he fixed his pack to his hip.  
Into his hip pack, he placed his small wooden comb,  
So that he could look tidy when far from his home.  
In the country, he passed gardens without a weed;  
Here, dandelions weren't allowed to go to seed.  
While he knew many folks did not favor his kind,  
In the bright open air, he found he didn't mind.  
To pull and yank, some people felt they simply must,  
But although life wasn't always fair, God was just.  
He gave the dandelion most wondrous powers,  
To grow just about anywhere as wildflowers,  
In all sorts of grand spots, on a log, in a crack;  
One once even grew on a tortoise's broad back.  
Reaching a spot near where his seed parent once stood,  
He met his brothers and sisters in a small wood.  
They shared tales of their start seeds, blown many places,  
Some even fitting into really tight spaces.  
One brother landed in a tree with a good view,

Until along came a strong wind, which blew and blew,  
Sending him to sit on an alpaca's soft nose,  
Before a sneeze left him on a fox's small toes.  
Another sat on the brim of a wide blue hat,  
Until falling down to the whiskers of a cat.  
One the wind picked up to fly high with a red kite,  
Before setting him on a blanket soft and light.  
They all made it to the ground as their final stops,  
Where they were watered by dew and falling raindrops.  
While they roasted marshmallows and drank sweet iced tea,  
He learned from his sister, who had grown by the sea,  
He was the only one to have seen city lights,  
With cars whizzing by him both long days and long nights.  
He was sad for those who would never learn to skate,  
Or play hopscotch under street lamps left on 'til late.  
After the sharing, he started the journey home.  
With the evening windy, he stopped to use his comb.  
But the first stroke caught something in his silky locks,  
Something most glistening and coming out in flocks.  
Knowing he was seeding, he dared pick up his pace;  
To reach his home in time, he must run a hard race.  
Swiftly he ran for many long bumpy hours,  
Because he knew the city needed more flowers.  
He wasn't sad seeding; it was part of the Plan,  
For growing things to begin again and again.  
When his stem bent down to sleep, he had many dreams,  
And he saw where his seeds landed in fields and streams.  
Winds carried others over roofs and across plains,  
To floors of great forests to await the spring rains.  
In the city, by a chapel, quiet and still,  
Some landed at the foot of a cross on a hill.  
On this specific hill, not much else was growing,  
Amidst intense sun and wind constantly blowing.  
So the city folk deemed the sight a great delight,  
And they didn't pull or yank the flowers so bright.  
Many came to visit the spot, year after year,  
And view the yellow hillside so treasured and dear.  
The flowers held the memories of ones before,  
Especially the one who lived by the green door.

While Em was writing, Ben was in the library helping Vini with her research. As she was taking a break, he shared with her some troubling

news from home that Sam had brought with him. The head pastor at their church was being sued by four plaintiffs for refusing to perform same-sex marriages at the church now that the law had passed making those marriages legal.

“So the fact that the pastor’s religious beliefs prohibit him from marrying gay couples doesn’t matter,” Vini stated. “Incredible.”

“I guess the parties that are suing think they are being discriminated against, if the pastor is willing to marry other people, but not them,” Ben replied.

Though Vini had at first been surprised to hear this, when she thought about it, she actually wasn’t all that surprised, not with everything that was happening in the world, and especially the attacks on Christians. Even if this hadn’t had something to do with a pastor, it was completely indicative of the hostile atmosphere many in the world were fostering against Christians, not only denying them the right to express their beliefs, but also to live as God commanded. It seemed many people were not able to understand that Christians couldn’t separate everyday life functions from religious beliefs because being a Christian meant following God’s laws in every matter of daily life. The news was full of examples, such as a nurse losing her job for refusing to help perform abortions, and a county clerk going to jail for refusing to issue same-sex marriage licenses.

The lawsuit wasn’t the only form of attack going on at the twins’ church. Evidently, people who had donated money to help pay the pastor’s legal expenses were under fire, mainly by groups of people using social media, which ended up being very effective in helping to ruin not only personal reputations but also businesses. And the hate directed at those standing up for their faith, or trying to help others do so, was absolutely astounding. False accusations, outright lies, the spreading of rumors—there seemed no limits to the malice.

The twins’ uncle had been one of the people to donate money to the pastor for his legal expenses. Mr. Dellinger was an account manager for a large beverage company. Based on his name being associated with the ugliness, even if most of what was being said about him was untrue, several grocery stores and restaurants that he normally dealt with no longer wanted to work with him. Thus, the backlash extended to the beverage company, which was now being touted as anti-gay because

some of their employees were “gay haters,” the term currently being used to describe anyone daring to stand up for their religious beliefs, even in a church setting.

As part of the bashing in the realm of social media, anyone daring to speak out in support of the pastor’s right to refuse to perform same-sex marriages, or in support of people being allowed to contribute money to pay his legal expenses, was accused of going into a “rant.”

“I remember we talked about this at a bible study,” Vini said sadly. “When Christians say what they think and believe, it’s called a rant; but when others express their opinions, it’s called free speech.”

As bad as this type of malevolence was, Ben was even more troubled by the watered-down religion of many churches that were compromising, bending to social trends and pressure. “A lot of churches are performing same-sex marriages,” he said. “But I doubt it’s because they really believe these are true marriages. I think it’s more that the churches don’t want the controversy, the hatred directed at them when they say that they define marriage as being between one man and one woman.”

There didn’t seem to be any answer to all of this, other than to pray and to ask for God’s strength and help, which Ben and Vini both did.

## Chapter Twenty-Three Tread Upon High Places

On Saturday morning, while Vini was dusting in the guest bedroom whose window led to the widow's walk, she felt almost as though the walk was calling to her. *Step out.*

In this close of proximity to the walk, she might have expected to feel sad or anxious, or to have difficulty breathing. However, today, she felt fairly settled, and able to breathe freely. *Step out.*

Since the summons didn't feel evil, as it might have coming from a Demon Pocket, taking a deep breath, she did step out.

Feeling more at peace than she expected, as she sat down in one of the Adirondack chairs, she pondered Mrs. Doyle's death.

Perhaps this was the way Mrs. Doyle was meant to be called home; after all, she didn't suffer the pain of a lengthy illness. Plus, the event had certainly strengthened Vini's resolve to keep going with her research, in looking for unicorns, and dragons, and spheres, and probably many more things in the future.

A short time later, still thinking, Vini was suddenly struck by the revelation that God had already allowed her to say goodbye to Mrs. Doyle, but to her younger self, when Vini traveled by unicorn back to the fifties to save Frances from a pack of demons. *So, no visit to the Garden of Stars necessary*, Vini thought, in fond remembrance of their parting hug. Pulling the handkerchief out of her pocket that Frances had given her, she dabbed happy tears from her eyes.

Oddly enough, though she had slept well the previous night, Vini ended up falling into a deep sleep while sitting on the widow's walk, just after a somewhat strange thought entered her head. *If this house were situated by the sea, I'd be out here watching and praying for sailors and fishermen to safely come home from the sea.*

While sleeping, she had three dreams.

In the first, she was on a cruise ship with Ben. (They were staying in separate staterooms, of course.) A murderer was on board, in the

form of a man who evidently couldn't be killed because he was in some way immortal, or at least very resilient and long lived. But both she and Ben survived. During the cruise, they couldn't completely get away from the murderer; but they somehow knew that the man wouldn't be able to kill them. While trying not to overindulge, they enjoyed eating some of the fabulous food; but they were always looking for something they couldn't quite find. And that was because it wasn't there. Later, in recording some of the details of the cruise in her journal, Vini would also write down her interpretation the dream: "Satan was the murderer; and while we can't totally escape his influences on earth, he won't be able to kill us. He certainly cannot kill our souls, destined to have eternal life with God. But even while on earth, in Satan's domain, we will be safe from him. And I'm going to solve the problem of the trapped unicorn; and I'm going to somehow stop Unicorn Hunters in the future, so Satan won't be able to kill humans in this roundabout way. I have full confidence that, with God's help, I will be able to do these things. As far as what we were (and are) looking for, like many people, we are looking for peace and fulfillment, which can't be satisfied by anything on earth, like money or food or entertainment. We will always be looking for something more, and that something is God. Also, it's obvious that Ben and I make a pretty good team."

The second dream had three parts. In the first, the ghost of Lucille Ball ended up saving her from someone dangerous and threatening that was inside of an apartment where Vini was living. Next to a pair of pantyhose hanging on a hook on the wall, the shadow of Lucille Ball was also hanging on the wall. There was no mistaking it because the voice and distinctive shape of the shadow definitely belonged to Lucy. Spooked by the shadow, the threatening person fled the apartment. Earlier in the dream, Lucille Ball in person (not her shadowy ghost) had given Vini a box full of useful items, like scissors and soap and tape and a can opener. The threatening person, named Big Meanie, had evidently barged into the apartment in order to take the box from Vini. But the ghost of Lucy was not going to allow this, which is why she appeared hanging next to the pantyhose, in order to scare Big Meanie away. In the next part of the dream, Vini was accused of stealing her neighbor's newspapers and packages left outside the door; but another neighbor came forward to say that he had seen a cat drag off some of the items.

In the last part of the dream, Vini was driving a car in a strange city and was trying to find her way home, which was difficult due to road construction resulting in numerous detours. But a kindly woman who was very familiar with the city rode with her part of the way, to help her navigate through the confusion. Vini's later interpretation of the three-part dream would read as follows: "I was helped three times, by three separate persons, one of them a ghost. God Provides, Jesus Saves and Intercedes, and the Holy Spirit Guides. All Three protect and comfort us. God in all Three Personas helps me daily. God has always given me useful things. Believing in Jesus has always saved me from harm (physical, emotional, whatever), from various dangers, including demons and persecutors. The Holy Spirit is always with me, guiding me, helping me to find my way and to make good decisions. I have nothing to fear. People in the dream were helping me too, to figure things out, do things right, and overcome the evil in that setting. God sends help whenever we need it."

In the final dream on the widow's walk, Vini found herself in the Peacock Garden of the mezzanine, sitting on a bench and observing the enormous peacock strutting around. The bird was absolutely gorgeous, especially with the sun bouncing off him, holding all the colors of the rainbow, and more, from his sparkling golden feet, to his gleaming head of deep magenta streaked with plum and turquoise. The orange, blue, and green of his feathers were multihued, and the amber eyes of his fan seemed to penetrate the air of the garden, as though seeking out things to see in every nook and crevice. As she watched, the peacock drew very close to her before suddenly beginning to shapeshift, turning into a tiger, roughly the size of a normal fully-grown tiger, but one holding all of the colors of the rainbow. Under Vini's gaze, the creature shifted again, this time shrinking to become a rainbow-colored eagle of about normal size. Next, the peacock became a multicolored dragon, then a turtle, then a thunderbird, then a unicorn, then a hummingbird, and finally a gryphon before once again turning into its normal self. After staring intently at Vini for a few seconds, the bird began shifting again, once more becoming the same colorful creatures, and in the same sequence of tiger, eagle, dragon, turtle, thunderbird, unicorn, hummingbird, and gryphon before again becoming a peacock. The bird next strode away to another part of the garden out of Vini's sight.

Waking, she felt as though the last dream meant she was supposed to visit the real Peacock Garden.

Climbing in from the widow's walk through the window, she first made a stop at her bedroom to pick up her journal because she wanted to write down a few things about the dreams so that she wouldn't forget, especially the details of the peacock dream because it was the most puzzling of the three.

Making her way to the mezzanine, after tying a ribbon on the handle of the door to the Peacock Garden, she also remembered to prop the door as she slipped inside.

The peacock was there, looking brilliant and colorful. And as she sat on a bench, Vini watched him shapeshift exactly as he had in her dream—tiger, eagle, dragon, turtle, thunderbird, unicorn, hummingbird, and gryphon—all splendidly multicolored. In viewing them in real life, she was able to see details that she hadn't noticed in her dream such as that the creatures all looked very surreal in more than just the area of coloring. For instance, the tiger looked longer and thinner than a normal one would. And the hummingbird was larger than most, as well as very fanciful and wispy in its feathering, as though it might have been a cross between a bird of paradise and a hummingbird. After repeating his transformations once, the peacock strode away, just as he had in her dream.

As the bird disappeared from view, the thought struck Vini that the individual creatures the bird was shifting into might not be what was important for her to ponder, but the number. The bird had shifted into eight different creatures each time, before returning to normal. *So the bird equals eight; and maybe the garden too.*

Opening her journal, she tried auto-writing and was astounded by the first sentence written. "The Peacock Garden is octessence."

For the moment, this was all her hand automatically wrote. However, in knowing it was often helpful to write out her questions, she continued scribbling. "If septessence is related to art, what is octessence related to? Maybe feng shui, possibly the eight-sided bagua symbol? Eight is an auspicious number (I remember reading that somewhere, and taking notes)." She would need to look up her notes about this later; they were in a different journal.

"And what is sextessence?"

Her hand wrote no answers at this time; however, her brain was thinking. *I have some notes somewhere on the number six; I just need to find them. Related to six dimensions? No, there are probably way more than six.* (She had read somewhere the speculation that there were sixteen dimensions created by God, and this was ringing true to her.) *He is, of course, outside of everything He created. And people, in our natural state on earth, don't have access to the dimensions closer to God. We barely manage to survive in our three dimensions, plus the fourth, which is time.*

In pondering being bound to earth in a human body, much different than how God's children will be in heaven, and in thinking back to her original research, speculation, and conclusions about quintessence, she suddenly realized that quintessence was much more than she had ever imagined. "They're all realms!" she said aloud, as the thought popped into her brain.

And as she wrote her initial thought, auto-writing took over for her. "Quintessence is not just a mysterious heavenly element. It is another realm that I have learned to tap into because God has allowed and led me. It is the place where all of our personal unicorns reside. The doorway to this realm is in the unused part of the human brain, and is accessed by a state of peace, joy, hope, and an additional component—trust in God, His Plan, His Son, His Word. Unicorns live in the Realm of Quintessence, and are connected to our souls, but are so much more. Our brains, bound to earth, can barely comprehend. Most people actually can't comprehend all of it. This is why God often takes His time in revealing things to us because we, as human beings, can only handle so much at once. (And if we understood everything about God, if there were no mysteries, He wouldn't be God.)"

Taking a short pause, and a deep breath, Vini continued writing. "Sextessence corresponds to magic, the laws of magic, and is related to the first six dimensions. Earthly Magic, sometimes called Mortal Magic will only work in these dimensions. This is magic that certain human beings (gifted by God and directed by God) can understand and make use of. Magic in dimensions closer to God cannot be accessed by human beings in their earthly or mortal state. God's brand of magic, Heavenly Magic, trumps all Earthly Magic because He is absolutely in control of everything. The Realm of Sextessence is where magicians

get their knowledge and sometimes their materials from. Generally, only magicians have access to this realm. Sorcerers do not have access to this realm. They get their powers from Satan and their resources from earth because this is Satan's territory."

Vini was shaking her head as her hand scribbled on because, like quintessence, her original thoughts about septessence were not entirely accurate. "Septessence is a realm related to art, both the creation and existence of, as well as the number seven and rainbows. The Art Gallery on the mezzanine at Netherwind is the Realm of Septessence. Any true work of art ever created on earth has a duplicate, but in reverse, residing in this realm. No work of art in the Realm of Septessence can ever be destroyed because it is protected by God."

The next paragraph, about the Peacock Garden, was just as fascinating. "Octessence is a realm connected to the five Chinese elements of water, wood, fire, metal, and earth. It is a place of balance, and renewal. While the shapeshifting creature residing in the realm is most noticeable as a peacock, he actually spends much of his time in the form of a turtle."

The final thing Vini ended up writing was also very intriguing. "Multiple doorways exist to each of the realms."

Leaving the Peacock Garden a short while later, in the mezzanine hallway, Vini wondered what might lie behind the five locked doors. *If this magical floor contains doorways to septessence and octessence, is sextessence here too?*

*If it is*, her brain answered, *since only magicians can access it, this would explain why we can't get into it.*

Since human brains contain doorways to quintessence, she doubted the mezzanine would contain another doorway to the realm filled with unicorns. But, of course, she couldn't rule out other doorways to quintessence, because nothing was impossible with God.

Vini hadn't particularly planned to try to get into any of the locked doorways. However, standing in the hallway, she felt drawn to a particular door. Though none were labeled or numbered on the actual doors, on Em's list, this would have been number eleven. As far as unlocking the door, she didn't think she could lift Ben's pocketknife to use it as a key. And even though she knew Em's key had been in a bagical, she didn't know that it was magical in a way that would allow it

to open just about any lock. Plus, a voice in her head, clear as a bell, was telling her to do this on her own. The voice was also telling her that if she was meant to enter the door, it would simply open, lock or no lock.

Before trying the handle, she speculated as to what she might find. In opening the door a moment later, she smiled because she had guessed correctly. Behind the door lay the Clock of the Universe, looking much as it had in her dreams, situated just down the block from her house. The setting even looked the same, except that she couldn't see Paloma Drive, presumably because the doorway she had entered from in her dreams wasn't currently open.

Sitting on the same bench she had sat on when visiting the clock in her dreams, she opened her journal and began to write. "The Clock of the Universe is not just on the mezzanine floor of Netherwind; it is also on Paloma Drive. Aside from entering by way of dreams, the realm holding the clock can be accessed from Paloma Drive using the Realm Key. This is due to the presence of the triangular tunnel. The lines of the triangle do not have to be perfectly straight in order for the Realm Key to work, so the fact that the tunnel curves in certain places doesn't matter. Consider other keys; their cuts are not always straight, but often contain curves. The Realm Key can work to unlock doors from inside realms as well, and can even be useful in finding exits because it can lead a user of the key to the nearest one. This might be helpful if a doorway gets shut accidentally, thus, trapping someone inside a particular realm."

Evidently, the doorway containing the clock was one not everyone was allowed to enter because it had been locked when Em was making her list. *The timing probably wasn't right*, Vini thought. *So if she had managed to open the door, the room probably would have just looked like a bedroom.*

Vini had noticed that, while writing, she was also hearing the words in her brain, as though God was speaking directly to her. She had been hearing His voice ever more clearly lately, like a bell ringing in her head. At least, that was the best way she knew to describe it.

Rising from the bench, she approached the clock. In somehow knowing it was okay and that she was meant to, she climbed onto one of the lower platforms, generally used by dragons when making

adjustments to the clock. On a series of platforms that basically formed large stairs, she climbed higher, until she found herself standing before the face of the clock, very near the keyhole used to wind the clock.

She gasped as a unicorn suddenly appeared on the platform next to her. As the shimmering golden creature inserted its horn into the keyhole, Vini heard a soft humming, that didn't sound at all mechanical, but more like the chants of monks, combined perhaps with the sound of mild breezes passing over gently-flowing water before heading off to lightly jostle forest tree leaves in a friendly fashion.

Glowing with an amber light, the horn of the unicorn didn't actually spin, but Vini knew that it was somehow winding the clock. She could feel energy emanating from it.

As she edged in close to the unicorn to softly stroke its neck, the creature finished winding the clock. Removing its horn from the keyhole, the unicorn stared at her for a couple of seconds before suddenly vanishing, in a soft flash and a mere half blink.

Vini was absolutely stunned, not by the sudden disappearance, but because the unicorn had eyes exactly like hers! It was as though she had been looking into a mirror! And she knew what this meant. She had just met her personal unicorn, the one connected to her soul.

Closing her eyes, she thought, *Thank you, Lord. What a truly special gift.*

Catching her breath a few moments later, she climbed down from the clock. *So Netherwind and Doyle Mansion were connected even before Em and Kip came to live at the mansion, she thought as she climbed. Of course they were, because we are all like cogs in the clock, all intertwined somehow.*

Vini had always figured that she was part of the Clock of the Universe, with her actions playing a role in its elaborate workings, by which God accomplished His plans on earth.

But as she made her way to the doorway by which she had entered the realm, she realized, *I'm not only part of the clock, I help wind the clock. Those of us working for God, for His Kingdom, are Clock Winders. By serving God, we help make certain things happen so the clock will run smoothly.*

She had, thankfully, remembered to crack the door, which was good since she didn't have the Realm Key with her, and likely wouldn't have

access to it for many years, since it was lying at the bottom of a sea inside a Demon Pocket.

Later, in her bedroom, in considering the difference between realms and dimensions, Vini would write, “There are many realms within the sixteen dimensions, hundreds, if not thousands, or possibly an infinite number, if God so chooses, since His powers of creation are limitless.”

The whole time Vini was busy writing and exploring on the mezzanine, Charlie was working on something as well, namely, conquering her fear of heights; though she hadn’t necessarily started doing this voluntarily.

Outside, shaking out the kitchen doormat, she noticed Boomer on the balcony above the carport. Evidently, someone had left the door to the balcony open. He was such a squirmy and excitable little thing; it wasn’t safe for him up there by himself. With no one else around to ask for help—not only people, but she couldn’t see the gryphons, or feel Lyydu’s presence—Charlie rushed inside and raced up to the second floor. She didn’t pause to check for anyone who might be in any of the bedrooms because she didn’t want to spend the time. In truth, Boomer wasn’t just excitable, he was often fearless; and she was worried he might suddenly get it into his furry little head that he could actually fly. As her feet tread the hallway, a thought was laid onto her brain, *Fear not; I will help you*. Knowing this was God speaking to her, to calm and fortify her, she actually had no fear when charging out onto the balcony.

“Hey! Come here, you Little Scamp!”

Boomer obeyed immediately, ceasing his sniffing of a spot by the railing to do so.

Carrying him inside and downstairs, in doing a bit of scolding, Charlie also did a bit of wondering, if maybe God Himself had arranged her need to go out onto the balcony, which actually wasn’t so bad, and didn’t even seem all that high up.

Still feeling calm and fortified, Charlie decided to pay a visit to the treehouse, with the Little Scamp tagging along to keep her company.

Reaching the tree, without hesitation, she began to climb the ladder. She wasn’t even four rungs up when Lyydu landed next to the tree, in slight worry because this was certainly odd behavior for his charge.

“I’m fine,” Charlie called to him, as she continued to climb.

Hoisting herself onto the platform, she immediately stood up, while clutching the railing for support. Just like the balcony, the treehouse wasn't so bad, and didn't actually seem all that high up. And this was an even lovelier view than the one from the balcony.

Looking out over the grounds of Laurelstone, she saw light behind one of the stained-glass windows of the house, as though a lamp very close to the window was lit inside the room, the glow and colors almost giving magical life to the glass.

Dropping her gaze, she noticed a large flock of wild turkeys passing by on the ground. Boomer, sitting next to Lyydu and yawning, was currently behaving and didn't chase after them. He had learned quite a bit from Pecan this summer, such as not to chase things like rabbits and birds. While the turkeys were scratching, and snatching seeds from billowing grass tops, the sun brightly shining down upon them made their feathers look like jewels. Charlie had never noticed before how exquisite wild turkeys were, possibly even more beautiful than peacocks because they had more colors in their feathers including reds, greens, golds, purples, bronzes, and even some blues. The birds might not have been quite as stately-looking as peacocks, especially because the toms among the group didn't have their fans raised; but still, they were absolutely gorgeous, and magical.

Em had spent most of the morning in the sewing room before reading the bible in the solarium for a while before lunchtime.

After lunch, she decided to call Violet, mainly to discuss that she might want to do mission work in the future. Em had been thinking about this a lot lately, ever since writing, "Learn to Roar."

"Aunt Fiona and Aunt Eugenia give good advice," Em told Violet, "but I wanted to hear your thoughts."

They talked for nearly an hour, after which, Em felt very motivated to write another poem.

### The Spirit to Fly

Inside each girl and boy lie hidden wings,  
Given as a gift from the Lord on High.  
What a wondrous blessing this surely brings;  
With our wings, we gain the Spirit to Fly,

To soar with great height into the crisp air,  
To visit a swallow, kestrel, or dove,  
Or a bee, or a ladybug most fair,  
Or simply bask in the warmth of God's love.  
What a marvelous adventure, flying.  
If we but stretch, our reach we can lengthen.  
Our soar, we should practice, each girl and boy;  
Nothing should ever keep us from trying,  
In gaining greater height, our wings strengthen.  
The Spirit to Fly, what amazing joy!

Em was pulling a few weeds in the garden a short while later, when she discovered that Zapor had a surprise for her. He wanted to take her for a ride. Hopping on, Em was thrilled.

In the skies, after circling the manor a couple of times, Zapor landed on the roof, directly next to Korszak, who shifted position slightly, presumably to make room for the landing pair. Though it was unusual for any of the gargoyles to move, Em didn't particularly think anything of it as she slipped from her protector's back while saying, "Thank you, that was fun!"

She had assumed the ride was only meant to be a short one; however, Zapor had a different sort of surprise for her. With a wink and a tilt of his head, he indicated Korszak, whose hands were outstretched in offering Em a long ornate dagger complete with a sheath and harness of a style that could easily be worn concealed under most loose clothing.

*I've been keeping this safe for you*, the gargoyle said by thought, handing the weapon to her before returning to his normal squatting and perched position.

Stunned, Em could barely manage to thank Korszak, her words coming out as a series of almost unintelligible squeaks.

Though stunned, she recognized that this was a duplicate of Vini's dagger. She knew it wasn't the same weapon because the sheath and harness were different. While not noticeable at first glance, the knife itself was also different than Vini's in that it had a bagical symbol on one side of the blade, very near the hilt. When Zapor pointed this out to Em, her mouth fell open. She certainly wasn't expecting this, not only a

dagger, but one magical in some way. In fact, she almost felt as though she might be dreaming.

With Zapor giving her a couple of pointers, she donned the harness, which fit perfectly, the sheath covering the blade resting snugly against her left side, in a good position for easy access since she was right-handed. While excited about the dagger, Em joked that she might be keener on just whacking hobgoblins and demons with her tennis racquet. "I've got a pretty good backhand, you know," she said.

Next, with Zapor, telling her, "Hop back on," she did.

He ended up taking her to see the Grand Canyon and the Smoky Mountains before they returned to the manor, landing in the garden about an hour after they departed.

As Em gave him a hug, Zapor suddenly realized that he loved his new charge as much as he had Frances. The love had just kind of grown over the summer, as he watched Em weed, hit tennis balls, cook with Charlie, write poetry, and such. He had especially enjoyed peeking into the sewing room on occasion to watch her make the little clothes for the puck trolls.

"I'm sorry I get angry sometimes," Em told Zapor. "I am trying to grow up. It's just hard sometimes."

"I know," Zapor answered. "Sometimes I think I'm still growing up, and I'm over two hundred years old."

"See you later!" Em called, as she bounded towards the house.

Right away showing the dagger to Vini, Em said, "I think I'll probably need some training in how to use it."

"Me too, with mine," Vini replied. "We'll ask Kip and Preston about this. It's not a weapon of choice for either of them, but I'm sure they could give us some pointers." (Having known of the existence of the duplicate dagger from reading Anei's journal, though she hadn't known its location, Vini was pleased to discover that Em was the one who ended up with the knife.)

Vini was sweeping in the solarium after dinner when Ben sought her out for a chat. "I'm pretty sure I'm going to seminary to become a pastor," he told her. "Despite what's happening in my church, and in a lot of other churches, I'm not afraid. I've been praying a lot this summer, and I think this is the direction in which God is leading me."

“I think you’re making a good decision,” Vini replied. “But keep praying about it, and keep listening closely to God.”

In his room later, Ben considered the messages he had been getting lately—through the bible, in dreams, and just by thoughts in his brain. He had at first been very cautious. Having glimpsed heaven earlier in the year, when he died before being brought back by dragon tears, he wondered if he might be creating his own messages. The event had certainly been powerful enough to inspire a decision like this. But after a good deal of soul searching, reading the bible, and asking God for direction, he definitely felt like he was being called.

*Father, please help me hear Your voice clearly, so I can make good decisions, Ben prayed. Work in me and through me. Change me so that I can have a greater impact while working for Your Kingdom.*

On Sunday afternoon, Mr. Galloway and Frank arrived at Netherwind to pick up the bicycles and to deliver several more boxes of food. When having coffee and visiting, Aunt Fiona shared that Pizzo and Heike had found a treasure room containing enough valuables to set the plantation on a course towards prosperity and self-sustainment.

“That’s wonderful!” Mr. Galloway gushed. He was indeed very pleased to hear this, as he felt the region badly needed more successful farms, plantations, and ranches.

“And I’ve got a few other big plans too,” Aunt Fiona said, with a twinkle in her eye, “in addition to equipment, crops, livestock, barns, hiring help, and restoring cottages.”

## Chapter Twenty-Four Onwards and Upwards

Late Monday morning, as soon as Kip and Preston rose from their after-training naps, everyone set out with picnic lunch baskets to the pecan grove. Weatherly came too. With the summer visitors set to leave Netherwind early Thursday morning, she wanted to spend as much time with everyone as possible before they left.

John and Weatherly invited everyone to Laurelstone on Tuesday for lunch and horseback riding. They might have done this earlier in the summer except that everyone was so busy.

Even the aunts went riding, and Aunt Eugenia related to everyone that, when she was a little girl, she had a pony named Pancake. “He was the color of pancakes,” she explained.

The riding set Vini to thinking about her future. At this point, she still planned to do something along the lines of hippotherapy, if not setting up her own program, at least continuing to work closely with May Burberry at Camp Burberry Wiffle.

On Wednesday morning, Aunt Eugenia made everyone start packing, so that they could all relax in the evening.

Weatherly had stayed at Netherwind after their morning training, and she sat down with Kip and Preston after lunch in the solarium in order to tell them a few things God had been telling her. The boys listened closely to her.

“We need to keep the ropes, mirrors, and flutes as secret as possible,” she began. “We still need to continue training with them, even if we don’t go to Kivetel very often. But we have to be discreet.”

“Discreet will be my middle name,” Kip said.

“I can think of a few others that might fit better,” Weatherly replied, with a bit of a scolding lilt to her tone.

Kip smiled because he didn’t mind that she was giving him a little of what he often directed at her.

“It was a good thing that the sorcerer we saw during training didn’t recognize us as being from his own realm,” she went on. “And it was a good thing that a sorcerer or hunter didn’t see how you killed the megahob, because those types of evil beings can’t find out yet that we know about these weapons, that we know how to use them, and that we have access to ones that work here.”

Kip and Preston were hanging on Weatherly’s every word as she continued. “The weapons and training have been given to us as a gift from God so that we can train others here; but we must do so secretly, making use of the Weapons Room, and maybe other secret places if we can find them. Both the skills and weapons are going to be needed to battle great evil in the future. But at that time, the element of surprise will be extremely important. We’ll only be openly using the rope, music, and mirror weapons when absolutely necessary, and when it is to our advantage. So that’s why we have to be as low-key as possible until then.”

“How far into the future might this battle be?” Preston asked.

Weatherly shook her head, smiling as she said softly, “I don’t know. But I’m sure God will direct us, in His own good time. We can still take ropes and things with us when we travel with the Laurel Stone,” she added, “but we just need to use them as sparingly as possible. And we have to keep training with traditional weapons too. They are going to be important in the future as well, especially because they are very effective against creatures like demons and hobgoblins.”

Preston and Kip had already been planning to dive right back into their martial arts training as soon as they returned home. And Weatherly had already signed up for some lessons at a local archery range.

“Crucifixes too,” Kip said. “They’re very effective. We should look into getting a lot of them.”

“Agreed,” Weatherly said. “That’s a very good idea.”

“I’m afraid it wasn’t my own,” Kip sheepishly admitted. “After she heard about the demon attack by the cave, Aunt Eugenia said she was thinking of sculpting crucifixes, various-sized ones. I think she sculpts in clay; then she makes a mold that metal can be poured into to make the final product.”

“Whether it was your idea or not,” Weatherly said, “I’m setting that task to you, to work with Aunt Eugenia on that very project.”

“I will,” Kip immediately responded.

Running through everything in his mind, so as to make sure he got it all, Preston basically ended up reiterating what Weatherly had said. “We can’t advertise ourselves. The weapons are a blessing, but we have to wait on God’s timing. We can still carry them, but use them for emergencies only, when we don’t have a sword or bow or crucifix handy. We’ll limit their use, so the sorcerers don’t find out that the weapons are here, and functional, and plentiful.”

“Exactly,” Weatherly said, pleased that she had gotten her point across, and that the boys had listened and taken her seriously.

In the future, as now, they would have no problems following her orders explicitly. Even when they were all three generals in a vast Underground Army, Kip and Preston would often find themselves looking to her for guidance, especially when making important and often difficult decisions. While some in the future might wonder at Weatherly’s military success, those who studied her history recognized that she was successful because, before every decision, every action, every order, she prayed. She also fully listened to and trusted in God.

From this meeting, Weatherly appointed herself a task as well—that of contacting the magician, Mr. Paladino, whom Kip and Preston had told her about. Since they were going to need more weapons for the future, she was going to need to find magicians to start making them. She would discover in the future that the magical Weapons Room could expand itself to accommodate as much as they needed to store inside it.

After an evening bible study, Aunt Fiona shared with Kip and Em that Violet and Dave were planning to adopt them, and Otto.

From overhearing the conversation between the aunts earlier in the summer, this didn’t take Em by surprise; and having had a little time to think about it, she now felt it was a really good idea. God was providing a pretty big blessing for them, in the form of two families, and two homes. Kip was surprised, but was more concerned about Em’s reaction to the plan than about the impact of having a new set of actual parents.

Giving her brother a hug, Em simply said, “I’m very happy about this; it’ll be good for us, and great for Otto.” And when they returned

home to the mansion, it wouldn't be long before Kip and Em would start calling Violet and Dave, Mom and Dad, this coming about quite naturally at the same time Otto's babbling started turning into intelligible words and he began to call his parents, Mommy and Daddy.

While everyone was still in the parlor, playing board games, Mr. Michaels surprised everyone by arriving back three days earlier than expected from his vacation. He had wanted to be able to say goodbye to the visitors, and to thank Ben and Sam for all of their help and hard work, which had been such an unexpected surprise and blessing for the summer.

In the fall, Mr. Michaels would discover another surprise that would turn out to be an enormous blessing as far as help. A bigfoot family living in one of the caves nearby would end up deciding that they wanted to help out on the plantation. Coincidentally, a dragon also occupied the cave of the bigfoots; but the bigfoot family didn't mind because the dragon was a pretty good roommate, in staying in dove form and sleeping most of the time.

Bigfoots, like other magical creatures, didn't need to eat. However, like puck trolls, they chose to. Thankfully, in relation to their size, they had a much daintier appetite than puck trolls. Very few people would ever learn of the bigfoots in the area because, being night creatures, they mainly worked at night, and very quietly. They preferred the night because it was cooler, especially important in the South, which had warmer temperatures than many bigfoots might prefer. But this particular family preferred to stay in the South because they didn't care for the deep snows and longer winters of the North. Plus, there were more pomegranate bushes in this part of the country; and bigfoots absolutely loved pomegranates. When Mr. Michaels discovered this, he planted a whole orchard of them. In addition to making his new friends happy, the plantation started producing grenadine (based on a bigfoot family recipe), which sold like hotcakes at the farmers' market in town. The local grocery stores also started to carry Bigfoot Grenadine. People actually liked to put it on their hotcakes, as well as grapefruits, and in certain fizzy pink drinks and punches.

Mr. Michaels also discovered that bigfoots could charm bees, so they started beekeeping, and ended up making a fortune on Bigfoot

Honey, which sold like wildfire, spreading to grocery chains nationwide.

The bigfoots had a knack for charming peppers as well, to make them grow hot but not too hot, shy but not too shy, and angry but not too angry; and these ended up being perfect peppers for an array of delicious hot sauces. Thus, Bigfoot Wildfire was born, and again spread to grocery chains, much as the honey had.

Mrs. Boyle was due back on Friday, and Ms. Small would return on the weekend. Both would be pleased to discover that Aunt Fiona had gained eight pounds while Charlie was cooking at the manor.

The visitors all left Thursday morning, after packing both cars. Aunt Fiona assured them they could return anytime, especially since they had speedy magical travel help handy in the form of various protectors.

Weatherly was seeing them off before going to training for the day, and she again offered Vini use of the Labyrinth Library. “Hopefully, we’ll have some of it mapped soon,” she said, “so it’ll be safer to explore.”

Aunt Fiona slipped each person an envelope, in order to pay everyone for their work, and to give Kip and Em a little spending money. “Mad money,” as she liked to call it.

Vini was carefully carrying the spheres in her backpack, and holding the pack in her lap.

As soon as she got home, she stored them in the trunk in her closet temporarily. She would take them to the mansion on her next visit, to store in the locked cabinet. Then she would talk to Violet about possibly getting a safe.

Kip and Em found out right away that Pizzo and Heike had been busy, not only visiting with the Galloway family, and with Louetta, who had just left the mansion the day before, but also with something else. Pizzo had managed to contact several other puck trolls in the area, and they were establishing a Tiny Art League. They hadn’t officially named it such; but this was what Em would end up calling the group, especially when making clothes for many members of the league in years to come. A woodcarver puck troll lived very near the Galloways’ farm, and another troll who knew how to blow glass lived very near Charlie’s house. Pizzo, of course, loved to draw; and Heike had started sculpting.

Mrs. Galloway had set up a special studio in the attic for her, near a dormer so that she would have good light; and Mr. Galloway was making a set of small shelves to hold her supplies.

As a thank you to Em for all of the wonderful clothing, Heike gave her one of her first creations, a seven-inch bronze of a gryphon in action, not flying, but posed in a fierce-looking pounce. And Pizzo presented Em with a drawing of Netherwind, in incredible detail for it only being about four inches high, that Dave had framed. Pizzo was keeping his distance, and was ready to run, in the event that Em might try to hug or kiss him because he felt he had had enough of that from Violet over the past year or so. He didn't need the kids to start loving on him too. Heike didn't mind a hug from Em, who managed this simply by leaning in and pressing her cheek to Heike's while gently patting the little troll on her back.

On Friday, after doing a bit of back-to-school shopping with her mom, Vini made a trip to the mansion to talk to Violet about her work schedule for the fall. She would have plenty of time for cleaning since she wouldn't be doing water polo. Because she was carrying the spheres, Vini had thought about asking Tulko to take her to the mansion, for safety. However, feeling like a walk, she simply asked her protector to stay near as she made her way down Paloma Drive.

Sugar Bear was visiting for a few days because his humans were out of town. After briefly greeting Vini by the side gate, he trotted off, carrying his bucket with him. In case he encountered any demons or hobgoblins, he wanted to be ready to give them a good whacking.

Vini soon discovered that the problem as to where she might keep the spheres long-term had already been worked out because Dave and Violet had purchased a large safe. It was so heavy that Folto had actually carried it down the stairs for them. She had been visiting the mansion one day, in order to borrow books from the library, and had seen Dave and Violet troubleshooting how to get it downstairs without hiring someone because they were still very committed to keeping the subbasement library a secret from outsiders. The safe had been easy for Folto to lift onto her back, though she had barely fit down the stairwell with it. Once in place, Dave had immediately bolted it to the concrete floor.

According to Violet, Vini was to use it for whatever she wanted. Even with Dave and Violet tucking a good many of their valuables away, the safe was well over half empty. The door had an electronic keypad, and the entry code was going to be limited to just the three of them at this point. Em and Kip would be given access later, Violet had decided.

After placing the spheres in the safe, Vini and Violet had a glass of lemonade on the back porch while chatting. Evidently, the thing at Violet's church had worked itself out while Vini was gone; and Mrs. Ellis had been instrumental in making this happen.

"I never even mentioned what was going on to her," Violet said, "but she heard the gossip—I guess a lot of people did—and decided to talk to her women's group. That's the group that gets together to play mahjong and visit residents in nursing homes. Well, I say talk, but she actually gave a lecture from what I hear, on the downside of those pyramid schemes, whether legal or illegal. When this got around to Muriel Jones, it made her very angry, so she started badmouthing Ellie too. But this reached the pastor's ears, and he wouldn't stand for it. He actually gave a sermon three weeks ago on the evils of these schemes, and how wrong it is to prey on and exploit others with this type of profiteering. And to make a long story short, I haven't see Muriel at church since."

In truth, Muriel was looking for another church because she didn't see much point in wasting her time at this one if she couldn't continue to take advantage of fellow church members, in getting money from them for her unsavory schemes.

Friday after dinner found Charlie pondering a vision from earlier in the day when she had seen the numbers of a lottery drawing televised on a news program, complete with the date of this coming Saturday, the date being repeated in the weather report that had followed the drawing. The jackpot was estimated to net the winner about eighteen million dollars.

*This is a test*, Charlie decided, and she had no intention of buying a lottery ticket. She couldn't claim it anyway, being underage. Of course, her dad could; but she knew in her heart it would be very wrong to profit in this way, from a gift God had given her. So she set about looking for something in the bible to fit this situation. Fairly quickly,

she found Proverbs 20:21. “An inheritance gotten hastily in the beginning will in the end not be blessed.”

*There*, she thought, after reading the quote. *I’m right; this is a test.*

However, she ended up having the vision again just before going to bed. But this time, a scene was added in which Charlie actually saw herself buying the ticket. *This is silly*, she told herself. *I’m not going to give in to the temptation.*

On Saturday morning, she had the vision again. This time, another scene was added—that of Charlie dropping the winning ticket off at a large inner-city church, which she recognized as being about thirty-five miles from her home. *Oh, I understand now*, she told God in prayer, also thanking Him for being persistent and patient with her.

The clerk at the convenience store didn’t ask her for an ID card, so she had no trouble buying the ticket. *I must look older than I am*, she thought.

Sure enough, the numbers matched the drawing. So early morning on Sunday, Charlie began the drive to the city to deliver the ticket to the church in her vision.

On the way, she saw quite a few things that greatly distracted her such as a small farm for sale, *Forty-Two Acres, Plus House and Barn*, that she thought would be perfect for her, so that she could source her own ingredients for her catering service, and the restaurant she knew she would one day own. She also saw a place in town for sale that would be a perfect location for a restaurant.

After parking the car at a meter a short distance from the church and depositing fifty cents into the meter (because she didn’t know that Sundays were free), she saw an expensive set of cooking pots in a store window, which got her thinking about how she and her dad really could use a new oven.

She was laughing rather giddily by the time she reached the church, in recognizing that Satan was throwing just about everything he could at her to get her to be selfish, keep the ticket, and go against God’s will.

One of the pastors of the church was just unlocking a side door, when the still-laughing Charlie surprised him by handing him the ticket. She then walked back to her car as calmly as possible. But she was sweating a little, and her knees were shaking as she unlocked the door. While she had passed the test, it had been somewhat difficult.

The church benefitting from the ticket was actually one of the churches whose parking lot had held a carpool during the bus boycott in the fifties. In the future, members of this particular church would be crucial in organizing underground churches, places for people to worship and fellowship, when bible-based Christians, by law, would not be allowed to practice their faith.

The lottery incident came about from moves by Boko and Etowa. While this didn't happen very often in their game, they had both made the same move (called an "even-through" in their gaming language), which resulted in the test for Charlie in providing her with the winning numbers and date.

Boko had made the move first in hoping that Charlie would fail the test. Etowa had called even-through in recognizing that she likely would pass. The fact that she passed was proof positive that, while evil is often very powerful, good ultimately has the power to prevail. Evil often counts on human weakness, but God can turn our weaknesses into strengths.

In the future, many churches would be the beneficiaries of a secret do-gooder who seemed to have a knack for picking lottery numbers. Eventually, many states stopped having the lottery due to this, not only because churches seemed to be benefitting, but under accusations that some sort of corruption was causing this. While many people recognized God's hand in this, since lottery organizers couldn't see a way to stop God, they stopped the lottery instead.

Just after the even-through lottery moves, Boko made a move affecting the Labyrinth Library, which Etowa followed by making a move involving the mezzanine door containing the windy desert world (number five on Em's list).

Charlie had another vision Sunday afternoon, of a pure-white dragon. Though she couldn't tell how far into the future she was seeing, she was sure the dragon was related to a time fairly close to the Endtimes. While many people knew about the white horse that Jesus will ride in the Endtimes, they might not know about the white dragon, which a white peacock helped to create. As Charlie watched, the dragon shrunk down to become a white burnished dove resembling softly-glowing platinum.

Meanwhile, back in the fifties on a similar Sunday afternoon, if anyone from the future happened to be looking on, possibly from a unicorn's back, they would see Frances and Ellie on the hunt for a unicorn whistle, which Frances had recently read about in a book. Being an adventurous pair, they would find one. However, since they were never able to get it to work, both Frances and Ellie assumed it was either broken or possibly that it took special skills or knowledge to operate. Even though she was never able to call a unicorn, Frances kept the whistle, which eventually ended up amongst the relics in the subbasement library.

“By wisdom a house is built,  
and by understanding it is established;  
by knowledge the rooms are filled  
with all precious and pleasant riches.”

—Proverbs 24:3-4





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