

# The Protector of Dragons



J.H. Sweet

Clock Winders Series

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book are from the Revised Standard Version.

### 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 Protector of Dragons

Time Key Travelers

““And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness  
of the firmament; and those who turn many to righteousness,  
like the stars for ever and ever.””

—Daniel 12:3



## Contents

- Chapter One: Ashton and Bibor – 7
- Chapter Two: Visiting the Magnolia Archive – 25
- Chapter Three: The Next Leg of the Journey – 42
- Chapter Four: Lost in the Himalayas – 54
- Chapter Five: Rainbow Lozenges – 84
- Chapter Six: Mr. Michaels' Albums – 93
- Chapter Seven: A Pyramid Is... – 100
- Chapter Eight: The Thirteenth Door – 108
- Chapter Nine: A Time of Seconds – 126
- Chapter Ten: In the Shadows – 137
- Chapter Eleven: Welcome to the World – 156
- Chapter Twelve: Grit and Diamonds – 165



## Chapter One

### Ashton and Bibor

Visiting the Technology Lab on Lion Mountain in Tennessee midmorning on a Saturday in late August, Quin couldn't understand where Cuoré had dashed off to. She had only just caught a glimpse through a window of his shadow departing as he streaked away. Heading outside and hearing a branch-breaking scuffle and a roaring blast of fire from the far side of a nearby hill, she raced in search of her protector.

The white dragon, with talons flashing and feathers ruffled, was engaged in battle against two teen boys, one of whom, seventeen-year-old Tanner Ellison, Quin had encountered before. Tanner was a sorcerer, and not a converted one, which meant he was extremely dangerous. However, the danger wasn't destined to last long on this day because the sorcerer and his companion rather quickly decided they wouldn't be able to hold their own against the dragon; and so, the pair hopped two airbikes they had recently acquired in order to swiftly depart the Mountain.

No sooner had they left than a third teen boy emerged from behind a clump of shrubs where Cuoré, by thought, had told him to take cover. With the sun shining fully upon him, the boy's skin was glowing with a bluish sheen, and Quin almost immediately realized that she was looking at a Sapphire Boy, but one evidently somewhat different than the other two she was acquainted with because, while Gavin and Henning often did stand out in a shining sort of way, neither ever glowed blue. This stranger looked somewhat familiar to her, though she couldn't quite place where she might have seen him before. Cuoré, nuzzling the top of the boy's head with his chin, certainly seemed to know who he was.

"Are you Quinlyn Brinker?" the boy asked.

Slightly startled, Quin slowly answered, "Yes."

“And you look about the right age,” he added pleasantly, “so that means I’ve come to the right time.”

“I’m sixteen,” Quin replied in a perplexed manner, until it dawned on her—“Oh, you must be time traveling.” Except, at this point, she didn’t quite see how this could be, since time travelers could only go into the past; though she fairly quickly guessed that he was likely from the future, which was correct.

Smiling, the Sapphire Boy next introduced himself. “I’m Ashton.”

No sooner had he said this than Quin realized exactly where she had seen him before, in a recent daydream vision of the future. “You’re the next Protector of Dragons, after me,” she voiced, with amazement at being face to face with her replacement in the here and now.

“Yes,” Ashton answered. “I won’t be born until forty years from now, and then you won’t start mentoring me until I’m ten. I’m fourteen, about to turn fifteen.”

Aside from it being somewhat mindboggling to meet someone from the future, Quin had never been very good at numbers or math in her head, always needing to put problems (even small ones) to pencil and paper; but she wouldn’t need to stretch her brain on this day because Linn had just zoomed up in his airchair, though soundlessly since the chair didn’t make any noise. “So Quin is about seventy in your time, and she started training you when she was about sixty-six,” he said. “I’m Chase Linn, by the way, but people call me Linn.”

“Ashton Ingram,” the Sapphire Boy answered while shaking hands with Linn.

As the three and Cuoré headed to the lab together, Quin asked, “Is Cuoré assigned to you as protector in the future, and is that how he somehow knows you?”

“That’s one question I can answer,” Ashton replied. “But please don’t be offended if I can’t answer a lot of others while I’m here.”

“Because it might change the future,” Linn cleverly deduced.

Quin easily recognized the truth in her friend’s statement as Ashton continued. “Cuoré is not my protector in your future. He’s still yours. I do have a protector. In fact, I came back because I need to find him, here in this time. Well, that’s part of the reason I’m here.”

“What’s the other part?” Quin asked.

To this, Ashton replied somewhat slowly. “I’m...not sure.”

“Oh I get it,” Quin said, “you can’t reveal too much.”

“No, it’s not that,” he answered. “I just don’t know exactly. Not yet anyway.”

Cuoré, though often a clever and intuitive dragon, also didn’t have an answer as to why Ashton was there. However, he did tell Quin by thought, *I knew he was a Protector of Dragons—dragons can always recognize their protectors—so I knew I needed to help him, and that I could trust him.* (At this time, Cuoré was choosing not to reveal to his mistress that he had actually met Ashton once before, when the Sapphire Boy traveled back in time on another occasion to seek the white dragon’s help.)

As they entered the lab, with Cuoré waiting outside and shapeshifting down to burnished dove form in order to perch on a tree stump, Quin suddenly realized why God had given her the recent vision of her replacement, so that she too would be able to trust Ashton, as well as recognize him.

“Even though I don’t know everything yet about my mission,” Ashton went on, while sipping a glass of root beer Quin had just handed him, “I can tell you that the dragons are in great danger. And I’m here to save them. Well, help you save them, since you’re the current Protector of Dragons.”

In recalling the events in the spring at Lake Atitlán, where she and her friends had been called upon to save hundreds of dragons, Quin was inclined to think Ashton had arrived too late. “But that was like four months ago,” she said. “The dragons are safe now. They’ve all been moved.”

After a moment of thought, Ashton replied, “Oh, you’re talking about the three volcanoes. Yes, you told me the story. This isn’t related to that. The dragons are in another kind of danger. We’ll need to figure out what that is, and then do something about it.” To Quin’s puzzled look, he added with a smile, “Your future self sent me back to help you save the dragons, but you weren’t able to tell me everything, I imagine because I am supposed to find out certain things for myself. I’m guessing this is the way it originally happened, so you were probably reluctant to tell me too much for fear of influencing our actions in the here and now.”

“But I would have thought I could have just told you,” Quin said, in a disappointed tone. “That would have sped things along a little.”

“Speed is not always the right way to go about things,” Linn advised.

“He’s right,” a voice from the doorway said. Alex Rodriguez had just arrived in the lab, and had heard part of their conversation. “Sometimes things need to take time.”

Quin had always had difficulty with the whole “patience” thing; and, like a lot of us, learning to be patient was going to be a lifelong endeavor for her. “I guess I just like efficiency,” she said, as Alex and Ashton exchanged names and shook hands, “so I wish my future self would have just told you what the problem is.”

Alex was smiling because, despite being nearly two years younger than Quin, he definitely had a few more things figured out than she. “Anytime we go through a process of any sort,” he explained, “we always learn something. And sometimes we meet certain people along the way that we were supposed to meet. If we’re in a rush, we don’t have as much time to meet people.”

Linn was nodding as he offered, “Often, the journey is as important, if not more so, than the end result.”

Since Quin generally received most of the important information relating to her job of protecting dragons through prophetic dreams, daydreams, and auto-writing, she wasn’t used to working in the realm of “The Unknown.” The same was true of her gift of healing by touch. Except for common-sense practice, she often relied on supernatural guidance to know exactly where, when, and who to heal. With no daydream coming into her mind, and somehow knowing that she wasn’t going to get any information by trying auto-writing, more to herself than anyone else, she pondered, “So how do we start trying to figure this out?”

“First things first,” Ashton said. “I need to find my protector, a dragon named Bibor. He won’t know me in this time, so I’ll need to introduce myself.”

While Quin didn’t know very many dragons by name, she did know Bibor because he had helped with the events at Lake Atitlán, and with relocating many of the dragons to Africa afterwards. “He’s the pale purple dragon that we met in March,” she told Linn, smiling as she

added, “well, mostly purple, but with some green splotches on his neck and shoulders.” Knowing which volcano in Africa Bibor seemed to favor on their many trips there, Quin felt finding him would be fairly easy.

In the middle of a couple of important projects, Linn didn’t particularly want to come along when Quin invited him. However, Alex definitely wanted to go, especially because this quest was starting off with a mystery—that of not knowing what sort of danger the dragons might be in—and Alex couldn’t resist telling Ashton, “That’s my main gift, the ability to solve mysteries.”

Smiling, Ashton didn’t tell Alex that he already knew this from knowing him in the future. As a time traveler, he wanted to be very careful when revealing things about many of Quin’s friends, in particular, Linn. At this point, Linn and Quin didn’t know that they were destined to marry; and so Ashton didn’t want to say or do anything that might influence the situation in any way.

Alex’s ability to fly would also likely come in handy on an adventure of this sort, though flying actually wasn’t one of his gifts, but rather something he had learned by solving the centuries-old mystery of how the Chinese dragon is able to fly without wings. While his current speed wasn’t anywhere close to that of a dragon, Alex could fly at nearly sixty miles per hour, and was gradually getting faster with practice.

Before they set off, Quin made sure to call Zin to ask her to join the party. With Tanner as a possible factor going forward, the presence of a magician would definitely help, particularly because Zin had encountered the young sorcerer before, and had even managed to best him during their latest duel.

“I wish you’d keep that on your sleeve or collar,” Linn said, referring to Quin’s walkie-talkie walnut that she was stowing in her shoulder pack after disconnecting with Zin. Though much varied as far as individual colors, the devices were most often called walnuts due to their close resemblance to the nuts in shape and size. “It’s just safer to have it more accessible,” he added, as Quin rolled her eyes and gave a great sigh while shooting him a look that said, *I know, I know, you’ve said so before! But I’m still not going to wear it!*

Quin might have voiced her frustration aloud, except that she felt a need to be well-mannered in front of Ashton, mainly because she didn't know him well yet. Plus, since she was destined to be his mentor, she basically didn't want to model anything but politeness.

"I just feel practically like a Christmas tree sometimes," she said, as calmly as possible, indicating her pin-on watch, mini Mind Key necklace, and the musical triangle (used to call magical white hummingbirds) that was fastened to her belt directly between the rope and flute weapons she always carried.

Ashton was smiling as he said, "This is just the same as in the future; you don't like to wear too much gear."

"What about just clipping it to the strap of your pack?" Linn couldn't resist adding as Quin once again rolled her eyes.

Linn had always felt protective toward his friends, which was why he had designed the walkie-talkie walnuts in the first place, modifying the little radio devices that many people carried to get their news, music, bible lessons, etc. from various broadcast stations.

Zin had just arrived atop her gryphon protector. No sooner had Magsen landed, her golden feathers and fur glittering in the morning sunshine, than Cuoré again took dragon form so that Quin and Ashton could both hop aboard. While Linn had an extra airbike handy that Ashton could have borrowed, at two hundred and forty max mph, the bike couldn't anywhere near match the speed of the dragon and gryphon.

While Quin was introducing Zin to Ashton, Alex by thought called to his friend, a rookh named Westerwing. Unlike the roaming tendencies of most of the giant magical blackbirds originally from the realm of Kivetel, Westerwing preferred to stay close to Lion Mountain, his home for many long decades; and so he often took Alex and his friends places they needed to go, and just lately had been coaching Alex to help him improve his flying speed.

With Cuoré flying close to Magsen, Quin filled Zin in on a few details as they traveled. "So I thought you would be the best option to deal with Tanner if we happened to cross paths with him again," she said.

Being a fabulously-talented magician, even at the young age of fifteen, Zinnia Summerhaven would indeed be an ideal choice to counter any sorcerer.

At the same time the group was leaving Lion Mountain, Tanner and his companion, Kemp Fischer, were just landing in the Rubble City that had once been Macon, Georgia. No sooner had the pair dismounted their airbikes, which were quickly folded and pocketed, than Kemp began kicking old boards and shingles around in anger. “We should have stayed!” he fumed. “I could have dealt with the white dragon!”

Tanner was shaking his head because he fully knew this to be untrue. Although Kemp had the ability to produce and control fire, his flames could not yet match the firepower of a dragon. Being a year older than his friend, Tanner often took the lead on their excursions, and thus had been the one to make the decision to leave.

“We’ve been after him for two days!” Kemp continued to hotly complain. “I didn’t sign on for this only to tuck tail and run!”

“Pipe down, you two!” a voice from about fifty feet away sharply commanded. Heather Finn had only just arrived at their designated meeting spot about a minute before her friends landed.

While Tanner was often the boss of Kemp, Heather was pretty much the boss of both boys when she was around, even though she was a year younger than Kemp. Her dominance mainly stemmed from the fact that she was a skilled Stone Hunter (trained to capture persons with jewel-related gifts), and one with more than enough expertise to catch Ashton. For that indeed was the plan, to capture the Sapphire Boy; and while taking him alive was preferable—because the stones produced by the tears of Sapphire Boys could be very useful—they would kill him if they had to, in order to ensure the success of a much larger plan.

Like Tanner, Heather had been born in Supercity Nine, which was spread over what had once been Indianapolis and its suburbs, while Kemp was from Supercity Eight, previously the Chicago area.

The Supercities in general were still in a pretty big mess due to the uprisings and mass exits that had occurred some five months previous. While not in as much of a broken-down state as the thousands of Rubble Cities spread across the country, all fourteen of the U.S. Supercities (often called Supes) were presently operating on a much smaller scale than they once had. In a manner similar to the centralizations that had

formed the enormous cities in the first place, people had moved inwards in order to consolidate and better function without the use of public transportation because the rail systems often weren't operational, mainly due to the destructive activities of gremlins, but also because materials and labor for repairs were currently scarce.

As they had for the past couple of decades, many gifted young people who were members of the elite of the Supercities were choosing to use their gifts for ill. This was not surprising because none had been raised with Christian principles. Christianity was still fully outlawed, though people in the various self-sustaining communities such as those on and surrounding Lion Mountain were no longer recognizing any of the laws imposed upon them by the government, which was still dominated, as it had been for several decades, by evil sorcerers and their servants. Being in the category of protégé, Tanner wouldn't have any political power for many years, but he was still stirring up a fair amount of trouble, particularly in an effort to prove himself to his mentor, Vidas Farr, who was one of the two Governors of Supe-9, and a person with a great deal of clout amongst his fellow Council of Twos members, of which there were twenty-eight in total (two for each of the Supercities), with Telén Mayhew in Supe-7 serving as the current Governor Ruler, basically, the equivalent of a president.

"I've got him," Heather told Kemp and Tanner. "He's airborne, north of our position." She was using a hand-held tracking device called a tracer, which was capable of locating Ashton and keeping tabs on his movements even at great distances. Just as many jewels have magnetic qualities, so too did the bodies of persons whose gifts were connected to jewels. This specific tracer was designed to home in on the magnetic signatures common to Sapphire Boys.

Instead of taking airbikes, Tanner called three nyregs using his staff, which had a built-in feature to summon these demonic winged creatures that sorcerers, hunters, and various others often relied upon for transportation, as well as for protection. At any given time, a hundred or more nyregs could be seen patrolling the skies above each of the Supercities.

Once in the air, still keeping an eye on the tracer, Heather called directions to her companions as she led her nyreg on a course to intercept Ashton's group.

Not expecting to encounter any unfriendlies, the party from Lion Mountain was traveling at somewhat of a leisurely pace, while comfortably enjoying the scenery. Though high up and moving fairly swiftly, the way wasn't blustery because the auras of creatures like gryphons, wind horses, thunderbirds, and dragons always protected their riders. Flying over Supercity Thirteen, what had once been the Atlanta area, Ashton was careful not to say that, in his time, only four of the original fourteen U.S. Supercities were still in operation, and Thirteen was not one of them.

About seventy miles south of the city, over a largely hilly, brushy, and deserted landscape, Quin and her friends met with an air ambush when the nyregs that Tanner and Heather were riding slammed hard into the sides of Magsen and Westerwing, respectively. While creatures like gryphons and rookhs could generally easily outdistance nyregs, taken by such sudden surprise, they basically hadn't had any chance to flee. At the exact same time as the slams, Kemp quickly raised a wall of flames, about thirty yards wide and approximately forty feet high, to separate Cuoré from the positions of the other protectors.

As the white dragon instantly came to a screeching and hovering halt, though jerked a bit from the abrupt stop, Quin and Ashton managed to maintain their seats. Zin and Alex, on the other hand, were not so fortunate.

Alex being knocked off of Westerwing was not in any way a problem because his ability to fly naturally kicked in. However, Zin unseated and in a freefall was another matter. Looking around for and spotting her, Alex did a swift dive and raced for her position.

Zin was able to control her panic, which lasted only about two seconds before she was able to think and act. Pulling a tiny capsule from a sleeve pocket and quickly swallowing it, she thought, *Better a magician in this position than someone else*. This was indeed true, as levitation—of both objects and her own person—was a skill Zin excelled at. As the capsule instantly kicked in, she was able to slow and control her speed to the extent that she completely stopped in midair in roughly three seconds. However, she wasn't entirely safe because this particular trick was subject to a thirty-second time limit; and having had only one Float Seed (made from dandelion fluff and cloud wisp) on her person, she was about to be in pretty big trouble. Blessedly, Alex

managed to reach her and scoop her into his arms at exactly twelve seconds into the trick. Once he had a secure hold on her, he headed toward the ground.

Connected to Kemp's fire gift was the ability to produce smoke, great clouds of it, which he was doing; and this was the reason why Magsen, frantically circling the area, hadn't been able to see where Zin had fallen.

In even more of a panic than Zin had been in, Magsen almost couldn't believe what was happening. She had only recently been assigned to protect Zin, and this was her very first assignment. How could she fail this early on? The notion was almost inconceivable.

Unlike dragons and rookhs, gryphons had the ability to speak aloud using human languages. Calling loudly to Zin in a screeching voice, Magsen was even more panicked when she didn't receive an answer; though in the back of her mind (and helping to control the panic) was the thought that Zin could be brought back to life by dragon tears, which Quin always carried with her, along with the special thimble to correctly measure the tears. Even if Quin was out of dragon tears, Cuoré could easily produce more. But the trauma to Zin of a fall like this, both physically and mentally, truly horrified Magsen who, of course, had already grown to love her charge.

Westerwing also hadn't been able to see through the smoke, so it was a true blessing that Alex had managed to locate Zin. In truth, the actions of a nearby watchman manipulating the smoke had afforded Alex a clear line of sight to his falling friend. Angels often helped the gifted, though their actions generally weren't noticed.

Alex and Zin were nearing the ground. They had been nearly two miles up when the ambush occurred, but Alex had descended swiftly, feeling they would be safer out of the air. He was right. Tanner and Heather were searching for them, while Kemp maintained the smoke production, as well as the wall of fire to hold back the dragon.

Wary of hitting his friends, because he was unable to see clearly through the thick billows of smoke, Cuoré refrained from using his own firepower. While he could have rather easily managed to knock a hole in Kemp's firewall, the risk of hitting unintended targets was too great at this time.

With his keen eyesight, Westerwing had just spotted Zin and Alex who were landing, though he knew they weren't totally safe from nyreg attacks because the beasts could spit acid from great distances. Angry about the ambush and planning one of his own, he headed like a black streak a short distance eastward. Westerwing was unique among rookhs in that he had the ability to fly forty times faster when traveling west than in any other direction. While he was already speedy, this made him even faster than a wind horse at full speed. In an all-out westward race, he might have even been able to give Cuoré a run for his money. Making a swift U-turn, Westerwing headed back in a westerly direction, so quickly that his form was barely a smear of a blur, and totally unnoticeable in the smoky sky.

In a mere blink of a moment, he slammed each in turn into the nyregs of Tanner and Heather. Being slightly smaller than the beasts, he was not able to unseat their riders, though he certainly surprised them because rookhs have absolute stealth (like that of owls) with regard to sound. In an effort to avoid additional slams, Tanner and Heather decided to land.

Cuoré had finally managed to catch glimpses of Alex and Zin on the run for cover below, and he was also able to see the forms of both Westerwing and Magsen some distance away in the air. This meant that it was now safe to use his own fire to blast a hole in Kemp's wall, which took only a few seconds and forced Kemp to retreat as the white dragon advanced. However, instead of pursuing the fire-gifted boy, on Quin's command, Cuoré headed to the ground to drop off his riders so they could search for Alex and Zin.

Kemp also chose to land, doing so only moments after Tanner and Heather, the latter of which, on foot, was already in pursuit of the subject on her tracer, currently only about four hundred yards from her position.

As Heather rushed past the hidden position of Alex and Zin, who were crouched behind a thick bramble, Zin recognized the girl as a Stone Hunter because of the gem-shaped tattoo on her neck. After a hurried whispered conversation, at Zin's bidding, Alex pursued Heather in an effort to help Quin and Ashton. He wasn't quite able to overtake her flying, and eventually had to land when she noticed him. Armed with a flame flute, one of Tanner's deadly creations, Heather shot

curved blasts of fire at her pursuer, who was forced to dodge and take cover. Grappling on his belt for his own flute, which was not of a flame variety but was nonetheless powerful, Alex was kicking himself for not having drawn his weapon sooner. Though he hadn't been expecting the attack in the air, and had afterwards been busy saving Zin from the fall, he could have retrieved the flute while hiding behind the bramble. The weapon was fully charged, but Heather was now out of reach. In pursuit, due to the girl's speed and her zig-zagging path, Alex had difficulty getting a clear shot.

Zin had sent Alex off because she knew she could, on her own, well deal with Tanner, who was just closing in on her position in pursuit of Alex.

Halting as Zin stepped out from behind the bramble to confront him, Tanner smiled in anticipation of yet another duel with his familiar adversary.

In keeping with the defensive dueling posture that she was most comfortable with, after a short bow to her opponent, which he returned, Zin let Tanner make the first move.

Glancing around at the terrain and noticing a small river meandering by only about fifty yards from their position, the sorcerer used his staff and an incantation to animate stones and gravel from its banks to form three approximately nine-foot-tall-each soldiers, who rushed full-force at Zin.

Standing her ground, Zin immediately countered by reaching into a jacket pocket to retrieve and toss out five tiny objects—a hoop, three clubs, and a baton—which rapidly grew in size as they floated toward the rushing soldiers. Reaching into her pocket again and coming out with a palm full of glittering dust, she blew the dust toward the stone men while issuing a command of “Perform!” to them, which caused the soldiers to halt in their tracks and grab for the objects floating in front of them. As the soldier in the center began juggling the three clubs, and his companion to the left started twirling the baton, the third began putting on a fabulous show of combining acrobatics with tossing and spinning the hoop.

With nearly thirty seconds left of Tanner's animation spell, the circus performance continued as he made his next move, that of a simple attack with a flame flute, which Zin countered like lightning

using the rope weapon on her belt to disarm her opponent before he even managed to get off one shot.

In shock over his basic combat move coming to such an abrupt end, Tanner had difficulty thinking of what to do next and so simply stood, dumbfounded, for about twenty seconds, until the soldiers collapsed into piles of stones, and the hoop, clubs, and baton shrunk in size and floated themselves back to Zin's pocket.

Tanner's inability to think clearly wouldn't matter much on this day because the duel was about to end. Magsen, finally spotting her charge through the clearing smoke, came screaming in pretty much like a golden streaking bullet, and one issuing a piercing war cry that might have been likened to something a gigantic eagle (perhaps one the size of a river barge) would be capable of producing, the effect of which left most of those within earshot cringing in fear.

Except for the fact that gryphons didn't breathe fire like dragons, Magsen might have been breathing fire, for as mad as she was; though her anger was perhaps more at herself than anyone or anything else, for getting separated from her charge for so long.

Not only was Magsen not a happy camper, she also didn't have to adhere to any rules of etiquette related to the dueling practices of magicians and sorcerers. Well knowing this, Tanner decided to flee rather than risk the wrath of the gryphon; though in truth, protectors rarely killed human beings, only doing so on God's orders or when no other choice was left them in defense of their charges.

The three nyregs on the ground weren't much of a safety problem at this point because Westerwing was doing incredibly speedy loops, coming in each time on a westward trajectory, in order to knock them down over and over again as they kept struggling to their feet. *This is like bowling*, the rookh thought, knocking down two at once.

A series of blasts from Tanner's flame flute ended up deterring Westerwing just long enough for the young sorcerer to reach and mount his nyreg, which very swiftly took to the skies to circle so that Tanner could search for his friends.

Meanwhile, Cuoré was facing off with Kemp who, though he wouldn't have wanted to admit it, was rather intimidated by the dragon, especially on the ground since Cuoré was over twice his height. After pelting the dragon with a short series of fireballs, which had little effect,

Kemp raised another wall of flames in order to keep the protector separated from his godly friends. With similar intent, Cuoré held his position to keep the boy engaged and unable to help his cohorts. However, in keeping with the concept of not killing human beings unless absolutely necessary, Cuoré simply matched Kemp's firepower, rather than taking him out.

Largely undeterred by Alex's pursuit, Heather was very rapidly closing in on her prey. Realizing they probably couldn't outdistance this incredibly-fast girl on foot, Quin stopped and turned to face her, while pushing Ashton behind her as she drew the gold rope from her belt. However, the weapon wouldn't end up having much of an effect because Heather had just stowed her flame flute and loosed the tattoo from her neck. Although varied in shape and size, the hunters working for the sorcerers each carried a weapon based on Ink Magic, with the ones of Stone Hunters being very similar in function to mirror weapons. When exposed to even the smallest amount of light, the stone was capable of emitting powerful energy bursts; and, just out of reach of Quin's rope, Heather couldn't be disarmed.

Because a rope against a mirror at this distance was not much of a match (the mirror being far superior), fearing for Quin's safety, Ashton stepped out in front of her, thus taking a flashing strike from the stone meant for his mentor. While this type of assault generally couldn't harm a Sapphire Boy, the force did knock him off of his feet, and knock the wind out of him.

In a flash, Heather was bending over him, her knee pinning his stunned form to the ground as she grappled with some sort of dark green netting that was sparking with energy. If she could get the net over him, Ashton would be completely immobilized, thus allowing her to easily complete her capture. However, getting him covered was slow going because she was working with one hand, while still directing blasts from her ink stone at Quin to keep her at bay.

Behind Heather, Alex had ceased using his flute in fear of accidentally hitting his friends. Opting for a different strategy as he raced up to the scene, he simply body-slammed the hunter, which served to knock her clear of Ashton. She also lost her grip on both the netting and her ink weapon, the latter of which swiftly returned itself to her neck, melding with her skin in less than two seconds.

Not too far in the distance, Westerwing was facing off with the two grounded nyregs, which had gradually been sneaking closer to the positions of Heather and Kemp who were currently only about forty yards from each other.

Scrambling to her feet and swiftly surveying her surroundings, Heather felt it wise to retreat, mainly because the odds of beating this many foes at once were very slim, even with help from two gifted companions, one of whom was nowhere to be seen. Specifically taking note of Kemp's position nearby, Heather began backing up toward her friend, which was precisely when Cuoré eased his fiery assault and began backing up as well, intent on circling the wall of fire in order to go in search of his friends. At the exact moment Heather reached Kemp, they both suddenly vanished and the wall of flames abruptly disappeared.

Recognizing a trick of some sort, Quin was on her guard, as was Cuoré, particularly because he could still smell the pair of miscreants in the area. (Dragons have a very keen sense of smell.) Flying low, he streaked toward Quin and Ashton, landing beside them just as Magsen arrived with Zin aboard. Westerwing landed beside the gryphon a mere moment later as Alex was helping Ashton to his feet.

The two nyregs were taking off nearby, carrying their currently-unseen riders. Outstretching one wing, Cuoré shielded Quin from a spurt of acid from one of the departing beasts. Though foul smelling, the liquid couldn't harm either his scales or feathers.

*They're gone*, Cuoré conveyed to Quin by thought upon recognizing that he could no longer smell either the hunter or the fire-gifted boy. And, indeed, this was true, as the pair was already over a mile high and meeting up with Tanner in order to head home for the day.

Heather and Kemp were now visible again. How they had disappeared on the ground had to do with Heather's gift, which was similar to Ashton's except that hers was connected to a black sapphire rather than a blue one. Instead of standing out, she was shrouded; and this was a skill that she could turn on and off as she wished.

Like Ashton, Heather's skin had shield qualities, so she couldn't be easily injured. However, unlike Sapphire Boys, whose tears produced stones that could either shield or heal, her tears turned into sapphires that could shroud, to the extent that a person holding one would appear

all but invisible, even when in motion. Tanner and Kemp each carried one of her stones, which worked to conceal them when in direct contact with their skin; but only as long as shadows were present. Whether from trees, clouds, rocks, or whatever, shadows were a necessary component for effective shrouding. This was true of Heather's body as well, but finding a shadow was rarely a problem because even the shadow of a human being would work. And while the outline of a shrouded person might have been faintly visible in clear and sunny conditions, in this case, the lingering smoke and the dust stirred up from the various scuffles had helped to completely conceal Heather and Kemp.

Those on the ground were taking a little time to catch their breath before continuing on to Africa. Ashton, in particular, was still shaking off the stun from the strike of the ink stone.

"Why didn't you bring a weapon with you on a trip like this?" Quin asked him.

When he didn't respond right away, Quin simply thought he was still out of breath; but in truth, he was waiting to see if she would come up with the answer herself, which Alex supplied a few seconds later. "Time Key Travelers can't always bring things with them from the future, unless God directs them to."

Ashton was nodding as he said, "Technology, especially, has to progress as it was meant to, and generally not from people getting ideas from being exposed to something from the future."

*Of course*, Quin realized, also thinking, *I'm such a dunce*. She had been on enough time-travel trips to know that a person might not be able to risk taking something into the past, particularly when the item might fall into enemy hands. She also should have realized right away that weapons of the future would be more advanced than those in her time.

Handing her protégé the flute from her belt, Quin asked, "Do you know how to use this?"

"Yes," Ashton answered, clipping the weapon to his own belt. Fortunately, he was trained in both mirror and music weapons, and had even had some practice with models of the past, since many were still being used in his time.

Ready to continue their journey, the group soon took to the skies, employing speed this time in order to reach their destination of a cluster

of volcanoes in Africa's Great Rift Valley in less than eight minutes of flight. Westerwing used Cuoré's tailwind to help his speed along, since they weren't traveling west and he generally wasn't quite as fast as gryphons and dragons.

Bibor's favorite sleeping spot was inside of an inactive volcano, which meant that the whole group could enter in search of him, and not just Cuoré and Ashton, as would have been the case with an active mountain since they were the only ones who could have taken the heat. Even Quin had to be super careful around volcanoes, since the shield sapphire implanted into her ankle wouldn't be able to protect her for long under such extreme conditions.

Most of the dragons inside, tucked into crags and perched on rocks, were in dove form; but a few full-sized dragons were sleeping on larger ledges. Currently, people were not calling dragons "sky serpents" as was common in centuries of old before falling out of favor in recent decades; though Ashton could have told the group that the term was making a comeback in his time. However, like any good Time Key Traveler, he had done his research before setting out on this trip; thus, he wouldn't be telling his companions this, so as not to influence anything having to do with their futures because even relating smallish trends might have unintended consequences.

Bibor was in dragon form, and so wasn't hard to find in the low light, particularly because Ashton was giving off a pronounced glow, which definitely helped with both searching and retaining their footing.

"He hasn't slept very long," Quin related, "so he should be easy to wake." Dragons tended to sleep for long stretches, sometimes even centuries, and thus were often difficult to rouse. Blessedly, Bibor had only been asleep about four months at this stretch, and so waked quickly, though he was none too pleased at having his sleep interrupted twice in one year.

Yawning and stretching, Bibor was a tad grumpy, as evidenced by the glare coming from his piercing green eyes. Even upon recognizing that these were friends, not foes, he was still cranky; though he softened considerably when meeting his future charge, which he instantly knew from the small voice inside his head telling him that this was his assignment as protector, both now and in the future.

Suddenly more excited than cranky, he leaned forward in order to rub his forehead and crest feathers on Ashton's shoulder and back, which might have hurt an ordinary person, but didn't the Sapphire Boy because of his gift. As Ashton reached up to scratch under his new friend's chin, Bibor made small contented cooing noises like ones a stout dove might put forth.

Interrupting the cooing and drawing the group's attention were the rather loud and raspy breaths of a large green dragon sleeping nearby. In addition to labored and hoarse breathing, the creature appeared to be molting, as evidenced by several thin patches of feathers around the neck, as well as loose feathers scattered on the ledge where the dragon slept.

"I've never heard of a dragon losing feathers before," Quin said, though quietly so as not to awaken any within earshot.

An orange dragon stretched out on the ledge just below them appeared to have several white lesions on its neck. Hopping down to take a closer look, and dodging a pile of foul-smelling vomit, Quin noticed that the creature also had a swollen throat and puffy red eyes. "They're sick," she said.

"Maybe something like the equivalent of a cold or flu?" Zin speculated.

In looking closely at the twenty or so doves occupying the same ledge, a handful of them appeared to be under the weather too. In addition to shedding feathers, several had swollen throats, puffy eyes, and nostrils oozing with a liquid reminiscent of putrid tree sap. If Quin had to guess, she would have said about one in five of the dragons were affected.

"The poor things," Zin said, trying a Pop of Peppermint Whammy on one of the doves, which seemed to have no effect. Shrugging, she offered, "It works on parakeets, to soothe and decongest them."

After thinking for a few moments, Quin confidently voiced, "Dragons are pretty hearty, so they probably just need a little rest to get over whatever this is."

"Exactly," Alex chimed in. "Sleep is the best thing when sick."

Though he didn't say anything, Ashton wasn't sure he agreed; and he was actually more than a little worried. *Dragons sleep most of the time*, he thought. *So they shouldn't be sick at all.*

## Chapter Two

### Visiting the Magnolia Archive

Hungry for lunch, the group decided to head back to Lion Mountain, and to the lab so that they might update Linn in person rather than simply by walnut. Alex's younger sister, eight-year-old Meg, was there looking for her brother. Linn had already eaten, but the fridge at the lab contained lots of sandwich fixings and a large bowl of pasta salad. Having not already had lunch, Meg joined the group in digging into the fridge and clearing off one of the work tables to hold the spread.

As they ate, Ashton related something he had been pondering since they left Africa. "I think the sick dragons might be the reason I needed to come back in time." This was ringing true, to his ears anyway.

Pulling out her journal, Quin tried auto-writing, which worked to confirm what Ashton had suspected. The sick dragons were indeed the issue that needed fixing. However, while the words God had led her hand to write confirmed the problem, she was given no advice or indication as to what steps to take next.

"We might ask a veterinarian to take a look at them," Zin suggested.

Quin agreed this might be a good idea. Several vets lived on Lion Mountain, and she knew of at least a couple more in practice at the twin plantations (a.k.a. Netherwind and Laurelstone) in Alabama where she lived. "The solution might even be something simple, like an herb," she input. "Animals sometimes nibble on belladonna when they have a tummy ache. Even though it's poisonous, they somehow know it can help knock out whatever might be troubling them, maybe another poison. But since dragons sleep most of the time, they probably don't know to do something like this. Plus, they are hardly ever sick; maybe never. At least, I've never seen a sick one until today. And when Professor Fulhausen was training me—and he was pretty thorough—he never said anything about dragon illnesses." Since her mentor had passed away some three years previous, Quin could no longer ask his advice.

“What about consulting Muriel?” Zin offered. In addition to being able to talk to animals of all sorts, Muriel Lofto was often able to tell what might be ailing ones that were under the weather.

As a bit of pasta salad evidently went down the wrong way, Ashton’s coughing nearly drowned out Alex saying, “She’s not available right now. She left the Mountain two days ago for the plantations, to help with a time-travel mission.”

Ashton’s coughing soon ceased as Meg patted him on the back and moved his water glass closer to him to encourage a few sips. Clearing his throat, Ashton said with regard to the interruption, “Sorry.”

Refilling her new friend’s glass, Meg said, “When we stayed at the Inn at Magnolia Hills last year, I met a man named Mr. Zemely who was super good with animals. Like if someone’s dog or guinea pig got sick, he could always cure them. He might be good with magical creatures too. And if he doesn’t have the answer,” she added, “the library at the inn has answers to any question. You would just have to do a little looking.”

This was completely true, as the Magnolia Archive had grown in size over the past twenty or so years to the extent that it nearly matched the holdings of the Labyrinth Library, the main entrance of which was still located under Laurelstone Manor, though much of the maze of the library was situated under Netherwind, where Ashton lived. The inn and both libraries still existed in his time, and were still good resources, particularly because the Labyrinth Library and Magnolia Archive often shared books. Both of these underground depositories had originally been built based on knowing what was going to happen in the future, specifically, the banning and destroying of books. And despite sprawling miles and miles each, the libraries were actually easy to access, with oodus (wormlike magical creatures) still delighting in carrying people around, in addition to tunneling out new passages on occasion, while eating rocks for enjoyment.

Since the day was getting on somewhat, and both Quin and Zin were expected home, they decided the excursion could wait until the next day, and that they would meet at the inn for lunch after their usual Sunday-morning church services. Again, Linn would be abstaining from the adventure in lieu of working on a few things in the lab; and

although Meg was invited, she already had plans with friends for after church.

Heading outside after cleaning up from lunch, the group noticed Cuoré and Bibor having a nap together in the clearing in front of the lab. Bibor was using Cuoré's rump as a pillow, and both were snoring.

"I almost hate to wake him," Quin said in a low voice. She could always ride an airbike home, instead of relying on Cuoré.

Also speaking quietly, Magsen said, "I can easily carry two." Since Doyle Mansion where Zin lived was only about fifty miles from the plantations, and therefore wouldn't at all inconvenience the speedy gryphon, Quin gladly accepted the offer.

It had already been decided that Ashton would be staying on Lion Mountain, though whether he would be bunking with Alex or Linn had yet to be determined. However, before this could be decided, and just after Magsen with Quin and Zin aboard departed, sixteen-year-old Ethan Stanley arrived in the clearing.

Westerwing often carted Ethan around, but today the teen was riding his favorite horse, Wendi Lee, when setting off for the twin plantations, which would take three days to reach traveling by regular horse; but it's often not a bad idea to take our time and see a few sights along the way, like some of the lovely gardens that the gnomes and bigfoots were constructing in many of the Rubble Cities. Plus, Ethan would be staying at the plantations for probably a couple of months, so he wanted to have Wendi Lee with him; and she, likewise, wanted to go. There were lots of horses to keep her company, not just on the plantations, but in the many magical pockets on the properties that held thriving communities as well as large horse farms. Ethan had just recently started working with Quin's dad, Dell Brinker, the current head of the Time Key Travelers.

Upon meeting Ashton, Ethan suggested that the Sapphire Boy stay at his house, rather than trying to squeeze in at either Linn's or Alex's. "My mom is used to having someone in the house, and doesn't like it much when I'm gone," he said, in an almost pleading tone. This was true, as Holly Stanley was often uncomfortable with being left alone in the house for long stretches at a time.

"So you get to take your pick of places to stay," Linn said good-naturedly. "It's like we're all fighting over you."

Smiling, Ashton actually jumped at Ethan's invite because he felt it a safer option with regard to the issue of not accidentally revealing too many details about the future. If he stayed with either Alex or Linn, the risk of letting something slip to them might drastically increase.

"Good choice," Ethan said. "My mom's a really good cook, and you can use anything in my room while you're here."

Because Ethan needed to be on his way, Alex actually accompanied Ashton to Ethan's home to meet his mother. "See you after church tomorrow," Alex said, after making the introductions, since the boys were planning to travel together to meet Quin and Zin at the inn the next day.

With regard to not revealing too much about the future, Ashton needed to take special care not to let anyone know exactly how long Linn was destined to live. While much extended over those of the past, the lifespan of a person with a severe form of muscular dystrophy was still not as long as someone without such a condition. As far as Linn's gift of overproducing human goodness, needed to feed the many multitudes of magical creatures in the world, by the time he passed away, two other individuals with this gift had already been born. Therefore, there was no danger in Ashton's time of any magical creatures starving from a lack of their primary source of sustenance. This was such a blessing because, although God's children had been granted a small reprieve from some of the wickedness of the world during the four decades preceding Ashton's birth, the events leading up to the Endtimes were destined to be full of many evils. And so, help from magical creatures of all sorts was going to be needed to endure the times of trial and tribulation human beings were meant to experience.

Cuoré returned overnight to the plantations, specifically, to the bigfoot cave in which he liked to sleep, mostly in dove form. When Bibor awoke in the clearing shortly after midnight, using his excellent dragon nose, he managed to locate the cabin where Ashton was staying, outside of which he parked himself to sleep until morning.

After church the next day, Quin and Zin set off to the Inn at Magnolia Hills to meet Alex and Ashton, both of whom came on Bibor because Westerwing was evidently busy with something else important. Immediately upon arriving, Cuoré and Bibor set to napping in the rose garden at the inn, while Magsen took the opportunity to visit the

Magnolia Archive because, like many gryphons, reading was pretty much her favorite pastime.

Mr. Zemely was at first not at the inn, but was expected back later in the day. The delay didn't trouble the group that resolved to be patient. After all, the sick dragons weren't going anywhere; and neither Quin nor Ashton had gotten the idea that the creatures were in any sort of imminent danger.

After lunch, they briefly met up with Gavin McWhirter and Henning Kosch, who had been staying at the inn. While trying not to reveal that he and Henning were close friends in the future, Ashton put on being thrilled to meet two more Sapphire Boys, which was not too difficult because persons with their specific gift were still rather rare, even in his time. Gavin, in his early forties, was mentor to his younger counterpart, though Henning was very mature for fourteen and actually didn't need all that much advising. The pair was heading to the plantations where Gavin was planning to spend some time on one of the horse farms while Henning was set to head out on several time-travel missions.

With the three Sapphire Boys side by side, it was obvious that Ashton was somewhat different than the other two. While Gavin and Henning tended to have a certain aura about them—which might have been likened to a shining personality that extended to their appearance and often made them stand out in a crowd rather than blending in—Ashton was positively flashy, almost glinting in fact. In truth, on certain occasions when it was prudent to conceal his gift, he wore a dampening device on his belt to subdue his brightness so that he might be low-key and blend in. In realizing he was standing out, he switched the dampener on, and in doing so, he ended up explaining to his companions what the device was for.

“That’s interesting,” Henning said, with Gavin nodding.

While Ashton often did try to blend in, in other situations, he used the flash and glint of his gift to distract and draw attention away from certain objects, persons, or actions that should remain unobtrusive. In one case, he had helped a group of people escape a prison by distracting a sorcerer and two demons that were holding the people.

What Gavin and Henning also found interesting (and this was something they already knew) was that gifts were definitely becoming

stronger with each new generation. Henning's gift was definitely stronger than Gavin's in that Henning could cry at will and had control over which types of sapphires his tears produced, healing or shield, which Gavin did not. Ashton had these powers too, but also had the additional gift of prophecy, mainly by way of dreams, but also by sometimes seeing visions in shiny surfaces. And while all Sapphire Boys had good insight and wisdom, Ashton's gift in these areas was particularly pronounced.

As Gavin and Henning departed for the plantations—by oodu, using the tunnel system connecting the Magnolia Archive and the Labyrinth Library—Ashton, Quin, Zin, and Alex took a stroll through the inn's gardens. Many of the topiaries were dancing in the afternoon sunshine, mostly using ballet, tap, and ballroom moves, with some performing little skits for onlookers. A leafy badger was twirling a twiggy osprey, while an azalea butterfly balanced on the head of a privet bear waltzing gracefully with a yew gorilla. In the rose garden, a bushy fox and a branchy elk were dancing circles around the two sleeping dragons. It was nice to see the topiaries frolicking, which was common of late because the magical trees and shrubberies hadn't had to be so diligent with their protection duties, this being because the world had calmed down some in recent months, with dangers from creatures like gremlins, stealth hobs, and such much reduced from previous times. In the Japanese tea garden, a pittosporum pony was giving rides to kids while a hydrangea hippo raked the rock courtyard under the watchful eyes and direction of a gnome.

After touring the gardens, the group decided to spend some time in the library. Rather than using the main twisty stairs to descend, they took the lift, which was like a giant dumbwaiter, and one rather crude and rickety in design, but that was great fun to ride. Upon reaching the first level, they all four went in separate directions, each according to individual interests. It was easy to get lost in the miles of books, but actually more absorbed than lost because if someone ever did lose his or her bearings, the zipakola water lizards patrolling the tunnels could always lead the person to either an exit or a common area.

All of the books in the library were kept in good repair by genie bookwrights who could occasionally be seen flitting about with their little repair satchels. The librarians were all eidetic individuals who had

only to consult their own excellent perfect-memory brains to help people find various books and other materials.

None of the group emerged until well after dinner; and so they had a late dinner, after which, Mr. Zemely finally arrived. While they were anxious to consult him, they were going to have to wait their turn because he was needed to tend to a sick grimmpt, who had merely eaten too many red grapes (like a whole bushel) and thus was easy for the man to treat by giving the little magical piggy some sassafras bark to calm his tummy. Mr. Zemely also rubbed tea tree oil on his ears to make him happy. And, indeed, the grimmpt was happy, which he demonstrated by grunting, giggling, and squealing as he flew in circles above them in the inn's conservatory.

When they were finally able to consult the animal doctor, Alex and Ashton took turns describing the symptoms of the sick dragons, which Alex wrapped up by saying, "And along with the yellow discharge, the steam coming from their nostrils was kind of putrid smelling."

Rather than the physical symptoms such as labored breathing and swollen throats, Mr. Zemely seemed more interested in the numbers of dragons affected. "So it seemed about one in five were sick," he mused, as Zin nodded.

After a few moments' thought, he asked, "Were they all females, by any chance?"

"Oh wow, yes!" Quin replied in surprise. "I think so." While it was somewhat hard to tell with those in dove form, the two in dragon form were definitely girls. And in thinking about the sick doves she had examined closely, she was pretty sure that they were all female, though she hadn't particularly thought of this as an important factor at the time.

"I think we're looking at something I once read about pertaining to dragons—a virus born from a curse," Mr. Zemely stated.

They weren't surprised by the man's words, having already assumed some form of evil was involved, particularly since Satan was behind all diseases, even those striking animals. Before the devil gained a hold on our world, there were no illnesses of any kind to contend with.

"I can't be sure of the diagnosis until I do some research," Mr. Zemely added.

Since it was getting somewhat late, they agreed to talk in the morning; and as the animal doctor took himself off to visit the library,

he said, “I might need to see a specimen.” As he wandered away, he further mused, “I really thought the disease was only a myth.”

As far as Mr. Zemely seeing a sick dragon, Quin hoped it wouldn't be necessary; but if it turned out to be so, one would have to be brought to the inn because she was reluctant to take anyone else to Africa. Already, too many people knew the location of the dragons. When this mission was complete, she was planning to use her Mind Key on her friends to erase certain memories so that they couldn't let the information slip if they were ever captured by an enemy. Though a mini version of the original, her key worked just as well for this purpose; and she was gaining some practice in using the magical sphere.

Staying at the inn for the night was no problem; rooms were always available because the pod architecture of the inn was based on magical triangles. While the structure from the outside looked only capable of housing a couple dozen guests, there was actually room to accommodate hundreds inside.

They secured two rooms, with the girls sharing one and the boys the other.

Praying before falling asleep, Zin was thinking of what a blessing it was that Alex had been near enough to catch her the previous day when she fell. Although she wore a ring set with a shield sapphire (one Gavin had produced many years past), the stone wouldn't have been able to shield her body from such an intense impact.

Alex was also doing a little thinking while praying, specifically about how he had always wanted to be a superhero. Now, he was sort of like one. It was as though God had granted him the most amazing wish. Closing his eyes, he smiled as 1 John 5:14-15 specifically came to mind. “And this is the confidence which we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have obtained the requests made of him.” Because Alex had always intended to use his hoped-for superhero powers for the good of God's Kingdom, it was no wonder that the Lord had granted his wish. When our desires line up with God's, He does grant any and all of our wishes, so we shouldn't be surprised.

With Ashton taking a moonlit walk in the gardens before turning in, Alex currently had the room to himself; and he was glad to be alone

because he was tossing and turning some in having difficulty getting relaxed enough to sleep, mainly because his mind was still so active. Earlier in the day, he had actually been feeling a little downcast and slightly worried, which might happen to any superhero on occasion.

Although he had only been working with Quin, Zin, and Ashton on this problem for a short time, Alex sort of felt a little like a failure. He hadn't been the one to figure out that the sick dragons were the reason Ashton was here, and he also hadn't been the one to make the suggestion to go to the inn and seek the advice of the animal doctor. He had been with Meg when they first visited the inn and met Mr. Zemely, so why hadn't he come up with this suggestion? Not that he would have wanted to deprive his little sister of a chance to contribute, except that he was currently feeling a bit lacking in this regard. Come to think of it, he had been going through something of a dry spell all around in the past few weeks. Not only had he not solved any great mysteries, he also hadn't been much help to Linn in the lab of late. The two often worked on things together, with Alex's problem-solving skills and good ideas helping Linn to create better designs. *Where are all of the good ideas that I normally have?* Alex wondered. His brain certainly hadn't seemed to have come up with any recently.

When feeling unsure about things, like life in general or his own abilities, Alex did the only thing he knew would help. Grabbing the pocket bible that he always carried with him, he switched on the light. As he flipped pages, Isaiah 30:21 jumped out at him. "And your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, 'This is the way, walk in it,' when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left."

Turning pages again, his eyes were drawn to Psalm 32:8. "I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you."

*God will guide me,* Alex thought, feeling very reassured. *I just need to be patient. He always helps me, every step of the way. So it's probably just that the timing isn't right for me to solve any great mystery or come up with some fabulous suggestion.*

As he was settling into sleep a short while later, his brain told him, *It's not like you're just sitting around doing nothing. You actually helped save Zin from falling when Magsen couldn't see through the*

*smoke.* (Alex had at least figured out without anyone telling him why the gryphon hadn't been able to catch Zin.)

Feeling restless after saying her bedtime prayers, Quin was also spending some time thinking, while trying not to wake Zin who had just dropped off to sleep.

Recalling the encounter with the Stone Hunter, in specific, Ashton stepping out to take a hit for her, this was certainly nothing she would have sanctioned. But, then, he likely didn't know about the shield sapphire in her ankle because she was probably keeping it secret from most everybody in the future too, as she was now. Currently, only Linn knew, because he had designed the capsule into which the stone was placed before implantation. Used by military personnel too, implanted sapphires not only provided physical protection, but also served to protect the mind from ugly thoughts and dreams planted by demons and others. This was something Quin's mini Mind Key did as well, and to an even greater extent against various forms of mind manipulation, which was beneficial because she had recently found out that certain gifted individuals could get past the protection of sapphires.

As she struggled to fall asleep, Quin's mind was also pondering a possible cure for the dragons. In thinking about how nothing like this had ever come up during her training with Professor Fulhausen, she suddenly realized something with regard to being a Protector of Dragons. While she, Ashton, and Professor Fulhausen were all very different individuals, they did have something in common—that of being healers. She had her gift of healing by touch, Ashton could produce healing sapphires, and the professor was fabulously gifted with herbs, almost like a medicine man. She specifically remembered him curing several bigfoot families of something like the flu one year. *Was it meadowsweet that he used?* her brain struggled to recall. While Quin had learned a lot about plants from her mentor, she hadn't taken many notes on the subject, and was now kicking herself for not doing so.

One thing very different about Professor Fulhausen was that he didn't seem to have a protector like Quin and Ashton did, other than watchmen looking out for him, like they do for all of God's children. In wondering why no other protector was assigned, Quin's mind only thought of one explanation. *Maybe in his day, we were not yet close enough to the Endtimes, when dragons will be needed to help remake*

*the earth with fire. So if something happened to a Protector of Dragons, another wouldn't be immediately necessary.* In truth, Professor Fulhausen did have an assigned protector, a stone spirit; but even the professor hadn't known about Golyó because nature spirits often work super clandestinely. Of course, dragons were not just important to the future, but to the here and now as well, in often performing godly tasks. Some helped tend to the Clock of the Universe by making adjustments to its workings. Others were assigned to help keep hellfire from brimming over. According to legend, the Rain Dragon helped with the Great Flood and the Star Dragon posed as the Star of Bethlehem. Although Quin had met both of these legendary dragons, otherwise known as Nyomo and Talmas, she hadn't confirmed these actual events with them. She had sort of gotten the idea that they likely wouldn't tell of their specific deeds because most dragons were not of the sort to brag. Plus, many would know to keep certain godly secrets.

While Quin might not have known about the stone spirit protecting the professor, she had already figured out why she had a dragon as a protector: so that dragon tears would be readily available for use while doing her job. And she reasoned this was true for Ashton as well. While his sapphires could heal, they could not bring back the dead as dragon tears could. Sadly, the tears of dragons didn't work to heal magical creatures, only humans, so this was not an option with regard to curing the sick dragons.

*What a dunce I am!* Quin thought suddenly, and rather severely, as she rolled out of bed and dressed as quickly and quietly as she could. Slipping out of the room, she made her way to the rose garden to find Cuoré whom she was already calling to by thought. She had just realized that she hadn't even tried to use her gift of healing by touch on the sick dragons. Having always assumed it was specifically for humans, she hadn't ever tried to use it on a sick animal. *It might work,* she thought, *you never know until you try.*

Having had a similar idea, Ashton was in the rose garden. In the process of mounting Bibor, who was whining a little at not having been allowed to sleep longer, the Sapphire Boy was planning to try to cure the dragons with his healing stones, several of which he had handy in a small pouch, so he wouldn't even have to cry to produce any. Ashton

and Quin shared their ideas in hushed tones, so as not to wake Magsen who was tucked in beside a rose trellis, fast asleep and dreaming about tilting at windmills with Don Quixote whom she had just been reading about in the library.

As they set off, Cuoré by thought told Bibor that he needed to get used to shorter sleep times, a task somewhat difficult for most dragons, since they were often used to sleeping without interruption for several decades straight, sometimes longer.

The sun was already up in Africa, which was a little disorienting to Ashton and Quin, though not badly so, since both had grown used to this sort of thing in their travels. Still being fairly dark inside the volcano, Ashton provided light for them by simply turning off his dampening device in order to restore his natural glow, which was more than sufficient for them to see by. The dampener was sort of like carrying around an extra shadow, but one covering him rather than extending from him, which then swiftly departed as soon as the device was switched off.

Trying her gift on both a burnished dove and a dragon, Quin had no luck with either. Neither did Ashton's healing sapphires work, though he tried several of various sizes and shades of blue. In thinking a "fresher" stone might be the key, he cried one about the size of a peewee marble. Sadly, the newer sapphire had no better effect than the older ones.

On their way back to the inn to get some much-needed sleep, Quin and Ashton were both quiet as they contemplated what else might be done to help the sick creatures. At this point, they simply hoped Mr. Zemely might have some good advice for them in the morning as far as what they might do as a next step.

In the morning, while taking a stroll in the gardens before breakfast, Ashton saw a vision in the shiny surface of a gazing ball nestled into a thick patch of ivy. Lasting several minutes, the vision gave him specific details as to why the issue of the sick dragons was so important.

Hurrying inside, he found his friends just sitting down to a breakfast of scrambled eggs, yummy orange scones, and oatmeal topped with nuts and raisins.

In addition to the fact that the dragons could not recover from the disease they were inflicted with on their own, the most pertinent

information of the vision pertained to two specific dragons, namely Sei Sei and Kanna, the only girls of the original seven dragons who were created by a magical peacock and designed to correspond to the seven colors of the rainbow, with Sei Sei and Kanna, respectively, being orange and red.

“If left unchecked,” Ashton related breathlessly, “this virus that only targets females will spread to and kill all female dragons, including Kanna and Sei Sei. But the original seven all have to be alive in the Endtimes in order for all other dragons to retain their power because the power of all dragons stems from the ancient colors of the originals.” Because what he had learned was somewhat complex and confusing, Ashton was slightly shaking his head as he added, “It has to do with water and doves and rainbows too, but the *colors* of the original seven are extremely important. And these have to be living colors from the living seven because the doves and dragons using the colors in the future will be living creatures. If even one or two of the original seven are gone, any dragons left will have no power. They’ll basically be weak and helpless and unprotected.”

“Plus, there’s the added factor of no new dragons being born if all of the females are dead,” Quin interjected as the thought occurred to her. “Dragons may be able to live for thousands of years, but they aren’t immortal.”

Ashton was nodding in agreement as he added one further detail. “The power of dragons is actually related to how color weapons work. The magicians that make them use water, colors in nature, and burnished dove feathers.”

Zin was squirming somewhat because non-magicians weren’t particularly supposed to know the secrets relating to the creation of magical weapons.

Mr. Zemely joined them for breakfast just as Ashton finished explaining. Quin was still determined not to take the man to see a dragon, but she would be willing to retrieve a sick dove if he felt a need to examine one.

In the end, there wouldn’t be a need because Mr. Zemely had done some reading late into the night which confirmed his diagnosis. “As I suspected,” he related, “this is the Eve of Death Virus that stemmed from a curse. And the bottom line is that I don’t think I can help

because the virus cannot be countered by any type of traditional healing practices.” With this, he elaborated. “In the same way sorcerers are able to create creatures like nyregs, they are able to create viruses using demonic genetics, existing diseases, and other worldly and satanic means available to them. And if they start the process with a curse, basically a powerful magical spell, this lessens the chance that anyone will be able to find a cure or be able to counter whatever they are creating.”

While Zin was a fabulous curse breaker, medical stuff mostly eluded her. In fact, most magicians were not capable of practicing any type of real medicine. She also knew that sorcerers often added imprints to their work, like individual signatures, that would make their curses particularly hard, if not impossible, to break. A favored imprint of the past involved gender, in that many sorcerers’ curses could only be broken by female magicians, which used to be incredibly scarce but were blessedly not so now.

As if guessing what the group might be thinking, Mr. Zemely said, “Sadly, it wouldn’t matter if anyone could break the curse because the virus has already come into being. Evidently,” he went on, “an extremely powerful sorcerer came up with this virus, a conjurer no doubt since this would be beyond the skills of your basic garden-variety sorcerer; and necromancers rarely specialize in things like curses, poisons, or diseases because they’re too focused on communing with the dead. It’s my belief that many necromancers are lazy, relying on the work of previous generations to give them their answers, instead of doing any work for themselves.”

“Why would anyone do this?” Alex said sadly.

“This is just more of the normal evils of the world,” Ashton responded. “This is Satan’s territory that we live in.”

“The Eve of Death Virus is specific to dragons,” Mr. Zemely told them, “and was designed by a sorcerer with a specific hatred for the creatures. I found most of my information in a single book relating to diseases affecting magical creatures. The chapter on this calamity was written by a prophet named Ian Mohs Grant who foretold the event. Since the virus hadn’t happened yet in his time, no cure could be worked on or developed.”

As they were mulling things over, Mr. Zemely speculated, “I’m thinking that ‘Eve’ is a play on the name of Eve, the original woman, since this is affecting only females. But, of course, it could simply mean the evening before death, since death is creeping up on the affected dragons.” With a note of apology in his voice, he added, “This is definitely beyond my expertise. I’m mainly versed in herbs and other such home remedies, and I don’t have anything right now that I think would work on a dragon.”

“Well, thank you,” Quin said, though with a deep sigh because she was truly sad that the animal doctor couldn’t cure the dragons.

Mr. Zemely would accept no monetary credits for his help, which was how he usually got paid, though sometimes people gave him goods like food or clothing in exchange for his services. Not only would he accept no payment, but he was still interested in their problem. “I’m planning to do more research, and consult a few friends,” he offered, as he trotted off to tend to a sick cat.

Though her friends were somewhat downcast over the situation, Zin was always one to look on the bright side. “At least we have the diagnosis,” she said, “which is more than we had this time yesterday.”

“True,” Ashton replied. “We do now have an important piece of the puzzle. And we have to remember that some things are meant to take time.”

“Rome wasn’t built in a day,” Quin mused, recalling the old saying.

Alex was again feeling a little bad and judging himself harshly since no good ideas were popping into his brain, and his mind was trying to decide if this wasn’t going to be a matter of patience and trusting after all. Maybe he just hadn’t been making good use of his gift lately. Mr. Zemely’s mention of necromancers being lazy had sort of struck a chord with him, appealing to some of his insecurities. Had he been lazy lately? It didn’t seem like it. He had been staying busy, focused on school and church activities, and in his spare time had been helping Linn in the lab.

*No, the voice in back of his head told him. You’re not lazy, and you have been using your gift as you should.*

In the end, Alex decided it was more likely that this was the concept of teamwork coming into play here. In truth, no one is truly a one-man

band. We all need help from one another once in a while, if not more often.

Before the group could leave the table, a smiling Mr. Zemely came rushing back into the breakfast hall, leading Rhett Collier who actually lived on Lion Mountain, but had come to the inn to visit a friend. Rhett was a converted sorcerer, which meant he was not dangerous, except perhaps to the non-converted of his kind or other enemies of God's children. A conjurer by specialty, Rhett had recently spent some time at the plantations, setting up a den which he had also recently done on Lion Mountain—dens being what conjurers called the labs in which they worked.

Mr. Zemely had given Rhett a heads up as to the problem with the dragons, and the sorcerer had a suggestion that involved the female of his kind. "Sorceresses are most often called prophetesses because they specialize in foreshadow," he said, "and most people consult them about their future, like they might a common fortune teller. But there is one prophetess who is a conjure woman by specialty, and I've heard from reliable sources that she is an expert in curing sick creatures. The last I heard, she was living in the Himalayas, just somewhere in the mountains, like in a cave I think. That's all I know, other than the fact that she's very old."

With regard to the "very old" part, it was pretty much common knowledge that many sorcerers and prophetesses took an elixir to extend their life, which enabled them to live for many hundreds of years. However, little did Rhett or any others of his kind know that the conjure woman in question had a very special elixir, one unlike the ones conjurers were capable of producing in their dens.

Even as Rhett spoke and then departed with Mr. Zemely, Alex was still pondering, specifically about God's timing; and his brain reasoned that the group hadn't come to the inn just to see Mr. Zemely, but to cross paths with Rhett as well.

Instead of accompanying her friends on the next step of their journey, Zin decided to head home for a bit, to study for a World History exam and to work on something a little stronger than the Pop of Peppermint Whammy. Since dragons were much larger than parakeets, she figured she would need to "go bigger" in order to truly make an impact on this problem. "Call me if you need me," she told Quin.

Zin had already packed up her gear before breakfast and was ready to leave the inn. As her friends accompanied her to the rose garden to bid her farewell, they discovered that Magsen's twin, Halli, was there, having tracked down her sister just before dawn. Upon hearing that Quin, Alex, and Ashton were shortly planning to set off to the Himalayas in search of a conjure woman, Halli offered to take Alex so that no one would have to ride double on either Bibor or Cuoré, or call a rookh. Smiling broadly, Alex basically jumped at the chance to team up with a gryphon. And so, as her sister and Zin departed, Halli stayed.

Assigned as protector to Zin's mother, Em, Halli hadn't had much to do lately as far as protection duties because her charge had been staying home a lot in recent weeks. As a writer, Em didn't need to venture out much unless she wanted to; and Doyle Mansion was well protected: Not only did puck trolls and topiaries live on the estate; wind horses also patrolled the area.

A short while later, having tidied up their rooms and paid their bill, Quin, Ashton, and Alex were ready to leave the inn.

## Chapter Three

### The Next Leg of the Journey

Taking off from the rose garden, the group was only airborne about ten seconds when Quin received a walnut message from Linn, who asked them to make a stop at Lion Mountain before going on.

Meeting him at the lab about five minutes later, they found a couple of friends with him. Trixie Greenspell and Jasper Hughes, both fifteen years old, didn't have classes on Mondays; plus, whenever students had something important to do, schoolwork was easy to make up. Linn actually only did evening classes, and only twice a week because he was ahead in his studies; in fact, he was getting close to graduating from high school. Even though he and Quin were the same age, she likely wouldn't be graduating for another two years because she tended to take her studies more slowly.

Ashton might not have known that the Great Pyrenees in the lab was Jasper, except that the dog was a little larger than most of that breed. Unlike other shapeshifters such as demons and dragons, Jasper had to maintain his approximate size during transformations. Only recently learning of his gift, his shapeshifting skills were rapidly advancing thanks to spending some time in Kivetel, one of the realms accessed through the magical mezzanine floor at Netherwind Manor. Because time passed much faster in Kivetel as compared to our own world, he had been able to spend the equivalent of several months there while only being gone from home for a couple of weeks. This was part of a student exchange program, which mainly benefitted people from our realm since Kivetel residents coming here, even for brief stays, had to spend long periods of time away from their homes. But since people in Kivetel were very long lived, most didn't seem to mind investing the time in getting to know us and our ways. In order to properly meet and converse with Ashton, Jasper shifted to his natural form just after the group entered the lab.

Since Stone Hunters could evidently easily trace Ashton, Linn had created a device known as a disruptor that would throw Heather and others like her off the track. This was something he had already been working on for a few weeks, having intended for Henning and Gavin to have the added protection. In recognizing how much danger Ashton was in, Linn had stepped up the pace on the project, which he finished late evening yesterday. Without causing harm, the disruptor basically muddled Ashton's magnetic signature so that it couldn't be identified as being particularly his.

Adding a belt clip to the device and fitting it to his new friend, Linn noticed Ashton's dampener and asked what it was.

Though answering honestly, Ashton did so somewhat warily, since Linn, in the future, would be the one to design the dampener for persons with jewel-related gifts.

"Interesting," Linn replied, without asking further questions.

Relieved, Ashton thought, *In this close of contact, certain exposures evidently can't be helped*, though he resolved to continue to be cautious. However, after contemplating for a few moments, he considered that maybe this was what was meant to be, exactly what God intended, for certain people to be given ideas about technology, but without specifics so they would still end up designing the gadgets entirely themselves.

Speaking of gadgets, Trixie was in the lab precisely because she was gifted with super hearing; and Linn's amplification device, which he used to hear a tiny voice that liked to sing to him while he worked, was currently on the fritz (mainly because he had dropped it a couple of times recently). All others of the device were in use by the Underground Army, still headquartered at this time in the caverns beneath Netherwind and Laurelstone. Linn had recently figured out that the tiny voice belonged to a boy spreesprite, rather than some other small creature, since puck trolls didn't speak (or sing) and because genies generally didn't make recurring visits to people. He was correct, as was his assumption that this was a boy, because of the invisibility factor. While girl spreesprites were very fast and were seldom observed, only the boys could become invisible. Figlin was the boy's name, and he had grown very attached to Linn in recent months. In fact, Figlin was acting like something of a protector to Linn, who also enjoyed the protection of the white lion living on the Mountain, though

the lion, a shapeshifting creature who preferred to stay primarily in mouse form, wasn't around all of the time because he liked to patrol the whole of Lion Mountain, as well as surrounding communities.

When he did have a working amplifier, and when the tiny songster was present, Linn often received advice, the words of wisdom being from God giving Figlin specific lyrics to sing as messages to Linn. This was pretty much the only way Figlin could communicate with human beings, other than possibly using signals like knocking something over or tossing a pebble, because people didn't particularly converse with spreepprites who, based on the way their brains liked to work, tended to ignore anyone trying to talk to them. Even if Figlin hadn't chosen to be invisible when inside the lab, Linn probably wouldn't have observed him because Figlin was only a tad over a half-inch in height.

In addition to helping Linn to hear Figlin, Trixie liked being in the lab because it was a fairly quiet place to study, away from the bustle of home where her twin toddler-age brothers tended to keep the house pretty well stirred up. Currently, she was writing an essay for her English class.

Switching on the disruptor, Linn found he needed to make a slight adjustment to the device. "It will only take a couple of minutes," he said.

This was no problem, as the group didn't feel the need to hurry, and Ashton was enjoying the opportunity to get to know Jasper and Trixie. Plus, where exactly in the Himalayas they needed to go was a pretty big question. In order to try to get some specific direction, Quin pulled out her journal and tried auto-writing.

"Closer to Bhutan than Nepal," she told her friends a few moments later, while giving a great sigh at the limited information. "That's all I got."

Alex, deciding to adopt Zin's cheerful philosophy, said brightly, "That's more information than we had a few minutes ago."

And Ashton chimed in with, "Some things are meant to take some time, and some exploring." He was very much looking forward to doing a bit of trekking in the mountains.

Linn might have gone with the group; but in addition to the many things he was working on in the lab, he also needed to spend some time at the plantations with Jitterbug, his longtime mentor. They often

collaborated on projects, which allowed both to make more progress than simply working on their own. Plus, Linn had recently figured out why he was sometimes uncomfortable around Quin, as far as what he hoped might be their future connection, as a couple. Since he was somewhat shy, he welcomed a little space while thinking things over and figuring out what might be the best way for things to move forward, while in the meantime simply admiring his longtime friend from afar. Quin, in likewise recognizing her changing feelings for Linn, was also enjoying having some space since she, too, didn't particularly know how to make the next step.

As he was just finishing the adjustment, Linn suggested that Jasper and Trixie go with the others on their adventure.

Both thought the idea an excellent one, though Trixie did ask, "What if your little friend shows up?"

"I can always call you by walnut," Linn responded, since the walkie-talkies worked all over the world, with no distance limit encountered so far. Plus, being genie enhanced, they even worked when the sorcerers were using their magnetism mixers (devices designed to disrupt electronics). Gremlins also couldn't break the walnuts. But aside from being able to call Trixie if he needed her, Linn was working on another amplification device, which he could probably finish in a day or two if he put his mind to it.

Extremely excited to be asked to go along, Jasper was already heading outside to call a couple of rookhs for them to ride. While he could impersonate winged creatures, like demons and various large birds, he didn't have the ability to fly. Plus, demons and regular birds couldn't fly as fast as rookhs anyway.

Again fitted with the disruptor, in an echo of Quin's earlier sentiment, Ashton said, "Now I'm starting to feel a little like a Christmas tree."

As he was saying farewell to Linn, the Sapphire Boy made an odd gesture which prompted Quin to ask, "What's that?"

"What?" Ashton replied, as he hadn't particularly been thinking when making a triangle out of his forefingers and thumbs.

"That thing you just did with your hands," Quin responded.

"Oh, the triangle," Ashton answered. "You know how people in the past used to use their hands to make a heart to tell people they were

thinking good thoughts about them. Well...this is like that, but specifically representing the Trinity. People in my time use it as a greeting, or a farewell, or anytime we want to wish someone well. It's like an unspoken 'Hello' or 'Goodbye' or 'God bless you,' or 'Safe journey'—things like that."

"Just like aloha can mean a lot of different things," Linn said, "except that the triangle with the hands is not verbal speech."

*Interesting*, Quin thought, as she tried out the hand gesture for herself.

As Alex and Trixie did likewise, both were thinking, *Neato*.

Gryphons were especially good at geography (dragons were too for that matter), and Halli had no problem leading the way, which thrilled Alex, particularly in observing that the land and water expanses below were an amazing blur of smooth colors, both soft and vibrant. Although they were traveling incredibly fast, due to the auras of the protectors, the humans were able to converse fairly normally; though they did have to speak up because wing widths and safe flying practices put even the side-by-side riders at about thirty feet from one another.

At a point when they were just coming up on the coast of Portugal, Trixie called, "We're about to have company," after which, she quickly retrieved the blue rope she was wearing coiled around the top of her left boot. Having heard the wings of a nyreg following them for the past couple of minutes, she hadn't been alarmed because the beast wouldn't have been much of a match against her group. However, when the nyreg obviously sped up on a rapid approach, she definitely felt the need to alert her companions.

Aboard the nyreg was Penelope Coyle, age thirteen and an associate of Heather, Kemp, and Tanner who were certainly not limited to working just with each other. In this case, Ashton had not been tracked by a tracer. Surveilling from the skies using a high-powered spyglass, Penelope had spotted the group leaving Lion Mountain and had tailed them while using a comm-cube (a device similar to the walkie-talkie walnuts) to call to her friends.

Closing in on the position of her targets, Penelope was soon joined by Kemp, Tanner, and another of their clique, a fifteen-year-old boy named Devin Helm. Although both Kemp and Tanner were trying to call Heather, they were not able to reach her because their comm-cubes

were currently being interfered with by the electromagnetic pulses (commonly called EMPs) that two leviathans in the sea nearby were emitting. Currently, the Stone Hunter was in Canada, and was not getting any readings on her tracer because Linn's disruptor, unaffected by EMPs, was working perfectly to scramble the Sapphire Boy's magnetic signature.

Ashton, Quin, and Alex were very glad to have the extra company of Jasper and Trixie, particularly because Jasper was fabulous with mirrors and Trixie with all types of weapons. Alex and Ashton had both drawn their flutes and Quin her rope.

Devin and Penelope were actually not strangers to Ashton, who didn't know them from the future, but rather from something that happened shortly before he began his adventures with Quin in the here and now. He had arrived on Lion Mountain two days early in order to thwart an attack on his grandmother who was a young woman of nineteen in this time, and one whose home was very near Linn's lab. While Devin and Penelope hadn't directly attacked Ashton's grandmother, they were responsible for driving two megahobs (supersized hobgoblins) onto the path she was taking to leave the Mountain on her way to the plantations. Blessedly, the white lion had been nearby and had taken care of the megahobs, with one pounce basically, after shapeshifting to roughly the size of a small house. His magnificent appearance had also caused Devin and Penelope to flee, which had allowed Ashton, using his dampener to quell his shininess, to remain undetected by the band of miscreants; until, that is, Heather managed to locate him on her tracer a short while later.

Penelope was gifted with powers similar to those of a wind horse, and she immediately directed fierce blasts of wind at Ashton and his friends. While the rookhs, gryphon, and dragons were largely unaffected, their riders certainly felt the brunt of the attack because the auras of the protectors weren't particularly designed to withstand powerful wind levelled with such pinpoint accuracy and tremendous force.

When Kemp swooped in and began shooting flames at them, which Penelope's wind fanned to incredible intensity, the rookhs were forced to retreat. While exposure to fire in short spurts would not be a problem, this could very well harm them. Halli shortly backed off as

well. Although super speedy and unlikely to get singed, she was worried for her charge. However, Alex, sensing that he was hindering her and that she would be better able to fight without him aboard, soon lifted off and headed toward a deserted stretch of beach far below the frenzy in the air. The rookh Jasper was riding had already landed, about half a mile from where Alex set down. Trixie's protector had stayed airborne, though the rookh was having to keep his distance from the fray, which meant she wasn't able to be super-effective with her rope; though she did throw it like a spear at Penelope, nicking her shoulder, which briefly caused her to cease her windy assault. During the pause, Bibor and Cuoré advanced on Kemp's position, battling him with their fire and causing him to retreat because, without Penelope's air fueling his powers, he was no match against two dragons. To better counter his foes, Kemp started producing thick smoke along with his flames, which hindered Halli. While free to maneuver and fight, she, like her sister in the previous battle, couldn't see through the choking clouds.

After a short time, even the dragons were forced to retreat, since they couldn't see well and for the safety of their riders, particularly because Tanner was shooting energy darts in rapid secession from his staff, which the dragons and Trixie's rookh were dodging while their riders did their best with their personal weapons, though without much success. Trixie's rope, being of a retrievable design, had come back to her; but in the heated scramble, she wasn't able to hit Tanner when she threw it again, mainly because Penelope, largely undeterred by the shoulder nick and only slightly bleeding, had once again started her wind attack. In the frenzy, Quin and Ashton were too much on the defensive for either her rope or his flute to have much effect in the battle.

As Quin gave a thought command to Bibor, he fled some distance, obeying because, even though Ashton was commanding him to stay, Quin was the current Protector of Dragons, and her commands definitely trumped her protégé's. Plus, Bibor shared Quin's concern of being more worried about the safety of Ashton than anything else.

Meanwhile, on the beach, due to the rocky landscape and the curve of the shoreline, Alex couldn't see Jasper who was currently being pursued by Devin who had been flying low and scanning for his prey while his friends took care of matters higher up.

Devin was jewel gifted with his powers connected to a pearl, which gave him not only the grit of an excellent fighter, but also amazing water skills such as swimming and diving, along with the ability to manipulate and control water. Seeing Jasper running along the shoreline, Devin raised a huge sea wave which swept the shapeshifter off of his feet and dragged him into the shallows. Blessedly, Alex had just managed to spot both Jasper and Devin, whom he struck with a well-placed flute blast that knocked him off of his nyreg and into the sea. However, Devin was practically at his best among the waves. Swimming underwater nearly as fast as a sailfish, he quickly closed in on the hovering position of his nyreg onto which he leapt out of the sea as easily as a dolphin might perform a simple hoop jump.

Scanning for his attacker, Devin was unable to see Alex, who had ducked into a cliff grotto. Jasper had also disappeared, though Devin searched for him by making methodical passes back and forth along the shoreline.

Jasper was actually in plain sight, but was unseen by Devin because he had crouched and transformed to look like a large stone on the beach. Having learned shapeshifting from a demon, he was capable of impersonating any number objects, animals, and even people. Rapidly advancing to abilities beyond most demons, his skills at present could perhaps have been likened to those of mimics, specialized demons capable of more complex shifting than their ordinary counterparts. Not only that, but he was on the verge of being very like a print double, the most advanced of all demons, capable of copying human beings right down to their fingerprints. While not quite there yet, it was only a matter of time; already he was able to imitate wrinkles, scars, and other such fine details.

Shortly spotting the purple dragon on the approach, Devin encouraged his nyreg to back off and take up a position well away from shore.

Bibor had fled to some fifty miles away, but had circled back on Ashton's coaxing. Landing on the beach, the protector dropped off the Sapphire Boy who hid amongst some vegetation by the cliffs, not too far from the grotto where Alex was concealed. Bibor then took to the skies once more in order to make passes back and forth along the shore.

Devin aboard his nyreg was staying a fair distance out over the water, though he had a spyglass like Penelope's and was scanning for the three boys that he knew were somewhere on the beach, all of whom were smart enough to stay hidden.

Bibor had reasoned that his charge would be fine on his own for a time because all Sapphire Boys were pretty well protected from most types of attack, like pounding waves and heat from flames. Ashton was actually safer on the ground than in the air because if he took a tumble from a great height, the impact would certainly damage him. The gifts of Sapphire Boys tended to strengthen as they aged, and Ashton was still pretty young, which was why direct blasts from weapons, while unlikely to kill him, could stun him more than they could Gavin, for instance.

Able to tell by his excellent nose that Alex and Jasper were nearby on the beach, Bibor sent thought messages to Halli and Jasper's rookh, who had been circling to look for their charges. The pair hadn't been able to help much in the air due to the flames and smoke, and having to dodge blasts from Tanner's staff. However, Jasper's rookh had managed to clear some of the smoke using great flaps of his wings, which allowed Halli on a few occasions to get in claw-slashing swipes at the nyregs of Tanner and Penelope. Alas, the beasts were pretty tough and the gashes made by the gryphon didn't seriously hinder them. While the rookh stayed in the air to continue to clear smoke, Halli dove to do flybys on the beach to help Bibor protect the boys.

Cuoré had barely been able to hold off Kemp's flaming advances strengthened by Penelope's wind, though the evil pair was somewhat hindered in having to evade strikes from Trixie, who was working with a mirror as well as a rope. Thus armed, she succeeded in getting Tanner to retreat some distance, which greatly lessened the accuracy of the blasts he was continuing to fire from his staff. Quin was also using a mirror. Although she wasn't very skilled with one, her efforts were helping to ward off Tanner.

Just after Halli departed the air battle, again using her rope like a spear, Trixie managed to hit and kill the nyreg carrying Penelope. Thrown with such precision and force, the blue rope was actually sizzling red-hot as it sliced through the air and completely through the

torso of the beast. Swooping in, Tanner managed to catch Penelope during the nyreg's death spiral into the sea below.

One nyreg short definitely made for a disadvantage. Still facing onslaught from Quin and Trixie, Tanner couldn't advance, which meant that Penelope could no longer help Kemp, now rapidly being pushed back by Cuoré who was actually spitting fireballs, something he generally didn't like to do because they were more lethal than bursts of flame. But he had just about had enough of Kemp on this day, and pretty much didn't care if he ended up killing the little fire-producing scamp. Recognizing the danger, Kemp decided to "tuck tail and run."

While Tanner had been somewhat relieved during this encounter not to have had to face Zin—whom he had started to fear somewhat due to never having bested her in a duel—he was not going to have an easy time of dealing with Trixie, who had just managed to sneak up on him while his attention was fixed on Kemp fleeing from the white dragon.

After grabbing Penelope's leg and upending her into the sea, using the lightning speed with which she was capable of wielding ropes, Trixie attacked Tanner; except, on this occasion, she wasn't using a rope, but rather a knotted scarf, which ended up being a pretty big surprise to the young sorcerer.

Color weapons were not limited to just ropes; in fact, the magicians who created them very much liked to use other cloth-like textiles. So too were the effects not limited to simply various types and intensities of energy bursts. Included in the arsenal of weapons used by the godly were blankets that could smother, neckties that could strangle, and hats that could put people to sleep.

Also, color weapons were not just limited to the primaries of red, blue, and yellow, though these were the most common. Secondary colors had long been used, with the orange, green, and purple weapons corresponding to emotions and personality traits, particularly ones having crippling effects on people. Orange ropes (and suspenders) could incite explosive anger, often causing someone to turn on the nearest person, even a family member or close friend. A purple rope (or afghan or belt or armband) could paralyze someone with fear. A lighter shade of purple could cause distraction severe enough for a person to have a terrible accident, or constantly speak in a sort of incomprehensible babble.

As Trixie tossed the knotted end of the green scarf over Tanner's shoulder, he experienced an acute attack of depression, feeling the effects instantly, like an electric shock through his entire body. While the contact of the scarf lasted a mere two seconds, the symptoms washing over him like a powerful wave would end up lasting several hours. He suddenly felt drained of energy, incredibly weighted, and extremely irritable, not to mention utterly defeated and down, as though nothing right had ever happened to him in his entire life. While these were only some of the symptoms of depression, due to the intensity of the weapon, they affected Tanner probably five times more strongly than they would have a person with a normal form of the illness. Although feeling horrendous, he did have the wherewithal to direct his nyreg on a swift downward plunge to escape a second strike from the scarf.

Trixie evidently wasn't the only one who could sneak up on people. While Quin and Cuoré were watching what was going on with Tanner, Kemp snuck up behind the white dragon. With a clear shot at Quin, he might have attacked, but for his nyreg being bashed into by what turned out to be another dragon, a female named Jarna who was turquoise in color with streaks of gold adorning her nose, wings, and the tip of her spikey tail. Though quite a bit smaller than Cuoré, she was powerful enough to knock the nyreg nearly two hundred feet through the air. Desperately clinging to his seat, Kemp decided that this time he had had enough; and so he permanently abandoned the fight, joining Devin and Tanner (who was rescuing Penelope) out over the open waters.

Jarna was from the same volcano that Bibor liked to sleep in. Stricken with the dragon illness, her symptoms had lately been keeping her from sleeping well; and so she had decided to secretly follow Quin and Ashton back to the Inn at Magnolia Hills after their second trip to Africa. From the inn, she followed them to Lion Mountain, and then to this scene. Experiencing low energy from the sickness, she had been slow to tail them. Following by scent, she had finally caught up to the group. While she had had enough energy to slam into the nyreg, she was not able to produce much fire at present; and, like Tanner, she felt incredibly drained, especially from the flying exertion.

As she hovered beside Cuoré and watched the miscreants flee, she directed a thought message to them. *That's right! You'd better run, you*

*Nasty Wind Girl, Mean Fire Kid, Evil Sorcerer, and Disgusting Pearl Boy!* Even if Jarna had known their names, she still would have used these titles, having great disdain for the ungodly, especially gifted persons who could have been using their talents for good, but were instead choosing to commit vile acts.

Tanner and his cohorts got the message as they were hightailing it towards home. As they flew, Penelope switched nyregs to ride behind Devin, since both were from Supe-8, and actually lived in high rises near to one another, as well as to the one Kemp lived in.

Partly due to his personality and partly from the symptoms he was experiencing, Tanner snapped at his friends on their journey. “If I hadn’t had to catch you,” he directed at Penelope, “and then fish you out of the sea—can’t you *ever* manage to hold on—we wouldn’t have had to run!” Starting in on Devin next, he said, “And you couldn’t manage to get even one of the boys on the beach? What’s the matter with you!? They were on foot! You had the advantage!”

Devin was in no mood for this and quickly retorted, “What about you? You were dealing only with *girls* in the sky, and they managed to best you! You can’t even hold your own against a couple of girls? No wonder you can’t *ever* win a duel against that magician!”

In Tanner’s present state, the words hit home. He felt very down, having had few successes in recent months, and being constantly reminded of this by his mentor. But, then, Vidas was seldom encouraging towards his protégé, even when Tanner did manage to do things well.

“Just cool down and calm down,” Devin added, in a slightly softer tone. “We’ll discuss things tomorrow.”

Since they were all tired, going home for some rest and meeting up the next day sounded like a good idea, which Tanner agreed to by nod before breaking off from his friends to head to his home in Supe-9.

Exhausted both mentally and physically, while dismounting his nyreg on the roof of his apartment building, in anger and frustration, Tanner kicked the beast, which spit acid at him, singeing his robe. “Hey, watch it!” he scolded the creature.

Nyregs couldn’t communicate with humans either by thought or verbally, but if this one had been able to speak, he would have told Tanner, “You watch it, you jerk!”

## Chapter Four

### Lost in the Himalayas

Back on the beach, Bibor landed just after Tanner and company left, with Cuoré, Jarna, Halli, and the rookhs setting down beside him moments later. Alex, Ashton, and Jasper shortly emerged from hiding to join their friends.

Trixie was stroking the neck feathers of the turquoise dragon as Jarna introduced herself by thought to everyone.

From the runny nose, slight cough, and watery eyes, the group could tell that their new friend was ill. Even if these symptoms hadn't been present, Quin would have been able to tell that Jarna was affected by her posture—head hanging slightly and wings drooping. Instructing her by thought to shift to dove form, Quin said aloud, "I'll carry you in my lap as we head on, so you can rest."

They continued on to the Himalayas right away, reaching a wilderness area "Closer to Bhutan than Nepal" in around ten minutes, and setting down in a mountain valley in a place that felt right to Quin, who fully trusted that God would lead them to the conjure woman.

Being the end of summer, the climate was not too cool; their light jackets would probably suffice. There was some snow present on the higher mountain peaks, but none in the lower elevations.

A rainstorm had obviously just occurred, as the area was wet; though the stiff wind would probably dry things out fairly quickly. Backing up against a stretch of cliffs protected them from the wind, and they were fairly comfortable.

When Quin dismounted, she left Jarna on Cuoré's neck; he would carry the dove at times when his mistress didn't. In flashing contrast to the scales and feathers of the white dragon, Jarna looked much like a jewel adorning Cuoré. When she climbed up to perch on the top of his head to get a better view, she looked like a fancy barrette.

Trying auto-writing again, Quin got, "A cave in the foothills."

The group decided they would need to keep to ground travel. They couldn't simply fly around to search because many cave entrances in the area were obscured by large rocks, overhangs, and even vegetation, which at present was not as sparse as it would be in the coming autumn and winter months.

And so they walked to check out crags, look behind boulders, and peek into just about every nook and cranny, since cave entrances need not be large. Based on the earlier attack and being wary of another, they opted to stay together, instead of splitting up.

Meandering over mainly gentle slopes as they searched in a radial pattern from where they landed, they all agreed they were enjoying not having to climb to any great heights. With the exception of Bibor, who was frowning slightly in wishing he could take a nap, the company was of good cheer. Even Jarna, asleep on Cuoré's head, seemed peacefully content, though she was snoring a little from her nasal passages being stuffed up.

The lush tundra was lovely in multiple shades of green dotted by the grays and browns of rocky areas, and they observed quite a lot of wildlife, mainly birds. Cranes, quail, and sparrows were plentiful, as was a strikingly-beautiful bird called a monal, a sort of pheasant sporting all the colors of the rainbow.

Other types of critters seemed to want to keep their distance—and who could blame them with dragons, a gryphon, and giant blackbirds in company with the humans—though from a hill, the searchers did spot several wild yak in a valley about two miles from their position.

After a time, the rookhs decided to take to the skies to circle and keep watch for any possible danger. Since walking didn't come quite as naturally to them as it did to humans, gryphons, and dragons, this was much more sensible; and the humans were still well protected on the ground. Even if all three dragons decided to nap, the gryphon would stay on her guard.

Due to the time difference between home and the Himalayas (home being roughly ten hours earlier) the day began to fade fairly quickly, and the group soon felt the effects of the earlier rigorous activity, and having missed lunch.

Tired and hungry, they searched for a suitable spot to make camp—fairly level and dry, not too low or high, and protected by cliffs and boulders from the wind.

With not much fallen wood to work with in the area, and the palm stove in Jasper’s pack on the fritz because, unknown to him, a gremlin had recently broken it, Bibor and Cuoré heated stones for them, which worked well as a substitute for a campfire for both cooking and keeping the area warm after nightfall. The thermal bedrolls they were carrying automatically adjusted to various climates and so would be able to keep them warm and dry, a good thing during the end of the monsoon season for the area.

As the group was having dinner, while gazing at the turquoise dove asleep on the back of Cuoré who was also asleep (along with Bibor), Quin said, “It’s good to have one of the affected dragons along, so we’ll be able to test the cure right away when we find it.”

In truth, Jarna’s symptoms were not yet severe because she was a younger dragon, with older ones being hit harder and faster based on their larger sizes. The disease had been designed so that larger dragons would worsen and die more quickly because the sorcerer was specifically targeting the two girls of the original seven. Quin hadn’t seen Kanna or Sei Sei on either of the recent trips to Africa because they liked to sleep in the active volcanoes. The two were indeed infected, and so time was somewhat crucial.

As they ate beans and cornbread, and munched on apples for dessert, Jasper was reflecting on the earlier attack and battle. When running on the beach, he had been thinking about God’s protection and promises in the bible, like Proverbs 4:12. “If you run, you will not stumble.” The first part of Habakkuk 3:19 also came to mind as he was sprinting through the sand. “God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like hinds’ feet...” As the wave was hitting him, he recalled Psalm 89:9. “Thou dost rule the raging of the sea; when its waves rise, thou stillest them.” When crouching and hiding, Jasper thought of Jeremiah 15:21. “I will deliver you out of the hand of the wicked, and redeem you from the grasp of the ruthless.” Making sure to keep very still while imitating the rock on the beach, he recited Isaiah 35:4 to himself. “Say to those who are of a fearful heart, ‘Be strong, fear not!

Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you.”

These were just some of his favorite go-to bible verses that spoke of help and protection. As he sliced his apple, he thought too of Isaiah 41:13. “For I, the LORD your God, hold your right hand; it is I who say to you, ‘Fear not, I will help you.’”

From a very young age, Jasper had trained himself to rely on God’s Word in times of trial and crisis; and this always served to strengthen and reassure him, while keeping him calm in stressful situations. God’s Word is a shield and is fully capable of protecting us, as well as encouraging us. Over the past few weeks, he had been reciting a lot of God’s promises to himself, in feeling a little discouraged and worried, mostly for his father, who had a very tough job as a brand-new clergyman just having finished four years of seminary studies and a six-month practicum. Knowing that Quin’s grandfather was a minister, between bites of apple, Jasper related that his dad had lately been working closely with Astrid, the leader of Lion Mountain, in dealing with a recent upsurge of false teachings in various communities.

“Not the snake handling again,” Quin asked with disbelief in her voice at the lack of good sense of some people.

“No,” Jasper replied, “but some are preaching the idea that good works alone will get you into heaven. Others are adding all kinds of rituals people need to do to achieve Eternal Life. And people are believing the false ideas, and following these false teachers.”

“The bible is full of all kinds of warnings about false teachers and false prophets,” Alex input, “in Ezekiel, Proverbs, Matthew, Luke, Jeremiah, Second Peter, First John, Acts, and more.”

Quin was nodding as she said, “Nearly all of Jeremiah 23 and Ezekiel 13 describe false prophets, and what will happen to them. God will drive them into darkness, feed them wormwood, and give them poisoned water to drink, not to mention attacking them with hail, storm, wind, and deluge of rain. Whether metaphor or real, it’s a pretty scary and horrible fate for those doing the misleading.”

“With so many places in the bible warning of this,” Ashton offered, “it’s hard to believe so many people can be misled.”

“It’s not so hard to believe,” Trixie countered. “When all those people were liberated from the Supercities back in the spring, they

ended up in just about every outside community—ranches, earthship settlements, the towns on the Mountain, and other places. Now, we have whole new populations among us, and some of those people have never read a bible. They couldn't have them out in the open in the Supes; all bibles were banned under penalty of imprisonment, and sometimes death. A whole lot of people are just now learning about God and Christ and Salvation, and it's like teaching children who don't yet know anything. So it's no wonder they're easily misled."

"All I know is that it's making my dad's job a lot harder," Jasper said, "to help people unlearn the wrong things."

Unfortunately, though she knew her Grandpa Ben had dealt with some of this over the years, Quin didn't have any good suggestions for Jasper's dad; but she did say, "My Aunt Weatherly never allowed this kind of thing to take root at the plantations."

"But she's gone now," Trixie said, "isn't she?"

"Quin was nodding. "Yes, and according to my mother and grandmother, we might not ever see her again. She's on some sort of super-long mission into the past."

"I wonder if any of the TKTs might meet up with her some time," Alex put forth. (Time Key Travelers were commonly called TKTs among those in the know of their adventures.)

Of all of the time-travel missions she had taken, Quin hadn't yet crossed paths with her Aunt Weatherly, a.k.a. General Dawson, the founder and former leader of the Underground Army.

In speculating what General Dawson might be up to in the past, Jasper suggested, "Maybe she's gone back in time to help build Laurelstone, like she could have been one of the stone masons."

While it would have been perfectly possible for her Aunt Weatherly to become a stone mason, or a carpenter, or for her even to have tackled the job of building the plantation house all on her own, Quin couldn't quite picture this happening.

Shaking his head at Jasper's idea, Alex said, "It's more likely she's doing something bigger, historically I mean, like leading the Crusades, or working with Hannibal to corral the elephants and stand up to Rome. Or, if she was meant to be a builder, she might have built the Great Wall of China."

“Well, whatever she’s doing,” Trixie stated, “since she’s no longer at the plantations, the leaders there will have to stay diligent about false teachings, particularly because of the new populations.”

Quin agreed, though she did say, “They all have to follow the rules, or move out. People may have all sorts of false beliefs—things that contradict the truth of the bible—but if they go around acting as leaders and teaching them to others, then there is intervention. Lots of people have visions, and they’re free to share them; free speech is never stifled. But you can be sure someone will quickly put forth the truth if falsehoods are being taught. And they definitely don’t allow dangerous practices like snake handling. My Aunt Merri is in charge now, and she’s just as strict as my Aunt Weatherly ever was, maybe more so.”

“So you have, like, a zillion aunts?” Jasper questioned.

“A few,” Quin replied smiling. “It’s funny. I’m not actually related to any of them, so I don’t have any actual real aunts. I guess it’s just the right thing to call them since they’re like part of the family.”

The others could relate, as this was common: for lots of people to have aunts and uncles who were considered family members, but were not blood relatives.

“I do have a real uncle,” Quin offered a few moments later, “my Uncle Preston, who’s really my great-uncle, and he went with my Aunt Weatherly into the past. So I imagine they are working on big things together.”

Ashton had been flipping through his bible as they talked, and he said, “Mark 13 gives signs of the end and talks about false prophets.”

“We definitely need to pay attention,” Trixie said, “because this is how cults form, sometimes dangerous ones. Many people believe Satan’s lies and end up serving his purposes. He’s very crafty, a Master Deceiver, getting people to serve their wants and desires, the flesh, rather than God. And he divides people, and churches, and sometimes they even worship the devil in an outright manner.”

“In the Endtimes,” Jasper offered, “false prophets will perform signs and wonders and deceive many.”

Since both Alex and Ashton were yawning and practically falling asleep, and the others were also tired, the discussion ended and bedrolls were pulled out of packs so that the group could retire for the night.

Trixie's super hearing had always posed a problem for her with regard to sleep, and so she wore special earmuffs so that sounds wouldn't keep her awake, particularly because her gift was incredibly powerful. Even as a young child living in Georgia, she had been able to hear birdsong carried on the winds from Mississippi and Arkansas. When putting her ear to the earth, she could hear footsteps from a hundred miles away. Listening in rivers, lakes, and seas, she was able to hear fish fins moving about, and the breathing of water creatures. The ability to hear conversations from great distances had its advantages, though this could be troubling as well, particularly when she could hear people arguing. She had, over the years, learned to tune out most conversations, mainly to protect others' privacy, but also because she didn't particularly want to hear everything said by everybody. Even with the earmuffs, Trixie could hear things too well, and her sleep was often interrupted, such as when a marmot went scurrying along an animal footpath about a quarter of a mile from their camp.

Early the next morning, a hard rain for about two hours delayed their search while the humans took shelter under the wings of Bibor and Cuoré, with Halli and the rookhs nearby tucked in next to a cliff.

When the rain eased and then finally ended, they spent the rest of the day searching amidst a colorful display of wildlife. In addition to lovely birds, they saw a red panda and several blue sheep, all of which didn't seem all that concerned about being around the dragons, gryphon, and rookhs. Wildflowers and their fragrances were abundant.

The weather was a bit strange. In the morning, they met an odd and extremely strong headwind coming from the exact direction they wanted to go; and so the group ended up several times turning and heading in the opposite direction. In the afternoon, they endured a sudden heavy downpour from a sunny sky, the result of which was a flash flood that caused the searchers to change their course.

Oddly enough, during the whole day, the hills started to look all pretty much alike, as though the travelers were walking the same trails over and over again. Even stranger still was a series of house-sized boulders (nearly identical in appearance to one another) popping up everywhere and forcing them to take numerous detours instead of their

intended path. Quin tried auto-writing several times, but each time got nothing.

As the searchers were nearing the end of their wet, windy, strange, and yet colorful day in the Himalayan foothills, Tanner and his friends were having a morning meeting at his home in Supercity Nine.

Even before his friends arrived, Tanner was stewing. While the depressive symptoms caused by the scarf were better, he was still very angry, particularly at the dragons, and especially when thinking about the third one showing up the previous day. But he didn't just hate the white, purple, and turquoise dragons that had helped to thwart him; he hated all dragons, everywhere. In truth, he was still smarting from what happened earlier in the year. Setting out to capture a small percentage and kill all others of the dragons sleeping in the three volcanoes at Lake Atitlán, he and his friends had accomplished very little of their goal, which made Tanner hate the godly creatures even more than the normal disgust and disdain he and many of his kind had been raised with. He also hated Quin and her friends, of course, since they were protecting the dragons that he had such abhorrence for.

Tanner's anger cooled slightly as he thought of how he would soon have the satisfaction of knowing that he had gotten the better of them all, because he himself was responsible for their current plight. Though he had something of a headache from not having slept well, he did feel smug enough to smile as he reveled in how all of this had come about.

His skills at present were not anywhere near capable of producing the curse-born virus that would soon kill all female dragons. However, his future self would be capable of creating something this complex and deadly, and would be clever enough to find a way to deliver the destruction to the here and now; and that is exactly what had happened.

The virus was created in the future, and a message containing the formula was sent back in time for use in the present. The older Tanner sent the message to his younger self using an aftershards, a crystal device that was something of an opposite of the foreshards that certain magicians used to get information about the future. While the older Tanner had the actual device, his younger self had only a receiving crystal, in the form of a thick shard that had once been connected to the aftershards. Only one receiving stone existed because the crystal used to make the device had only ever been split into two, and any other

receivers would have needed to have been part of the original crystal. About half the size of a football, the aftershard could only send messages, not receive them, so the older Tanner had no way of knowing if his younger self had received the message. In truth, he wasn't even sure if the device was fully functional; nor would he ever be able to find out because messages could only be sent backwards, not forwards. So even if the younger Tanner somehow managed to craft another aftershard, the two sorcerers would never be able to communicate back and forth with one another.

The aftershard was actually one of a kind, created in part by using the research notes of a tech-gifted necromancer who had tried and failed to make the device. Mr. Zemely was correct to characterize most necromancers as lazy. Many were content to simply commune with the dead using a centuries-old device called a Mancer's Sphere (of which many versions existed), and therefore often chose to abandon difficult projects. Conjurers, on the other hand, were generally not as lazy. And so, the Tanner of the future picked up the project.

However, he would not even begin working on the aftershard for ten years, when his mental concentration and others skills progressed to a point of being able to correctly interpret and advance the notes he had discovered relating to the project, which would then take him twelve years to complete. Thus, the message had been sent from twenty-two years into the future. Tanner was careful to use as the starting component for the aftershard a crystal he knew had been in his private den for many years, a smoky quartz split into two, so that the receiving portion would for sure be in the den of the past, and be able to draw the attention of his younger self.

And the quartz did indeed draw attention, by glowing bright green when the message came through. The younger Tanner had but to use an eyepiece called a magniplier to sort through the lines of communication in the facets of the receiving crystal that was roughly the size of a large pickle.

Tanner was setting out fruit, bagels, plates, cups, and a carafe full of hot coffee in the living room when his friends arrived for their scheduled get-together.

This little band of miscreants had known there would be some resistance to the Dragon Project, which was what Tanner was calling his

offensive. However, he hadn't necessarily expected a Sapphire Boy to be involved, so it was truly a stroke of luck to have Heather show up the same week he was planning to deliver the Eve of Death Virus to the dragons. Since she spent the majority of her time at various training camps run by the Guild of Hunters, Tanner hadn't seen her for nearly a year.

While there were dragons scattered all over the world, the main concentrations were in Africa at present. Tanner had discovered this by consulting a Dragon Hunter, who didn't know any precise locations, but did reason that places with volcanoes were the best bet. Simply knowing the continent was enough for Tanner to release the virus in various spots over Africa by means of a Fling, a device commonly used by sorcerers to deliver toxins to their enemies in an airborne fashion. This was done roughly two weeks before Ashton arrived. Once a handful of dragons became infected, the disease spread rapidly simply by means of dragon breath traveling around the earth on currents of Chi. Also known as the cosmic breath of the universe, Chi was basically just unseen energy flowing around.

Wary of getting too close to dragons, Tanner hadn't asked a hunter to help him find one so that he could view first-hand the effects of his malice. But he didn't need a close view of the devastation to be perfectly satisfied. (In fact, just inserting the vials into the Fling to let the Eve of Death Virus loose had given him great satisfaction.) Even if he had wanted to see the sick dragons, according to Heather, the hunters hadn't been able to find any specimens of late. But there was really no need, not even to check as to whether or not he had been successful in recreating the virus developed by his older self. Obviously, with Quin and her friends scurrying here and there, and the Sapphire Boy showing up, the disease had taken hold.

Since the curse couldn't be reversed, in attacking Quin and her friends over and over again, Tanner was more just trying to get back at them, since they had for some time been getting in his way. Plus, he wanted to help Heather capture a Sapphire Boy, if possible. If she could accomplish this, she would rise in the ranks of hunters fairly quickly; and Tanner would benefit over the years from an association with her.

For Heather's part, she didn't think she could ever get her hands on Gavin and Henning. For one thing, they were often at those twin

plantations, which were fairly impenetrable by hunters, particularly the magical pockets, which were still largely unknown to the ungodly, even to the extent of being in the realm of myth because no one on the side of evil that had ever managed to get into one of them had ever made it out alive to tell about it. These were places of refuge and resources for the children of God, Who also knew how to protect them. In addition to the residents being far from helpless, watchmen frequented these mini-realms, which were what the pockets were sometimes called. So too did nature spirits occasionally protect those inside, mainly from the likes of demons, stealth hobs, and gremlins clever enough to find (and bold enough to enter) the doorways to these pockets. However, since sudden violent storms were somewhat common in this day and age, the interventions of nature spirits often went largely unnoticed, particularly because most people couldn't recognize sylphs, water spirits, dryads, and such, let alone communicate with them.

Although the sorcerers knew about Demon Pockets (basically depositories of evil holding hordes of nasty creatures and facilities in which the likes of nyregs and megahobs were produced), most of these evil men and their associates simply thought the mini-realms of the godly to be in the category of fairy tale, the idea being preposterous that an acre of land could hold a doorway to a place of twenty thousand or more acres, with whole cities built inside containing thriving communities that were safe and away from such creatures as demons and hobgoblins.

Heather, on the other hand, did believe the rumors of the mini-realms, but she was wise enough not to try to find and enter them. As far as her targets, Gavin and Henning did indeed spend a great deal of time in pockets that were protected from detection, the protection coming from both God and various gadgets He had led gifted technologists to design; and so, often the pair didn't show up on her tracer. But this latest Sapphire Boy—the one that had shown up in recent days, and was out and about so much—was a good option for capture. And what a treasure he would be to the sorcerers, who could then study and experiment on him.

The group mainly just relaxed at the onset of their get-together. While munching on strawberries, Tanner remarked how pleased he was that his plan was working out so well so far. “So losing a few

skirmishes here and there really isn't anything to worry about," he said. This was his way of apologizing for snapping at his friends the previous day, because he would never actually utter the words, "I'm sorry."

Penelope had done some research recently on dragons. With her powers very similar to those of a wind horse, she liked to study magical creatures. Finding out early on that the dragons of old were often called sky serpents had aided in finding research materials. Therefore, this little group of friends knew about the original seven dragons, which they were calling the Old Ones. They also knew that two were girls and that the dragons as a whole would lose their power if any of the originals were to die. "All seven of the Old Ones evidently have to be alive at once," Penelope said. "So even if some of the male dragons end up living long lives, they'll be weak after the two females are dead," she added, with satisfaction in her voice. She, like Tanner, hated dragons; and she was especially pleased by the thought that they would no longer be able to procreate.

One thing the group didn't know, however, was that the power of the dragons was related to color, even though this concept was staring them in the face in the form of the color weapons used by the godly. (Often, followers of Satan are just not quite clever enough to figure things like this out.)

Nor did the ungodly particularly believe that dragons would end up helping to remake the earth with fire, this being a common theory found in Penelope's research. God, of course, doesn't need any help; but He does often allow his servants to do certain things to help progress His plans, which will be done, no matter what. Sadly, those on the side of evil often mistakenly assume that they can thwart His will. But, then, those listening to the lies of Satan, who has already been defeated by Christ, often believe what the Master Deceiver is telling them.

Sipping coffee, Tanner was slightly wishing his older self would have sent the message even further back in time, so he could have killed the dragons before the mess at Lake Atitlán ever happened. But when he actually thought about it, even as recent as a year ago, he would not have been capable of some of the steps needed to make the virus, which had taken several weeks to complete. He could only imagine how long it took to develop in the first place—so many steps. The starting curse alone had taken nearly ten days to complete; then the virus following

was even more difficult. And he had only recently mastered the use of certain equipment in his den. So too were mixings always tricky, particularly those involving diseases, the chemistry being almost mindboggling at times.

Heather was good at investigating people and had just learned the names of Trixie Greenspell and Jasper Hughes, which she shared with her friends, none of whom had encountered either of these particular residents of Lion Mountain before. “Trixie has super hearing and is evidently a student of that weapons expert that I’ve heard about—that Chevy Longwood girl,” Heather offered. “Chevy lives on the Mountain too. Of those weapons they use, she’s a master of all three—light, music, and color—which is evidently very rare. And she’s not just good with the mirrors, flutes, and ropes that are the most common; she’s super skilled in the variations too, like sea glass, bulbs, polished award medals, drums, horns, maracas, blankets, nets, towels....

“And scarves,” Tanner input, making a sour face, followed by one much like a storm cloud.

“Good grief, do they start training with those weapons when they’re toddlers?” Devin asked.

“Probably,” Kemp answered. “The younger the better, I always say.”

“I don’t know anything about Jasper yet,” Heather said, “other than his name. His gift is a mystery, nothing through the grapevine so far.” (Heather’s grapevine was a network of informants living in various communities throughout the U.S. and other countries.)

The group hushed their conversation as Tanner’s eleven-year-old brother, Patrick, came into the room to get a bagel.

Obviously annoyed, Tanner gave his brother not only the cold shoulder, but a few scathing looks as well. This happened quite often on weekday mornings because Patrick didn’t have classes until the afternoons. Having already graduated high school, Tanner was completely free from traditional types of education, particularly because most sorcerers never attended college, preferring instead to continue learning simply by practicing their craft.

In truth, Tanner was not just annoyed by the intrusion, but by his brother in general, mainly because Patrick as yet showed no signs of having any special talents, and so was often scorned by the elites with

obvious gifts. (Actually, Patrick did have a gift, one that was currently unknown to his family and most of his friends.)

Since Tanner didn't want to let his brother in on anything he was working on, especially not the Dragon Project, grabbing handfuls of grapes and strawberries, he and his cohorts abruptly left the apartment to head up to the rooftop deck.

At such a vantage point, they were able to survey much of Nine, which was currently very much like the rest of the fourteen Supercities. About ninety percent of the general population (often called slaves by Tanner and his kind) had exited the cities and work camps during the March uprisings, including about a third of the members of the Enforcement Services Squad (the ESS, commonly called Snakes, even amongst themselves). About twenty-five percent of the elite had left at that time as well, or shortly thereafter.

Tanner was actually somewhat disgusted by what he was seeing—the once-beautiful city was now mostly centralized, with the outer parts largely in rubble. As in the other Supercities, many factories had been leveled, as well as quite a few work camps outlying the Supes. However, goods and services were still flowing, thanks to careful negotiations between the remaining workers and the Council of Twos, which was still the governing body in the United States. Telén Mayhew, as Governor Ruler, had wisely (by some people's opinions, though not others) focused entirely on the cities and what was salvageable in the camps after the uprisings, while choosing to ignore anything going on outside in the self-sustaining communities. Although most were violating the laws, he reasoned that if the Underground Army, with help from an enormous secret navy known as W'eeppers (short for Water Keepers), had managed to bring down Supercities all over the world, it would be foolish to try to mount an offensive against those being protected by such overwhelming forces.

Most of the elite residents of the Supes had been totally blindsided by the uprisings that were totally unimaginable in their smug little existences. What an eye opener this had been. The ESS traitors had been particularly shocking. Telén was wise enough to know that some hadn't revealed themselves during the massive insurrection, and therefore were still in the cities and still acting undercover. Thus, much of the former abuse had stopped, and negotiations with the remaining

workers had begun, to make things like housing and wages fairer. While it annoyed many of the wealthy to see the lines being blurred between the classes, most people saw the benefits of the current plan, and most agreed that Telén was doing a good job of keeping the Supes in operation.

The workers were no longer being called slaves, and people were not kept under lock and key as they once had been, which meant there was some freedom to travel to destinations outside of the cities and camps. More of the elites were taking jobs to help keep goods and services flowing, instead of simply standing aloof, or being oppressive managers, as once was the case. Thus, many were becoming friends with the commoners, a natural result of becoming commoners themselves. The fathers of Kemp and Devin both worked, as did Tanner's mother, as a teacher at Patrick's school. Both of Penelope's parents worked, her father at a fish farm and her mother in a clothing manufactory.

Gremlins were still a huge problem for the rail systems; as such, many of the farthest-situated camps had been abandoned in lieu of focusing on keeping the closer ones operational. Quite a few abandoned farms, quarries, etc. had been taken over by nearby self-sustaining communities, in order to take advantage of the equipment and other resources left behind. Gremlins were also the reason no airplanes, drones, helicopters, and such were in operation worldwide. Some dippers and skimmers (subs and surface watercrafts, respectively) were still being used in the seas, but were unreliable in also being affected by gremlins, as well as EMPs. The Weepers used mainly older-style sailing vessels, which had less mechanical equipment aboard for gremlins to break, and electronics either made or enhanced by genies, their powerful brand of magic being largely impervious to interference by things such as EMPs and magnetism mixers.

In addition to only being able to keep up the central areas of the Supercities, many people avoided the outer blocks due to high concentrations of demons, megahobs, and such, which were still being kept mostly in check by the sorcerers and their subordinates, i.e. senior demons, mimics, print doubles, and hunters. (This was the main reason no dragons had been captured in recent months—the hunters were mostly staying busy helping out in the cities.) However, having less

supervision and roaming in packs, the nasty creatures were definitely dangerous. Most of the duties of the ESS were taken up with keeping gremlins away from city operations; thus, the stupid laws relating to banned books and not gathering into groups were currently not being enforced.

The Population Control Laws had been suspended in the cities. They had to be, or all female workers would have left. Therefore, women were no longer being forced to produce four children, only to have them taken away to be used as slaves. And, the sorcerers had released many children back to their families in the cities.

Although Christianity was still officially banned, many were looking the other way at people reading bibles, praying, and holding services in living rooms and basements; though the sorcerers still disapproved, and often made their disapproval known. However, those in charge were no longer allowing the Muslim population to openly persecute Christians, as had been the case previously. Of course, many Muslims had left the cities during the uprisings, mainly those wanting peace. Others, the sorcerers were keeping in check as far as violent tendencies because the workers were needed, and thus couldn't be murdered, or tortured, or whatever, as had been common practice for the past couple of decades. However, even with less extremism, God's children inside the Supes definitely saw the wisdom in exercising discretion with regard to religious practices, particularly in wanting their witnessing to be allowed to continue, which was largely why many had chosen to stay in the cities.

Gazing out over the city, Kemp spotted a large symbol of the Underground Army on the roof of a nearby building. The stylized peacock treading on a serpent with a dove overhead had been done in bright blue paint. *Probably Art Moles or those stupid little puck trolls*, he thought.

These were indeed good guesses, as many puck trolls lived in the Supes, along with members of the Art Moles, a underground group that had formed several decades past when the insane art laws came into being and were being enforced. Massive amounts of exquisite art had been destroyed over the years, which was horrible. However, while still working to protect art, those on the side of good didn't mourn long over lost works because things on earth are, after all, only temporary, since

this is only a short-term home for us compared to our eternal lives in heaven.

The symbols had lately been popping up everywhere, in the cities and camps, as a reminder to the sorcerers of the uprisings—that they could happen again and that people, now free from much of the former tyranny, should remain so. The sorcerers were indeed taking heed of the warnings, though some, like Tanner, were also taking certain matters into their own hands in order to continue the war against God’s children, which was destined to continue until the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

After plopping down on the rooftop sofas, the remainder of the group’s meeting didn’t last long. With Heather’s tracer evidently on the fritz, and because they were all somewhat tired from recent excursions and didn’t have any good ideas as to how next to proceed, they simply decided to go their separate ways and meet again in a few days to strategize more moves. Anxious to consult with his mentor about a few things, Tanner soon set off on a nyreg. Devin, Penelope, and Kemp left from the roof, on the airbikes they had arrived on.

After the others left, Heather simply walked home, to her family’s apartment sixteen flights below the roof level. She often ran the stairs of the high rise for exercise. Deciding to do just that, she changed into workout clothes and ran the stairs for sixty minutes, after which, she showered and settled in to study. She was ready to be home for a few days, having been in the skies a lot lately. Unlike Tanner, she still had a year of high school left, and so was looking forward to catching up on some of her studies.

Meanwhile, back in the Himalayas, sundown was creeping up on the searchers, who hadn’t made any real progress during the evening, though they had seen a couple of musk deer and a black bear, and had found one cave, which Jarna went into with Jasper who had shapeshifted flat, like a thick pancake, in order to squeeze through the narrow opening at the mouth of the cave. They found nothing of interest inside.

Deciding on a suitable campsite, they made dinner, afterwards simply relaxing and talking. In continuing their discussion from the evening before about false prophets and people being misled, Alex had looked up a few things in his bible during the day when they stopped a couple of times to rest and have energy snacks; and he now shared some

of what he had discovered. “Micah 3:5-8 gives a description of what will happen to false teachers. And a lot of Jude seems to be a warning.”

“Galatians 1:6-9 talks about that too,” Ashton contributed, as he too had been busy with his bible during the day.

The others had also spent some time looking up quotes about false teachers and prophets in their pocket bibles. The ones Jasper and Quin carried were made by genies and were foldable to very tiny sizes. Also, if they were ever destroyed, another would automatically come into being, thanks to genie magic being added to the magic, wonder, and miracles the bibles already held. Trixie’s bible was on an armband reading device that she also used to keep up with schoolwork.

When Quin mentioned a surge in false prophets being a sign that the Endtimes might be near, Trixie rolled her eyes and said somewhat irritably, “I’m so tired of people speculating when the Endtimes will be. No one’s going to know when Jesus is coming because He’s going to come ‘like a thief in the night.’ Those are His own words.”

“True,” Alex answered, “but there are signs of the Endtimes.”

“Except that many theorists have put forth that we’ve actually been in the Endtimes for many years, possibly even centuries,” Trixie responded, “especially given a lot of the events the world has lived through, and certain signs like blood moons, eclipses, plagues, falling stars, poisoned water, pestilence, earthquakes....”

Quin was nodding as she input, “Some people think we’ve already had the overall population decreases that the Book of Revelation talks about. Like people have died from disease, terrorism, famine, abortion, natural disasters, wars, and so on.”

“That’s an interesting idea,” Alex said wonderingly.

“And I’ve read theories,” Quin went on, “that say other things mentioned in the Revelation have already happened, like that a third of our fresh water has been poisoned by pollution. And a third of the earth’s vegetation has been killed off from things like wildfires, deforestation, and whole species of trees dying off from attacks by beetles and fungus.”

“Wow,” Alex said. “I always thought we were waiting for *all* of the events of the Revelation to happen. From what you’re saying, we might only be waiting for the very end, like for the antichrist and for Jesus to come and finish things.”

“Exactly,” Trixie offered, “the Great Tribulation, the final great battle, the firestorm, and the judgement too, of course.”

“And New Jerusalem, our new home,” Jasper said, with a huge smile. “I’ve read a lot of Endtimes timeline theories,” he added, “including some that say what we’ve been talking about—that the four horsemen have been roaming the earth for many years, and that other things in the Revelation might have happened too. Since the prophecy has so much symbolism in it, it’s hard to tell, especially if some of the events might have been somewhat subtle or gradual. There’s definitely not an exact timeline that we can easily follow, especially since flashbacks are added, like the birth of Jesus.”

“And the fall of Satan and his angels,” Quin offered. “That’s described in the Revelation too.”

“But surely the end isn’t right upon us,” Alex interjected, “because people haven’t been told to take the mark of the beast.”

“Which might not be a real mark, as in something physical,” Trixie said, “and might not be the three sixes for the number because some say it’s really six one six. The point is that we can’t know anything for sure because of the symbolism and mystery involved.”

With the others looking somewhat questioningly at him, Ashton, who had kept quiet until now, said, “I don’t have anything new to report from the future, except a lot of the same type of guessing.”

“People can’t help but speculate,” Quin said with a smile.

“But back to what we talked about in the beginning,” Jasper said. “We just need to stay diligent about false teachers, like people claiming to be Jesus, because there won’t be any mistaking Him when He comes again—He has said this. And anyone saying they know for certain what’s going to happen in the end might be a false prophet because we know that we’re not meant to know for sure until it actually happens.”

“If people knew for sure, they’d try to manipulate things,” Alex offered.

“Then God would have to step in to fix things,” Quin replied, “because human beings tend to mess things up from trying too hard, or just from our human weaknesses. So it’s really best if we don’t know for sure, even though it’s kind of fun to hypothesize.”

Before going to bed, Alex, Quin, and Jasper spent some time using their walnuts to update various people at home as to their progress.

Holly Stanley was particularly interested to hear news of Ashton, since he had so far on his visit to this time only managed to spend one night “at home in a real bed” by her terms. Feeling responsible for him, and wanting to make sure he was eating well, she was happy to hear news that he and his friends were all okay.

As she was dropping off to sleep, Quin was thinking that it wasn’t just false teachings the self-sustaining communities had to worry about. A lot of unexpected issues had come up after the uprisings, like the airbikes falling into enemy hands, which probably couldn’t have been avoided given the numbers used to help people escape the cities and camps. And since the bikes had few moving parts and thus weren’t easy for gremlins to break (plus they ran on trash for fuel), the sorcerers and their associates had been able to make full use of them, unlike the many rope, flute, and mirror weapons that had been left behind in various battles, which would take a good deal of training and discipline for those on the side of evil to learn to use at all, let alone master.

In a recent discussion Quin had had with Linn, he had speculated that in the future, some weapons would be synced to an individual’s DNA so that an enemy wouldn’t be able to use them. But this might have drawbacks, since a person couldn’t then take up a comrade’s weapon in a time of need. There had already been a lot of weapons innovation by both magicians and tech-gifted people in the past thirty or so years, like smaller models and retrievable designs (of thrown things such as spears and ropes), so expectations tended to run high as far as what more could be accomplished.

Early the next morning as they were just setting out, Trixie immediately heard footsteps behind them on the trail. They were definitely being followed, but not by a human, or a nyreg, or any sort of wild animal that she was familiar with as far as tread pattern. It almost sounded like Halli’s footsteps. *Maybe her twin?* Trixie wondered.

As Trixie suggested this in whispers to the gryphon, Halli shook her head. She would be able to sense if the follower was her sister because the two were telepathically connected, even able to communicate over long distances. Since gryphons were also able to converse telepathically with dragons and humans, Halli and Cuoré quickly hatched a silent plan, which was then conveyed by thought to the others of their party.

Cuoré was the only white dragon in existence and had been designed this way (by a magical peacock) for a very good reason, for camouflage purposes, so that he could blend in perfectly with clouds, ashes, snow, pale stones, and such. (In truth, Penelope using her spyglass hadn't picked him up at all, but rather had seen others of the party leaving Lion Mountain.) The white dragon also had good stealth with regard to movement; thus, he was able to speedily sneak up behind the creature that was tailing them in order to block any rear escape, while Halli turned and streaked like lightning down the path by which they had come to confront what turned out to be a male snow gryphon.

The confrontation took the form of Halli tackling the stranger, this being followed by an intense scrapple. Cuoré stayed back, for now, as he didn't particularly want to harm the snow gryphon, or interfere with Halli's movements.

The two gryphons were fairly evenly matched as far as strength and size, but Halli had the advantage here because she often wrestled with Magsen, and so had had more practice than her opponent. Remembering the times she had won matches against her sister, Halli employed a particular move, which ended up working perfectly against the snow gryphon.

"Oh no, please stop! Just stop!" her rival pleaded, almost pitifully. But he was also laughing.

*So, this guy's ticklish, just like Magsen,* Halli thought, going at it even harder on his left side, just below the rib cage.

Halli, on the other hand, was not ticklish, and had used this tactic to gain the upper hand on many occasions against her sister, until forced to add the no-tickle rule to others already in place, like no biting. Except that she would bite this guy, or slash him with her claws, if she had to.

In the end, there would be no need because he yielded fully, releasing the hold he had on her ankle, and also relaxing the wing he was using to pin her head to the ground.

Halli then also relented, ceasing tickling and allowing her opponent to slowly rise, as she scrambled to her feet in order to stand squarely in front of him, while staring him directly in the eyes as a form of warning not to make any sudden or threatening moves.

By appearance, the male gryphon was mostly a glistening white, like snow in sunshine, but he also had speckles and streaks of shadowy

pale gray adorning his feathers and fur, as though soft ashes had been scattered over him. The rookhs circling high above the position of the searchers hadn't seen him following their friends because his camouflage was a lot like that of Cuoré's, blending in perfectly with many of the light-colored boulders of the landscape. The gryphon, on the other hand, *had* noticed the rookhs overhead.

Backtracking on the trail, the others had just reached the position of the scuffle.

Telános turned out to be the snow gryphon's name, which he shared with everyone by thought, before saying aloud, "I just wanted to know what you all were doing here, so I was keeping an eye on you." His tone was slightly brusque, and not very sociable, which was understandable given the fact that he had just been attacked.

Halli was shaking her head as she fiercely scolded, "You could have just asked us what we were doing here, instead of sneaking up on us!" As her glare into his eyes intensified, she stepped forward and gave Telános a hard shove with her shoulder, which he returned to indicate that he was capable of standing up for himself, though he did step back a couple of paces afterwards in order to show that he didn't particularly want to fight with her.

The others hardly noticed the tussle between the gryphons because their attention had been drawn to Ashton, who for some reason had turned extremely red in the face.

*Well, there are red sapphires,* Quin thought, *but this looks different than that.*

Not only was Ashton beet red in the face, but he also doubled over, before actually sitting down, as the laughter he had been holding in finally spilled out and he was then able to catch his breath and turn a more normal shade again.

"This is hardly funny," Trixie said, in a slightly scolding manner, as Ashton was clearly still struggling not to laugh.

The gryphon face-off ended as Halli and Telános were also intrigued by whatever was happening with the Sapphire Boy, who was saying, "I know, I know. I'm sorry (laughing again)...it's just, well (still laughing)...I just thought of something funny, unrelated to this. Sorry...."

Taking a deep breath and a sip of water that Alex was offering him, Ashton finally managed to get ahold of his laughter well enough to stand up and say, “Sorry, but I just didn’t think there was much danger. I mean, this is a gryphon, and I’ve never heard of one gone bad before.”

“It’s good to be wary,” Trixie advised, “because you never know. I never would have thought dragons could be converted to evil.”

No one responded to this, and Quin was particularly stricken by the remark as she was still greatly affected by the deaths of the more than one hundred dragons that had perished at Lake Atitlán, including the four converted ones who had to be killed because there was virtually no way to bring them back to the side of good.

After several moments of awkward silence, Quin took a deep breath to collect herself, after which, she stepped forward and said to Telános, “We’re looking for a conjure woman living in these parts. Do you know where we might find her?”

“As a matter of fact, I do,” the snow gryphon responded, falling into silence after this because, while these newcomers may have been somewhat wary of him, he was extremely wary of them.

“So, will you tell us where she lives?” Jasper asked, not quite sure what to make of the gryphon’s silence, and thinking perhaps they just hadn’t made themselves clear, or been direct enough.

Sighing heavily, Telános responded in a surly manner. “I still don’t know exactly what you’re doing here, though I do accept that you are probably godly people, since you’re in company with such creatures as dragons and rookhs, and this bit of nastiness here,” he said with a toss of his head in reference to Halli.

Alex happened to notice Ashton, standing next to him, was again trying not to laugh, and was covering with a cough.

“So I will tell you what you want to know,” Telános went on with another great sigh. “Take the same trail you were on for about a mile. When you see two hills and a cliff wall on your right, take an immediate left and you’ll find a cave entrance about a quarter of a mile farther, just along another cliff wall marked by a silver bush and a grayish-blue boulder shaped like a hawk. Just beyond the bush and boulder, that’s where you’ll find the entrance.”

“Thank you,” Alex, Jasper, and Quin said all at once.

Telános merely nodded as he watched them depart, afterwards deciding that he would take to the skies to keep eagle eyes on them (but really gryphon eyes) as they continued on.

Bibor could relate to the surliness of the snow gryphon because he himself would have much rather been sleeping, instead of trekking around in the Himalayas. But he had to admit he was enjoying all of the sights, particularly the wildflowers, and the lovely clouds. And there was plenty to eat because human goodness, totally aside from Linn's gift, was presently at a fifty-year high. People were being kinder to one another, and helping each other, as they should; and more and more people were surrendering their lives to Christ.

Following the snow gryphon's directions, about an hour and a half later, the group began to suspect that they had taken a wrong turn somewhere because they ended up simply in a maze of rocks through which they seemed to be going in circles.

"He was spinning us a yarn," Alex finally said, figuring out that Telános had misled them. "Just to get us lost."

"Are you sure?" Jasper asked, thinking it very possible they had simply gotten lost.

"Positive," Alex replied, scoffing. "A silver bush and a stone shaped like a hawk—that's fairytale stuff. Like we'll find what we're looking for 'East of the Sun and West of the Moon.' But really we won't find anything at all because we've been misled."

The others had to agree that Alex was probably correct.

Telános, who had been keeping eyes (and ears) on them from the skies, landed nearby, but a good distance from Halli who basically had to hold herself back from again tackling him. Keeping a cautious eye on his rival, the snow gryphon said, "I'm sorry I misdirected you, but I needed more time to tell if you were truly good people. I've come across a few others of your kind recently that were not so good. But I believe you are friend, and not foe, so I will now tell you how to find the person you seek."

Continuing to cast uneasy glances at Halli, who truly was on the verge of clobbering him, Telános produced a round object about the size of a small grapefruit from under one wing.

“Great,” Alex said sarcastically as he recognized what the gryphon was holding out to them, “a real ball of yarn to go along with the tale you spun us before.”

Quin was smiling because she recognized that this wasn’t just any ball of yarn. “It’s been in a bagical,” she told the others as she stepped forward to receive the silvery-white ball. (A bagical was basically a magical bag, capable of producing magical objects for various uses.)

“Very good,” Telános said, in an admiring tone. “And I assume you know what to do with it?”

Quin nodded as she sincerely thanked the snow gryphon for his help.

“Then I’ll leave you to it,” Telános said, before giving a nod of farewell and once again taking to the skies.

Cradling the ball close to her chest (as if it might be the most valuable object in the world), as her friends looked questioningly at her, Quin explained, “This is magical, and can lead us to the conjure woman.”

Having just been misled, and now hearing something that again sounded like a fairy tale, the others were naturally skeptical, until, that is, Quin tossed the ball onto the ground in front of her, where it took off, unwinding itself as it rolled along completely on its own, pausing only occasionally to rewind itself (when it ran out of length) before taking off again. The group followed because this was the magical trick of the ball—it was designed to lead others to a particular destination, in this case, to the home of the conjure woman.

As the group moved swiftly along, Quin excitedly explained how she had recognized the ball. “They used to use these in the Labyrinth Library before the oodus became plentiful enough to carry book browsers and before the zipakola water lizards decided they liked to lead people around. Following the balls, people wouldn’t get lost in the miles and miles of twists and turns of the tunnels.”

Though her friends were a little worried that Quin might be getting caught up in a fairy tale—because she was somewhat prone to this, being a fanciful person—they went along, following for now.

Halli was definitely skeptical, and she made a point of saying, “If he’s misleading us again, I’ll clean his beak, and clean it good.”

“You mean ‘clean his clock?’” Jasper said.

“Yeah, but really his beak, because I’ll punch him in the face,” Halli replied.

Smiling, Jasper didn’t bother explaining that the cliché meant exactly the same thing.

With Ashton once again looking like he was trying extremely hard not to laugh at some hilarious joke that only he was privy to, Alex considered what Halli had just said. And it dawned on him that Ashton knew something about a connection between the two gryphons in the future, probably a friendly one, since Ashton seemed to think their present situation was pretty funny.

Alex’s assumption was perfectly correct. The Sapphire Boy did indeed know of a future connection between Halli and Telános. In fact, in Ashton’s time, the pair was mated and had three offspring. Since he was good friends with the gryphon family in the future, having this look at their somewhat tumultuous beginning was pretty amusing.

In less than an hour of following the ball of yarn, they arrived at a cave, the entrance of which was well hidden from casual passersby by great slabs of overlapping natural stone through which the visitors zigzagged to enter, all except Bibor, Cuoré, and Halli who waited outside as the others followed the eager Quin who had Jarna perched on her shoulder. Oddly enough, the location of the cave was less than a mile from where they had originally landed in the Himalayas.

Inside, the group was met by an extremely old woman with snow-white hair who greeted them in a friendly manner. Dressed in pale blue robes, the conjure woman was somewhat thin, but was not stooped and looked anything but frail, appearing instead to have an aura of strength about her not commonly found in very many people this advanced in years.

Quin had picked up the yarn ball as they entered the cave. Taking it from her, the conjure woman said, “I wondered where that had gotten to. It disappears sometimes, but then always comes back to me, often with people in tow.”

One by one, the visitors introduced themselves to their host who, as she was stroking Jarna’s neck feathers, said, “I’m Esther, just Esther, no last name.” As she said this, both Trixie and Alex were reminded of Astrid, who also didn’t have a last name.

Alex, too, thought of the leader of Lion Mountain, not as related to the single name, but because Esther had a scar on her cheek reminiscent of one Astrid carried; though this one was less noticeable, being tucked deeply into facial wrinkles, of which the conjure woman had more than Astrid. Esther definitely looked older than Astrid, if that was possible, since many on Lion Mountain believed their leader to be just about the oldest woman on the planet.

In scrutinizing Jarna, the conjure woman could pretty much guess why they were there. “So this is a virus,” she said, “curse-born, I’m guessing. Reminds me of some of the nasty things sorcerers are capable of creating.”

“Exactly,” Quin replied, “and a sorcerer suggested we find you.”

“A converted one,” Ashton hastened to add.

“Can you counter it?” Quin asked hopefully.

“Maybe,” Esther said, still examining Jarna by getting her to open her mouth so she could look down her throat. “I’ll need to pray first, before I can give you a better answer.”

“So you’re converted too,” Trixie remarked.

“You could say that,” the conjure woman answered, smiling.

“Of course she is,” Jasper said, “or we wouldn’t have been led here.”

The visitors waited outside for a time, so that Esther could pray and seek guidance in privacy. Strolling around the valley, they saw a Mongolian horse who wasn’t alarmed at all by their presence, probably because the horse was very tame, and attached to the conjure woman, occasionally taking her places she needed to go, like to gather herbs or visit other residents of the Himalayas. The rookhs shortly landed for a bit of a rest, and this also didn’t give any sort of alarm to the horse who came right up to the visitors in the hopes that they might have some sort of a treat, which Alex provided in the form of an apple from his pack.

When the group meandered in the direction of the cave, and then saw Esther emerge and beckon to them to come back, they also saw something odd, in the form of a soft gray cloud briefly enveloping her body. Alex recognized this from having once seen something similar on Lion Mountain. This was a cloud spirit in communication with the conjure woman, which was very strange. In all of time, only a handful of human beings had ever learned to communicate with nature spirits,

Astrid being one of them. Alex had on occasion seen her communing with various spirits protecting the Mountain.

Inside the cave, Esther bid the visitors to sit and have tea with her, and crunchy blueberry cookies. Since she seemed to want to take things slowly, they didn't press her for an answer right away.

A natural chimney and a heliostat provided a fair amount of light to the cave, illuminating a good-sized lab set up in the back. In addition to equipment easily recognizable like microscopes, burners, petri dishes, flasks, and beakers, quite a few unknown devices and oddly-shaped glassware vessels adorned tables and shelves. Several mortar and pestle sets lined the top of a low bookshelf upon which also sat a bible.

In noticing their interest in her lab, the conjure woman said, "I'm working on elixirs of all sorts at present, including one that can convert sorcerers. But it's not a crucial project because other things can convert sorcerers."

Trixie was the first to notice a grimmpt tucked under a table in the lab.

"He likes to help keep the cave warm in the winter," Esther offered.

"And he likes sweet potatoes," Trixie said, indicating several full crates stacked against a wall.

Alex was eyeing the bins with a question on his face because something about them seemed odd to him; however, he decided not to say anything.

"So I *can* make a cure for you," the conjure woman decidedly announced to the happy group, though she quickly followed with, "but I'll need your help to do it."

"We'll do anything you tell us," Quin said.

"I need an ingredient," Esther replied, "a single leaf from a mystery tree. And you should only take one leaf when you find the tree, not more than that."

"So how do we find this tree?" Quin asked.

"That I don't know," the conjure woman answered. "But I'm sure you'll get some direction, and likely very soon."

As Quin sat thinking, Esther added, "You found me, and I'm not easy to find, so I'm sure you'll find the tree. And you have a little time, but not a lot, so be diligent. Like, don't head off on a vacation, or start working on any other big projects right now."

“No, of course not,” Quin replied, though she was still perplexed as to what steps to take next in order to get the direction she needed.

“God will lead you,” Esther said in a reassuring tone. “You’ll get something soon, a message.”

“But I haven’t gotten much lately,” Quin said, in a slightly dejected manner.

“This one probably won’t come through auto-writing,” the conjure woman responded, “but by some other means.”

None of the group bothered to ask how the conjure woman knew Quin possessed the gift of auto-writing, instead assuming Esther was a real prophetess who might naturally know a great deal about each of them.

“So, likely through a dream or daydream,” Quin conjectured.

“Or just from reading the bible and having words jump out at you,” Jasper suggested, since this was the way God often communicated with him.

“I got a message in a field of grass once,” Trixie offered. “The grasses swirling and blowing around actually spelled out words.”

“Once, a pattern in a rug changed and told me a place I needed to go,” Ashton input.

“God communicates with His children in many ways,” Esther said. “We just need to be attentive.”

Quin smiled in recalling her grandmother telling her this, and also stating that she was so dense in her younger years that God nearly had to beat her over the head a few times to get her to notice things that were right in front of her.

As the group was rising to leave, Esther told Ashton, “You might get a message too, since you’re also a Protector of Dragons.”

Nodding, Ashton reminded himself to stay alert to the possible ways God might be speaking to him.

On impulse, Quin gave Esther a hug, which the conjure woman wholeheartedly returned. The hug puzzled Quin because it felt oddly familiar, though she couldn’t figure out why.

When sending the visitors off outside of the cave, Esther made the same triangular hand symbol that Ashton had shown them, leading several of the party to wonder if she might be a person who had traveled back from a future time, perhaps to live long term in the past.

With regard to things being familiar, while Alex was pretty much sure he knew something about the conjure woman that the others didn't, he refrained from saying anything because he thought maybe no one was supposed to know. *Some secrets are best kept as secrets*, his brain told him.

However, he did share with his friends that he felt nature spirits were protecting the area. "Just like they do on Lion Mountain," he said.

"And they were misdirecting us," Jasper said in sudden realization as to what had happened with the odd wind, rain, and boulders.

"Exactly," said Alex, "like a stone spirit moved the boulders."

"And probably a wind waif or a sylph was blowing us around, and a water sprite might have caused the sunny downpour," Ashton said.

"But do they protect just the conjure woman, or the whole area?" Jasper wondered.

The others didn't know, though Quin speculated that "just the conjure woman" was probably correct. "The snow gryphon obviously protects her too," she said, "and maybe yetis in the area."

Jasper then remarked that he was a little disappointed not to have seen any yetis on their trip. "Bigfoots are all over the place at home," he said.

"From what I've heard," Trixie offered, "yetis are not as friendly as their cousins back home. So it's probably good that we didn't run into any."

Once airborne, Quin and Cuoré immediately took off on a speedy trek toward the plantations, while the others made their way home to Lion Mountain. The group planned to meet up again as soon as either Quin or Ashton got a message regarding the steps they would need to take next. They were all confident that this would happen; they just needed to be a little patient while waiting.

Holly Stanley was especially glad to see Ashton, and was particularly worried that he hadn't been eating well, mainly because she felt the Sapphire Boy was a little thin. And so she fed him what she was calling a "real meal" (as compared to campfire food) that consisted of chicken and dumplings, green beans, corn on the cob, and cherry cobbler topped with homemade ice cream for dessert.

## Chapter Five

### Rainbow Lozenges

Taking Jarna with them early the next morning, Quin and Cuoré paid a visit to Linn who was already hard at work in his lab; and he had a visitor. Bear Hammermill, the man in charge of pretty much all construction on Lion Mountain, was there having coffee and discussing with Linn a mishap having to do with an addition to a cafeteria building.

“The corner posts are way too long,” Bear said, “and they’ve already started framing the roof. Well, what can you expect with a lot of rookies from the cities joining the team? So we’re just going to have to take it apart because a dining room doesn’t need a high ceiling. Plus, it needs to match up with the existing roofline.”

“There’s an easier solution than taking it apart,” Linn said.

“Oh?” Bear asked, intrigued.

Linn was nodding as he went on in a serious tone. “First you make cuts in each post all the way through around knee high. Then make a second cut higher up for the amount you want the post shortened.” (Both Bear and Quin were listening raptly at this point because Linn was a clever thinker and almost always had good ideas.) “Next, round up four circus strongmen and station one by each of the four posts. They’ll have to put down their barbells and pick up those big circus hammers. Then, all at the same time, they’ll swing the hammers and knock out the cut sections of posts. And, voilà, you’ll have your shorter walls and ceiling, and the roofline will match up.”

Bear was already practically rolling on the floor with laughter before Quin even had an inkling that Linn was joking and that something like this couldn’t possibly work. But, then, she was always a gullible sort, particularly with regard to Linn who could always keep a straight face when telling jokes.

Wiping tears of mirth from his eyes, Bear soon left to be about his business for the day, still rumbling with laughter as he headed to the

cafeteria construction site where he expounded to his crew Linn's idea while striving to keep a perfectly straight face.

One of the rookies was already setting off on a quest to find the circus strongmen before the laughter of his coworkers brought him back to the gathering, and back to his senses, where he too managed to have a good laugh, mostly at himself.

Back at the lab, Linn laid out breakfast for them as Quin told him about the meeting with the conjure woman.

After eating, Linn was anxious to get back to work on one of his projects. When he needed a tool from across the lab, Quin offered to get it for him.

"No, no, I can manage," Linn said. "On second thought," he added, deftly pulling her into his lap, "we can both get it."

Laughing as they zoomed across the room, Quin hugged her friend's neck tightly, only loosening her hold when Linn needed to lean forward to grab the pliers he was after on a shelf.

After flying back to their starting spot, as she was popping up out of his lap, Quin placed a kiss on Linn's cheek, which he returned.

"Well, I'd better get going," she said, "to let you get back to work; and I need to see Zin, to give her an update."

Watching Cuoré take off a few moments later, with Quin and the "turquoise barrette" aboard, Linn thought, *I surely can manage a better kiss than that next time.*

Quin happened to be thinking the same thing. *Smack on the lips next time. Then, if it seems weird, or if he jumps or something, I can always say I just missed his cheek.* She had for many months now been thinking of him more as a partner, and not simply a good friend, as she always had in their younger years, even back to when they were sitting in a sandbox together and throwing plastic buckets and shovels at one another, this being one of her earliest memories of time spent with Linn. In pondering spending her future with him, she suddenly realized that she had never had a boyfriend before, which seemed a little strange for someone her age.

*Well, it's not like I've had a lot of time for one,* her mind reasoned. She had admired someone a couple of years back, a boy from one of the plantation pockets, but it was nothing like this.

For a brief moment high in the clouds, Quin wondered if she might be attracted to Linn because he was a hero type, with a fabulous brain, capable of designing and making the most amazing things for people, gadgets and even prosthetics. So too had his tutoring rescued her from failing both her Physics I and Algebra II classes. *Sometimes we get attracted to rescuers without it being real*, her brain warned her. She had seen a play once and then found herself afterwards admiring the actor who had played the hero. *Is this like that?*

*Surely not*, she answered herself. *I've known him for years. This is definitely something more than that. It feels much more real.*

In the end, she decided that she would simply pray on the matter, and let the Holy Spirit guide her actions.

With Cuoré skirting a rainstorm, the ride was taking a little longer than usual, but they still reached Doyle Mansion in around fifteen minutes from departing the Mountain.

Zin was just finishing having breakfast with her mother in the kitchen. Declining the offer of an omelet, Quin also said, "I'd better not have coffee either. I just had a cup with Linn, and I don't want to start bouncing off the walls from too much caffeine."

"I do some of my best work when I've had too much caffeine," Em said, before heading upstairs to write and sew clothes for Pizzo, Heike, Pipac, and Kisi.

The puck family had apparently just finished their own breakfast; and Heike was just kissing Pizzo on the cheek before leading their twins out to the greenhouse for a morning of work. Kisi and Pipac had started gardening with their mother. Usually pucks only liked to eat. But the twins were pretty happy to be growing some of the food they were enjoying, this being a bit of a relief not only to Doyle Mansion's pantry and root cellar, but also to Wharton Farm nearby, which Em often relied upon for reinforcements for the pucks' enormous diets. The trio heading out the back door in the kitchen looked pretty adorable, wearing smart little aprons made by Em and genie-made gardening boots. Pizzo was on his way upstairs for a fitting with Em for some new trousers; then he was planning to read for a bit. Before leaving the kitchen, he threw a grape at Quin. He hadn't thrown anything at her lately, to show how much he liked her, so it was high time. Smiling as she caught the

grape, Quin stuck her tongue out at the little troll, who grinned and waved a hand at her before scurrying down the hall to the stairs.

Zin was happy to hear an account of the time her friends had spent in the Himalayas. Having been on a time-travel trip while Quin was away, she was now resting up. Although trips into the past took no time at all in the present—because TKTs always arrived back from their adventures only a mere moment after they left—being away from home on these missions could be tiring, particularly because some could last weeks, even months. Zin was a little fatigued, and so was staying home, not just to rest, but also to study for a couple of tests and work on a few things in her lab.

One project she had just completed pertained to the sick dragons. With Zin anxious to share this with her friend, the girls shortly headed down to the subbasement library together.

“It’s a lozenge to help with the symptoms,” Zin explained as she handed Quin the pill of rainbow colors in bright swirls that was about the size of a penny, but a little thicker.

Heading back upstairs together, they tried the lozenge on Jarna who was in dragon form in the garden and whose throat issued a fizzy sort of hiccup as she swallowed the pill, the fizz being mixed with a bit of smoke that came out of her mouth and nostrils. Arranging itself into a sort of rainbow-colored halo over Jarna’s head, the smoke began dissipating a few seconds later with a series of sizzles and pops reminiscent of those atop a freshly-poured glass of soda.

Standing up tall and outstretching her wings as the lozenge took immediate effect, Jarna’s eyes stopped watering, her nose stopped running, and her throat felt much better, as evidenced by her soft cooing that didn’t sound at all raspy.

“So, it’s not a cure,” Zin said somewhat apologetically, “but it should help the dragons feel better; and for two weeks, because I put a fourteen-day extender on it.”

This was truly exciting to Quin, who was also thrilled to discover that Zin had already contacted the genies (often known as the Great Multipliers) to ask for their help in making more of the lozenges, many more. In fact, a huge bucket of them was ready and waiting in the subbasement library.

Lugging the bucket upstairs and out to the back garden, Zin and Quin decided to head out right away to treat as many female dragons as they could find.

*So much for resting*, Zin thought, though not in a grumpy sort of way because she very much wanted to help her friend with this task.

Magsen was soon raring to go, having felt a bit cooped up for the past couple of days; but she was trying not to wake Halli who was still sleeping, having returned late the previous night after delivering Alex to his home, and deciding to visit a library in one of the communities on Lion Mountain. Since the sisters liked to sleep on the back porch most nights, the daily bustle at the mansion often prohibited rising late; except on this day, Halli had donned earmuffs and eye shutters for the express purpose of sleeping in, or at least being able to ignore the puck family's often boisterous early-morning activities. Cinders—the cat that had long ago been brought to life by Pizzo from the trompe l'oeil painting on the wall of mansion's music room—was curled up sleeping on Halli's back.

While Zin and Quin were stowing the pills in travel packs—triangularly designed to hold much more than their outward appearances might suggest, and with a lightening spell attached so that the weight of the contents couldn't be felt—Trixie arrived in the garden on a rookh. On her way to the plantations for the day to do some weapons training, she was merely stopping in to say hi to Zin, whom she hadn't seen for a while. When she found out about the task, Trixie immediately offered her help, which Quin gladly accepted. Grabbing a third pack and stuffing it full of the lozenges and a few travel supplies, the trio was soon ready to depart.

Since Jarna was feeling much better, she could carry Trixie, and so the rookh soon took off to be about other business.

"I'm glad to have a break from training," Trixie offered, as they took to the skies. Lately, her mentor had been pushing her extra hard. Trixie smiled in thinking of Chevy as a mentor because it was funny to think of someone a year younger than herself as such. But there was no denying Chevy's skill: Few people were like her in the realm of magical weapons, capable of mastering them all; and she was an excellent teacher, which made her even more special, at least in Trixie's eyes.

Even though Chevy lived on Lion Mountain, she spent a good deal of time at the plantations; and so, Trixie often traveled in order to train.

Halli awoke mere minutes after the girls left. Gently moving Cinders from her back, she looked for Em, happy to be home and nearer her charge for a time. While Em didn't need a lot of protecting, she was good company for Halli, who loved her dearly, and loved spending time with her and helping with certain tasks, sometimes simply picking up dropped sewing pins or helping to cut material with her razor-sharp talons. Being at home meant a lot of time for reading too. Halli was also looking forward to having a good-ole heart-to-heart with her Uncle Zapor, who was no longer here in person, but was in a painting hung on the parlor wall, done and brought to life by Pismo so that anyone could converse with the gryphon at any time. This was actually much better than animating the life-size bronze statue of Zapor in the gardens done by Heike because a heavy statue tromping around could be dangerous, particularly to flowers, shrubs, and the windows of the garden shed that had recently suffered accidental onslaught by the heavy bronze wings. And so, the pucks agreed to keep the statue settled, for now at least, relying only on Zapor's portrait for his company.

Quin was super-glad to have this task to keep her occupied while waiting for direction. She wouldn't have been able to concentrate well on schoolwork anyway with the dragons' plight on her mind.

The girls needed to visit over eighty volcanoes in Africa. For the active ones, they might have needed Ashton's help, except that Zin's sapphire ring was able to protect her for short exposures to the extreme heat. Trixie carried a shield dime and so was also able to enter active volcanoes for brief stretches. While Quin didn't disclose her ankle sapphire, since she too could enter the active volcanoes, her friends simply assumed she was carrying a dime.

Magsen ended up waiting outside many times due to the heat, but this posed no inconvenience because Zin was able to double up on either of the dragons.

Jarna and Cuoré were fairly easily able to lead them to the sick dragons and doves. In distributing the lozenges, the girls were soon able to identify without difficulty which of the burnished doves were female, which seemed obvious now as the tails of the girls were a little shorter and their foreheads a little slimmer than the boys. They didn't have to

wake the sleeping dragons and doves, but they did have to get the pills into their mouths for the fizz to begin to work its magic. Breaking the lozenges in half helped with getting them into sleeping doves' mouths.

Watching Cuoré and Jarna dive in and out of the volcanoes, Magsen could easily see why dragons had once been called sky serpents. With long necks and torsos writhing, and tails coiling, they very much looked like huge airborne snakes, especially because their speed would have made it difficult for onlookers to make out specifics like wings and legs. In fact, an ostrich catching a glimpse of this pair merely saw glittering white and turquoise scrolling streaks decorating the pale blue sky. With regard to the swiftness, if the riders hadn't been protected by the auras of the dragons, they might not have survived such break-neck speeds.

Quin was overjoyed to find Kanna and Sei Sei early on, both of whom were very sick, but felt better instantly thanks to the Rainbow Lozenges, which was what Quin had started calling Zin's creation.

Nearly four hundred girls were in the eighty-plus African volcanoes, and the lozenge distributors found themselves about two-thirds done when darkness began settling upon them.

Choosing a suitable site at the base of an inactive volcano, they made camp for the night. Looking up at the heavens, Quin was praying, asking God not to let her miss any signs or messages from Him. *Please help me to be observant, and beat me over the head if You have to. Amen.* The stars seemed to answer in the soft twinkling that soon lulled her into a peaceful and reassured sleep.

Ashton had spent most of the day hanging out with Alex, mainly talking and reading. Taking a walk after lunch, the pair took several baskets with them to harvest blueberries from a hill not too far from Alex's home. Linn joined them for a time and engaged his airchair in a race against Alex to see who could fill a basket quickest. Alex ended up winning, as he was able to maneuver slightly better while flying in order to reach several of the thickest patches of berries on the steepest parts of the hill. Not being all that competitive, Ashton simply had fun watching the race, while enjoying handfuls of berries from his half-full basket.

Joining Ashton after the race, Linn and Alex might have been concerned for the Sapphire Boy who had sat himself down in a nettle

patch, except for remembering that his gift could protect him from the stinging plants.

“I remember reading about certain people of the past who were immune to poison ivy,” Linn said. “Maybe they had an early version of a shield gift like yours.” His reasoning was exactly correct, in keeping with gifts getting stronger with each new generation.

Minus a carton each for them to take home, the boys delivered the rest of the blueberries to the cafeteria in their community. Dropping the baskets off in the large storage pantry, Alex took note of several crates of zucchini and acorn squash. The crates were exactly like those containing the sweet potatoes in the conjure woman’s cave. There was no mistaking them because they were handmade on Lion Mountain, as were the baskets they had used to gather the blueberries. Through an open rear door in the pantry, Alex also noticed Westerwing taking off from a delivery platform with a huge net loaded with supplies that included a crate of zucchini.

Charlene Wharton (more often known as Charlie), a renowned chef, ran this particular cafeteria, putting out breakfast, lunch, and dinner most days, and rotating the wide-ranging menu selections by days, weeks, and even months sometimes based on certain seasonal factors. Group meals were common in many of the self-sustaining communities, particularly for those working odd schedules and people just getting settled. Plus, many families liked to gather with others at the facility, which also hosted community events like bingo nights and wedding receptions. Alex’s family ate at the cafeteria at least three times a week, various meals. This was the modern-day means of eating out since few restaurants existed anymore, other than in the cities and a few of the larger pocket settlements. Most of the cafeterias never had a lack of supplies due to donations. People tended to donate not only excesses, but also some prime ingredients that were in shorter supply, so that all could enjoy the bounty and specialties like artisan cheeses and rare spices. When needing an ingredient, Charlie simply had to put the word out and it usually was donated by someone within a few short hours. Some communities had barter systems by which gardeners, farmers, ranchers, bakers, canners, etc. donated their goods in exchange for meals.

Just before going to sleep at night, Alex was reminding himself to be patient. Since he didn't have any clever ideas about how to find the mystery tree and its all-important single leaf, he definitely needed take his own good advice about the slow path often being the best one. Confusing to him was how to balance this concept with the need to help the dragons, who would eventually run out of time. Missed schoolwork could always be made up, but dead dragons couldn't come back to life, the exception being Cuoré who had eight lives based on how he was created, one of which was already used up. But most dragons were hatched from eggs, and so didn't have the same type of built-in protection. *This is maddening*, Alex thought, as he once again felt a sense of inadequacy pressing on him, as well as time. Prayer ended up helping, though he still felt a need to do something other than just wait.

The girls finished the task in Africa around noon the next day, but they weren't quite done yet because they needed to treat dragons in other locations. While the main concentrations were in Africa, there were basically dragons all over the world. Being their protector, Quin knew of quite a few spots on other continents that dragons liked to frequent. "Sometimes they move around," she told her friends, "and a few are loners."

They ended up visiting six more volcanoes and about thirty caves. In total, they found another eighteen girls. For the few that they didn't manage to find, the dragons would just have to manage the symptoms on their own, without the help of the Rainbow Lozenges.

The volcano and cave searchers finished at sundown, whereupon, they each headed to their respective homes. Since Jarna was feeling so well, she decided to stay with Trixie on Lion Mountain for a time, to be available for speedy transportation because Trixie planned to stay on-call for Quin with regard to the next stage of this adventure. While Quin was a very good Protector of Dragons, her weapons skills were somewhat limited, and so Trixie felt she might be a great help to her. Likewise, Jasper was also on stand-by, in the hopes he too might be of help.

As Quin was drifting off to sleep, she added Trixie's name to the list of others in her head as to who knew the locations of the dragons. At the end of their mission, she would need to use the mini Mind Key on all of them, to make sure they would forget this information.

## Chapter Six

### Mr. Michaels' Albums

Quin didn't have long to wait for direction. While brushing her teeth at sunup the next morning, she had a daydream vision, though she didn't at all know what it meant. Confused, she thought, *Two heads are better than one*. And so she headed to Doyle Mansion.

Actually, this would turn out to be many more heads because she had promised to keep those involved so far up to date, especially Ashton since he had obviously traveled into the past expressly for the purpose of helping her with the plight of the dragons.

Linn was still absorbed with his projects and didn't want to come; but Trixie, Jasper, Alex, and Ashton all accepted the invitation to gather at Doyle Mansion for an update and to make further plans.

The group from Lion Mountain arrived shortly after nine in the morning. Alex and Jasper both rode rookhs, while Trixie and Ashton were respectively aboard Jarna and Bibor. Zin and Quin had waited breakfast and were setting out a spread for everyone in the kitchen.

While the back yard of Doyle Mansion was very large, this was a little crowded, and so Pizzo was outside directing things, by miming (because this was mostly how puck trolls communicated with others), telling the dragons to all revert to dove form so as not to squash bushes or accidentally smash the greenhouse to pieces. Most creatures would obey a puck troll, despite their small size, and especially one like Pizzo who was incredibly determined as well as powerful. Actually, he might have been tempted to set the statue of Zapor on them all if they hadn't complied. Once the white, turquoise, and purple dragons had shifted to dove form, the little troll was satisfied. Pizzo liked visitors, but he also liked a proper amount of space for the greenhouse, topiaries, resident gryphons, flower beds, and other various garden inhabitants like the two gnomes living in a treehouse in one of the oaks.

Breakfast was merry, as the group enjoyed waffles, basted eggs, and an assortment of fruit. Having already had their morning meal, Heike

and Kisi were heading off to the greenhouse together, eager to get started on a fall garden they had been planning for the past couple of weeks. Jasper was popping strawberries in his mouth thrown at him by Pipac who was quickly becoming just as good at hitting his targets as his parents.

Looking a little sheepish and slightly red in the face, Trixie abruptly left the gathering, saying, "I'll be back shortly."

Her mother was scolding and calling loudly for her; and, of course, Trixie wasn't going to pretend that she couldn't hear, particularly because she knew exactly what the scolding was about. She hadn't made her bed and had left the bathroom in a bit of a mess. Plus, she hadn't emptied the kitchen compost bin or swept the mudroom. Everyone had chores, and they had to keep up with them. If Trixie didn't keep up with hers, she wouldn't be allowed to go on adventures like the one involving the dragons. Not only that, but she wouldn't even be allowed to go to weapons training. So she'd better "get with it and shape up" by her mother's terms, if she wanted to be allowed to continue with these and other privileges.

Returning about forty-five minutes later as the boys were doing dishes, and Zin and Quin were shaking out a rug and wiping off the back porch patio furniture, Trixie was reluctant to tell her friends that she had lately been shirking some of her responsibilities at home, and so she merely said, "Sorry, I had forgotten something."

When the Doyle Mansion chores were done, the group again gathered, this time in the music room. Pizzo and Pipac were just leaving the room on skates, heading into the hall to engage in a few races. The skates were the kind with the wheels at four corners, what was known as traditional skates; but these had been genie made, which meant they liked to perform tricks on occasion, like taking the wearers into unexpected midair somersaults, which thrilled the pucks to no end.

Taking a break from writing, Em got a cup of coffee and joined the group in the music room, where Quin had just started telling her friends about the vision she had had.

Strangely enough, the daydream featured Mr. Michaels, the former caretaker of Netherwind, who had passed away nearly twenty years previous. This was a man Em had grown up admiring and seeking

advice from over the years. He was basically like a grandfather to her, and she greatly missed him.

“I just don’t understand it,” Quin said. “In my vision, he had a big camera and was taking pictures in some lonely field, of gravestones, I think.”

“How weird,” Zin said.

“Not so weird,” her mother input. “That was his hobby, for like fifty years or more. He loved to take pictures of headstones. Any vacations he took, that’s what he liked to do.”

“But what could his hobby have to do with the dragons, and the mystery tree that we need to find?” Quin asked.

“That I don’t know,” Em replied, “but you might find out by looking at his photo albums. They are all in the downstairs library at Netherwind. He kept them there because he didn’t have room for them all in his cottage.”

It seemed prudent to head right away to the plantations.

On the way, though he hadn’t said anything, Ashton realized he too had gotten a message the night before when he had a dream about graveyard headstones; but he hadn’t known that the dream was a message.

Mr. Michaels’ photo albums were on a particular long shelf (as described to the group by Em) in the downstairs library at Netherwind. Since there were sixty-three in all, they hardly knew where to begin. However, Alex had a good idea. Having noticed that five of the albums were a pale blue color and the rest were a darker blue, he suggested, “What about these five that are a lighter color than the rest?”

This seemed as good a place to start as any; and so they began looking through the lighter blue albums, the result being that both Trixie and Alex fairly quickly noticed something odd at the end of each book. A completely blank page with no photos on either side preceded the final page in each of the five albums. Then the final page of each contained a single picture of a headstone sporting an engraving of a name only, without any dates that were traditionally on grave markers.

“Just a name on each,” Zin remarked. “That seems strange.”

Placing the albums side by side, they all pored over the five photos, with Ashton reading the names aloud: “Virginia Metompkin, Dakota S. Kimball, Washington Malone, Miss Ouri Braymer, and Georgia Eton.”

“I’ve heard the name, Metompkin, before,” Jasper said. “It was a small town in Virginia. My grandfather was born there. It’s in rubble now, having gone the way of most towns when the Supercities came into being.” His eyes still scanning the photos, he added, “Virginia, Georgia, and Washington are all states. Dakota too, and this would be South Dakota because of the S.”

“Then Miss Ouri could be Missouri,” Quin said excitedly. “And these might all be towns and states, basically, locations.”

Since the idea sounded promising, they swiftly made their way to the library map cases to search the drawers for old maps of each of the five states in question.

Ten minutes of rifling through drawers yielded what they were looking for; and sure enough, in addition to Jasper finding his grandfather’s birthplace, Ashton and Quin found Kimball, South Dakota and Malone, Washington, while Zin and Trixie located Braymer, Missouri and Eton, Georgia.

However, before they could decide what to do next, they were interrupted by Em entering the library. Mr. Veseko, one of the puck trolls teaching art at the Netherwind-Laurelstone Schools, was sitting on her left shoulder. Just after the group left Doyle Mansion, Em remembered something odd from the past, on a particular day when she had come to the plantations with Heike who was teaching a sculpting class. Mr. Veseko was a sculptor too and on that day had been working on something with Mr. Michaels in a spot out on the back lawns. “This was about five years before Mr. Michaels passed away,” Em explained. “They were making a headstone out of a hunk of granite.”

Mr. Veseko was nodding as Em placed him onto the table upon which the maps were spread. He then proceeded to mime to them a detailed account of how he had helped the former caretaker make five headstones and engrave them. Then bigfoots helped Mr. Michaels place the stones in particular graveyards around the country, after which, photos were taken of the stones to add to the albums.

As Mr. Veseko was gesturing, Trixie and Alex delighted in telling the story aloud, interpreting much like they might have for an elaborate game of charades. Since the little troll was being very specific about the engravings and the sizes of the stones, and even about such things as the colors of the granite and the height of the bigfoots and the months in

which the stones were placed, this was basically one of the best puck performances ever.

When he finished his story, Mr. Veseko was somewhat tired, this being understandable given that he was somewhat elderly. He basically needed to be fed so that the food could provide extra energy for him, though of course he didn't need it for sustenance because, like all magical creatures, he was sustained by the goodness in mankind. After thanking Mr. Veseko for the information, Em, Trixie, Jasper, and Alex immediately headed to Netherwind's large kitchen. Since Em was actually part owner of Netherwind, it was no problem for her to raid the pantry and fridge on occasion, in this case, for armfuls of food to take back to the library, not just for the puck troll, but as a hearty snack for everyone.

"So we should find the gravestones," Quin suggested as they were snacking, "then maybe they will lead us to the tree we're looking for."

About fifteen minutes later, as Em was leaving for home and the others were getting ready to head out in search of the gravestones, they again thanked Mr. Veseko who barely acknowledged them with half a wave. Engrossed in a propped-up book, and with piles of food on either side of him, he was likely to be engaged for some time. While many pucks tended to hang out in the Genie Library at Netherwind, to make use of the small-size books, quite a few liked to peruse the other two libraries that had mainly human-size books on the shelves.

Quin and Ashton carefully folded and took the five state maps with them because the protectors didn't know where a lot of the smaller towns in the U.S. used to be. However, they only ended up needing to reference them once before departure because the dragons, rookhs, and Magsen all had excellent memories for geographical details.

They decided to start with Georgia since it was the closest location to the plantations. Upon finding what had once been Eton, it took them some time to find the graveyard in which the photos were taken because the site was very overgrown. However, once found, the specific headstone was not too difficult to locate, with some clearing of vegetation, which Magsen delighted in doing, her talons being tailor made for such a chore. In brushing dirt from the engraved surface of the stone marked Georgia Eton, Jasper noticed something that hadn't been particularly obvious in the photos, namely, the shape of a V under the

name. They might have thought that Mr. Veseko had simply signed his sculpted work, except for Zin suggesting that the V, which was somewhat wide in shape, might actually be an arrow pointing down.

“Oh no,” Trixie fretted. “Tell me we’re not going to dig up a body!”

“There’s no body here,” Ashton wisely surmised. “Remember, no dates are given for either birth or death.”

Quin agreed, and immediately looked around for something to begin digging with as she said, “Mr. Michaels probably just got a message from God to make these stones. I don’t think they have anything to do with dead bodies.”

Alex actually found a spade propped up against a tree about twenty feet from the spot, kind of a nice one that appeared to be gnome made, lightweight and foldable in design for easy carrying.

Digging merely a foot and a half down in front of the headstone, they found a wooden box shaped much like a shoe box, but a bit wider and flatter. The box was wrapped in layers of plastic for protection from the elements. As the plastic was unwrapped, Quin was thrilled to recognize the box as being made of wood from Noah’s Ark, the pitch staining the wood being very distinctive. “My Grandma Vini has a box very like this,” she said excitedly. “She found it as a teenager, and inside was a very special bible that helped her call her first unicorn.”

This particular box differed from her grandmother’s in that it didn’t require a key to open, which meant they could check out the contents right away, which Quin did, holding her breath as she unhooked the clasp and lifted the lid. Inside, wrapped in a piece of cheesecloth, was a flat piece of glass art, overall in the shape of a triangle and made from many smaller glass triangles being set into a framework of light-colored metal that looked like platinum. Each of the three sides looked to be roughly nine inches in length. The first thing that came to Quin’s mind was that it might be a trivet, except that most trivets were not triangular in shape.

Since she knew they needed to move on to find the other headstones, Quin simply rewrapped the glass whatever-it-was in the cheesecloth, placing the bundle back into the box, which was then stored in Alex’s pod pack since it was too large for Quin to carry in her shoulder pack.

Following suit in Virginia, Missouri, South Dakota, and Washington, the group found four more wooden boxes containing flat art glass pieces, one in each box. They had left the spade at the first site. Even though they thought it might be useful at the other graveyards, suspecting that a gnome might have left it there on purpose and might end up looking for it, they didn't want to accidentally steal it. As it turns out, there was no need to have it with them because at each location, a spade just like the first one was nearby for them to use.

The whole task proved somewhat time consuming—searching for the sites and then clearing a certain amount of vegetation and digging up the boxes—and late evening fell upon them as they were just digging up the final box.

The group decided to camp in a Washington forest for the night. As they were having dinner, they examined the works of glass, one of which was noticeably different than the others, being square overall in shape, though it still had triangular insets. Since they weren't able to see very well by the light of the campfire or the moon, they carefully packed the glass pieces back into their respective boxes and into Alex's pack. They were planning to head back to Doyle Mansion in the morning and would examine them more closely there. Quin had already decided that the subbasement library would be a safe place to keep them, particularly because the library already contained a lot of religious relics, which meant the boxes made from wood from Noah's Ark would likely feel right at home.

Quin was correct in her assumption that Mr. Michaels had gotten a message from God, except that he had actually gotten several messages relating to this rather intricate project. Not only had he had two dreams about the headstones and their placements, he had received information in later dreams relating to the boxes, made by a puck troll named Wrengo who liked to work with wood, and particularly wood from Noah's Ark, plenty of which was available after a fleet of special ships had been constructed from the ark remnants for the secret navy, under the direction of Admiral Albert Nolan. So too had Mr. Michaels had dreams instructing him to work with a puck glass artist named Ms. Ophar to have the four triangles and the square piece made.

## Chapter Seven

### A Pyramid Is...

Early the next morning, the group made a quick stop at Netherwind to return the maps to the library before heading on to Doyle Mansion, where they set the boxes on a large table in the subbasement library to examine the contents while having a breakfast of oatmeal and yogurt.

About a third of the triangular insets of the five art pieces had scrolling symbols etched onto their surfaces. Putting aside the square piece, they focused first on the triangles. While all four were the same overall size, with equal-length sides measuring exactly nine inches, none were identical as far as their etchings, which were, at present, indecipherable to the group. Small curlicue symbols resembling flowers at the corners of each of the four triangles seemed to draw their attention the most, and Quin noticed similar symbols on the corners of the square piece.

“They’re not all the same,” Ashton observed with regard to the curlicues. At first glance, they might have appeared to be so, but he was now noticing small differences in the curls.

“But these two are the same,” Trixie noticed, pointing to the corners of two different triangles.

“Here’s another two,” Jasper discovered a few moments later, “and two more.”

Alex ended up being the one to have the good idea to match up the symbols, as though they were piecing together a puzzle. In doing so, they ended up building a pyramid out of the pieces, with the square one as the bottom, or floor, and the triangles making up the four sides. As they worked the puzzle, they discovered the light-colored metal edging of the art pieces to be magnetic, and more than capable of holding the pyramid together.

“So they altogether make one object, pyramid in shape,” Ashton said, “and we needed to find the pieces to make it for some reason.” (At this point, he was more pondering than stating the obvious.)

“Maybe it can perform some sort of trick,” Jasper speculated.

“It doesn’t look mechanical,” Trixie noted, “just more like a piece of art.”

Zin hadn’t yet spoken, but this was because she was completely speechless, almost unable to believe what she was seeing because she was familiar with this pyramid; in fact, she had helped to build one exactly like it (though much larger) on the time-travel trip she had just taken. Also hard to believe was the fact that she hadn’t recognized it until the puzzle was pieced together, proving that sometimes certain things we are looking for might literally be staring us in the face.

Finally finding her voice, though it was a little squeaky from the slight shock and her excitement, Zin told her friends that she recognized the pyramid and that she and several other TKTs had just helped to build a larger model.

“So we need to find the pyramid that you guys built,” Ashton said, with the others all agreeing that this would be their next step.

“But I don’t have any idea how to find it in the here and now,” Zin replied, “because we didn’t know where we traveled to.” (A lot of time-travel missions were like this, as the participants following God’s commands weren’t given specific information.)

“Did you recognize anything about the landscape?” Trixie questioned.

“No,” Zin answered. “We didn’t know a date or even a time period. The location was fairly isolated.”

“What kind of terrain was it?” Alex asked.

“Kind of hilly, a little woodsy, lots of vegetation, but not particularly tropical,” Zin said. “Some plains off in the distance from the wooded areas, and valleys like you might see farmlands in.”

“What was the climate like?” Jasper wanted to know.

“It was kind of nice, not too humid, medium temperatures. It rained regularly, but not all the time.”

“So do you think you were there in spring or fall, instead of summer or winter?” Ashton asked. “Or was it just one of those places with nice temperatures year round?”

Zin was starting to feel pressured, and a little like she was being interrogated by the police; and Quin could sense this, which was why she said, “Even though we don’t have all the answers, we’re further

along than we were yesterday; and I'm sure we'll continue to be led. So let's ease up now."

Looking at the model in front of them, Jasper was truly amazed as he said to Zin, "Wow, the way the Lord works is almost spooky sometimes. He had you build the pyramid in the past, just so we could find it in the future, right now when we need it."

"God's timing is always perfect," Alex agreed.

"The pyramid might be for other things, aside from what we need right now," Trixie said.

"True," Jasper acknowledged, "but it seems almost too convenient for Zin to have *just* built it."

Quin was nodding as she said, "So it would be fresh in her mind and she would know to tell us about it. Plus, God led me to Doyle Mansion to make sure I included Zin in the party, and to find out from her mother about the headstones. I would have never known about the photo albums without coming here."

Ashton had the good idea to have someone check the arbor window at Laurelstone. "Since time travel was involved in making the pyramid," he said, "maybe another trip is needed, to find out more about its location."

The TKTs were mostly led by Laurelstone's stained-glass window of a rose arbor, which changed periodically to display scenes of the destinations of their travels. This was the portal that most time travelers used. And while they sometimes used a device called a time-setter to set destination windows, they couldn't in this case because the location of the pyramid was unknown, as well as the time in which it was built.

"Good thinking," Quin said. "My dad has someone checking the window throughout the day, but they don't watch it all of the time." She then proceeded to use her walnut to contact her father who agreed to check the window himself and get back to her.

Staring at the glass-art pyramid, Trixie had been pondering something. "I always thought pyramids were associated with the devil, paganism, or other ungodly things," she stated.

"Not necessarily," Ashton offered. "This is basically just triangles with a square at the bottom, so how could that be bad?"

"He's right," Jasper said. "It's what we make out of things—how we think and what we say and do—that can make things bad."

Zin tended to agree. “Like in the bible, it says don’t let anyone tell you that eating or drinking certain things is bad. It’s only unholy if you think it is.”

“That’s Colossians 2:16, which also says not to let anyone tell you how to celebrate the Sabbath,” Alex contributed, “and that’s why it was okay to change it from Saturday to Sunday.”

“But some people don’t agree that Sunday is okay,” Trixie said. “Some people stringently stick to Saturday. So I think we need to be careful about a pyramid shape.”

“I agree we need to be careful,” Quin said, “but with God leading us, I think we’ll be okay.”

Alex had been studying the pyramid on the table. “Four triangular sides with a square base; I guess some pyramids might have a different number of sides, but this one has four.”

“I think that was the most common in history,” Ashton input, “a square pyramid I think they call it.”

Jasper had just said a little prayer, to ask for guidance from the Holy Spirit, after which, he felt led to say, “We know triangles themselves are not ungodly, and squares aren’t bad either. In fact, from the description in the bible, the walls of New Jerusalem will be foursquare.”

Ashton had also prayed, and he was led to say, “Many mountains are pyramid in shape, and we know that mountains are not evil.”

“I don’t think the pyramid I helped build is a bad one,” Zin said. “For one thing, my Uncle Otto designed it; and he was there when we were building it. He’s a godly man, and he said God gave him the vision for the design, and told him to come along on the trip to oversee the construction.”

“So a pyramid is...what we make of it,” Alex surmised, smiling, “not something we assume it might be, or anything predisposed to be bad.”

Quin’s dad had just gotten back to her about the arbor window, which displayed no destination scene at present. “But he said they’d keep a super-close eye on it for any changes that might relate to the glass pyramid,” she said.

While Doyle Mansion now seemed like something of a headquarters for them, based on Ashton’s mention of mountains, the group suddenly decided to head to Lion Mountain for a time, to give Linn an update,

and because Holly Stanley had just contacted Jasper by walnut to invite them all to lunch at her home.

“We need to get you a walnut,” Jasper said smiling to Ashton, “since she’s mainly interested in how you’re doing, and obviously wanting to feed you. She asked twice how you were and if you had been eating.”

Zin declined going because she had an errand she needed to run. While the group was discussing whether or not pyramids were bad, she had picked up her foreshard. She hadn’t read the crystal for several days, and it had just given her a vision of a future event—that of her finding something in a hidden wall niche on Netherwind’s third floor.

Em had never shown her daughter the niche that Pizzo and Heike had shown her when she was fourteen, but she had recently put an object into it, this being a two-compartment Chinese puzzle box very like one she had had in her youth, except this one was blue and the one she had earlier possessed was red.

Zin easily found the niche. Though she had never before seen a box like this, she managed to open both sides in about fifteen seconds, which was pretty amazing given the fact that her mother had struggled for nearly forty minutes just to open one of the two compartments for the first time. One side of the box contained a key, and the other a polished gemstone roughly the size of a large raspberry, mostly red in color but with some green and brown hues thrown in.

Somehow knowing that the key was more important than the gemstone at this time, Zin shut the stone back into its compartment, afterwards placing the key into her belt pack before returning home to stow the puzzle box in her sock drawer.

Meanwhile, at the Stanley house on Lion Mountain, the group was enjoying a robust lunch of turkey sandwiches, pasta salad, and angel food cake with strawberries and whipped cream for dessert, after which, they headed to Linn’s lab, taking him a lunch packed up from the leftovers because he hadn’t wanted to break from his work.

Having anticipated (or perhaps being on the same thought-wavelength as Jasper), Linn had a spare walnut all ready to go for Ashton.

As he clipped it to his collar, Ashton said, “Again, feeling like a Christmas tree...but liking it.” Knowing that his friends cared enough

to outfit him did indeed make the Sapphire Boy feel both protected and special, much like he might if he were a real Christmas tree.

Trixie had arrived at the lab at a convenient time because Figlin was visiting, and singing; and Linn still hadn't gotten the new amplifier done in order to hear his tiny friend.

"It's a warning!" Trixie quickly said, before drawing her blue rope and dashing toward the sink area of the lab to deal with a pair of gremlins hiding under the sinks. The two were soon dissipated under her expert assault, with only smears of residue left on the floor.

Although invisible, since the residue was inside of a building and therefore wouldn't get washed away with rain as it would have outside, Trixie set about cleaning under the sinks. "Yuck," she said, able to feel the gunk on the cleaning cloth, which was discarded instead of washed, since it was pretty much ruined from the festering nastiness.

While Trixie was cleaning, Westerwing arrived with a delivery for Linn from Laurelstone. Inside the small bag were several somethings so tiny, they could barely be seen. In fact, Linn was using a magnifying glass to locate and retrieve them with tweezers.

"Oh good," Linn said, quickly recognizing what the items were, whereupon, he made a quick walnut call to Meg, who arrived fairly swiftly to see what turned out to be a hat, a scarf, and a pair of socks that she had knitted at Linn's request, after which, he had sent them to Laurelstone to be shrunk down by the resizing trunk that was kept in a walk-in safe in the caverns used by the Underground Army,

Merri had done the resizing, having figured out over the years how to get the unpredictable and sometimes temperamental magical trunk to perform in certain ways; and so, the knitted gear had been made into the exact right size for a spreesprite, for Figlin, in fact, so that he might have extra warmth during the upcoming fall and winter.

They all ended up looking at the socks, hat, and scarf under the magnifying glass, which Linn also used to write a miniscule note. Not knowing Figlin's name, he simply wrote, "For our visiting friend, from Meg and Linn." He then placed the note and knitwear on a small table in the corner of the lab.

Figlin had already left; there were too many people around for his liking. Plus, he wanted to visit a little boy living on a ranch in Arizona that he liked to prank, mainly by twisting and knotting his shoelaces.

The untwisting and unknitting provided good coordination exercises for the boy, who was just learning how to tie his shoes.

Linn may not have finished the amplifier yet, but he did have something that he was anxious to show Alex, who often helped him try out his creations. Based on the airbike technology, Linn had designed an airboard; and he had a prototype ready. Since Alex could fly, he would be safer than another person if he happened to take a spill, so he was a good choice to try out the board that looked much like a large skateboard, but one with airwheels instead of rubber ones.

Alex thought it looked like a small surfboard, particularly because the airwheels weren't at all visible when in motion. "But for surfing on air, instead of water," he said as he gleefully took it outside to try it out.

The airboard test turned out fine, other than a few abrupt stops that jerked Alex around a bit, which equated to Linn telling Trixie, Jasper, Quin, and Ashton that they were going to have to wait to have a go until after he had made a few adjustments.

Ashton smiled in thinking how important Linn's work was to the future, in a time when many electronics didn't work due to solar flares and leviathan-produced EMPs. Some people in his time had implants that weren't as prone to being disrupted inside their bodies, but that could still be affected. In these cases, the human bodies provided the energy that made the devices work. The walnuts still worked. Having become as small as hazelnuts, they were most often worn as pins. Magician-created message kites were also still used. Gifted technologists like Linn were still working on things in Ashton's time, though they well knew their efforts might be in vain because the future was set and couldn't be stopped, being all part of God's Plan. While He always expected us to be clever and industrious, He never intended for us to rely too much on gadgets, becoming lazy and in some cases isolationists, unable to communicate well with others due to primarily interacting with machines for so long.

Most of the color, music, and light weapons still worked in the future, since their designs were based on magic provided to human beings by God; but other weapons didn't, particularly because gremlins were still plentiful. In fact, a single gremlin could break half a dozen guns in about ten seconds flat. With regard to Linn's idea about weapons synced to a user's DNA, these had been briefly used by the

military, but weren't a good idea with regard to the magical weapons that people often traded off with one another; and so the DNA weapons were abandoned fairly quickly.

As the visitors were all leaving the lab for their respective homes in the late afternoon, both Jasper and Alex used the triangle hand symbol to bid their friends farewell.

*So it's catching on here*, Ashton thought. He would have never imagined that he might have been the one in the past to cause the use of this gesture to come into being and become widespread, which was the case, even though another person in the future had actually invented it.

Since Alex and Ashton were heading in the same direction, they walked together, taking a scenic path alongside a large pond. Walking slightly ahead of his friend, Alex was talking about the airboard ride, particularly the thrilling loops he had performed, when he glanced around and noticed that Ashton was suddenly nowhere to be found. Since he hadn't said goodbye, or called for him to hold up, Alex was tempted to think he had simply disappeared, vanished into thin air.

*Okay, that's a little weird*, Alex thought, wondering if the Sapphire Boy's dampener was perhaps doing a little too good of a job, like possibly turning him invisible.

However, upon catching sight of another friend coming toward him on the path, Alex didn't ponder too long over Ashton's disappearance.

Muriel Lofto was heading to the lab to pay a visit to Linn.

"He's probably still there," Alex said, in knowing that Linn often worked through dinner.

"I'll see if I can coax him to the cafeteria with me," Muriel said. "I imagine he could use a break."

The spreesprite gift and note were both gone from the lab early the next morning, having been carried home overnight by Figlin who carefully tucked them into the trunk at the foot of his bed. *Oh goodie. A pretty table runner, polishing mittens, and nice little sack to gather seeds in*, he thought of the scarf, socks, and hat, since he didn't exactly know what they were, other than colorful and soft items that he planned to make good use of.

## Chapter Eight

### The Thirteenth Door

Having breakfast with Alex the next morning at the cafeteria, Ashton said, “Sorry I left so suddenly yesterday. I remembered something I wanted to ask Quin, and I backtracked to try to catch her.”

“Did you catch her?” Alex asked.

“No, she had already gone. I’ll ask her later.”

“You could use your walnut.”

“Nah,” Ashton replied, “I’ll just wait.”

After breakfast, the pair headed toward Linn’s lab, enjoying the sights and sounds on the Mountain, particularly the birds bidding the day good morning with their lovely songs.

Pointing to a cardinal making his signature *chink-chink-chink* sounds, Ashton said, “He’s telling us he knows where some juicy bugs can be found.” To a wren’s loud chatter on a branch overhead, the Sapphire Boy said, “Yes, we know, the clouds are puffy today and the water in the creek is nice and cool.”

Having good discernment, Alex immediately recognized that Ashton was not merely making up interpretations for fun, but that he actually understood what the birds were saying. With this idea in his brain, Alex connected it to Muriel. She was the only other person he knew of that could understand birds—their twitters, chirps, warbles, and such. With her smiling face in his mind, Alex suddenly realized that her eyes were the same hazel color as Ashton’s. Putting this together with what happened the previous afternoon by the pond, he had thought there was something fishy about Ashton’s disappearance. Plus, the explanation for it at breakfast was pretty lame.

*Well, I’ll be,* Alex’s mind told him. *She’s a relative, and he needs to avoid her while he’s here. Probably his grandmother, he reasoned, given her current age and how many years need to pass before Ashton will be born.*

Alex was perfectly correct in his reasoning. Muriel was indeed Ashton's grandmother, and he definitely needed to avoid meeting her in the here and now, so as not to influence anything about her future, especially anything that might directly impact his own existence.

Zin ended up being the one to receive the next message that would guide them on the next leg of their quest for the mystery tree, her foreshard giving her the information at breakfast, at nearly the exact time Alex was pondering the connection between Ashton and Muriel.

"We need to go to the mezzanine," Zin by walnut told Quin, who then called the others involved so that they could all meet on the back lawns of Netherwind, this happening about twenty minutes after the various calls took place.

The protectors wouldn't be going with them onto the mezzanine, though the dragons in dove form might have gone along since they certainly wouldn't have been a problem as far as size; except that Quin had gotten the idea that this next step in their adventure would be relatively safe, so they wouldn't need the extra protection. Therefore, the dragons all decided they would have a nice nap beside the croquet lawns while waiting for the return of their charges. Since Zin likely wouldn't need her for a bit, Magsen decided to take the opportunity to visit the Labyrinth Library. The rookhs that had brought Alex and Jasper soon set off to be about their day. Since no one had any idea how long they might be on the mezzanine, it would be silly for the rookhs to wait around. Besides, the humans could always call on any rookhs in the area, or just double up on the dragons, if they needed to go somewhere in a hurry.

On their way up the side stairs of the manor, Zin explained that her vision was of a particular door on the mezzanine, one she had never seen before; and this door would help them find the pyramid, which she felt would hold the clue as to what they needed to do next to find the leaf. Upon reaching the floor, however, she was confused.

"It was right here in my foreshard," she said of the blank patch of wall directly next to the door to the Art Gallery.

"Maybe it's only here sometimes," Ashton suggested, "and we're either too early or too late."

Quin suddenly thought of Lizzie and Edna Dwyer. Having long ago been brought to life by Pizzo, the sister portraits occupying the

mezzanine hall delighted in conversing with various visitors. “Have you ever seen an extra door on the hall?” she asked the pair.

Both shaking their heads, Edna was the one who replied, “No never, just the twelve that we’re all familiar with.”

Jasper had been staring at the spot where the door was supposed to be, and he suddenly thought to say, “Maybe it’s just hidden.”

With this, Zin quickly reached into a deep pocket of her vest, withdrawing a handful of glittering dust, which she tossed over the section of wall in question to reveal what was in fact the door of her vision. As Jasper had cleverly surmised, it had been hidden, but was now exposed by the Reveal Powder Zin had invented and sometimes used to expose gremlins.

“A Thirteenth Door,” Quin breathed.

“Oh no, not the number thirteen,” said Trixie, with trepidation in her voice. “That’s bad luck.”

“There’s no such thing,” Zin countered. “It’s just like the pyramid shape; it’s what people make of it.”

“A lot of people think the number thirteen is unlucky,” Trixie insisted.

“So do you think all thirteen-year-olds are bad luck?” Zin asked. “And is every thirteenth step on a set of stairs out to kill someone?”

“I chose my words poorly,” Quin hurried to input. “I shouldn’t have said thirteenth. It’s just an extra door; there’s no number on it. And if you count the entrance and exit doors to the mezzanine, there are actually fifteen doors in the hallway, not just twelve, or thirteen counting this extra one, which might not always be here, since no one’s found it until now, or at least not that we know of.”

Zin found it hard to believe Trixie could be so easily unsettled or spooked. Trixie was indeed superstitious, which was why she had reacted the way she did about the possibility of disturbing a grave, and why she had been wary with regards to the pyramid. However, while Zin was a little annoyed, Quin was super glad to have someone along who was willing to question things. This was a nice balance to her sometimes overly fanciful-and-trusting nature, prone to charging ahead without taking pause to be appropriately wary. This group of friends did tend to complement one another as far as personalities and skills;

and while they might tend to grate on one another on occasion, they all knew that their differences were valuable to the success of the team.

“I don’t like the number thirteen either,” Alex had to admit.

Thinking further about the mezzanine doorways, Quin went on. “Numbers might not be what we think they are sometimes. Even though there are twelve really important realms here, there are countless others elsewhere. As far as dimensions, sixteen exist; but only fifteen were made originally because hell had to be created when Satan fell.”

“Imagine if he hadn’t chosen evil,” Ashton said, “how much good he might have done, instead of bringing things like disease and death to the world.”

They were getting a little sidetracked, and Alex and Jasper were practically jumping up and down over this. “Open the door!” they both cried at the same time, fairly startling Lizzie and Edna.

Zin started too, afterwards quickly focusing her attention on the door, which was locked.

Generally, magicians didn’t need keys to unlock things, not even magical things; but for this door, somehow she knew she would need a key because this was a special door, not likely to open by a simple magician’s trick. The key in her belt pack suddenly sprang to mind; and from a little voice in the back of her head, Zin knew that it was a magic key capable of unlocking just about any door, the exceptions being doors that God didn’t want people to open. Fitting the key to the lock, she wasn’t at all surprised when it turned easily, allowing her to open the door.

Following Zin, they all filed through the door to find themselves on a large plateau, mainly rocky but dotted with clumps of trees and bushes serving to break up the positions of huge boulders, one of which they had emerged from. Visitors to the mezzanine didn’t generally close the doors to the realms they were entering, instead leaving them propped open. However, for some reason, Quin, as the last to come through, didn’t think to leave this door propped and just automatically shut it. Blessedly, it didn’t immediately disappear as the other twelve would have based on their design.

The door from this side looked identical to the one in the mezzanine hall, except for being set into a boulder instead of a house wall. However, the door had begun to fade. Just like when Zin used the

Reveal Powder on gremlins, the effect wore off after a few minutes. “Don’t worry,” she said. “We’ll just need to use more powder on it to expose it again.”

“If we can find it,” Trixie said, noting that a lot of the boulders on the plateau looked similar. Using a piece of chalk stowed in her pack, she marked a cross on the rock just beside the location of the door.

“That’ll work,” Zin said, “until it rains.” She then proceeded to stack a few stones, roughly grapefruit in size but slightly flatter, in cairn fashion about five feet in front of the door, similar to how many hikers liked to mark wilderness trails.

“Oh, and that’ll work,” Trixie said somewhat sarcastically, “until an animal like a deer trots through and scatters them.”

“Actually, both the chalk and the rocks are a good idea,” Quin said, moving three more rocks to a position up against the boulder, directly underneath the door, which had just disappeared from sight. “This will be our extra marker, if rain washes away the cross or an animal knocks over the cairn.”

Both Trixie and Zin cooled off rather quickly, in realizing there was no reason to be testy with one another; and neither remembered the interchange at all upon following the boys and Quin to an overlook from which they surveyed their amazing surroundings.

The plateau was central to twelve enormous canyons stretched out as far as the eye could see; except that the onlookers almost felt a need to shield their eyes from the brilliant colors of the huge slabs and chunks of stone forming the walls, floors, and formations in the gorges. Each canyon was a single color in theme, though much varied in each with regard to hues. In some, the rocks were crystalline and glittering, while others featured stones smoother and more subdued in sheen. All were incredibly exquisite to view, even more so than the visitors might have imagined in the most vibrant of dreams.

“Gemstones,” Jasper breathed, almost unable to believe the vast quantities, which were probably easily more than the all of the deposits on the earth for any one of the types of stones in the canyons. “Topaz, onyx, agate, emerald...”

“And jasper,” Trixie said, indicating a deep red gorge that she felt almost certainly contained jasper, though the stones were obviously

somewhat different than those ordinarily found in wilderness areas, being already polished up to some degree, perhaps by a Heavenly Hand.

“Sapphire too,” Alex said, nudging Ashton while pointing to a canyon containing deep blue stones of varying shades. Huge crystal chunks easily the size of elephants jutted from the walls, while many the size of train cars protruded from the canyon floor. With glints of sunlight bouncing off of the sapphires in swift flashes, the onlookers were tempted to imagine they were catching glimpses of angels dashing about.

No pyramid was in sight; but they imagined they would discover it eventually, hopefully sooner rather than later. They were going to have to look for it, of course, as they had looked for the conjure woman. Quin was hoping they wouldn’t end up misdirected as they had been in the foothills of the Himalayas. This felt different to her somehow, as though they were meant to take a fairly straight path to find what they were looking for.

Since the mezzanine doorways all led to other realms, they figured they were in another realm, but didn’t yet know what to call it, other than Breathtaking and Beautiful by Quin’s suggestion, or possibly Mystery Realm, this being Alex’s idea, which Quin and the others agreed sounded better. As far as Zin helping to build the pyramid, TKTs sometimes did end up in other realms; in fact, the original airbike, the design from which many others had been made, came from a visit to a strange realm by TKTs.

Twelve long ridges extended from the plateau between each of the canyons, nicely separating them like spokes on a wheel, with the plateau being a hub of sorts. The jasper and sapphire canyons were situated next to one another, and the ridge separating them contained a path running down the center of it that was obviously well-trodden by the looks of it; though the few prints they found in softer areas of ground were not those of people, but looked more like they were made by horse hooves. While they might have traversed the ridges between any of the canyons, since this appeared to be the only trail, they decided to take it. And the path did seem to be beckoning to them; in fact, Trixie and Ashton had already started down it, with the others quickly following suit. Since the ridge was around thirty feet wide in most spots, they

would be safe traveling at a quick pace. Anxious to be on their way in search of the pyramid, they chose to do just that.

At around the same time the group was stepping through the extra door on the mezzanine, Tanner and his friends were again meeting at his home in Supercity Nine, this time in his bedroom.

Heather had figured out that her efforts to track Ashton were being blocked, but she wasn't giving up. "Spies have told me he's still here," she said. "But since I can't find him with the tracer, we'll just have to work around that."

Tanner had just finished working on something he was anxious to try out; and so they decided on another offensive. Whether or not they could find the Sapphire Boy, they could still make some headway in hindering the work of the "goody two-shoes," as Tanner liked to call gifted individuals who were godly.

In talking about their plans, the group didn't realize they were being overheard, by Patrick, who was on the roof of the high rise, just sitting and relaxing, and tuning in to the conversation by means of his special gift; well, part of it anyway, because he actually had acute senses all around including super hearing, eyesight, smell, touch, and taste. With regards to hearing, his was not nearly as powerful as Trixie's, but he could still hear conversations from great distances, including from the roof, some eighteen floors above his family's apartment. He might have been of fabulous use to his brother; but because of the way Tanner often acted, and all of the no-good things he was up to, Patrick wasn't inclined to help. In fact, he had always had a much kinder and sweeter nature than his brother, and never would have wanted to help Tanner do foul things. Family experts had long known that younger siblings most often develop different personalities, interests, and skills than their older brothers and sisters, in order to have their own identities, to be more individual, instead of being like others in a collective. And this was exactly what had happened with Patrick. He wanted to be his own person, not simply a clone version of his nasty elder sibling.

In addition to not wanting to help his brother, Patrick on occasion even went so far as to try to counter him, in this case, by sending a warning about his brother's latest plans by means of a dawn pigeon, a magical creature of extraordinary speed that liked to carry notes.

Heather may have had her spies, but Patrick had a few contacts of his own, friends actually, one of these being Cecelia Landris, a.k.a. The Sparrow, a gifted seventeen-year-old living on Lion Mountain. Before the uprisings, The Sparrow often visited the Supercities, mainly to help sneak people in and out, which was when she had befriended Patrick, initially by offering to help him with his math homework, this having occurred about two years back now. Cecelia's gift was extreme inconspicuousness, like the many sparrows that people tended not to notice, with her abilities developed to the point that she was all but invisible to most people who would literally trip right over her rather than see her. With his gift of acute eyesight, Patrick could see her; and he found it amusing that others could not, in particular, his brother, who always thought himself such a hotshot, yet he couldn't even see the girl sitting right in front of him at the kitchen table.

While Patrick was able to send a message, it was not a detailed one because he didn't actually understand everything that was being said in the apartment far below him. But he got a good chunk of it, at least enough to warn that an attack on a certain group of friends who were helping the dragons was imminent.

Meanwhile, back in the Mystery Realm, the group had been able to make good time while enjoying the sights in the sapphire and jasper canyons, both of which contained amazing and eye-catching rock formations. In addition to traditional ones like arches, bridges, and hoodoos, the visitors enjoyed playing a version of the cloud-pictures game to interpret the more unique shapes: "A giraffe, a rocking chair, an eagle, a bowling pin, a feather, a cross, a family of hippos...."

Though traveling swiftly, it took nearly the whole day for them to reach the end of the canyon lands, where the ridge path gradually descended downward into a stretch of lush valleys filled with colorful trees and flowers, many of which they had never seen the likes of before.

Nearing sundown, their path took them alongside a large lake. From the vantage point of a hill, they were able to see the whole of the lake, which contained twelve gigantic oysters, each easily the size of a small warehouse. As one of the oysters gently yawned, they saw an enormous round pearl inside, gleaming beautifully from the day's waning light softly bouncing off of its luster.

While the entire group was speechless at this sight, Jasper found he actually had to sit down, which he did right at the feet of Ashton, who knelt to make sure his friend was okay.

A few moments later, shaking his head at Zin's offer of water, though not yet able to stand, Jasper was able to find his voice; except that what he was saying was coming out a bit muddled. "Materials...for the gates...for the foundations of the wall," he said, struggling somewhat to catch his breath because he had just figured out something absolutely amazing. "It's all in the Book of Revelation; the walls are made of jasper."

Alex was starting to catch on, and was nodding as he said, "The description of New Jerusalem."

"Each of the twelve gates is made from a single pearl," Quin mused, casting her gaze once more out over the lake.

"And the twelve foundations are adorned with twelve different kinds of gemstones," Trixie said with awe. "This realm contains the materials to build New Jerusalem!"

They all agreed this was probably correct.

After a few moments of contemplation, with hope and excitement filling his voice, Ashton said, "I wonder if we might get to help build the city. I mean, I know God doesn't need any help; but He sometimes lets us help with things. And we're meant to be useful, even in old age; and even when we get to Heaven, I'm sure we'll have jobs of some sort."

"Jesus has gone to prepare a place for us; He said this," Trixie said. "But maybe He'll let us help build some of it."

"Maybe, someday," Quin agreed. "But right now we're here for a leaf from a special tree. And we're on the hunt for a pyramid that probably holds a clue to finding the tree."

With Ashton and Alex helping Jasper to his feet, they decided they needed to move on, since it was still light enough in the dusk of the evening to travel a bit farther before stopping for the night.

As she walked, Zin was thinking about her Uncle Otto. He had always wanted to help build New Jerusalem, and had on occasion talked of such. Although God could simply speak anything into being, since there were actual physical materials available, she felt He might very well let human beings help to make this amazing city of the future. *So*

*Uncle Otto might get his wish, she thought smiling. We can all be dreamers, and our dreams might very well come true.*

Also pondering while walking, Ashton too had a smile on his face because he was thinking of God's throne as described in Ezekiel, made of sapphire. And he could almost imagine angels, possibly craftsmen ones, harvesting the stones in the canyon to make the throne. *Unless God made it Himself, he thought. No, He probably let some of His servants do that, just like He lets us do other things, like travel through time to help fix problems.*

Jasper had been thinking about the measurements given in the bible for New Jerusalem. *Everything in the bible is important, he thought. So there must be a reason we are given the dimensions for the city, like that we'll need them to help build it.*

They decided to spend the night in the next valley. Upon bedrolls nestled into huge patches of springy and fragrant moss, they silently gazed at the stars for a while. Only one constellation looked familiar to Quin—Orion. As she was drifting off to sleep, she recalled her grandmother once telling her that the three center stars of Orion were the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit watching over believers on earth. *And the four other bright stars are the cherubim at the four corners of the throne, she thought, just as her eyes closed for good for the night.*

Quin dreamed of the cherubs. Each was accompanied by a peacock, the feathers being the many eyes attributed to this special quartet of angels. The eyes kept watch on all of mankind, and searched corners of the world for the lost, to help those witnessing on earth to find them. This made sense to Quin in her dream because the four cherubim had long been thought to correspond to the Four Gospels. *And the wings of the angels and the peacocks help spread the Good News, her dream-mind told her, so that everyone can come to Christ and be saved.*

In the morning, after continuing on the trail for half of the day, they finally found the pyramid in an area of rolling plains filled with unusual varieties of orchards, vineyards, and huge fields of crops. At least, the members of this group had never seen many of these types of trees, vines, and plants, nor fruits and vegetables so unique in shapes and colors. Reminded of the Garden of Eden, they were wary not to touch anything, particularly any of the fruit.

*I should have known*, Zin realized as they approached the pyramid. *It's a greenhouse*. And she almost couldn't believe she hadn't thought of this before, since it made perfect sense now, being made of glass.

One on each side, the greenhouse contained four doors, each made from four of the largest inset triangles. The east door was nearest; and as they entered, the visitors all had a thought pop into their brains that this pyramid was called Zoe, meaning, Life.

Inside, the greenhouse was not filled with plants, but contained a single lovely tree situated in the exact center of the floor with its branches taking up much of the space in the pyramid. Near the bottom of the tree, the trunk split into two, forming a sort of pathway underneath, though the visitors didn't walk this thoroughway for fear of disturbing the silvery-sheened moist and mossy soil the tree was planted in. The branches contained lush green leaves and twelve different kinds of colorful and fragrant blossoms, none of which any of the visitors had ever seen or smelled before. In the same way the name of the pyramid had popped into their brains, the group received the thought that this was a baby tree, not anywhere near fully grown.

Zin at first thought the pyramid was slightly larger than she remembered from the building project, but then she decided this was probably just a trick of the eye. The greenhouse was bound to look different with something inside it, and because the setting outside had changed so much since she had been there.

Ashton was the one to remind the mesmerized Quin that they were there for a leaf.

"A single leaf," Alex stressed, in wanting to make sure they got everything exactly right.

Since there was no doubt that this was the mystery tree they had been looking for, Quin didn't hesitate to pluck a single leaf that was about the size of a silver dollar. Carefully folding it into a handkerchief, she then stowed the precious bundle into her shoulder pack.

Once outside again and heading toward the path to make their return to the doorway, they noticed a tall platform situated on a forested hill about a mile from their location. Wooden in structure, the tower looked much like the fire-training platforms that were common to many of the self-sustaining communities. These were often called lookout lofts, and people frequently observed from them, ever on the lookout for the

approach of creatures like nyregs. However, knowing that many skilled archers and other weapons experts lived in these communities, most nyregs tended to keep their distance unless otherwise commanded by their riders.

The group decided they could take the time to climb the tower. Alex might have flown up, except he thought it might be rude to, since his friends all had to climb. This was also what was keeping him from flying as they traveled—he didn't think he should have such an advantage over the others. Upon reaching the top, they spied about five miles in the distance another pyramid in the center of an elaborate maze made from both stones and an abundance of vegetation including bushes of deep red, purple, and bluish-gray hues, with the hedges mainly rounded in shape instead of squared. The pyramid was not glass, but looked to be made of stone, mainly gray in color but with some oranges, yellows, and pinks mixed in.

“Probably granite,” Jasper suggested, looking through a spyglass.

Even farther in the distance than the maze, he spotted a vast expanse of something pale golden in color that might have been a sea of gold, except that it didn't particularly look watery, probably because of a lack of movement. *Maybe a desert*, his mind speculated, *but a really glassy and shiny one.*

Feeling time somewhat pressing on them, the group descended the platform and made their way back to the path. They might explore more some other time, if God directed them to come back to this lovely realm; but for now, they had what they came for and needed to be getting home.

With regard to the need for speed, mezzanine explorers rarely thought to bring airbikes with them. For one thing, they never knew if a journey might be a long one as far as distance. In this case, the group certainly hadn't known the miles they would need to travel. Also, mechanicals often didn't work crossing realms, even when a tech-gifted person was along to tinker with them. As they were making the long walk back to the plateau, Quin briefly thought of the dragons; they would have been very useful to speed their travel. However, in the back of her mind was the idea that some things were meant to take a certain amount of time, the journey often being as important as the end result. Indeed, if the dragons had simply whisked them over the landscape,

they might only have seen the oysters as a blur. So too might they have missed seeing the second pyramid if they had hurried; and she certainly thought it was important to know about, possibly for something related to the future.

They spent the night at the base of the canyon ridge, ascending on the path the next day, where they reached the doorway late in the afternoon.

The door was revealed by dust and unlocked by Zin, and they made their way through it with no problems.

Greeting the portraits in the hall, they were surprised when Lizzie asked, “Nothing much in there?”

“Why would you ask that?” Quin questioned.

“Well, you just went in,” Lizzie replied. “And now you’re back.”

“I guessed it was a broom closet,” Edna said.

So virtually no time at all had passed while they were inside the Mystery Realm, which was what they were still calling it because “Materials for New Jerusalem” seemed too long. They shouldn’t have been surprised that time would pass differently, since it did also in Kivetel and Antica, though the time formula was obviously different, with thirty minutes in our realm equal to roughly nine hours in either of the two sister worlds. In the case of the Mystery Realm, the time was obviously much shorter here and longer there.

“It was three minutes,” Edna declared, to Zin’s query as to how long they were gone.

“How can you know for sure?” Lizzie asked.

“The hall clock was striking quarter after when they went in,” Edna answered, “and it was eighteen after when they came out.”

Since the dragons hadn’t had much of a nap—and Magsen was nowhere to be found because she was deep in the Labyrinth Library, with her nose deep in a book—the group decided to make visits to the hippotherapy horses and to Netherwind’s enormous treehouse, after which, they had lunch at one of the plantation cafeterias.

Bibor was a little sad not to have been able to sleep longer than until after lunch; but, whatever...he was sort of getting used to not sleeping as much. Jarna was still feeling good from the Rainbow Lozenge and so was happy to be up and about. While Zin could have called Magsen by thought, rather than disturb her protector, she ended up doubling up with

Trixie on Jarna for the trip to Doyle Mansion, which was where they were headed for a quick stop before going on to Lion Mountain.

Zin found a kite message waiting for her at home from Cecelia who was relaying Patrick's warning. Being low-key like herself, the magical kites were The Sparrow's preferred way of communicating with others, particularly because they were approximately as fast as dawn pigeons and because she had never been much keen on using a walnut to talk to people. Plus, with regard to speed, it was her opinion that that whole world needed to slow down somewhat.

While the news of an imminent attack was a little troubling, the group decided it was nothing they couldn't handle, and so they decided to go ahead with their plans to spend the afternoon on Lion Mountain. After giving Linn an update, they would hang out at Trixie's house for a bit, having dinner and spending part of the evening there, before heading on to the Himalayas latish in order to arrive at the conjure woman's cave at around sunup there.

Magsen arrived just as the group was setting off for the Mountain, and so she was able to carry Zin.

Not much was happening in Linn's lab, other than Figlin having played a prank involving dye that had turned Linn's fingers blue from handling various tools. He was busy cleaning his fingers and tools as they described the trip into the Mystery Realm to him.

Quin did a little auto-writing at Trixie's house from which she learned that the baby tree in the greenhouse was actually the Tree of Life. "So time definitely isn't what we think it is," she said as she shared this information with the others.

"Right," Jasper agreed, "because the Tree of Life was in the Garden of Eden."

"So some of what's going on in that realm precedes even Adam and Eve," Trixie mused, with awe.

This was a little hard for them to wrap their brains around, even though it sounded correct.

More trying to explain things to himself than to his friends, Alex commented, "The bible describes the Tree of Life in New Jerusalem as huge, straddling the River of Life, which itself is probably fairly large. But the tree is only now just starting off in the pyramid as a baby. Then it's present in the beginning of everything and again at the end."

Nodding, Quin said, “God had everything planned from beginning to end before man even existed.”

“He is the Beginning and the End, the Alpha and the Omega,” Trixie said, quoting the bible. “And He is outside of time. That’s how He’s able to spend time individually with each of His children, and hear all of our prayers at once.”

In thinking about how only three minutes had passed while they were inside the Mystery Realm, Zin reiterated what Quin had said. “Time definitely isn’t what we think it is.”

“The end isn’t what a lot of people think it is either,” Jasper said, “because there really is no end for those of us who will inherit Eternal Life.”

“Numbers, too, aren’t what we think they are,” Quin said, thinking about the Thirteenth Door.

For Trixie’s part, after seeing what lay beyond the door, she had started thinking that maybe the number thirteen wasn’t so unlucky after all.

Even though they had been warned about the attack, which came as soon as they took off from the Mountain that evening, they couldn’t be fully prepared because most battles are somewhat unpredictable.

Because Penelope’s spyglass had night-vision capabilities, she easily spotted the group taking to the air. Penelope, Tanner, Heather, Devin, and Kemp were encamped on the highest ridge of a neighboring mountain. Ready to go, they swiftly took off on nyregs after their prey.

Based on what our heroes expected might happen, the three dragons, Magsen, and the rookhs carrying Alex and Jasper all quickly landed, which greatly disappointed Tanner who had hoped to use his newest form of malice against them in the air.

*Whatever*, he decided. Since he was fully prepared, the positions of his foes wouldn’t matter much; and so the sorcerer commanded his nyreg to dive so that he could unleash a powerful sleep spell from his staff, which spread rapidly, covering those on the ground in a thick blanket of yellow fog. Not only that, but Tanner had added a super-magnifier to his staff so that the effect of the spell was three times as potent as any he had ever created. This meant it could get past the mind protection of sapphires, and drop the protectors, which was why Tanner had hoped his targets would stay the air, so that all would plummet to

their deaths. *So we'll just have to kill them in their sleep*, he thought. *No matter; it'll be good slaying practice, all except the Sapphire Boy because Heather wants to capture him alive.*

All of the protectors did indeed drop into deep sleep, along with Trixie, Zin, Jasper, Alex, and even Ashton, though his gift was fighting the effects and he was, at this point, only super drowsy and slow moving, and not yet asleep.

Quin, however, was wide awake, not from the protection of the sapphire in her ankle, which wasn't powerful enough to ward off the spell, but because the mini Mind Key had been designed to counter attacks of this sort. With her musical triangle, she called a white hummingbird that worked in conjunction with her pin-on watch to stop time in an area measuring a hundred and twenty square feet, the maximum range of the magical watch, which was enough because all of the nyregs had just descended into range. Since the time limit of the watch was five seconds, Quin and the hummingbird stopped time four times in a row to give Cecelia and Chevy, both on standby, time to swoop in on wind horses and do their work. Staying just outside the area in which the sleep spell was active, the horses were easily able to clear the fog, which quickly dissipated, losing its effectiveness as it was blown away.

Though Quin and her friends had basically known what was planned, they hadn't worn masks because they weren't sure if ordinary masks would work, and Linn wouldn't have had time to design special ones to afford enough protection against such a spell. They were correct in their assumption that ordinary masks wouldn't have worked because Tanner's sleep fog was designed so that it didn't need to be inhaled; in fact, it was easily absorbed through the skin, and in the case of the protectors, through scales, feathers, and fur as well.

Before they left for Lion Mountain, Zin had whipped up a magical stimulant to rouse anyone affected by the sleep spell. This was in the form of a nasal spray, which Quin set about administering to everyone including the protectors, while Chevy and Cecelia worked the skies on their horses, warding off advances by the five miscreants. This was not a problem given that the speed of the horses was much greater than that of nyregs. Plus, Penelope's gift was not strong enough to counter the power of a single wind horse, much less two.

However, an end to the encounter was not quite in sight because even after the application of the stimulant, the protectors were still a little sluggish, particularly the dragons. Because of their size, they would take longer to rouse.

Chevy was throwing color stars at her opponents in rapid succession, forcing them to keep their distance. Despite the distance, she managed to knock flame flutes from the hands of both Penelope and Devin. Tanner and his friends ended up landing to take cover from the whizzing and sparking stars, and from an assault by the wind horses.

Having assumed all of their adversaries would be asleep from the spell, the miscreants hadn't thought to use Heather's shroud sapphires. Now, in the thick of battle, they had no time to fumble in their packs for them; and so they couldn't hide themselves from their foes.

On the ground, Kemp immediately set a section of forest on fire, which Penelope quickly stirred up. The wind horses wisely backed off so as not to fan the flames further because there were two communities nearby and a large farm with livestock numbering into the hundreds.

Intent on trying to counter Kemp and Penelope, Cecelia and Chevy landed, while Trixie, Jasper, Zin, and Alex set about trying to locate Heather, Tanner, and Devin in order to engage them. Quin needed to stay with Ashton because he was still somewhat groggy, and she wanted to make sure to protect him from Heather.

The Stone Hunter had loosed her ink weapon (that could be used like a throwing star as well as a mirror weapon) and had sent it flying at Chevy, who easily dodged while sending back a short spear that caused Heather to back off and consider her opponent. Engaging Devin as well, who was armed with a gun, Chevy didn't flinch as bullets raced towards her, instead deflecting them with lightning-speed mirror strikes. With ricochets bouncing off trees beside him, Devin immediately desisted in firing.

Cecelia had managed to sneak in beside Tanner. With one deft move, she relieved him of his staff. Since he didn't quite know how to counter a foe that he couldn't see, especially minus his staff, he was forced to back off.

Since they were obviously completely outnumbered, Heather made the decision that they needed to leave; and she forcefully communicated this to her friends by comm-cube. They all heeded her command, even

Tanner, though he was none too happy about having to make another retreat.

Their departure ended up being a little more complicated than their arrival because Chevy had just taken out two of their nyregs, in about six seconds flat, using two ropes at once. Kemp and Devin ended up doubling up with Penelope and Heather, respectively.

On the ride home, a suspicion sensor kicked on in Tanner's brain. It was almost as though the prey had been given a heads up, especially with the two girls showing up on the wind horses and basically ambushing them. Plus, that Quin girl wasn't affected by his sleep spell, and she somehow had a way to quickly revive those under the spell. In thinking the whole thing over, not only was he suspicious, he was angry, particularly over the loss of his staff, which was a new one. He had a spare, but it was still maddening to think of how it had been so easily taken from him.

Cecelia was planning to drop the staff off at Linn's lab in the morning, so that he might study it, and hopefully learn something useful about the sorcerers' latest technology. However, right now, she couldn't think about the staff because something else was incredibly pressing. With the night being rather windy, the fire was spreading rapidly. In fact, the flames were practically racing toward the nearby farm.

## Chapter Nine

### A Time of Seconds

Before anyone had a chance to think of what to do (or panic), by way of a huge surprise, the perfect form of help arrived. This was none other than a second person from the future coming back in time expressly to stop the fire.

Michele Bahns, age thirteen, was a good friend to Ashton; and her gift was much like that of gargoyles in that she had power over stone and earth. Not only that, but she could see things in the eye of her mind like gargoyles, which meant that she didn't even have to move in order to raise massive quantities of loose dirt (from various plowed farm fields in the area) into huge clouds that sailed in quickly to smother the flames. Afterwards, she swiftly moved the dirt back to the fields.

Alerted by the smoke, Lyydu had just shown up; but the thunderbird had nothing to do because the fire was well put out by the time he arrived. All in all, the whole process of extinguishing the fire and returning the dirt had taken Michele less than twelve minutes. And thanks to the nighttime breezes combined with the efforts of the wind horses, not even much smoke was left in the area. And so, Lyydu returned home to the Mountain, specifically to keep watch on Charlie, his longtime charge.

After Ashton introduced her to everyone, Michele told Quin, "Your future self sent me back based on your journal notes that evidently told you exactly when, where, and why I needed to be here."

Wide eyed, Quin was silently reminding herself to get better about journaling. She had been somewhat lax of late.

Michele wasn't staying. Bidding everyone farewell with the triangle hand gesture, she moved about fifty feet from the group's position where a destination window displaying the scene of Laurelstone's study (the location of the arbor window) automatically appeared. The window disappeared the moment Michele stepped through it.

Quin was a little stunned from everything that had just happened, and her brain felt somewhat muddled.

Zin's brain was working better, and she wondered how Michele had managed to come back in time if Ashton was using the Time Key. So she asked him, "Do people in the future not need the Time Key to time travel?"

"She was using the Time Key," Ashton responded, in knowing that most people traveling through the arbor window used the sphere-shaped key that was roughly the size of an antique boulder marble.

"Then if you have one too," Zin said, "there must be more than one key in the future."

To this, Ashton didn't respond; and he looked extremely uncomfortable.

"You don't have a Time Key with you," Zin cleverly surmised from his reaction.

After a pause, he said, "I'm sorry, I can't say anything."

"I understand," Zin replied. "Sorry, I forgot about the limited-information thing." She should have known there likely wasn't a second Time Key. Even though she had helped Linn make the mini Mind Key for Quin, based on the complexity of the Time Key's design, she felt it would be nearly impossible to duplicate.

As Alex pondered, his brain hit on a likely answer to this scenario: Probably more people in the future could call unicorns, and this might be how Ashton had arrived and would return home at the end of their adventure. Alex was partially correct in his assumption. Unicorns were involved, but not exactly in the same way as they had been in the past with regards to time travel.

Before leaving, Cecelia informed Zin, "We both need to take a time-travel trip the day after tomorrow, early morning."

"Okay," Zin said. "I'll meet you at Laurelstone at dawn."

After this, Chevy and Cecelia departed on the wind horses to return to their homes.

When everyone had had a few minutes to collect themselves, and as soon as the protectors were fully awake, they continued on to the Himalayas, landing in a spot about fifty yards from the entrance to the conjure woman's cave just before dawn.

Esther was already up and about, as it was her custom to rise early each morning to get started on her day. This was Zin's first time meeting the conjure woman, and she thought there was something familiar about her. After a couple of minutes, she hit on it. *She looks a lot like Astrid.*

*No, that's not it, her brain told her a few moments later. Someone else...but I just can't quite place her right now.*

Although Zin didn't know, Alex had figured out that Esther was Astrid. While Esther was an older version, they were definitely one and the same person. Noticing a crate of zucchini, and then a basket of blueberries identical to the one he had filled and delivered to the cafeteria, he thought, *Westerwing brings her things. He brought that load of stuff I saw him taking off with, and then he made another trip to bring her some blueberries. Well, why wouldn't he, since they are Astrid's favorites? And she's been his friend for a very long time.*

Esther was already making breakfast for them. "Pancakes with homemade blueberry syrup," she said with anticipation.

In the kitchen nook, Quin and Trixie helped make the pancakes on a large griddle over an open fire, while Zin and the boys did some dusting and sweeping in the living and lab areas of the cave.

As she was flipping pancakes, Quin asked, "Since lady sorcerers are prophetesses by specialty, I was wondering, do you know anything about the Endtimes?"

To Esther's questioning and somewhat amused look, Quin clarified. "It's just that we've been talking about the Revelation lately, like what it all means and when things are likely to happen."

Nodding slightly Esther replied, "Christians like to speculate. I've read the Revelation many times, and I've prayed and reflected on it over the years. I can tell you some of my interpretations, but I don't know if they are correct." After a pause, she added, "It's a pretty detailed book, so do you have any specific questions?"

"Can you tell us anything about the four horsemen?" Trixie asked.

"Like whether or not they've been wandering the earth for many years?" Esther answered with a smile. "My guess is, very probably. And I've always thought the bow carried by the rider of the white horse might be a rainbow, since rainbows are plentiful in the bible. And I think the white horse might represent Christianity and the spread of

Christianity. Besides the promise not to flood the whole earth again, symbolized by the rainbow, God promised to save and protect us, which He did through the gift of His Son.”

“The Revelation talks about people with God’s name written on their foreheads,” Quin said. “What do you think that means?”

“I never thought it meant actual writing,” Esther replied, “but more a way of thinking, and acting; in this case, having a firm commitment to God, and openly proclaiming our faith, not shrinking or shirking in the area of witnessing, no matter how much persecution we might face.”

Zin, Alex, Ashton, and Jasper had just finished cleaning. Sidling into the crowded kitchen nook, they heard part of what had been said.

“What about the timeline?” Jasper queried.

“In truth, only the Father knows when things will happen,” Esther answered. “As far as events that may have already happened, I think some might have been subtle and we might not have noticed. And with regard to the term, Endtimes, this might be a misnomer because the Second Coming, the Battle of Armageddon, the Great White Throne of Judgment...these events aren’t an End, they’re more of a Beginning, the Beginning of our Eternal Life.”

Some of what she was saying they had already heard or considered, but it was still fascinating to hear someone else say these things. Plus, they figured for as long as she had lived, she must have good insight about a lot of things, so why not about the Endtimes?

As they sat down to breakfast, in conjunction with the mystery and wonder of it all, Esther quoted Ecclesiastes 3:11 to them. ““He has made everything beautiful in its time; also he has put eternity into man’s mind, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.””

With regard to some of the terrible things destined to happen leading up to the Endtimes, Esther said, “Certain bad things are meant to happen. Like when the Supercities came into being, and all of the horrors associated with them; I believe all of that was meant to be, for various reasons, not the least of which was driving more people into the arms of Jesus.”

Jasper was nodding as he said, “The bible even tells us not to be surprised by these things, and that God is aware of them, which means they’re happening for a reason.” He then looked in his bible and read

Ecclesiastes 5:8 to the group. “If you see in a province the poor oppressed and justice and right violently taken away, do not be amazed at the matter; for the high official is watched by a higher, and there are yet higher ones over them.”

The grimmpt evidently didn't want the pancake Ashton was offering him. As Esther said, “I'll give him a zucchini later,” the little piggy snorted happily and wriggled his tail.

When they had finished breakfast and finished cleaning up, as Esther carefully took possession of the precious leaf, she stated, “The cure will take a week to make.”

“Oh,” Quin said in obvious surprise, having thought it wouldn't take nearly that long.

“It's not something I can just whip up in a day,” the conjure woman responded.

Intending to walk out with them, as she was taking down two short swords from rack on the wall of her living area, Esther said, “I have a couple of things to deal with outside.”

After filing out of the cave, in something of a fascinated state, the visitors simply watched as the old woman calmly walked toward a small boulder and a large bush situated roughly a hundred yards from the cave entrance. As she approached, the boulder and bush sprang to life because they were really disguised megahobs that swiftly transformed into their nasty, festering, fanged, and clawed selves to charge in attack. Not to worry, because Esther with flashing swords dealt with the pair in less than eight seconds, which was long before Trixie could reach the scene by racing and drawing a rope as she ran.

After wiping the swords clean on clumps of grass, with Trixie somewhat meekly in tow, Esther returned to explain, “Nature spirits in the area generally take care of things like this; but a few demons, hobs, and such once in a while manage to slip through.” Heading toward her cave, she added brightly over her shoulder, “So, I'll see you exactly one week from today.”

“Okay, thank you,” Quin called, as the group made ready to depart.

Looking back as they were flying away, Alex saw Esther enshrouded in a cloud of mist just outside the cave entrance. Recognizing the cloud as a water waif, Alex could also tell that the conjure woman was in communication with the spirit. This reaffirmed

in his mind that Esther and Astrid were definitely one and the same person. How this was possible, he figured, probably had something to do with time travel, though he didn't know details; and he wasn't about to ask. He also knew not to ever tell Astrid about Esther. Since Astrid was the younger version, he definitely didn't want to influence anything related to her future that might affect Esther.

On the flight home, Alex also realized that Astrid was actually an older version of Weatherly. Even though he had only seen General Dawson a handful of times before she departed on the mysterious time-travel mission, he remembered well the scar on her cheek, her smile, and other features. Others might have known too, if they were attentive, particularly because of the blueberry thing (Weatherly and Astrid loving them too), and because both Weatherly and Astrid demonstrated weapons skills similar to those of the conjure woman.

It also occurred to him as they were flying that maybe he hadn't hit as much of a dry patch as he had thought lately as far as solving mysteries. His brain certainly seemed to be working better these past few days, probably the result of praying a lot, since prayer was certainly the key to using his gift properly.

Since they had backtracked roughly ten hours as far as time zones, it was only just slightly later than their normal bedtimes when they returned home; and they all managed to get a good night's sleep

While breakfasting the next morning, Zin was thinking about the time-travel trip scheduled for the next day. She was glad to be going with Cecelia. They had been friends for several years, and had both been on the trip to build the pyramid. Zin smiled in remembering how, at first, people kept bumping into Cecelia while they were working. Because the large pieces of glass they were carrying around presented some danger, The Sparrow had taken to wearing a bell on the hem of her shirt to alert others to her location.

Zin's smile continued as she thought of another person she had enjoyed spending time with on that trip, a young man named Luis Abril that she guessed was about twenty years old. All in all, around thirty people had helped build the pyramid, only seven of these being TKTs. Based on the rules they generally followed during most trips into the past, the Time Key Travelers hadn't shared a lot of information with the people they met, so as not to affect the future. While Luis hadn't shared

a lot of information either, Zin did know that he was sick and that he had less than a year to live.

As she was packing a few things for the upcoming trip, Zin found herself thinking about the pyramid and Quin's current quest, and it suddenly hit her: If the conjure woman could make a cure for the dragons, she could probably make one for Luis too. *She would need another leaf from the baby Tree of Life*, this idea having popped into her brain as though someone had just dropped it there. *And then I would just have to find Luis again to give him the cure after it's made.*

Zin had thought it likely that all of the people who had helped to build the glass pyramid were time travelers. But she did wonder if some might be actually from the Mystery Realm. This didn't seem likely, especially since she and her friends, on the trip to get the leaf, hadn't seen any people. There was wildlife. She remembered seeing birds flying about and hearing scurrying noises in the undergrowth, and spying what she thought was a squirrel in a distant tree. Plus, Trixie had been wearing two sets of earmuffs at night because she was hearing something like raccoons or possums wandering around and rooting about for things. *But there might be people there*, Zin thought, *because someone probably takes care of the maze hedges.*

*A gnome can do that*, her brain immediately countered. *People don't need to be involved.* This was ringing very true to her at present, and so she concluded that there likely were no people inhabiting the Mystery Realm.

*So Luis was almost definitely from somewhere else, and from another time*, Zin reasoned. *The question is where and when, and how will I find him again?*

*But those details can wait*, her mind told her. *For now, I just need to get another leaf for the conjure woman. Then I'll figure out how to find Luis later.* For some reason, probably because the idea of the leaf and the conjure woman making the cure was stuck in her brain, Zin didn't think about trying to use dragon tears to heal Luis, or asking Quin to use her gift of healing by touch. While these things had crossed her mind while helping to build the pyramid, at the time, she didn't think they could be used. Unless God clearly directed a TKT to heal someone in the past, they didn't, for fear of something adversely affecting the future, like a person's family tree changing drastically. If a person was

meant to die in the past, going against God's Plan would certainly mess things up as far as the future.

Although her plan at this time sounded and felt right, Zin was a little wary, especially in knowing that Satan and his demons could easily plant these kinds of thoughts, that might seem like good ideas, but that might lead to all kinds of trouble. Also, they had been told only to take the one leaf from the tree

Zin relaxed a little when she realized she was wearing her sapphire ring, which she knew would protect her from most forms of mind intrusion; and she told herself, *I'll go to the mezzanine, and if the door is there again, that means I should go through. If it's not there, I'll pray and ask for more guidance before taking any other action.*

Based on how little time had passed at home as compared to the Mystery Realm, Zin felt it was safe to go after the leaf today; she would be back home in plenty of time to get rested up for her time-travel trip, probably in less than an hour, unless she decided to stay at the plantations for a while afterwards.

The door was there when Zin looked for it, exposed by the Reveal Powder; and she again had no problem using her magic key to unlock it. *The door is here when we need it, Zin reasoned, and if God is allowing us access in accordance with His Plan.*

If He hadn't allowed it, she would have trusted that God knew best. However, she had prayed on numerous occasions for God to heal Luis. *And if we ask anything according to His will, she reminded herself from the bible, He hears us.*

As she set off running along the ridge path, she had a clear picture in her mind of God's hand in all of this. Quin's quest was obviously connected to hers in some cosmic way because Zin wouldn't have known about either the conjure woman or the leaf if the dragons hadn't gotten sick. *So that was like a prelude to what I'm doing, she thought. Except that the greenhouse had to be built before any of this, so that was actually the prelude, she reasoned a few moments later.*

While not as much of a runner as her mother—who still regularly ran the fields and farmlands surrounding Doyle Mansion, sometimes for several hours at a stretch—Zin was in good physical shape, and she managed two hours of a brisk jog before needing to slow her pace to a fast walk for a bit of a breather. Alternating jogging and walking, and

having snacks and water on occasion, she made much faster progress than the group had on the previous trip. As before, she saw no people, but did see birds, lizards, and a fox that was very bluish in coloring. When night fell, by the light of the nearly full moon, she continued on, only stopping for a short nap when she was nearly in sight of the pyramid. Upon reaching it, she noticed that it was definitely larger than it had been previously. *So it wasn't a trick of the eye before. The greenhouse is growing to accommodate the growth of the tree,* she reasoned. *Just like Lion Mountain grows as needed to make room for more people to come and live there.*

After taking a single leaf and carefully wrapping it in a handkerchief which she stowed in her belt pack, she started jogging and walking back, eventually pausing to sleep for a few hours in the mossy field in which she and her friends had spent a night before.

Up and jogging again, it crossed her mind that while Magsen would have been too large to squeeze through the doorway on the mezzanine, an airbike might have been useful, except for not knowing if it would work here. But this was good exercise, and she wasn't going to miss much time at home, so she didn't fret over not having thought to slip a bike into her pocket before leaving the house. Plus, it was good to be alone with her thoughts for a time. Most of all she was thinking of how everything everywhere was intertwined, and people were all connected to each other. *Of course we are,* her brain told her, *because of the Clock of the Universe, which we are all helping to wind by doing God's will.*

After stepping back through the doorway to the mezzanine, Zin checked the hall clock, which she had looked at just before entering the door in the first place. The nearest she could tell, exactly three minutes had passed. *So no matter how slow or quick we are in the Mystery Realm, the journey will still take three minutes of our time,* she thought. *That's interesting.*

When she reached home, she had the idea (again basically dropped into her mind) that she should simply hang on to the leaf for now. For one thing, she wouldn't have even known what to tell Esther, in not knowing how to find her sick friend, or exactly what his condition was. On instinct, and from a little voice inside her head telling her, Zin stowed the precious leaf inside the Chinese puzzle box, where it just fit into the compartment from which she had taken the magic key.

Extremely tired after what had basically amounted to two full days of exertion in the Mystery Realm, Zin spent the afternoon resting and getting caught up on some homework; and she went to bed fairly early in the evening.

Though she slept well, she was tired and sore the next morning, and basically had to forcefully encourage herself to get up, which she did by reciting a bible verse in her head, from Isaiah 51:9. “Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the LORD; awake, as in days of old, the generations of long ago.” It was amazing how much energy she gained just from these words.

As she was hopping onto Magsen a short while later to head to Laurelstone for her time-travel trip, Isaiah 35:3 also came to mind. “Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees.”

Zin was back home by the afternoon, having taken a trip to find a box very like the ones they had found in the graveyards, the main difference being that this one contained a maze with a pyramid in its center, an exact model, in fact, of the maze and pyramid she and her friends had seen from the lookout tower in the Mystery Realm.

Along on the time-travel trip was eighteen-year-old Ron Sibley who was eidetic. The TKTs hadn’t been able to take the box from the place in which they had found it, namely, inside of a glass case in a museum in Austria. However, with his perfect memory, Ron had easily memorized the contents of the box. The model pyramid had been too tiny to reveal very many details, but the lines of the maze had been very distinctive; and Ron was already in the process of drawing it out so that they would have a map to follow, this being a good idea because the maze appeared to be extremely complex containing even different levels.

They were planning a trip into the Mystery Realm to explore the maze and pyramid in a week or so, once the map was complete and after taking some time to do a little research, which was always good practice before embarking on any journey, especially one containing many unknowns.

They definitely didn’t know much about the pyramid at this time, other than its name, Chronos, this having come into the minds of the TKTs as they were studying the contents of the box. They did, however, realize it must be important because why else would they have

been led to it. Stuck in Zin's mind was that the pyramid had something to do with unicorns and time travel, though she didn't know exactly where this idea had come from.

After checking in with her mother, Zin immediately headed upstairs to take a shower and have a nap because she was basically too tired to do much else.

Tumbling into bed a short while later, she reflected on God's perfect and amazing timing. First, she took a God-led trip to help build the glass pyramid to house the tree from which they needed a leaf. Then her foreshard showed her the puzzle box with the magic key just before also giving her the vision of the Thirteenth Door. Then, being in the Mystery Realm and seeing the second pyramid helped her recognize what the maze in the box meant; otherwise, she wouldn't have thought much of it just passing through the museum, and she wouldn't have known to tell her fellow TKTs where they could find the full-sized maze and pyramid. *The Clock of the Universe ticking along*, she thought as she drifted off to sleep.

## Chapter Ten

### In the Shadows

Although Quin had a little trouble waiting for the cure to be made, the week passed fairly quickly because she had plenty to do at home, mainly chores. She also got completely caught up with her schoolwork and did some journaling.

One afternoon while helping her grandmother brush the hippotherapy horses, Quin was thinking about how only three minutes had passed at home during the whole time she and her friends were in the Mystery Realm. Remembering the canyons, giant oysters, and the lovely tree, she started thinking about the other doorways on the mezzanine, all leading to wondrous realms including one containing the Clock of the Universe. With the picture of the clock in her brain, she was inspired to ask, “Grandma Vini, do you think the Clock of the Universe could offer us any clues about time as we know it, since time is so mysterious?”

After considering for few moments, her grandmother responded, “Probably not. As far as I know, the clock is simply a device that makes everything going on in the universe line up with God’s will, as things were meant to happen. Even though it’s obviously mechanical, the clock might also be largely symbolic, in the same way that big chunks of the bible are symbolic; except that the clock is working on the physical aspects of the world, rather than on hearts, minds, and more spiritual things like God’s Word does. Since it’s in another realm,” she went on, “probably not much of it is related to our version of time, linear time, though it might be connected to the Fourth Dimension.” After a pause, she added, “I guess the best answer is, I don’t know. But I don’t think we’re meant to know everything.”

As Quin continued brushing, she ended up thinking about the Sixteen Dimensions, the fourth of which was the Dimension of Time; and she reminded herself to have a look at her grandmother’s journal notes relating to the dimensions, since it had been a while since she had

read anything about the ones less common than the first three that all people were familiar with from living in a three-dimensional world. *Time is the fourth, she pondered, then there's Life and Death, Heaven and Hell, things that are Known and things that are Mystery, Creation and Destruction, things Transforming and things Fixed, and Light and Darkness. The largest ones by our ways of thinking are Light and Heaven; and even though there are sixteen in total, the dimensions are not particularly numbered, as in a specific order.*

A short while later, as she was rubbing a couple of saddles with leather conditioner, Quin was thinking of how nice it was to spend time with her Grandma Vini who was glowing softly, being fully sanctified and connected to her Soul Shadow—her personal unicorn. (Each human being has a unicorn attached to his or her soul, but few people end up fully connected to theirs in their lifetimes.) Just being around her grandmother made Quin feel reassured, and as though everything was going to be okay about the situation with the dragons. In the same way that unicorns were a counter to the depressive things of the world, people fully connected to their Soul Shadows could be too.

As they were finishing up in the barn, Quin mentioned that she and her friends had recently been talking about the Endtimes.

In reply, her grandmother smiled and said, “Charlie once told me about a vision she had of the four horses being born. She first thought it had to do with the future; but then she realized she might have been seeing something from the past, or even an event outside of time since God is outside of time.” After a short pause, she went on with a word of advice. “I wouldn’t put too much stock in theories about either time or the Endtimes. It’s okay to speculate some, but only the Father truly knows. Consider the way the bible is written. Some of it is in chronological order, some of it isn’t. For example, Christianity was present long before the birth of Jesus, existing in the promise of a Savior to come. And then there’s the symbolism in the bible, some of which is very mysterious. Mysteries have been given to us to wonder over, but I wouldn’t develop any firm expectations because some things are meant to remain as mysteries.”

Later that same afternoon, Quin paid a visit to Linn in his lab, but only a short one because her mother was also visiting the Mountain on this day and Quin was anxious to see her. Samantha had been named

after her Uncle Sam, and she was visiting his pottery studio, which was exactly where Quin caught up with them both.

“I saw Grandma Vini earlier, and we talked some about the Endtimes,” Quin told her mother as she strolled around admiring her great-uncle’s work, which was used in several of the cafeterias on Lion Mountain, as well as in many private homes.

Both Sam and Samantha looked amused, and Sam was the one who said, “The only thing we can know for sure about the Endtimes is that bible prophecy always comes true.”

“Yes,” Samantha input, “because the bible *is* Truth.”

Outside, as she was leaving for home, Quin smiled to see Beme helping to fire some of her great-uncle’s pottery in a specially-designed pit. The firebird was completely ignoring the two puck trolls that often helped Sam around his studio, and who also liked to direct things such as the glazing and firing of the pots. Luca and Pone were throwing small stones at Beme, who didn’t care and wasn’t taking any directions from the trolls as far as the temperature and positions of the pots because he was the master of the firing and knew exactly what he was doing.

The following day marked one week since the leaf was delivered to Esther. Since picking up the cure was a simple task, Quin decided to go alone to the Himalayas. Leaving early morning, she and Cuoré arrived in only a few minutes to the late afternoon sunshine greeting them outside the conjure woman’s cave. Telános, looking on from a distance, saw the girl and dragon arrive. Recognizing the pair, he knew they posed no threat, and so went about his other business.

The cure was ready. In addition to the leaf from the baby Tree of Life, Esther had needed many other special ingredients, which she fortunately had on hand. The cure had actually taken several weeks to make, but had been squeezed into a week of our time by Esther doing most of her work in Kivetel. She didn’t use the doorway on the mezzanine; instead, she used the one in Heritage Oak, also located on Netherwind’s property. While in Kivetel, she took the opportunity to spend time with an old friend, except that Linna looked anything but old, since she was aging incredibly slowly like most people of that realm.

“You won’t need too much of it,” Esther explained. She then proceeded to show Quin the delivery system for the liquid cure that would be turned into a mist using devices (also developed in Kivetel) much like Tanner’s Fling, but that Esther was calling Misters. “You just fill the cartridges, then load them into the Misters. The cure will spread the same way the virus spread,” she went on, “by dragon breath carried on currents of Chi. So once a certain number of dragons are treated, the rest will follow fairly rapidly, and should all eventually be healed.”

While they were packing up flasks of the cure, along with several cartridges and Misters, Quin said, “I thought the curses of sorcerers could hardly ever be countered because of the imprints on their work.”

“That’s correct,” Esther answered, “but we’re curing the virus here, not the curse. The curse is still present, but it’s not what’s affecting the dragons, only the virus is. So in this case, it’s possible to counter the work of the sorcerer.”

Quin was smiling as she said, “Zin was trying to explain that to me the other day, but she was in a hurry so I guess I didn’t understand what she was getting at. You explained it better.”

“Well, I’m older,” the conjure woman stated. “You get better at things like explanations when you get older.”

Having not had breakfast before she left home, Quin gladly accepted Esther’s invitation to join her for a dinner of pizza, three-bean salad, and blueberry cake. A couple of the conjure woman’s closest neighbors (from some fifty miles away) were expected and arrived just as the two pizzas were coming out of the oven. The husband and wife would be staying overnight after doing some trading of goods with Esther. While Quin didn’t understand the Tibetan language the couple was speaking, Esther was able to translate; and so they were all able to understand one another while having a merry time.

Leaving shortly after the cake was served, Quin headed to Lion Mountain to pick up her friends who were going to help her distribute the cure. She had confirmed the previous day that Zin wouldn’t be going to Africa with them. Having taken three time-travel trips during the week of waiting for the cure, she was staying at home to rest up. Quin was fine with her friend’s absence because she would have plenty of help from Alex, Ashton, Trixie, and Jasper. Plus, Linn had decided

he wanted to come along. Having been cooped up in his lab a lot of late, he was looking forward to an outing.

They all met outside of the lab where Jarna, feeling very poorly, was being cradled in the arms of Trixie who was beside herself with worry. In fact, for the past couple of days, she had practically been sitting on her hands to keep from going crazy, and to stem the urge to seek out the conjure woman early to try to hurry things along. “She either needs the cure right away,” Trixie said stroking Jarna’s neck, “or she badly needs another Rainbow Lozenge.”

Quickly filling a cartridge and loading it into one of the Misters, Quin immediately spritzed the dragon’s head with the pale glittering blue mist that came out of the device with a sound like a small musical sigh.

Deeply inhaling the droplets, Jarna immediately felt better. And when she exhaled, the blue mist on her breath swiftly rose into the air in swirls where it immediately set off in search of other dragons because this was the way it had been designed. The seeking feature was one of the reasons the cure had taken weeks to make; otherwise, the process would have been much faster for Esther who happened to be the most powerful and clever potion maker ever to live, which shouldn’t be surprising given the fact that she had been at her craft for nearly eight hundred years.

A rookh had been fitted with a special saddle with a secure seatbelt for Linn who brought his foldable airchair along for times when he might want to be mobile aside from the rookh.

Departing right away for Africa, the group had just reached the Great Rift Valley when they were air-ambushed by Tanner, Penelope, Kemp, Heather, and Devin. Knowing that most of the dragons were located in Africa, Tanner had predicted the approximate destination of his adversaries. Then, all outfitted with spyglasses, he and his crew had simply been keeping watch for them.

In a manner similar to the last attack, Quin and her friends had been warned and were prepared. But rather than hearing from Patrick this time, they had gotten their information from covert missions undertaken by Jasper and Trixie during the week of waiting. Because we know that our friends are pretty well capable of looking after themselves, this might be a good time for us to pause slightly in our story and take a

peek back at what happened during these operations, which took place three days prior to the intended trip to Africa to distribute the cure.

Setting out early morning, Jasper went to Supe-8 to spy on Penelope, Kemp, and Devin. It might have been debatable as to whether his assignment was a little easier than Trixie's because of his gift of impersonating anything he wished to. Indeed, Kemp never noticed the out-of-place tree just outside the window of his family's apartment. And Devin never knew that Jasper was a bench he passed on his way to visit Kemp. Jasper only had one scare when he was inside of Penelope's home and her mother started down the hall towards him just as he was leaving Penelope's bedroom after having a snoop. Simply shapeshifting to impersonate Penelope, Mrs. Coyle thought nothing odd because she hadn't noticed that her real daughter was reading out on the balcony.

Despite the scare, Jasper's covert mission wasn't nearly as eventful as Trixie's turned out to be because she ended up in something of a crisis. She had gone to Supe-9 in order to spy on Tanner and Heather, the latter of which was nowhere to be found. However, Trixie easily tracked down Tanner. Able to keep her distance and simply listen in, she stayed safe and unnoticed, until, that is, she decided to sneak inside Tanner's home at a time when he was off on a trip to see his mentor.

After she crept in through a window, Patrick easily heard her footsteps and found her. But this wasn't the crisis because she had actually been hoping to run into him. "I have something for you, from Cecelia," she said, handing him a small package from her jacket pocket.

"Thank you," he said pleasantly. "Hey, I just figured out the code to my brother's den," he added. "Do you want to look inside while you're here?"

This was basically an offer Trixie couldn't refuse, and so she followed him to the back of the apartment where Patrick proceeded to use the code to open the door to the young sorcerer's den.

Inside, Trixie couldn't make heads or tails of anything. To her, the large room simply looked like a messy version of Linn's lab.

With Linn on her mind, she told Patrick, "I know someone who might be able to understand some of this and who would probably love to have a look inside."

“Cecelia can sneak him or her in anytime,” Patrick offered. “If you want, I can send her a pigeon message when I know for sure Tanner will be out of the apartment for a few hours.”

“That would be great,” Trixie replied.

“Here, you can give her the code for me,” Patrick said, grabbing an orange marker from his brother’s desk and writing the numbers on the back of Trixie’s hand.

Trixie’s crisis occurred several minutes later, after she departed Supe-9. In midflight, looking down at the numbers Patrick had written on her hand, her eyes flew wide open in shock. Her mouth was open as well, but she only managed a short croak from her throat. By thought, she commanded the rookh she was riding to head to Doyle Mansion, since it was closer to their position than Lion Mountain. (Trixie was out and about on a rookh on this day because Jarna was feeling a little tired, not yet having been cured, and with the lozenge effect wearing off.)

Zin and Em were both on the back porch and saw the pair approaching. Halli and Magsen were both reading on the balcony of the upstairs library. Craning their necks and seeing that this was friend arriving, not foe, they both simply ignored the approaching visitor and went back to reading.

Hey, it’s Trix,” Zin said. Having picked up the habit from her mother, Zin liked to shorten people’s names (as she had her own from Zinnia to Zin) and so she was occasionally calling Jasper and Trixie, Jasp and Trix.

Since there was no danger around that the rookh could sense or see, he had been thoroughly confused in the air when Trixie started to panic; and the poor creature very nearly crash-landed in his own panic over whatever unseen force might be upsetting her. He was still confused as she scrambled from his back before breaking into a stumbling run toward Em and Zin on the back porch.

“What on earth?” Em said, immediately rising to race out to meet the obviously-rattled girl, who by this time was quite red in the face and crying.

Sobbing as Em reached her, Trixie choked out, “I’ve have the mark of the beast! I didn’t know I was taking it!—(still sobbing)—I swear I didn’t know! It just happened!” Holding out her hand, she showed Em the code Patrick had written. “It’s six one six!” (By this time, her voice

was sort of a raspy squeak because she could barely breathe as upset as she was.)

“Calm down,” Em immediately directed in a motherly tone that was extremely firm, as well as soothing. “It’s not even the correct hand. The bible says the mark will be on the forehead or the right hand. This is your left hand.”

Leading Trixie up to the porch and then through the back door and into the kitchen with Zin in tow, Em went on. “And it’s not even the right number. See here, there’s a zero and an asterisk in front of the six one six. Also, many translations of the bible say the number is three sixes. So either way, you’re okay.”

Steering her charge to the sink where the marker was easily washed off with soap and water, she added, “Plus, you didn’t renounce God or Jesus, did you?”

Trixie shook her head as she took a few deep breaths and tried to stop crying, which happened about four minutes later as Em was hugging her while the pair sat in the window bench of the kitchen with Zin hovering nearby with a glass of water.

Calming down fairly quickly from the hugging and additional deep breaths, Trixie eventually accepted the water. Smiling a little sheepishly as she took a sip, she still couldn’t quite say anything; but this didn’t matter because Em wasn’t yet finished speaking.

“The mark of the beast might not even be a real mark,” she said, (this being something Trixie already knew). “When the bible says the forehead or the right hand, I think it might mean a certain way of thinking and acting, like someone straying from biblical truths and acting in ungodly ways. And I think people will probably be called upon to renounce their faith. For all of the ideas about the mark, we’re likely overthinking it. But whatever it might end up being in the Endtimes—if it’s a Global ID, a microchip implant, a tattoo, whatever—if you just continue to follow the teachings of the bible, you’ll be okay. So just keep God’s commands, don’t compromise, and all will be well with your soul.” Indicating the previously-marked hand, Em finished with, “Also, know for sure that you can’t lose God’s love or your Salvation this easily.”

Sniffing, Trixie nodded, feeling very reassured because this made perfect sense. People probably couldn’t be so easily tricked into taking

the mark; they would have to do so at least somewhat consciously. And she now felt a little silly about getting so upset over what basically amounted to nothing more than a felt marker and the good intentions of a young boy.

However, since the mark of the beast was serious business, this wasn't quite the end of the discussion. With Trixie deciding—at Zin's invitation—to stay at the mansion for part of the day, Em ended up again reassuring both girls at lunch later.

"I don't think people will take the mark unknowingly," she said. "I think God will make sure His children know what's happening. We will have to depart from His ways and worship or pay homage to the beast. And we won't do that; we will resist. As far as not being able to buy or sell anything without the mark, or hold a job, or get medical treatment, the whole world at this point is not under any one system. Think about all the different self-sustaining communities. Some use the common credit system; others are all about barter. Some are more capitalistic, while others share everything equally, including workloads. That's why some people move around, to find the perfect fit for them."

"But what if the evil leaders of the future hide the numbers into something like a pretty flower-shaped tattoo, or a piece of jewelry?" Trixie asked. "Then people won't know they're taking the mark if they get the tattoo, or wear the pin."

"Again, people will be asked to act in ungodly ways," Em stressed. "A person who doesn't know that a flower pin has certain numbers worked into it has not taken the mark. Same with branding or tattooing done against a person's will; they haven't taken the mark willingly. And if the mark of the beast is a pledge or something," she went on, "it will be something ungodly, and we'll know because it will go against biblical truths and will probably be something that blasphemes God. So we'll know not to take the pledge. True, the evil leaders will probably deny people food and might even threaten to hurt family members; but we have to be strong and resist, not giving in to fear or threats." With this, Em quoted Matthew 10:28. "'And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.'" With regard to God protecting His children, and people resisting sinful ways, she also looked up and read 2 Timothy 2:19 to the girls. "'But God's firm foundation stands, bearing this seal:

“The Lord knows those who are his,” and, “Let every one who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity.””

After a moment’s pause, Em finished with, “Also, many Christians think we won’t even be around for the mark of the beast; they believe the rapture will happen before that time. But others believe the mark happens first, so it’s good for us to be on our guard.”

The issue of the rapture was a whole other discussion, since some people with seemingly sound arguments didn’t believe in it at all as far as how it had been presented over the years in things like books and movies. Instead, they believed the rapture was simply the transformation (unknown as to exact details) that would happen to believers when Jesus comes again, and that God’s children simply needed to wait patiently for it to happen, without a whole lot of speculation. Because this was a complicated subject that biblical scholars tended to disagree on a lot, Em chose not to delve into it at this time. Her personal opinion was that the rapture would happen before the mark of the beast, in the same way she believed that the saved couldn’t be “possessed” but were merely “occupied” when demons entered their bodies, this also being a controversial subject that even godly people tended to disagree on, as far as whether or not an evil spirit could possess someone already possessing the Holy Spirit.

Zin was so glad her mother had been at home because she might not have known the right things to say to calm Trixie down. It still seemed a little odd that her friend could be so superstitious, but Zin could understand why she had panicked in this case because the mark of the beast was a pretty scary subject.

Trixie left shortly after lunch, heading home where she made sure to tell Cecelia and Linn the code so that when the all-clear came from Patrick, the pair could make a visit to Tanner’s den.

Acting on a message from Patrick the very next day, Cecelia was able to sneak Linn into Tanner’s den. From having a good look around, Linn was able to learn quite a few things that would eventually be very useful in future encounters with the young sorcerer.

In returning to the ambush over the Great Rift Valley, we find Kemp engaged in blasting fire at our heroes. Tanner had recently developed a booster for his friend (in the form of a crystal worn on a neck lanyard) so that Kemp’s firepower could match and even exceed

that of most dragons. Jarna was pretty much one of the scrappiest and toughest of her kind with regard to battle. She was also healed and feeling better to the point that she gladly would have taken on Kemp for hours upon end. However, being worried for Trixie's safety, the turquoise dragon was obliged to keep her distance and eventually land, as the other protectors did too, in not being able to see clearly through Kemp's smoke and in worry for their charges over the flames and heat. And so, the band of miscreants also landed.

Once on the ground, Kemp's booster crystal was less effective because its design was based on the elements. Having his feet connected to the earth acted to somewhat counter the enhancement the crystal provided. However, despite having slightly less firepower, he was still formidable; and it took the efforts of both Jarna and Bibor to hold him at bay after Trixie and Ashton dismounted.

Cuoré was engaged in protecting Ashton and Quin from a wind assault by Penelope. His wings outstretched, he was largely able to shield them from the tornadic-like gusts of air.

Nearby, Heather was facing off with Trixie; and the Stone Hunter was not nearly as good with her ink weapon as Trixie was with the mirror and flute she was using alternately. However, since Heather's gift basically allowed her to disappear into the shadows, she was proving a difficult target for Trixie to locate.

Although Heather was fairly well shrouded, the black sapphires her friends carried were having little effect due to the haziness of the day and the angle of the sun. With few shadows to draw upon, the shroud effect was basically nullified.

Alex and Jasper were perhaps engaged in the toughest battle, with Devin, who had taken on both boys at once with his bare hands. Evidently, the pearl-gifted boy was one of the grittiest fighters in existence. He had, first thing, knocked the weapons out of the hands of his two opponents; and in the dust and smoke storm surrounding them, Jasper and Alex had been unable to locate the mirror and flute they had, respectively, been previously armed with. Now fending off body slams, punches, kicks, strangle-holds, and more from Devin, they couldn't even think of stopping to try to find their weapons. Alex couldn't fly at this point to try to escape the assault because Devin had, early on, managed to wrap and activate a type of a rope restraint around his ankle.

Another of Tanner's malicious creations, the Twist acted like a weight of a hundred pounds and had a locking mechanism so that it couldn't be removed without a special key. Devin's attempt to attach a Twist to Jasper's forearm was thwarted when Jasper simply shapeshifted his arm to relieve himself of the weight, though he couldn't seem to find relief from the pounding of Devin's fists.

Oddly enough, Jasper and Alex received a reprieve when Devin was injured on his left thigh from Heather's ink weapon having gone astray.

Running to him and helping him to retreat, the Stone Hunter was apologizing profusely. "I'm sorry! The smoke got my eyes! I'm so sorry!" (Kemp, indeed, was still producing great clouds of smoke.)

Jasper and Alex were also retreating, with Alex helped along by Jasper because the weight was forcefully dragging on him. Despite the weight, the pair managed to recover their weapons and make it to a grouping of boulders behind which they took cover while trying to figure out how to relieve Alex of his ankle weight. Having taken a pretty bad beating, both boys were thinking they desperately needed some training, in wrestling or martial arts or anything that might prepare them for an encounter such as this in the future.

Devin's wound wasn't too bad; though he was limping, he still could fight. Unable to tell where Alex and Jasper had gotten to, he joined Penelope who, thanks to the smoke Kemp was producing, was advancing somewhat on the position of Cuoré, Quin, and Ashton. Heather had once again engaged Trixie.

Meanwhile, Tanner had taken to the skies, in order to use energy bursts from his staff on his enemies below. However, he ended up retreating in surprise upon discovering a sorcerer's staff being used against him from below.

This was Linn on the offensive. On his visit to Tanner's den, he had specifically sought information that would allow him to convert the staff Cecelia had given him into a device for his own uses, one even more powerful than the original staff; and he had managed to do this in a single afternoon.

Linn's airchair had a stealth feature, and so Tanner couldn't even see who was shooting energy charges at him. Nor could he track the movements of his invisible adversary who was also using a flute whenever Tanner came within range. The eerie musical sounds,

combined with the fact that he couldn't see Linn, made Tanner at first think that ghosts, or possibly angels, were attacking him.

The rookhs Alex, Linn, and Jasper had been riding were currently circling, and knocking into the nyregs that had, after dropping off their riders, taken to the skies in order to spit acid at their foes.

In addition to keeping Tanner at bay, Linn also invisibly sidled in next to Kemp, where he relieved him of the booster crystal with one good yank on the lanyard.

Sadly, even with the loss of the booster, Kemp was still a force to be reckoned with; and raising a wall of flames, he could still hold the two dragons back. However, he was soon thwarted, by none other than Michele, who had just arrived once again from the future where she easily raised great clouds of earth that not only collapsed the wall of fire, but also knocked Kemp flat. While not permanently injured, the force was such that he would be rendered unconscious for several minutes. After settling the earth again, Michele left, waving only briefly in the direction of Quin and Ashton as she stepped through the destination window to return home.

Observing the actions of the earth-gifted girl, and glancing at her pin-on watch, Quin resolved to remember to record Michele's latest trip in her journal.

"Boy, she's like a hit-and-run heroine," Alex remarked, having also seen the brief appearance from his spot behind the boulders.

Seeing Kemp lying unmoving, Penelope ran to help him.

Linn had just reached the position of Alex and Jasper, and he was able to free Alex because, on the visit to Tanner's den, he had been able to examine a Twist and was then able to duplicate a key in his own lab.

Bibor and Jarna had taken to the skies to help the rookhs because ten additional nyregs had just shown up, summoned by Tanner using the call feature in his staff. The extras kept the dragons and rookhs fully engaged, since the protectors didn't want their friends below to have to deal with acid burns, or getting slashed and clawed by low-flying swoops of the nasty creatures. Nyregs also favored picking people up and dropping them from great heights.

Noticing what was happening in the skies, and feeling able to protect herself and Ashton since Penelope had moved off, Quin sent

Cuoré up to help, though she might have wished she hadn't sent her protector away, because of what happened next.

Even though she and her friends had been prepared for this encounter, people can't predict or plan for every eventuality, such as the extra nyregs showing up, one of which had gotten away from the protectors. Soaring swiftly down, he knocked Quin off of a cliff, where she fell some eighty feet into a river.

Quin had been staying close to Ashton; but with her out of the picture for a time, Devin was able to move in and grab him. He then grappled with the arm of the Sapphire Boy in an effort to attach a Twist to immobilize him until Heather could net him.

Flying toward the scene, Linn attacked Devin with flute strikes, one of which hit him square in the stomach, sending him rocketing some twenty feet and nearly over the same cliff that Quin had just fallen from.

Doubling over as he struggled to his feet, Devin was barely able to mount a nearby nyreg (the same one that had attacked Quin) to flee from further assault by whatever unseen force had just attacked him.

By this time, Linn was more focused on looking for Quin than anything else and so wasn't likely to attack Devin again. Directing his airchair over the cliff, he began searching the water and along the banks.

Tanner was on his comm-cube, commanding his friends to flee. With Cuoré breaking off from the other protectors to help in the search for Quin, two nyregs were able to land to pick up Kemp and Penelope. A third, looking for Heather, wasn't able to find her because she was still shrouded, unwilling to give away her location because Trixie was very near her position.

Cuoré soon began to panic because, not only could he not hear Quin's thoughts, he couldn't catch her scent.

After fifteen minutes of searching, Linn had no luck in locating her anywhere in the area.

Alex, too, had taken up the search, flying low over the water and up and down the banks of the river along the stretch where they were sure she must still be. Since the flow of water was fairly gentle, they couldn't see how she could have been swept away any great distance.

In truth, having struggled up onto the silty riverbank, Quin was covered with mud, which was why Cuoré couldn't pick up her scent. Disoriented, she had managed to crawl into a dense patch of vegetation,

this being why the airborne searchers couldn't locate her. Even the rookhs, with their amazingly-excellent eyesight, couldn't see her because she was well covered with both mud and leafy fronds. Not only that, but she had passed out at that exact time she was struggling with her pack to open it and fish out her walnut, which she had intended to use to call for help.

Trixie, listening, wasn't able to hear anything useful. Not only was there no call for help, she couldn't even hear Quin breathing, which was pretty scary. When she spent enough time around someone, Trixie often could pick up on sounds specific to that individual such as breathing, sneezes, hiccups, stomach rumbling, etc., because these sounds were unique for each person. But in this case, she couldn't hear anything, probably because the sound of the water, which Quin was still very close to, was drowning out any sound of breath.

Alex was trying not to panic; but in the back of his mind was the thought that, if she were dead, they might not be able to find her quickly enough for dragon tears to work.

The group had gathered on the cliff in order to brainstorm what to do next. Linn had just tried using the locator feature on his walnut to try to hone in on Quin's walnut, but he hadn't gotten anything. Trixie ended up telling him that Quin was using an older-model walnut, one that didn't have the locator feature. "She said she dropped the newer one in a pond at Laurelstone, but she didn't want to tell you she lost it, so she decided to just use the older one for now."

Heather had been watching the group from about sixty feet away, and she fairly startled all of them when she stepped out of the shadows. Unshrouded, she slowly walked towards their position with her hands held up, in an apparent sign of peace. "I just want to talk," she said.

Not believing the gesture or the words, Trixie quickly sent a sizzling and sparking red rope flying towards the Stone Hunter, who ended up proving she had earlier been feigning fighting incompetence by slicing the rope in two with a single lightning-swift swipe of her ink weapon, which then speedily returned to her neck before Linn or Alex could even think of raising their flutes to attack her.

"No, don't!" Ashton yelled at Trixie to stop her from also sending throwing stars toward Heather, who was once again holding up empty hands to them.

“What if it’s a trick?” Trixie demanded.

“It’s not,” Ashton said imperatively. “Just trust me.”

“If I wanted to kill him,” Heather offered, indicating Ashton with a toss of her head, “I would have by now.”

Ashton knew this to be true. “She could have captured me probably ten times already,” he said.

“More like twenty,” Heather replied, “but who’s counting.”

While they might have taken the Stone Hunter’s response and demeanor to be arrogant and prideful, she was actually being more truthful than anything else, and simply expressing the natural confidence that tended to accompany her skills.

“They’re all gone,” Heather related, referring to her friends. “I’ve been monitoring their comm-cube transmissions. They’re heading home, and they don’t particularly care where I might have headed off to.” Directing her next comments to Linn, she said, “I think I can help you find her.”

Linn basically didn’t have time to respond before Heather said, “She’s got a sapphire, right? I’ve picked it up before on my tracer. So I should be able to track her.”

Trixie was quick to say, “No, she doesn’t carry a sapphire. You must have been reading Ashton.”

To this, Heather was impatient and shaking her head. “I think I know how to read my own device. She’s got a sapphire!” she insisted.

Linn had been reluctant to disclose Quin’s ankle sapphire, but he had to agree. “Yes, she has one,” he admitted. “It’s just kept hidden.”

“Then this should be easy,” Heather said. “I’ll just separate the Sapphire Boy’s signature from my readings, and I should be able to find her.” As she adjusted a couple of settings on her tracer, she added, “Anyone else have a sapphire that I need to separate out?”

On this day, no one else was carrying one, as they all had shield dimes for protection instead.

Getting a reading right away, Heather descended the steep cliff, climbing down as easily as if she were related to a mountain goat, where she located Quin in less than ten minutes.

She wasn’t dead, and didn’t appear to be injured; but she was still unconscious. In truth, her implanted sapphire had protected most of her from getting broken and bruised on the rocks in the river. However, the

shock of the fall, along with inhaling water and further panicking, had caused her to pass out.

Ashton quickly cried a healing sapphire, placing it into his friend's hand, the result of which roused Quin in less than fifteen seconds. Next, giving the sapphire to Heather, he said, "Thank you."

"No problem," she responded, stowing the stone in her pack.

"Why are you helping us?" Jasper asked.

"Because she's a Christian," Alex guessed, correctly as it turns out.

Linn chimed in next. "It's often been prudent for Christians living in the cities to keep their faith as low-key as possible, for safety."

Heather was smiling because the answers were pretty much spot on. "Plus," she said, "I can do more good for God's Kingdom by staying where I am for now, and acting like I'm part of all the schemes."

With this, Heather needed to be off in order to check in with Tanner and the others. "So they don't get too suspicious of what I'm off doing," she said.

Using a kind of whistle device, she proceeded to call a nyreg who landed somewhat cautiously amongst all of the godly creatures. And even though the beast pretty much figured out that his rider was also godly, it's not like he could have told Tanner or anyone else anything. Beside, this was the nyreg Tanner had kicked earlier in our story, so he wouldn't have been inclined to want to help the nasty sorcerer in any way.

Finally, the group was going to get to heal the sick dragons, though Jarna had already been doing her part. Indeed, her blue and sparkly breath had already been traveling around Africa, though a good many more dragons needed to have the cure in order to speed the process.

They set to work right away, finding and misting female doves and dragons as quickly as possible. Quin found Kanna and Sei Sei barely in time to save the two, who were very weak and struggling for breath. However, with the cure working on them as quickly as it had on Jarna, the girls were soon their old selves, sleeping peacefully and soundly.

Meanwhile, Heather was catching up with her team at Tanner's home, all except Devin who was already back in Supe-8 and having his wound tended to.

"He'll live," Tanner said, "and it will only be a small scar."

“I stayed for a while to watch them,” Heather told the group. “I kept the comm-cube dark because I didn’t want to be overheard, not just by that Trixie girl with her super hearing, but they had a tech-gifted person along. He was in an airchair with a shroud feature.”

“Oh, it’s that Linn guy,” Penelope correctly surmised.

“Anyway,” Heather went on, “they’re curing the dragons, right now, as we speak.”

Tanner could barely breathe, as angry as he was, and he was very red in the face.

“So this project didn’t work out,” Heather said somewhat consolingly, “but we can come up with something else,” she confidently added.

Penelope and Kemp were careful not to say anything, for fear of incurring the wrath of Tanner whom they had once seen turn a man who bumped into him on the street into a lizard, which was then fed to a nyreg.

Kemp had a short while earlier related the loss of the booster, which had upset Tanner because the yellow firestone crystal from which the booster had been made was very rare. With this latest news about the dragons, he was not likely to cool down anytime soon. And so, Penelope and Kemp made rather hasty departures, giving the excuses that they were expected at home. Heather left soon after that saying that she needed to be off to try to track those two Sapphire Boys at the twin plantations.

Mulling over everything that had happened, Tanner ended up figuring out that his own staff had been used against him. *So that Linn fellow figured out how to make it work, and he somehow enhanced the power. Well, he’s clever, I’ll give him that.*

Again it seemed almost as though the enemy had been well prepared for the attack. While Cecelia and Linn had been careful not to move anything out of position when in the den, Patrick had not been so careful. In looking over everything, Tanner noticed that the orange marker on his desk had been moved. Despite the mess about the place, he could always tell when even small things were not where they should be. And so, this led him to suspect his brother, because he didn’t think his parents would ever try to work out the code for his den. Whereas, Patrick could be an annoying little snoop, often going through the

drawers in Tanner's bedroom, for who knows what, since he didn't keep anything of importance in any of them.

Also, Penelope had mentioned that she saw Patrick through her spyglass one day on the roof deck with one of those dawn pigeons. Tanner hadn't thought much of the information at the time because he assumed his brother was probably just petting the bird. But now, Tanner wasn't so sure. *Could Patrick be less of a dunce than I've always taken him for?*

Now strongly suspecting his brother of colluding with the enemy, Tanner said aloud, "If I find out that little creep is interfering with what I'm doing, I'll wring his neck."

"You'll have to find me first," Patrick said, taking off from the roof on a stealth airbike. This was the item Trixie had brought to him from Cecelia who wanted him to have the bike for the express purpose of escaping Tanner, if necessary. Patrick, over the years, had become quite good at escaping his brother's clutches, with the airbike simply giving him another means of doing so.

Tanner was somewhat wary of others amongst his circle as well. After all, he hadn't known either Devin or Heather very long; and it struck him as slightly odd that Heather had accidentally hit Devin with her ink stone. *But it was probably an accident*, his mind told him a few moments later. *After all, she could have killed him, not just given him a minor wound.*

Although things hadn't worked out exactly as the miscreants had planned, all was not lost with regard to their cause because something pretty horrible had happened to Ashton during the battle, specifically, when Devin grabbed him. And this was something the Sapphire Boy and his friends would shortly discover.

## Chapter Eleven

### Welcome to the World

Ashton was very surprised by the wound he had received. After all, injuring a Sapphire Boy was not an easy thing to do. At first, the sore on his arm, no larger than a small pea, was only slightly bothersome. Since Quin's future self never told him he would be injured on this trip into the past, he assumed this was something that would shortly resolve itself. In Africa, he hadn't wanted to make any big deal of it because they had needed to focus on finding Quin and then treating the dragons. Ashton also couldn't think of the wound as anything severe because he never considered that another gifted person might have any kind of power that could seriously affect him. So for the time being, since he didn't particularly feel ill, he wasn't too worried.

Back on the Mountain, even though his arm had started to feel rather strange, he again hadn't wanted to tell his friends, particularly because Jasper had returned home to something of a stressful situation in that his dad was dealing with a whole slew of incidents involving false teachings in various communities. In fact, Pastor Hughes had been busy pretty much dawn to dusk recently in trying to counter those leading people astray on Lion Mountain.

Jasper ended up accompanying his father to a settlement where a preacher had been leading his congregation to sacrifice animals, something no longer necessary because Jesus' death on the cross had become the ultimate sacrifice that bridged the gap between Holy God and sinful man. The preacher was a false prophet, full of his own ideas, not God's. There was nothing biblical about present-day animal sacrifices. And so, this practice would be stopped. The preacher would be removed from his leadership position and another would take his place. No animal sacrifices would be allowed. If the false preacher didn't comply, he would be ousted from Lion Mountain. There was no wiggle room when it came to blatant contradictions of God's Word that

harm not only innocent animals, but also people susceptible to being misled.

Jasper found the sacrifices odd. He would have thought people would have had enough of killing, having lived as slaves in the Supercities where Trials by Tiger and fights to the death in prisons were common, and where demons and megahobs regularly killed people simply for pleasure. So too had Muslim extremists slain many in the cities, and sorcerers enjoyed turning people into small rodents and reptiles to feed to the nyregs. *After having lived through all of that, people are still craving blood? This is simply the result of Satan's influence.* In Jasper's mind, there could be no other explanation for it.

Voicing his thoughts to Trixie, she ended up telling him, "Because Satan still has a hold on the earth, we have to expect that in every community, some bad guys will eventually come out of the woodwork."

Her comment was a little funny because in one community, this had literally happened. A false preacher with a gift similar to Cecelia's ended up performing tricks for his congregation in order to convince them he had supernatural powers; and in one of his tricks, he appeared to emerge from a wall. Cecelia ended up helping Jasper's father to expose the trickster by performing a few tricks of her own to show how the fraud had been perpetrated. She also counseled members of the congregation. "God will not let us get away with abusing the gifts He has given us. Eventually, there will be consequences."

In another community, a false leader had been claiming he could heal others by touch, and had been demanding payments to do so. In truth, he was a fraud, and had secretly been using a sapphire to heal people. Quin ended up coming in and healing a cut on a person's leg by touch, and she accepted no payment for it; after which, she encouraged members of the church to seek healing from other sources in the future, since many gifted people were willing to help others at no charge.

Trixie ended up accompanying Jasper and his father to a village where polygamy was being promoted as being what God intended.

"For all of the changes to the laws over the years," Trixie said, "they didn't change that one. It's still illegal to have more than one spouse."

"And it's certainly not what Jesus taught," Jasper added.

By witnessing, speaking the truth, and sharing bible scripture, they were able to turn around the minds of many. Sadly, Pastor Hughes did

have to oust the false preacher, who had three wives, not because he believed this was sanctioned by God, but because the man was lustful. One wife was even underage, at fourteen; so he was basically a depraved molester too. A bible-based preacher was then appointed to lead the church to help get people back on track. All polygamous marriages in that village were legally voided, and several underage girls were returned to their parents' homes.

Astrid had received word from several mothership communities outlying the Mountain about similar problems, and had sent out teams of spiritual advisors to help counter teachings that were not supported by God's Word. People could, of course, believe all kinds of untruths, because no one has ultimate control over another person's brain. But when they start teaching falsities to others, actions would be taken to make known truths.

By way of a warning to the false teachers, many of the advisors ended up quoting Proverbs 28:10. "He who misleads the upright into an evil way will fall into his own pit; but the blameless will have a goodly inheritance."

On the flip side of things, in most communities, people were not being misled by false teachers; and many were coming to Christ by discovering the truth of Salvation. People were being spiritually reborn, and many baptisms were taking place. As people began their new and transformed lives, many were hoping the same thing would happen for those who had remained in the Supercities.

Of course, some of this had already been going on inside the cities in an underground manner; take Heather, for example.

Quin had been thinking a lot about Heather, specifically how, against all odds, some of the elites in the cities were being converted. Cecelia also knew about Heather—based on certain observations during her trips to the cities—but had been keeping quiet for many months now. Zin was certainly surprised when learning about Heather, having never guessed the Stone Hunter might actually be on their side. All of the friends involved with the dragon healing project had agreed to keep Heather's secret just that—a secret.

Linn had related to Quin that they shouldn't have been surprised because the black star sapphire upon which Heather's gift was based had long been associated in legend with the Star of Bethlehem.

“Which is also connected to dragons through the Legend of the Star Dragon,” Quin said, smiling. “So you’re right, we should have known that she would be predisposed to being good.”

“It’s more a matter of personal choice,” Linn said as a reminder. “We all have to choose how we use our gifts, either for evil or for good. Heather evidently chose to use hers for good.”

“And imagine how much good she’s probably doing, having a gift like Cecelia’s,” Quin said in an awe-filled sort of way.

“I like imagining how much good Tanner might do in the world if he ever decided to convert,” Linn responded.

“Do you think that could ever happen?” Quin said in an almost incredulous tone, as she didn’t think it very likely the nasty sorcerer could be turned to good.

Linn shrugged as he answered. “There’s always a chance. No one is ever too far gone, beyond the reach of being saved. And the Light of Jesus is a powerful magnet.”

“And the Love of God,” Quin said.

Later at home, Quin found herself praying for Tanner. *Please save him Lord. Please open his heart and his mind, and help him come to know You and Your Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen and Amen.*

With prayer being quite powerful and amazing, and sometimes inexplicable, we shouldn’t be surprised when God grants the wishes of His children, particularly wishes that are good and selfless.

At the same time Quin was praying for Tanner, Heather happened to be reading her bible, specifically, John 1:12-13. “But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.”

She also happened to be privately celebrating her spiritual birthday: the exact day two years previous when she accepted Jesus into her life. *Happy Birthday to Me*, she thought. Her parents weren’t yet Christian, but she was working on them.

Speaking of birthdays, Esther was on her way to attend a very special one; and she was time traveling in order to do so.

Packing a small bag and leaving early morning, she used a time-travel portal situated in the Himalayas and inside of her cave actually.

She arrived through a destination window that appeared directly beside the largest barn on the Laurelstone Plantation.

This happened to be a warm June evening; and inside the barn, the owner of Laurelstone was just finishing up his nightly feeding of the horses.

Entering the barn, Esther greeted the man. As she was stroking the neck of one of the horses, she explained that she was traveling and asked if she might stay one night in the barn.

“Why certainly,” Mr. Dawson replied. “But you can stay at the house if you like, we have plenty of rooms.”

“I’d rather stay in the barn, if you don’t mind,” Esther replied.

“Suit yourself,” he answered pleasantly.

“At least come up to the house for dinner,” a voice came from inside the barn door. Mrs. Dawson had just waddled in, waddling because she was very pregnant; in fact, she felt almost ready to burst.

“Thank you, I accept,” Esther said.

While the family and guest were eating, we must look in on something going on in one of the smaller barns, the one that Laurelstone’s flock of peafowl often used for shelter in the winter. Being summer, the birds preferred to stay outdoors at night; and so the barn was currently empty, of godly creatures that is, but not of foul ones because two demons were holed up inside. Gotom and Chuud were on a special assignment directly from Satan who, over the centuries, regularly became disappointed in many of his servants, particularly demons, since most were fairly stupid and inept. However, he was recently more disappointed in his sorcerers, who had botched a lot of things of late; and so he was giving his demons a chance once again, this being right around the time Weatherly Dawson was born.

Gotom and Chuud were simply waiting in the barn at this time—waiting for a chance to kill Mrs. Dawson and her unborn child because this was their assignment. They had been too afraid to confront the conjure woman who was accompanying the plantation owners as they walked from the horse barn to their home.

A short time earlier, a tree spirit had prevented the pair from leaving their hidey hole. With a swirling cloud of leaves, earth, small branches, and rocks hitting them square in the face for fully two minutes, Chuud and Gotom were completely blinded and sputtering; and so had missed

their chance to catch the pregnant woman alone and vulnerable as she was walking to the barn to tell her husband that dinner was ready.

Even earlier, the pair had had to keep somewhat low-key in an effort not to alert the farmhands finishing their work for the day to their presence because this was at a time when demons were not fully exposed to the world. They had to stay in hiding so that Satan could continue to foster atheism. If demons were out and about a lot, it would be harder to convince people not to believe in God, the devil, hell, everlasting life, and other such biblical truths.

While Astrid was supposed to stay clear of her younger self, Esther was under no such instructions from God; in fact, quite the contrary. Indeed, she had very clearly heard the familiar voice in the back of her head actually telling her to look in on her own birth, but arrive slightly early.

Weatherly had been born at home, with help from a local midwife who was on standby for the occasion. At this time, her brother was only a little boy, and one trying hard to be very polite at the dinner table in front of company. John ended up spilling the gravy when passing the boat to the guest, whereupon, he turned red in the face.

“Oh, don’t fret,” Esther told him, swiftly wiping up the spill with her napkin. “I’ve spilled gravy hundreds of times in my life.” She smiled in thinking of her brother in the future. John was still living at Laurelstone in Esther’s time, and still teaching science to high school kids and working in the hippotherapy program.

Esther was very much affected to again see her mother, who had passed away when Weatherly was eight, of cholera on a mission trip. She also enjoyed seeing her father, who had died of cancer when Weatherly was in college.

But what her parents may have lost in years on earth, Esther was more than making up for, in living what might have been the equivalent of probably thirty lifetimes, possibly more, first as Weatherly, then Astrid, and now as her present self.

Despite her appearance of aged and frail, Esther was anything but; and she knew the exact reason she was here, having heard God’s instructions very clearly.

Leaving the house after having cobbler and ice cream, Esther simply went to the peafowl barn where she killed Chuud and Gotom in less

than five seconds with the gold rope she had concealed in her robes. If she hadn't made the trip into the past to take care of this problem, Mrs. Dawson and her baby still would have been safe because a watchman was nearby making sure of this.

A cot in the large barn served as a very comfortable bed for Esther, who awoke before dawn as the plantation house suddenly came to life with bustle and light because Mrs. Dawson had gone into labor. And it was a quick birth, happening only a short while after dawn, the midwife having arrived only thirty minutes before. Esther had simply stayed in the barn in order to stay out of the way.

Leaving the barn a short while later, she ended up running into Mr. Michaels, on a trot to Laurelstone from his cottage situated behind Netherwind. "Baby Weatherly has just arrived!" he gleefully exclaimed.

"I know," Esther replied, smiling inside and out to see the grinning gentleman clutching the tiny teddy bear that she remembered well from her childhood and that Astrid still had in a bureau drawer in her cabin on Lion Mountain.

Making her way to the house, and being ushered inside by one of Laurelstone's farmhands, Esther took a quick peek at her newborn self, before leaving the house and heading to the spot of the destination window beside the barn, which appeared instantly as she neared it, activated by a device very like the Time Key. No one saw her leave, not even a bigfoot nearby who looked exactly like a tree to most creatures. While the bigfoot, at times, liked to watch the activities of the peafowl and horses, he generally kept his distance. On this day, he had snuck closer to the house out of curiosity as to the reason for the early-morning bustle. When Mr. Michaels left the house a short while later, the bigfoot tailed him to his cottage, afterwards watching the man do some gardening.

With regard to the watchman in the area, when in labor, Mrs. Dawson had caught a glimpse of the angel, who was actually in the room when Weatherly was born, and whose splendor had been briefly reflected in the stained glass window adjacent to the bed. The family cat, named Astrid, also saw the angel; but since she had seen angels before, this was not quite as much of a thrill for her as it was for Mrs.

Dawson whose mind suddenly thought of Psalm 34:7. “The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them.”

In the present, another type of creature was being born, at right around the same time the conjure woman returned to her home in the Himalayan foothills. But this was not a birth in the traditional sense; rather, this was a first model of a false dragon being created.

The sorcerers had decided not to try to convert any more real dragons; such a fiasco that had been, taking decades, and they now had nothing to show for it. However, many sorcerers (with help from Satan) were industrious, which was how mimics, print doubles, megahobs, and other foul creatures had come into being. The false dragons would look like dragons; but based on their design, would end up being a smaller size in general than real ones, more in keeping with the size of the original nyregs (the most common size), before supersized ones were developed. The falsies (as these fake dragons would largely be called) would also not be able to shapeshift as well as real dragons (less quickly and with less detail), and would end up having to retain their approximate sizes, which would limit their ability to hide in various circumstances. The color of the falsies was also limited, to varying shades of green (often putrid looking), instead of the multitudes of lovely colors real dragons sported, based on the seven colors of the rainbow in their varying hues and intensities. Real green dragons were generally as vibrant in their coloring as many green-themed hummingbirds, while fake green dragons tended to look like over-cooked peas much of the time. Similar to real dragons was the fierceness, speed, and fire of the false ones, leading some to call the creatures, flash dragons.

The development of this creature was actually predicted by a prophet and recorded in a book called *True Dragons versus False Dragons*, the volume of which was currently located in the Labyrinth Library. In short, the book describes Satan and his followers producing creatures based on the design of nyregs, but made to resemble and act like dragons. However, these new beasts couldn't fool the godly into believing that they were real dragons because of the issue of feathers. True dragons have feathers, false do not. While Satan and his followers could make creatures to resemble dragons, they could not create feathers because feathers are godly, only in God's domain. The fallen angels

might have feathers, but they cannot make them. Even the efels that the sorcerers had created—which were like a midnight version of dawn pigeons—didn't have feathers, but only spiny, skinny, and sharp scales that somewhat resembled feathers, but in reality were not.

Since godly prophecies always come true, we shouldn't be surprised that the false dragons came into being. Over the centuries, using fear and deception, Satan has tried to turn people against dragons. Knowing the roll they are set to play in the Endtimes, he has long wanted to make people hate and hunt the godly creatures. Bringing the falsies into being was just another part of the plan to make this happen. It has long been foretold that in the Endtimes, Satan will take the form of a terrifying dragon. However, in this impersonation, he will again be thrown down. He is already defeated; it is now simply a matter of time. For now, those living on earth in his territory must endure and persist. In Ashton's time, the flash dragons were as much of a problem as the nyregs had ever been; and much of his and Quin's time in the future was spent protecting real dragons from people upset with the evil actions of the false ones, and hunting all dragons as a result. However, the truth, including the truth about dragons, will eventually be exposed, as we know from Luke 8:17. ““For nothing is hid that shall not be made manifest, nor anything secret that shall not be known and come to light.””

But enough about false dragons; with only one at this point having come into being, it would still be some time before most human beings would even know of their existence. For now, we must return to the realm of true dragons where Holly Stanley was in the process of alerting Quin, Alex, and Linn that Ashton was desperately ill, and desperately needed help.

## Chapter Twelve

### Grit and Diamonds

Two days had passed since the group had returned from Africa, and Ashton had not yet gone home, for two reasons basically. One was that he wanted to spend a little more time with Linn, Alex, and other friends on the Mountain. He was enjoying their company; plus, Alex had promised to help him search for bioluminescent mushrooms, which were often hard to find. The second reason involved the destination window by which Ashton had arrived. For time-travel trips that might take weeks, months, or even longer, TKTs of the future had learned to set up interval windows. The Sapphire Boy had just missed one of the return windows that appeared five days previous, and the next one was not set to appear for nearly two weeks. With regard to not using the Time Key, Ashton had a similar device. However, instead of being a sphere, it was cube shaped and roughly the size of a sugar cube. Although the Time Key was specific to Laurelstone's arbor window, magicians of the future had made additional keys that could work in all time-travel portals of the world, of which four were known to exist; and the magicians had done this by tapping into the powers of unicorns.

The Sapphire Boy had fairly quickly figured out that something was terribly wrong with him; and having thought of himself for so long as largely invincible, he was pretty scared. What had started in his arm, which was now completely numb, had quickly spread to his shoulder and chest area. His whole body was weak, so much so that he couldn't even rise from the bed. Not that Holly Stanley would have allowed it, for as pale as he was. Ashton wasn't even wearing his dampener, and so should have been practically blinding others with his brightness; instead, he looked a lot like milk to which a few drops of pale blue food coloring had been added.

Quin arrived quickly and tried to heal him by touch, but this did not work. Having fished a measuring thimble out of her pack, she was on the verge of giving him a dose of dragon tears when Ashton stopped her.

“Don’t waste the tears,” he rasped. “They won’t work on me. They don’t work in the future.”

This was news to Quin. While she knew that various electronics and other mechanicals weren’t likely to work in the times to come, she had never considered that something magical like dragon tears might not.

She didn’t doubt what Ashton was saying, but after considering for a few moments, she told him, “Even if they don’t work in the future, you’re not in the future right now.”

Ashton was shaking his head, as vigorously as he could in his condition; and he ended up obliged to take the dose she offered because it was easier than trying to argue with her or explain further. Like the touch she had tried, the dragon tears also didn’t work.

“I don’t understand,” she said, now starting to panic somewhat because she thought surely the tears would have worked.

Ashton tried to explain. “The tears are the same in the future, but people of the future can’t be healed by them. They were never meant to work forever.”

Alex had just figured out what Ashton was trying to tell them, and he tried to explain it to Quin in a way that her brain could comprehend. “It’s probably because we can’t change certain events that are meant to happen. If a certain number of people are meant to die before the Endtimes, we can’t keep raising people from the dead. So it makes sense that at a certain time, God will no longer allow the use of dragon tears because they might interfere with His plans.”

Ashton was nodding because this was what the people of his time believed had happened, including Quin who still retained her healing gift in the future, though it was nowhere near strong enough to raise people from the dead, nor cure people of things like cancer and diabetes, as she also couldn’t now.

Linn, Alex, and Quin had all turned nearly as pale as Ashton from this news; and Holly Stanley looked just about ready to faint. However, the situation was about to get at least somewhat better because Heather had just breathlessly arrived in the room with an explanation as to what had happened to Ashton.

“Devin just told me what he did. The jerk!” she said. “He was apologizing for not handing the Sapphire Boy to me alive, but told me

he thought I might be able to collect his body. For part of his gift, Devin can produce poison grits through his tears and sweat, like Diamond Girls can cry diamonds, and like how I can produce star sapphires, and like how Ashton can cry blue sapphires. And a grit held on the skin long enough can eventually penetrate even a Sapphire Boy's protective shielding," she added. "The poison grit is working its way to his heart; when it enters, it will kill him."

At this point, things were looking rather dire for Ashton; and no one quite knew what to do. Heather may have had the explanation, but she didn't have an answer. He would have some time, but not nearly as much as the dragons had had.

Quin's future self never told Ashton about the wound because she didn't want to scare him. It had indeed happened in the past, and the future Quin was aware of it. But since she was taking steps to counter the poison grit, she didn't see the need to scare her protégé. Plus, she didn't want to interfere with anything of the past that was meant to happen. And this scare was definitely meant to happen, mainly because a certain person needed to be sent back from the future to help with the situation. And much like the hit-and-run style of Michele's trips back, this person would also arrive and leave in a speedy fashion.

Quin's present self, of course, didn't know help was on the way; and her brain was working feverishly in trying to figure out what to do. Should they send for a doctor, or maybe for Astrid? Likewise, the usually-brainy Linn didn't have any good ideas. So too was Alex stumped. And Heather was busy supporting Holly Stanley, who truly was on the verge of fainting by this time.

They ended up simply praying, for God's guidance and help, which is always the best thing to do in any difficult situation.

In truth, everything was about to be okay because, in a flash of light, another person entered the room—a girl who looked to be around fifteen or sixteen. Though no one knew who she was, she was definitely a Diamond Girl who shone brightly even in the darkened room.

With only a brief nod of greeting to everyone, she went right up to Ashton's bedside where a speechless Quin scooted out of the way to make room for the visitor, in somehow knowing this was the answer to their prayers.

This Diamond Girl was evidently advanced because none others of the past with her gift had ever possessed the ability to extend their shielding to another, and even to the extent of reaching the interior of human bodies, which is exactly what she did. Placing both hands over Ashton's chest, and then moving them slightly to one side, she not only stopped the grit from entering his heart, she worked it out of his chest entirely, wrapping it into a cloth while pressing another cloth on the exit wound which was already closing itself. His color and brightness were also returning. Based on Ashton's gift, no doctor would have been able to penetrate his skin to remove the grit. The Diamond Girl from the future was basically the only person who could have saved Ashton, and she had only been able to do so because diamonds are harder than sapphires.

"I'll get rid of this," the Diamond Girl said, indicating the cloth-wrapped grit. She then smiled and gave a nod of farewell, whereupon, she left the cabin. Following her to the front door, Linn caught a glimpse of the destination window displaying Laurelstone's study appearing then disappearing as the Diamond Girl stepped through it.

Ashton was much brighter and had more energy by this time, and he was able to get out of bed. Like the exit wound, the sore on his arm where the grit had first entered had also closed itself. In only a couple of days, he would be fully back to normal, particularly with Holly Stanley feeding him all sorts of good foods.

As Ashton rose to stand next to her, Quin, who had found her voice again, ended up quoting Isaiah 60:1. "'Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.'"

She ended up recording the quote in her journal later, along with the details of the Diamond Girl's visit, particularly the exact time. Since Quin herself might have been the one in the future to send the girl back, she wanted to make sure she had completely accurate information.

She also made journal notes relating to Devin's gift, just a few thoughts based on her ponderings with regard to how pearls are formed: when a piece of grit enters an oyster and acts as an irritant, which forces the oyster to react and eventually causes a pearl to be formed. In thinking about the gigantic pearls in the Mystery Realm, she had to consider that some trials and hardships (and grits) might not be as evil as we perceive them to be, particularly if they are meant to produce

something beautiful. Perhaps Ashton would be stronger and his soul more beautiful from this experience.

For all of the worry, they shouldn't have worried. In the same way the dragons were healed—with God's help and in His perfect timing—Ashton too was healed, and would soon be returning home.

Quin had been a little sad to find out that in the not-so-distant future, dragon tears would no longer work to heal people. But as Ashton said, they were never meant to work forever. This was ringing true to her and was confirmed when she tried auto-writing.

*We shouldn't rely on things like dragon tears, she reasoned. We must trust in God; He always provides. Human bodies aren't meant to live forever. The tears never worked on people who died of old age, and they never worked for suicide victims, and they have an unknown time limit as far as raising the dead.*

Alex was keeping his mouth shut on this subject. He knew how long a person could be dead and still be revived by dragon tears, but he didn't want anyone being reckless and testing it. The answer was found in the stars, which dragon tears were related to. For most people, the formula was pretty simple, based on their birthdays and the position of the stars on that day each year. For a few people, specifically those born in March and September, the calculations were a little more complex, but still could be worked out by someone with a logical brain. For every person, the time could vary by about twelve hours. Since human beings were each and every one unique, the exact answer couldn't be pigeonholed down to the exact minute, or even to within an hour. The answer being related more to birth than to death was just one of those paradoxes, like how Jesus had to die so that we could receive Eternal Life.

For Ashton's part, in reflecting on the trial he had just undergone, he would end up coming to the conclusion that we sometimes need to be reminded that we are weak, and totally dependent on God. Bad things sometimes happen to get our attention because God wants us to rely on Him, and not on ourselves. We were never meant to be totally self-sufficient. Ashton had indeed felt helpless and dependent as he lay dying, and praying; and for the rest of his life, he would remember that all he needed in that moment was God, and nothing else.

Back in Supercity Nine, Patrick was thinking of leaving home. He was basically fed up with living with his brother. There were plenty of places in the self-sustaining communities that would take displaced kids, and even a lot of families that were eager to adopt. He didn't particularly think his parents would miss him. They had only really wanted one kid anyway, which was common among the elites who had for years been paying doctors to provide medical excuses to avoid complying with the Law of Four. But when his mother got pregnant for a second time, for some reason, she didn't get rid of him.

As he was in his bedroom and thinking of what he might pack to take with him, to Patrick's surprise, his mother came in to talk to him. And he was even more surprised by what she said. In short, she related that since Tanner was nearly eighteen, a legal adult, they were thinking of moving out of the city. "Your dad and I both want this, and we hope you will want to move too," she said. "Tanner, of course, will want to stay. But your dad and I think, overall, that things will be better for the three of us in one of the outside communities, maybe a ranch or a large farm. So we'll talk more about it later," she added. "And for now, don't mention it to your brother. We'll tell him later."

After she left his room, Patrick got to wondering if maybe his mother had some sort of gift that he didn't know about. *Could she read minds, maybe?* It seemed odd that she had shown up just as he was thinking of running away, which he wasn't contemplating anymore because he too thought living somewhere else (and with his parents) was a good idea.

Mrs. Ellison didn't particularly have an extraordinary gift, at least, not one like her younger son's; but she was intuitive. And she did truly treasure Patrick. She wouldn't have wanted to lose him. When she was pregnant with him, she had been given a blessed diamond; and the blessing she received from the stone was none other than the realization that she was carrying a child in her womb, not just fetal tissue that didn't matter and could be discarded. Many people come by this knowledge from the Word of God, or from the Holy Spirit talking to their hearts and minds. Since Mrs. Ellison wasn't a Christian, God had spoken to her in another manner. He often does this; people simply need to listen. Moving out of the city would give the family the opportunity to learn more about God and Jesus, and they would

eventually come to know both, and know what it's like to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

On the subject of minds, Quin had just used the mini Mind Key on her friends, to make them forget the various locations of the dragons. She didn't use it on Ashton. Since he was a Protector of Dragons, albeit a future one, he could have this information.

On the day before Ashton was set to leave, Quin went to the Mountain early in the morning to say goodbye to him. She then headed off to her classes for the day because she had a Biology II exam and a book report due in English.

Walking to the cafeteria with Alex at lunchtime, Ashton was very surprised when his friend suddenly gave him a hard shove, sending him flying into the bushes beside the path. The shove was because they were about to run into Muriel, just approaching from the other direction. As soon as she passed, Alex helped his friend to his feet and out of the bushes. "Thanks," Ashton said. "When did you guess?"

"Awhile back," Alex replied. "You have her eyes."

Trixie, Jasper, Linn, and Alex were all present the next morning when Ashton was leaving. Holly Stanley had already said her tearful goodbyes at the cabin. Realizing this was hard on the woman, Ashton said, "We'll see each other again." He didn't think this information would change things too much about either his or her future, so he felt comfortable sharing this with her.

After using the triangle hand gesture, with a smile, Ashton simply stepped through the interval window when it appeared in a field not too far from Linn's lab, after which, the window swiftly vanished, like a blink. The Sapphire Boy never did get to see bioluminescent mushrooms on this trip, but did end up seeing some at home in his own time on a trip to Lion Mountain not too far into his future.

Ashton had used a time-travel portal actually located in the Great Rift Valley, where he and Quin did a lot of their work protecting dragons. Upon arriving, he found Bibor waiting to take him home to the plantations. However, the purple dragon was a little grumpy. Since no time at all had passed while Ashton was on his trip, he hadn't had much of a nap on this day. However, since he took his job seriously as the protector of the Protector of Dragons, Bibor didn't grumble too much.

A couple of days after the Sapphire Boy left, Quin, Jasper, and Trixie got to have a go on the airboard, the design and settings of which Linn had tweaked.

“Too bad Ashton missed his chance at this,” Jasper exclaimed breathlessly, when handing the board off to Trixie.

This actually wouldn't have mattered to Ashton, who at home had a much more advanced model of the airboard. It still worked in the future because it had very few moving parts, like the airbikes. So too were many airbuses, both large and small, still in operation.

Zin was on her way to the Mountain on this day. In midflight atop Magsen, she suddenly got to wondering if there might be other invisible doors at Netherwind; and she thought she might check sometime, using her Reveal Powder. She was on her way to Linn's lab because the pair had been collaborating on a project. Bad dreams and insomnia had recently been a problem for many people, especially for those who used to live in the Supercities; and so Zin and Linn were working on a magical Rainbow Nightlight, the rainbow being a reminder of God's promises and protection. In this case, the rainbows could both lull people to sleep and interact with their dreams. Once complete, thanks to the Great Multipliers, the nightlights would be plentiful and would indeed help many people achieve more peaceful sleep.

Later the same day, Quin and Linn managed their first kiss on the lips, which didn't seem weird and neither of them jumped or anything. It just seemed natural, in the same way that Quin sitting in Linn's lap had seemed natural.

Linn had just given his longtime friend (and now girlfriend) a new walnut, one with a locator feature; and she had promised to keep it handier. She was clipping it to her belt as he told her, “If you lose it, let me know right away and I'll make you another one. I don't care if you lose a hundred of them. I want to know, so I can replace them as needed, so you'll stay safer.”

Astrid was passing by outside, on her way to have a talk with a certain meadowian (a spirit of the meadow). In a manner similar to pulling the rug out from under someone, the spirit had lately taken to pulling patches of meadow, field, and even forest floor out from under anyone passing through the areas under her protection. This was because a group of boys had recently been teasing a beaver family and

throwing stones at birds. Upon finding out the problem, Astrid alerted the parents of the boys to the mischief, and calmed the meadowian, eventually convincing the spirit to let innocent travelers once again pass unhindered through her guarded domain.

In roughly twenty years, Astrid would leave the Mountain, in order to go back in time to become Esther. She would not go quite as far back as Weatherly had to become Astrid; but she would experience nearly as much history in living her life as the conjure woman. Knowing how to communicate with nature spirits would greatly help Esther with her work, often enabling her to find exactly the right herbs, tree leaves, berries, and such to use in her concoctions.

Journaling at home later, Quin was speculating as to why God had allowed help from the future from the Diamond Girl, Michele, even Ashton. Auto-writing gave her part of the answer: “This whole thing started from meddling from the future. Tanner sent a message back to his younger self as to how to create the Eve of Death Virus that affected the dragons. But also, the whole concept of the TKTs is to help make a difference in our past so that certain things will for sure happen in the future.”

Looking ahead for a few moments to Ashton’s time, we find him taking another time-travel trip, a shorter one this time, to the Magnolia Archive. Going back a little further in time than he had for the dragon healing project, he enlisted the aid of a genie bookwright in adding chapters to three separate books on illnesses of magical creatures. The added chapters contained the prophecy about the Eve of Death Virus. For the writers, the Sapphire Boy used three pseudonyms that were anagrams of his own name, Ashton Ingram. In addition to the one Mr. Zemely had mentioned, Ian Mohs Grant, the accounts in the other two books were under the names of Manias Throng and Nian Grathmos. So Ashton himself was the “prophet” who had foretold this calamity.

Upon returning home, the Sapphire Boy took another quick trip that was not time-travel related. He had suddenly gotten it into his head to deliver half a gallon of blueberry syrup to Esther at her cave in the Himalayas, if she still lived there after all of these years.

Bibor had no trouble finding the cave again; and the conjure woman was indeed there, looking much unchanged from when she had made the dragon cure. This was because she was still taking an elixir to prolong

her life, the elixir in her case being water from the crystal River of Life provided to her by God. Esther was pleased to see Ashton, and was equally pleased with the gift since she still loved all things blueberry.

The next day, Ashton celebrated his fifteenth birthday with an evening party at one of the plantation cafeterias. Looking across the crowded dining room, he nearly dropped his bowl of mint chocolate chip ice cream, that he was pouring grenadine over, when he saw none other than the Diamond Girl who had saved his life walk into the cafeteria. Aube Metz lived in one of the pockets on the plantation; and as she approached the ice-cream bar, Ashton could immediately see why she didn't recognize him: She was a younger version of herself than the one who traveled into the past to save him. (At this time, she looked to be about thirteen or fourteen.)

*So she hasn't yet been sent back to save me,* Ashton's mind mused, as he watched her pour grenadine all over her mint chocolate chip ice cream. This made him smile because he thought he was the only one who liked that combination.

Briefly looking in on the younger version of Tanner, we find him very upset. He had just discovered that his receiving crystal was dark, completely inactive, leading him to believe something had happened to the aftershield of his future self. This was indeed true, and the reason had to do with another time-travel trip taken by the older Diamond Girl shortly after she was sent back to help Ashton.

Entering the older Tanner's den a short while after he sent the message about the virus back to himself, she found and destroyed the aftershield. It didn't even matter that the sorcerer was there, or that he tried to stop her using a grenade-like device that he set off in desperation and that blew up over half of the contents of his den. Aube's shield gift protected her and she swiftly returned home.

Since the aftershield was strictly a one-way device, the older Tanner didn't even know if the crystal had worked to get the message to his younger self. Whether it worked or not, he was lamenting the twelve years of work that had just been destroyed, including all of his research notes. Since he wasn't eidetic, he couldn't remember a lot of this stuff. Plus, he couldn't recreate the aftershield anyway, since the crystal from which it was made had just been reduced to dust by the Diamond Girl.

Why she hadn't killed him, when she easily could have, was a mystery Tanner puzzled long over. Just about any of the gifted who were godly could have given him the answer to this: There was always a chance he could be saved; but this could only happen if he were alive because after a person dies, it is too late.

For Aube's part, she would have said that God had not told her to kill the sorcerer, only destroy his aftershadow. And so she would do as He bade her, as we all should.

After the birthday party, many of those attending headed outside to see a spectacular star shower. In watching the display, Ashton couldn't help but think of his trip back to work with the younger Quin. He had kept some things from his friends of the past, such as that there were more signs of the Endtimes in his time. Some were, of course, subtle. (They had to be, since Jesus Himself said He would be coming "like a thief in the night.") However, the more obvious ones were hard to ignore, like powerful earthquakes, amazing meteor showers, scores of false prophets, and huge volcanic eruptions. Plagues and droughts also seemed to be overtaking the earth. In preparation, Ashton, like many others, kept reminding himself to be ready and stay discerning, while continuing to be patient and enduring, as Revelation 14:12 reminds us. "Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus."

"And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; yea, and on my menservants and my maidservants in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. And I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth beneath, blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke; the sun shall be turned into darkness and the moon into blood, before the day of the Lord comes, the great and manifest day. And it shall be that whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

—Acts 2:17-21





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