

The Promise of the Snow Gryphon



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

The Promise of the Snow Gryphon

The Lost Genie Diaries

“The Lord is not slow about his promise as some count slowness, but is forbearing toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.”

—2 Peter 3:9

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Chapter One

Fairytale Revivals

Clutching the Time Cube tightly and smiling a somewhat nervous smile at the conjure woman, Eizel Mendes stepped through the tapestry time-travel portal to the past where she instantly found herself in a secluded alley in Supercity Ten. As the destination window behind her disappeared in a mere blink, she slipped the Time Cube into a secure pocket before taking a deep breath and heading to the high-rise apartment of her younger self, only a couple of blocks away. Being January (as it had been when she left home), the day was rather chilly.

Eizel walked slowly, so as to have a little time to think. She was using the portal in Esther's cave in the Himalayas because she felt a need to keep most of what she was doing secret from everyone; or nearly everyone, since she was pretty sure that the conjure woman knew what she was up to. This was a correct assumption because Esther did indeed know, including specifics. Being a powerful prophetess, she couldn't help but know, particularly because she heard from God regularly, as she had for most of her life.

In making the arrangements for the trip as clandestinely as possible, Eizel had used dawn pigeons to communicate with Esther since the birds were a little more reliable than message kites, which could stray off course or be intercepted. Out of worry that electronic communications might be monitored, she had avoided use of walnuts, still called such out of tradition, though current models were more the size and shape of hazelnuts.

Although she was using the tapestry portal, rather than the stained glass window at Laurelstone Manor, Eizel's mission was largely connected to the twin plantations in Alabama, where a fair amount of time travel was still going on. In addition to the window in Laurelstone's study, the mirror portal in Africa was also being used regularly by TKTs, which were what Time Key Travelers were still

commonly called even though they were using Time Cubes as well as the Time Key.

The frequency of the time-travel trips was exactly what had prompted Eizel's mission. Going into the past to change things always presented something of a danger to the future. No matter how closely the TKTs followed God's instructions, since human beings could always make mistakes, Eizel was worried about certain things changing, especially with regard to her personal situation. Therefore, she had decided to do something proactive. And having prayed long and hard on the matter before taking any action, she was certain that God was sanctioning what she was doing to protect the past, and the future.

What fond memories, Eizel thought of her first apartment, as she unlocked the door using a shapeshifting feather capable of working in just about any lock.

What a mess! her mind whined as she opened the door and stepped inside. With the fond recollections having painted such a rosy picture, Eizel had forgotten what an incredible slob she was at age eighteen, with clothes and shoes strewn about, dust everywhere, dirty dishes in the sink, and a kitchen table piled so high with whatnots that it couldn't possibly be used for eating a meal.

Having kept journals for most of her life, Eizel knew that this was a time when her younger self had been out of the apartment for several days on a trip to Europe, so there was very little danger of being discovered. Seeing the latest journal of her counterpart on the cluttered table, Eizel smiled in thinking that people of the future, in using journals a lot for reference, had started calling them almanacs. Trends like this tended to come and go. For herself, she still liked to call the ones she kept, journals. Resisting the urge to plant a bible verse or two in the one on the table—because even small things changed in the past might affect the future in unexpected ways—Eizel focused on the task at hand.

The mess in the apartment presented something of a difficulty in finding the two books she was looking for, one being a fairytale anthology and the other a mystery novel. After locating them, and slipping genie-made bookmarks onto page fifty-four of each, she swiftly left the apartment. Heading next to the rooftop of the high rise, Eizel could feel the Holy Spirit telling her she had done the right thing. This

reaffirmed that she was hearing God's voice clearly, and acting appropriately on His instructions. Plus, the genies always worked in godly ways. They wouldn't have created the magical bookmarks if the task was not sanctioned by God, so there was really nothing for her to worry about.

However, she was not quite done for the day because the purpose of her trip was twofold; and she actually felt the second part of her errand to be even more important than the first.

On the roof, she encountered a mimic who was impersonating a doctor, this being common at the time, as the sorcerers in control of the Supercities and work camps were always trying to infiltrate safe places harboring women evading the Law of Four that was forcing them to produce four children each, only to have most of them taken away to be used as slaves or organ donors for the elites. In answer to a call for transportation from the mimic, a nyreg was just landing beside the demon.

Eizel's gift of being able to plant thoughts and dreams into the minds of others didn't just work on humans; and so, the mimic and his transport were no trouble to deal with. In fact, both creatures were instantly incapacitated, their minds flooded with thoughts of blossoming trees, brilliant rainbows, glistening waterfalls, and joyous meadow scenes depicting dryads and nymphs frolicking through mounds of lush grasses and fragrant flowers. Though the effect was temporary, lasting only about three minutes, this gave Eizel plenty of time to unpocket her airbike, unfold it, and take to the skies to put some distance between herself and the city, dodging demons and nyregs as she zipped away into the blue.

Eizel smiled in recalling how she had ridden nyregs in her youth. In fact, she still had one of the whistle devices commonly used to call them; and she probably could have still commanded them well enough, except that she didn't want to ride the nasty creatures that were a reminder of the evils that Satan and his cronies were capable of, and the kind of miscreant lifestyle that she herself had once participated in. Plus, nyregs were prone to spitting acid, even in windy conditions, thus endangering riders. Blessedly, with speeds well exceeding 300mph, the airbike she had brought with her from the future was faster than either demons or nyregs. With few exceptions, the creatures were limited to

the mid-200s in spurts and the low-200s for sustained speeds, though nyregs did know how to use various winds to achieve higher speeds, doing so mainly for longer journeys. However, the speed limitation was one of the reasons why the sorcerers had created flash dragons, often called false dragons, or falsies, since the fakes weren't much like the originals except vaguely in appearance. Eizel smiled again in thinking of how many tumbles sorcerers had taken while riding falsies, since the beasts were even more disagreeable than nyregs in many ways, including commonly engaging in loop-de-loops for the express purpose of unseating their riders. Also, without as much of a protective aura as dragons, many sorcerers simply couldn't handle the speed, since the falsies could fly nearly as fast as their godly counterparts.

Increasing her speed as a nyreg swooped in to spit acid at her, Eizel planted a thought of seventeen monkeys clinging to his neck and wings, which caused the beast to veer, and nearly crash, before the vision wore off sixty seconds later.

In addition to planting thoughts and dreams, Eizel could also read the minds of other creatures, her powers having grown over the years as she learned to make full use of her gift. Indeed, she didn't even need enhancers anymore such as those a sorcerer friend had once developed for her. In thinking of Tanner Ellison, Eizel resisted the urge to visit his younger self (who had just turned eighteen) in Supercity Nine, to perhaps give him a dose of malice equal to some of the no-good things he was often up to at this time. Although the idea was tempting, again, she didn't want to risk changing things with regard to possible effects on the future.

In contemplating the task she had just completed, she realized she needn't have been at all nervous about possibly being discovered in her old apartment because she had a shroud sapphire with her, which would have made her virtually invisible. She could have used the stone on the roof to hide from the mimic and nyreg, but it had just seemed more natural to use her gift. In contact with her skin, the shrouding effect of the black star sapphire could even extend to her airbike, which wasn't a stealth model but was completely soundless, like all airbikes, unless hungry for the trash that fueled them, in which case, they tended to gurgle a bit (like a rumbling tummy) until given old cans, rags, bits of old tires, cardboard, sheetrock crumbles, potato peels, and other such

discards. Except in Eizel's time, things like potato peels and cardboard were nearly always composted, and so had become rather scarce as fuel for airbikes.

Her mind on the sapphire in her pocket, Eizel thought of her friend, Heather Sullivan, the jewel-gifted individual whose tears produced the gems that worked to hide people by drawing on shadows, which were only present because of light, this being an interesting dichotomy, like many others in the world, reminiscent even of Jesus Christ Himself—how He had to die in order to bring us Eternal Life.

While she hadn't been in any kind of danger, Eizel was relieved that she hadn't needed the stone in the apartment, since her younger self had not deviated from the behavior of the past, and none of her horrible friends of that time had unexpectedly shown up.

As with her decision regarding Tanner, in not wanting to mess up the future, Eizel also wouldn't be visiting Heather, whose last name was different in this time. Come to think of it, Heather's true name in the future wasn't Sullivan, but O'Sullivan. She had unofficially shortened it because, in leaving the one-syllable maiden name of Finn behind, she had said, "I'm willing to accept three syllables, but I draw the line at four. It's just too much!" Her husband didn't mind that she preferred Sullivan to O'Sullivan. In truth, he did too, but had only kept the "O" out of tradition.

On the subject of last names, Mendez was, of course, not the last name of Eizel's younger self who was not yet married and had the surname of Gibson, which seemed very distant to the older Eizel. Having turned into quite a different person over the years, many aspects about her former life now seemed hazy, and even strange, almost as though they might have belonged to someone else. In again recalling her former apartment, she thought, *How did I ever function in all that mess?* Her home now was pretty well always neat and tidy, bearing only a few exceptions such as when the grandkids were on extended visits.

Lost in thought, Eizel started in surprise and almost fell from her bike when a fireball as large as a grapefruit nearly hit her from behind. Looking around, she instantly recognized her attacker. *Kemp Fischer, I should have known.* Though one of her former acquaintances, Kemp, of

course, didn't recognize the older version of Eizel, who was over six decades aged from her younger self by this time.

As she dodged another fireball, again choosing not to use her sapphire, Eizel simply planted a thought of a sudden rainstorm into her adversary's mind, not only to hinder his ability to produce fire, but also to make him think he was slipping and sliding from his nyreg, thus forcing him to land. The rainy vision would last five minutes to give Eizel plenty of time to get away before Kemp could recognize the trick by finding himself and his beast perfectly dry and unhindered.

By airbike, the full flight to Eizel's destination might have taken around thirty hours. However, a female thunderbird named Naya happened to be out and about on this day. Noticing the elderly woman on the bike, the thunderbird by thought offered to help with travel. Accepting the offer, as Naya swooped below her, Eizel folded the bike, whereupon, she landed squarely and safely on her new friend's back. (Actually, Naya and Eizel in the future were old friends, but the thunderbird in the here and now didn't yet know this.)

About thirty minutes later, Naya dropped her rider off in a section of rainforest in Madagascar. After receiving a pat of thanks from Eizel, who also used a particular triangle hand gesture to bid the thunderbird farewell, Naya headed home to the U.S., specifically to West Virginia, where her charge (the person she was assigned to protect) happened to live.

The rainforest was where Eizel knew she would find her future protector, who had been visiting Madagascar on this day in history and who had a fabulous memory in the future as to the exact time and location where they had first met; because this was indeed the introduction, since God would not be making the protector assignment until approximately three decades from now.

After introducing herself and securing a promise from her protector, Eizel simply gave a smile and a small farewell wave before returning home through a destination window that automatically appeared as she made a minor adjustment to the Time Cube. The TKTs in her time had figured out how to set roving return windows, so there was no need to make her way back to the spot of the one that had brought her to this time.

Eizel might have wished to have stayed a little longer in the loveliness of the rainforest, except she felt a need to hurry on this day. She seldom time traveled, so her apprehension about staying too long in the past was natural. But maybe she and Ramon could take a trip to Madagascar when she got back home. The couple liked to travel, and both were in good health. Plus, nothing was currently pressing with either the kids or grandkids, though the first great-grandchild was on the way, expected to be born midsummer.

Back in the conjure woman's cave, things didn't seem any different to Eizel than when she had left. *So all's well so far*, she thought. Of course, she might not have known if things had changed and weren't well. But as far as she could tell, she was still saved (as in, a member of Christ's family); and Esther was waiting for her, which was expected since time travel took no time at all in the present, no matter how much time a person spent in the past. In truth, Esther had barely had time to retrieve a book from a shelf less than ten feet from the edge of the tapestry before turning to find Eizel stepping back through the portal.

While nothing seemed to have changed, Eizel was still somewhat anxious to check the pre-trip notes in her journal, which she had made to remind herself as to the exact intent of her mission, in case anything of the present were to change drastically. She had left the journal in the living area of Esther's cave just before following the woman to the enormous chamber at the rear of the dwelling where the tapestry was situated. Since her total mission would necessitate taking a series of time-travel trips over the next few months, Eizel's apprehension was understandable. However, because she could feel the Holy Spirit inside her telling her to relax and not worry, she decided to forego reviewing her notes, and instead put the journal aside when accepting Esther's invitation to join her for coffee and blueberry scones spread with yummy lemon curd.

As if reading Eizel's mind about the journal, as they sat down at the kitchen table, Esther said, "In being led by God, TKTs don't make pre-trip notes as a general rule. God will lead us when we time travel. And He will even fix our mistakes when we make them. We must trust Him."

“I do trust Him,” Eizel responded. “I just don’t always trust myself. It’s so easy to get muddle-headed. Then I wonder if I’m hearing Satan’s voice, and not God’s.”

A fire was crackling merrily in the conjure woman’s fireplace. In gazing into the flames, Eizel reflected on going back in time, her main purpose being just about the opposite of most time-travel trips, which were taken in order to change certain things. Instead, she was trying to make sure things stayed exactly the same. While it might have seemed like a good idea to go back and undo some of the hurts she had caused in her early years, the opposite was actually true because some of those bad things were meant to happen. God had allowed them, for various reasons, one being to draw people to Him, to force them to rely on Him. Plus, anything God wanted stopped would be. In fact, He had arranged counters to Eizel’s past malice many times, mainly using individuals gifted with the ability to block the ugly thoughts and nightmares she was planting. So too had other gifted persons stopped many suicides stemming from the nightmares.

After finishing the coffee and scones, in not being in any great hurry to leave, Eizel wandered around the conjure woman’s den (her lab) in order to check out some of the concoctions that were brewing.

“A sleeping potion,” Esther responded to Eizel’s query about the bright green liquid in a tall beaker.

“And this one?” Eizel asked of a flat orange pill.

“That’s a cure for hiccups.”

“Really, wow!”

“Yes, but it causes a rash, so I still need to tweak it.”

A short while later when Eizel was ready to leave, the pair headed outside, observing a stone spirit descending a steep hill a short distance from the cave entrance. Many nature spirits inhabited the area, part of their job being to protect the conjure woman and help her obtain materials like herbs and berries needed for various projects. So too did they look after the landscape and its many other inhabitants such as birds, animals, bugs, and reptiles. While some people might have dismissed the spirit as being clunky and ordinary, Eizel saw only beauty and grace, particularly the fluid movement that was absolutely lovely, like a gliding breath. Even when coming to a rest at the bottom of the

hill, the spirit was exquisite, like an airy version of a beautiful boulder of granite with the sun just glancing off the various colorful minerals.

“I know,” Esther said, “I think he’s pretty too.”

“So you can read minds, like I can,” Eizel stated, having suspected this might be the case.

“No,” the conjure woman answered, “it was just the look on your face.”

“But you can see into the future, right?”

“Sometimes,” Esther responded. “All sorceresses have the ability. But I chose early on, on God’s instructions, to be a conjure woman.”

“That’s rare among female sorcerers,” Eizel said, in remembering a sorcerer once telling her this.

“Yes,” Esther answered. “But I was well suited to it because I always had a love for flowers, berries, herbs, and whatnot. And I grew to like botany and chemistry.”

Esther was sending a book back to the plantations with Eizel, for deposit in the Labyrinth Library, the main entrance of which was still located under Laurelstone, though the sprawling tunnels and chambers of the library went on for miles and miles in different directions. Amazingly, the book was the exact same fairytale anthology that had been in the apartment of her younger self, and not just the same version by its publication date, but the actual volume. Recognizing a stain on the corner of the cloth cover, Eizel smiled and took this as a sign that all was indeed well in the present; and so, she felt very reassured, to the extent that she didn’t even bother to review her pre-trip notes after dropping the book off at the library and returning home to her cottage situated behind Netherwind, the sister manor to Laurelstone.

Still feeling reassured, particularly because she could feel the presence of her protector nearby (in the back garden), Eizel decided to make a pie. She had some fresh berries from the plantation greenhouses that she often helped the bigfoots and gnomes tend to. Having enough butter to make extra crust, she opted for making two pies, stretching the berries between the two and smiling because they did indeed just stretch.

Rolling out the top crusts, Eizel was thinking about her time-travel project. The first stage was done; now she would have a little time before going again. While she could have taken all four trips one right

after the other and been done with it, she wanted to take her time, mainly to pray and seek ongoing guidance from the Father. This was always a good idea when making plans, rather than rushing, which was how many people end up making mistakes. Plus, she wanted to think some on the matter, to digest everything, which helped her balance her worry with trust. Eizel had very much meant what she said to Esther. She did fully trust God, but she didn't always trust herself. If even one little thing went wrong in the sequence of past events, the whole thing could have tilted the other way. No, she would definitely take things in stages, because that was what was right. She could feel the Holy Spirit telling her this was right, for her, anyway.

After popping the pies into the oven, Eizel made her way to her bedroom to pray and read the bible.

The pie that turned out the prettiest, she took to the gnome family living in a small treehouse only about fifty yards from the rear of the cottage. While gnomes never wanted (or liked) either thanks or compliments for their work, they had over the years grown used to humans sharing things with them. In this case, the family of six much appreciated the pie, particularly because it was incredibly tasty.

Returning to the time in which the younger version of Eizel was living, in another cave in the Himalayas, not too far from Esther's home, Telános was cozying up to his fire in an enormous velvet-covered chair. While being a snow gryphon meant being outdoorsy, especially in the wintertime, Telános also liked coziness and warmth. Plus, he liked to look at the flames, especially because this was sometimes how he got messages from God, in the flames. He also liked furniture—many gryphons did—and most of his kind could fit comfortably into something around the size of a double king bed. Telános' bed was even a little larger than that, with a big canopy covering it, held up by four sturdy posts draped with tapestries that were open to the huge fireplace beside which sat his comfy evening chair, called such because evenings were when he most often sat by the fire.

On a normal evening, Telános might have been looking forward to shortly snuggling up under his stuffed Sherpa bedcovers and resting his head to sleep on his plush flannel pillows. On this evening, however, he was planning an outing. *I'll read for a bit while I'm waiting*, he decided. Telános was waiting because the locations in the U.S. that he

planned to visit were about ten hours earlier than his time at home. *It's only midmorning there*, his brain noted after consulting the mantle clock.

Before settling in to read, he retrieved a lap afghan from the trunk at the foot of his bed, while also turning down his bedcovers to be ready for his return later, so that he could just dive right in. He didn't really need covers to stay warm, but he liked the feeling of being wrapped, mainly because it reminded him of how his mother had held him when he was a little gryphon. She was gone now, along with his father, both killed by a sorcerer; but because this happened over one hundred years previous, Telános was no longer angry about it, especially because he had godly work to focus on. While he wouldn't be officially assigned as a protector for anyone for roughly another thirty years, unofficially, he helped protect the conjure woman, though she didn't need much protecting. Even the nature spirits in the area didn't have much to do as far as protection duties, other than leading visitors astray once in a while. But it was good to remain diligent in this unpredictable world. He had a good view of Esther's cave from his own, which was at a much higher elevation than hers; but with his excellent eyesight, he was able to keep watch at this distance, equating to about sixteen miles.

In keeping with not wanting to be idle, a common trait of most gryphons, Telános often kept busy helping God's children, in various ways such as driving hobgoblins out of villages, and helping to gather peat blocks to fuel stoves in winter. However, his most important task these days was keeping watch on a magical device in his possession. The Time Glass was currently sitting adjacent to the fire in a position directly across from his chair so that he could keep a good eye on it, even from the bed. Time Glasses were each individually designed to perform a unique function, some more complex than others. The one Telános possessed, which was five feet tall, was connected to the promise he made to his future charge who had traveled back in time expressly to exact the promise from him. Mainly a countdown clock, the glass was perhaps simpler than many others, and even so in appearance, though its metal frame was embellished with crystals and the stone top was carved with a weave pattern intertwined with climbing roses. Although hourglass in overall shape, the Time Glass was not connected to a sixty-minute timespan, like traditional hourglasses. And

while sand was flowing through the device, the magical sand didn't just fall downwards, but moved more in a swirled pattern, with some granules on occasion even making their way upwards to the top again after falling.

Gazing at the reflection of the flames in the surface of the glass, Telános reflected on his promise. It had all happened so quickly, his charge just showing up and getting him to agree. While he recognized the person as being his future assignment (from God placing this information into his brain), Telános hadn't really had any time to think; otherwise, he might not have agreed. But he had, mainly because it was hard for any gryphon not to agree to a request from his or her charge, especially one based on good intentions. Then, the Time Glass had arrived at his cave the next morning, as a reminder of the magical contract and as a way of helping keep track of the deadline.

Not quite nine months to go, Telános thought. He would simply need to be patient. Fortunately, patience was a virtue that most gryphons possessed. Plus, waiting gave him plenty of time to read. Settling into his comfy chair and spreading the afghan over his lap, Telános opened a book of fairy tales. Within seconds, he was thoroughly engrossed.

Visiting Supercity Ten in Ohio, a young human happened to be on a hunt for the very book Telános was reading. Salvatore Ricci, a gifted wordsmith who liked to be called Sal, was not alone. While he wouldn't have minded taking a solo trip, his mentor thought he was still a little young, at age thirteen, to be visiting the Supes on his own. Sal's mentor was none other than the famous writer, E.R. Tremaine, better known as Em to most of her friends, or Ms. Tremaine to folks as young as Sal. Since she didn't often visit the cities, and because Sal didn't have a protector assigned to him at this time, Em had sent a puck troll along for both company and protection for her young protégé. Pipac was currently perched on Sal's shoulder.

The rookh that had brought the pair to the city (depositing them in an alley) had swiftly departed, which was not a problem. When ready to leave the city, Sal would simply call another by thought. Since the giant magical blackbirds were highly telepathic, and liked to carry godly people around, one would generally answer a mind summons in a matter of minutes.

Sal and Pipac were in Supe-10 to visit a couple of hidden libraries, which nearly all of the cities had. These facilities were, in general, not as well organized as the libraries in many of the self-sustaining communities outside of the Supes. Therefore, books were a little harder to find, even with the help of those running them, most often eidetic individuals having perfect memory.

As a lover of fairy tales, Sal was on a very personal mission. He, like many others, was extremely disappointed in what had happened over the years to many of the world's most cherished stories, which had been changed drastically. Fairy tales were supposed to teach lessons. In the rewrites, wholly inspired by Satan, moral lessons were removed, particularly anything to do with Christianity. Thus, the newer stories had practically no meaning, but were mainly fluff and nonsense, serving only as shallow entertainment, from which no one learned much of anything, except perhaps a few unhealthy values and habits.

The changes had been going on for nearly a century, to the extent that many of the fairy tales bore no resemblance at all to the originals. For example, the original story of "Cinderella" was not as much about a ball, or pretty dresses, or gaining a prince's favor, but more about being kind, even-tempered, and forgiving. Instead of taking revenge, Cinderella forgave her wicked stepmother and stepsisters, and they came to live with her at the castle. "The Red Shoes" was originally about the sin of vanity, and a young girl trying to find redemption, which could be found only in God, and in suffering. In fact, the main character asked to have her feet cut off so that she could no longer sin in the vain manner that had overtaken her. When she got to heaven, because she was redeemed, her sins were not remembered by God. In the toned-down versions of this classic, vanity was actually celebrated, along with achieving the world's version of success at all costs, including the cost of a soul. "The Silver Skates" was originally about the right way to extend charity, the importance of working, and helping others to succeed rather than focusing on ourselves. Rewritten, the story became about coveting, competing, and acquiring desires at all costs.

As time progressed, more and more changes were made to classic stories, to suit political correctness and remove anything that might make readers feel uncomfortable, or be shocking, such as a young girl

having her feet cut off. Never mind that a shock to the system might be a good thing for certain people, to curb unhealthy ideals such as vanity, coveting, and trampling on others to achieve goals.

In recent decades, activists had even lobbied to have many classic books rewritten to address the issue of making gender pronouns neutral, which made the stories almost unreadable. They made no sense. But this was the trend. In bending to pressure from lobbyists, many writers and publishers decided to change the correctness of the language, and shame anyone who didn't go along with the changes. So too did those forcing this agenda target learning programs. This resulted in chaos in education systems, particularly in elementary schools, because the English language was already one of the most difficult languages to learn, containing vast quantities of idioms and other peculiarities. Adding more complexities ended up putting a huge burden onto young brains. Therefore, many grade-school children basically never learned to either write or converse correctly, and thus ended up struggling for much of their lives to communicate well with others.

Activists pushing this agenda should have created an entirely new language, rather than changing one that had worked just fine for centuries. Sadly, perhaps the result of laziness or a lack of creative insight, they didn't. Instead, pandering to a special interest group claiming that feelings were being hurt, they decided to hurt mass quantities of children, making their path through life even more complicated and treacherous than it already would have been. Blessedly, people eventually recognized the insanity of what was happening; and finally, after a couple of decades of this incredibly damaging nonsense, schools began educating children correctly again.

However, the damage to books had already been done. Therefore, Sal had made it his mission to find original copies of fairytale classics that had been changed; though with many books banned and burned over the years, it was proving a somewhat difficult task.

Telános had just arrived in Supercity Ten, for the purpose of checking on his future charge, who at this time was living in an apartment in one of the high rises. In contrast to his flashy golden cousins (also known as regular gryphons), Telános was unlikely to be noticed when out and about because he had been especially designed by God to blend in perfectly with pale stones, clouds, light-colored smoke,

and such. Indeed, he was rarely even observed during his city travels because his camouflage could easily work with factory smokestacks, dumpsters, retaining walls, etc. However, to the trained eye, and especially with the sun shining on him, his form was visible, not only his outline, but also many details of his glistening white fur and feathers, adorned with soft gray speckles and streaks, from the tip of his sharp beak to the fluff on the end of his furred tail.

In checking on his charge, Telános would resist interfering. He was simply visiting out of curiosity, to see how things were going. And with his keen eyesight, he could keep his distance. Although both city operations and populations were now largely centralized into about twenty square miles, the whole of Supe-10 extended well over a hundred miles, both width and breadth. From a distance of about fourteen miles, while perched on the top of an office building, Telános was merely observing his future charge, who was simply sitting on a rooftop deck and reading. This was, of course, a younger version of the person who had traveled back in time to exact the promise from him.

Human beings can be very clever, Telános had to admit. However, he also had to admit that he felt a little manipulated. But he could understand the reasoning behind the manipulation, especially the worry. Telános himself sometimes worried, particularly about whether or not he would be able to keep the promise he had made. He felt he probably could; after all, it would be very unusual for a snow gryphon not to keep his word. Plus, he had to consider the serious nature of making a promise. In pondering this, one of his favorite bible verses sprang to mind, Numbers 30:2. “When a man vows a vow to the LORD, or swears an oath to bind himself by a pledge, he shall not break his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth.” As far as keeping his word, Telános considered making a vow to a human very similar to making a vow to God. And the fact that he was a gryphon, not a man, also made very little difference to his way of thinking.

After only a couple of minutes of observation, something else caught Telános’ eye, in the form of a human with a puck troll on one shoulder and a hairy vetch on the other. Because the camouflage abilities of vetches could extend to other creatures, the trio was barely visible, and mainly only so because Sal was on the move, walking at a brisk pace. Godly people often used this means of safely traversing the

cities, especially since hairy vetches, living in the Supes in great numbers, liked to seek out and help godly people. Other methods of safe travel included use of shroud mirrors, enormice, and special sapphires. Some travelers also donned rose-colored glasses, produced by bagicals (magical bags), to be able to see invisible and camouflaged creatures like gremlins, stealth hobs, and other unseen forces that might pose a threat to them.

As Telános watched, the boy and his companions were suddenly on the run, having come under attack by a mimic wearing a version of rose-colored glasses, specifically to spot those using various shrouds. Designed by sorcerers and commonly called spy-specs, these devices had only recently come into use in the cities.

Determined to help, Telános took off and sped towards their location, of some five miles in the distance. However, his intervention would turn out to be largely unnecessary because the godly group was hardly helpless. In fact, they were more than capable of dealing with not only the mimic, but also the two regular demons that had joined the chase.

Turning to face his pursuers, Sal simply used one of his favorite methods of dealing with evil beings, a flashcard, which was an old-fashioned wordsmith trick, but was nonetheless effective. However, since Sal was still learning the nuances of using flashcards, the word “freeze” written on the card in a certain style and in icy-blue marker, ended up freezing the miscreants in a literal sense, basically into ice statues, from which they would not thaw for several hours.

“Oops,” said Sal, as he had only intended to freeze them in place, not in the sense of a chill. While he had some flashers (as he liked to call them) already made up, he also carried cards and markers in a jacket pocket. This was one he had hurriedly scrawled as he ran; and the letters of “freeze,” though appropriately slanted forward to suggest the sudden stop, were too elongated, like icicles. Plus, he should have used a red marker, to register on the subconscious like a stop sign or red light. Obviously, he needed more practice. He hadn’t run this one by his mentor, so he would need to consult her upon returning home. Sal’s family had recently moved from New Hampshire to the twin plantations precisely to be closer to Ms. Tremaine. His family liked the warmer

temperatures of the South in winter, as well as the friends they were making in their new community.

Upon observing the screeching halt and crackling ice coating the three pursuers, Pipac's eyes became wide with awe at the power of his young human friend. The hairy vetch, on the other hand, wasn't particularly impressed; however, he was excited. Leaping from Sal's shoulder, he landed on the frozen head of the mimic, before bouncing over to the heads of each of the regular demons in turn, after which, he returned to the head of the mimic. He then repeated the head-bouncing moves, very rapidly, five times more, giggling as he did so because he was thoroughly enjoying this game he had just invented for himself, popping from head to head to head, over and over again.

Boy, it doesn't take much to make a hairy vetch happy, Sal thought.

Telános was just landing nearby as the vetch made his fifth circuit of the three frozen heads.

"Hello!" Sal exclaimed upon noticing the snow gryphon. Since puck trolls never spoke aloud, but communicated mainly by gesturing (and occasionally by drawing or writing things out), Pipac simply waved at the new arrival.

Because puck trolls also didn't communicate with others by thought, Telános felt it was polite to speak aloud when in this particular company. Plus, this was how most gryphons spoke to human beings anyway, just by normal verbal communication, though they had telepathic abilities very similar to those of rookhs, thunderbirds, wind horses, firebirds, and dragons. "Hello," he returned to Sal, while nodding to Pipac as names were given by way of introductions.

The hairy vetch had only briefly paused in his bouncing to take note of the gryphon, and then had once more begun his game. However, his services wouldn't be needed again on this day because Telános very graciously offered to take Sal and Pipac anywhere they needed to go in the city.

"That's very nice of you," Sal said, before explaining that they were on their way to visit a secret library.

Being always interested in visiting libraries, especially secret ones, Telános was very excited to be going along, and became doubly so when he discovered that this young human was looking for the very book he had been reading, and had actually brought with him in a little

satchel that just fit under his left wing and that he often used to tote books to and from libraries, or simply for handy access for reading, as had been the case today.

In showing the book to Sal, who was fairly astounded, Telános said, “I’d offer to let you take it, but I need to return it next week to a hidden library in England.” The particular library he was referring to was located in a series of catacombs.

“No, no, I’m pretty sure I’ll find another copy,” Sal said. “At least, the librarian I talked to earlier was pretty sure of the location.”

“Oh, good,” Telános replied. “I never miss a due date when I borrow books, so I’d hate to start now.” He also wanted to finish reading the book because it contained the original versions of many of his favorite fairy tales, including “The Ugly Duckling” and “The Emperor’s New Clothes.”

With Pipac still on his shoulder, Sal hopped onto the back of Telános who took off swiftly. The hairy vetch, still popping from head to head to head, would continue his game for some time, until the demon trio was nearly thawed. Then he would be off to find some of his friends, or maybe other godly travelers to help.

“I think it’s a good omen that you have the very book I’m looking for,” Sal said to Telános as they flew. “Like, I’m sure we were meant to meet today, and I’m sure I’ll find what I’m looking for.”

Telános agreed with this.

They were heading to an old rowhome in a rubble area at the fringe of the city’s centralization, about four miles from where they had encountered the demons. The home, still fairly well intact and being kept up by a pair of eidetic librarians, was guarded by a resident puck troll named Barkley, who was a friend to a local firebird that also helped protect the house, as did a grouping of magical topiaries living in a nearby apartment courtyard.

Landing on the roof, they accessed the home by a wide pair of attic windows that Telános just barely fit through. Inside the roomy attic, behind a screen of draped blankets, they discovered a trompe l’oeil painting, the scene of which depicted a large library. The painting had long ago been brought to life by a puck troll, who was none other than Pipac’s father, Pizzo. Brought to life in this case meant the painting was a fully-functioning library, which various godly creatures could access

and which books could be added to or borrowed from at any time. This incredibly real-life painting had been done by renowned artist Louetta Nolan, in the height of her secretive activities for a group known as Art Moles. For many years, the library had provided access to forbidden literature for people in the city. When checked out of the library, many books, magazines, and newspapers magically changed in appearance to look like sea shells, tie pins, refrigerator magnets, hair barrettes, wrist bands, and the like. This was a result of help from the genies, who delighted in assisting godly people, as well as thwarting sorcerers whenever possible. All over the world, libraries such as this had been established over the past several decades precisely because so many books had been banned and were being destroyed by Torch Squads overseen by the sorcerers. This particular library also acted as a safe haven for artwork, also highly targeted by Torch Squads based on insane laws, as well as personal malice. Thus, many paintings and tapestries adorned its walls; and groupings of baskets, pottery, and sculptures were displayed in various alcoves.

Several visitors were just leaving the library as Sal, Pipac, and Telános entered. This included a teacher and three utility workers who had decided to stay in the city after the massive uprisings (nearly a year past now) that had liberated about ninety percent of the enslaved populations of Supercities worldwide.

This was precisely what had prompted the centralizations, because it was impossible to keep up operations on such a large scale with so few workers. The sorcerers were still in charge, but were now treating people better, to keep more from leaving. Already there was talk of abandoning Supes Five and Thirteen, and integrating the populations into the remaining cities. The Council of Twos, the governing body for the U.S. Supercities, had just about decided that twelve out of fourteen of the Supes surviving was not bad, considering what had happened. They had had few resources with which to push back against the uprisings; and with no way to reverse what had happened, those in charge were now simply having to go with the flow. If they had stopped to think about it, the sorcerers might have thanked their lucky stars that the cities were not taken over by the liberating forces; though this was unlikely since the main goal of the Underground Army (with help from a secret navy known as W'eeppers) had been simply to free the

oppressed. Unknown to the majority of sorcerers, all of this had been by divine design, helped along by sorcerers who had converted to Christianity, the secret converts currently numbering nearly one in four of the sorcerer population worldwide.

With regard to the book Sal was searching for, blessedly, there was a copy in this library, which was easily borrowed for use in the Labyrinth Library so that the genies working there could duplicate it. And, often being known as the Great Multipliers, duplicate it they would, for distribution to libraries, schools, and even private homes all over the world, so that all could enjoy the stories as they were meant to be read, with lessons and religious elements fully intact.

Sal and Telános were definitely meant to meet up on this day because the gryphon, using his excellent eyesight, spotted another volume of fairy tales in a pile of books on a table halfway across the library. Using a walnut to call to a librarian friend of his, Sal soon discovered the book to be on the list of desired acquisitions for the Labyrinth Library. And so, he would be taking it back as well. This happened to be the exact book with the stained cover that had been in Eizel's apartment, the book at this time, of course, still being a younger version of the one Esther had given to the older version of Eizel to take to the future version of the Labyrinth Library.

Ten days had passed since a roving librarian had liberated the anthology from the younger Eizel's apartment, an enormouse helping to sneak her in and out. Like rookhs and vetches, enormice very much enjoyed helping godly people, though the fluffy, blue-accented mice were much too large to fit on a shoulder, but instead tended to trot alongside people to extend their camouflage to them. The older version of Eizel had just left the apartment, an hour before the rover's visit. By that time, the genie-made bookmark had already worked its magic. The book had not been an original, but was one in which changes had been made. Thanks to the magic of the genies, it was now completely restored to the original text.

While some might have wanted to cry foul in defense of those doing the rewriting, most people of good sense felt the stories should not have been changed (more like desecrated) in the first place. In fact, the original writers probably would have been mortified. If people were going to make these sorts of drastic changes, they should have started

with their own stories, instead of tearing to shreds the works of others. Sadly, those making the changes had limited minds, not capable of much creative thought, let alone quality writing. But this was often the case with people who deny Christianity without doing any research into the Truth—that of the completely unlimited and supernatural power of Christianity that transcends, confounds, and even surpasses both known sciences and just about anything else most people can discover, discern, or even imagine.

As they were leaving the library, Telános suggested a visit to one of his favorite literary spots—a hidden book depository in Supercity Eight in Illinois. Finished with their errands for the day and not being in any hurry to head home, Pipac and Sal gladly accepted the invitation.

With the snow gryphon's incredible flight speed, they might have reached Supe-8 in less than five minutes, except for running into an early model of a flash dragon just after taking off from the row-house roof. While few falsies existed at this time, numbering less than a hundred worldwide, they were already becoming quite a danger and a nuisance. This one, after sending a blast of fire from his throat at his prey, swooped in to slash with flashing talons at the gryphon, human, and puck. Blessedly, Telános was able to dodge both the fire blast and the slashing swoop.

Since flash dragons had speeds nearly matching those of real dragons, this was a creature a gryphon couldn't outrun; and while Telános might have wanted to turn and fight, he was worried about the safety of his companions. And so, he opted for stealth instead, moving swiftly upwards to meld with a stretch of billowing clouds. The strategy worked, as the falsie couldn't at all distinguish between the gryphon and the clouds, the riders also being protected as the camouflage magically extended to them. From this higher position, the godly trio quietly observed the flash dragon make several passes below in search of them, before giving up and streaking off in a southwardly direction.

Ugly fellow, Telános thought, as he watched the creature zoom away.

Pipac happened to be thinking the same thing; correctly, as it were, because falsies were not at all pretty like real dragons whose colors were much varied and often extremely vibrant, whereas, most flash

dragons were limited to a range of rather sickly-looking pale greens. But despite not being pretty, they were definitely worthy of notice, based on the danger; therefore, word was spreading rapidly amongst the godly about these new evil creations of the sorcerers.

Once he was sure the danger was gone, Telános continued on to Supe-8, specifically to an old building in the heart of the city, the basement of which contained the book depository situated inside an old bank vault, the façade of which was camouflaged by the spell of a magician to look like a large utility panel to the eyes of the ungodly. Though smaller than many libraries, the vault was still roomy enough for a gryphon to fit inside; except Telános had to be careful not to jostle the books lining every inch of the walls, or the tall stacks crowded together on several long tables. Floating shelves were also drifting about, needing dodging on occasion. Sal too could barely maneuver around, mainly because several families were visiting the library, some with very young children who seemed more interested in greeting the snow gryphon than in continuing to peruse the books. In truth, Telános liked to read to the children frequenting this particular library, and today would be no exception. As they crowded around sitting cross-legged in front of him, he chose “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves” from the book in his satchel and began to read, while Pipac and Sal cruised the library. While the pair didn’t find anything they were specifically looking for on this day, both felt they would be interested in coming back again sometime.

After the visit to the library, Telános flew Sal to Laurelstone, afterwards taking Pipac home to Doyle Mansion roughly fifty miles from the twin plantations. Upon dropping the puck off in the back gardens, the snow gryphon made his way home, tumbling into his comfy bed as soon as he got there. The moment his feathered head met his flannel pillow, Telános began to dream of magic passwords, hidden treasures, and other such fairytale things.

Chapter Two

Mysteries and Discoveries

Meanwhile, on Lion Mountain in Tennessee, Chase Linn (whom everyone called Linn) was watching something of a real-life fairy tale playing out before his eyes, of the romance sort, that is.

Bernadette Hayes, the blacksmith in his community, had just thrown Bear Hammermill, the man in charge of all construction on Lion Mountain, out of her workshop; literally, in a physical sense, by a hefty heave-ho, which might have been a difficult task for any other woman, except that Bernadette (whom most people called Bern) was not only a rather beefy lady blacksmith, she also had supernatural strength. This was a gift Bear too possessed, but had not been inclined to use to prevent his ejection from the shop, mainly because he knew he had been something of a pest lately, in asking the blacksmith for certain deadlines to be moved up for projects, such as a loft guardrail and custom door hardware, even though he knew she had a busy schedule lately working on nearly a dozen pieces of farm equipment to get them ready for the spring planting season.

Landing on his backside some thirty feet from the swinging barn doors of the workshop, Bear scrambled to his feet before trotting off, somewhat meekly because Bern had followed him out the door, shouting, “AND STAY OUT!”

While Bear and Bern couldn’t yet see that they were destined to form a special connection (in the not-so-distant future), many people in the area already knew, including Linn, who was smiling broadly at watching Bear hasten away.

And speaking of special connections, Linn was on his way to the blacksmith shop precisely because of his connection with Quin Brinker. While the pair had known each other all their lives, Valentine’s Day was fast approaching, and this would be their first celebrated together as boyfriend and girlfriend.

Linn approached the shop somewhat slowly and cautiously, though Bern was expecting him, and would of course never have considered giving someone in an airchair a toss like she had Bear. But being prudent was always a good idea. In this case, by the time he tentatively knocked on the workshop door, Bern had calmed down and was ready to cordially receive the visitor.

Despite being busy, the blacksmith had found time to help Linn with making a Valentine's gift for Quin—a framed picture. Having long had an interest in photography, Linn had taken the picture of Cuoré, Quin's longtime protector; and Bern was making the frame for the shot, out of horseshoes, which might have seemed strange for a picture of a dragon, except that Quin had a special love for horses, from having grown up around them at the plantations, specifically the ones working in the hippotherapy program. The frame was almost done, and was lovely. Linn especially admired that several of the horseshoes had been made into hearts.

Expecting the frame to be completed by the end of the day, Bern informed Linn that she would have her apprentice, a somewhat sullen and scrawny man named Gabe, deliver it to Linn's technology lab late in the afternoon.

Since he was planning to spend the entire day in his lab, Linn simply said, "I'll look forward to seeing it." Using an armband device to transfer funds, he then paid Bern in credits, the common payment system used by most of the self-sustaining communities.

"In case she's there..." Linn started to say, referring to Quin.

"I'll have it wrapped in paper," Bern hastened to assure him, as she was always careful with gifts, so as not to ruin anyone's surprise.

As he zipped off to his lab, Linn smiled the whole way in anticipation of giving the gift to Quin.

He would also need to think of something special as a gift for her birthday. They were the same age, and would turn seventeen within just days of each other in early March. Already, several of their friends were planning a joint party for them.

Meanwhile, nearby, Linn was not the only one who had observed Bear getting kicked out on his butt. Lydydu had too, and the thunderbird was chuckling while thinking, *Serves him right; he's being too forward, even though he doesn't realize yet exactly what he's doing.* This was

correct, as Bear currently had himself convinced he was only interested in the deadlines of certain projects. However, in a short while, he would come to recognize that he was definitely more interested in the blacksmith herself than in any of the items she was working on.

The next afternoon, Quin happened to be visiting Lion Mountain, but not to see Linn; in fact, she was keeping her visit on this day a secret from him because she was working on a special gift for him. For the past three weeks, she had been taking knitting lessons from Meg Washburn who, at age nine, was already a fabulous knitter. Quin had already made a hat and was close to finishing a scarf for Linn for Valentine's Day. When finished, she thought she might try her hand at a sweater for his birthday.

Cuoré had brought Quin from the twin plantations to the Mountain, but had shrunk himself down to burnished dove form to be less visible so that Linn would be less likely to see him and suspect that Quin was around. And while it was true that a dove by appearance was less obvious than a dragon, Telános had no trouble spotting Cuoré's glistening white form perched on a limb in the tallest elm on the south side of the cabin that Meg and her family called home.

The white dragon was also aware of the gryphon, though he could only sense rather than see him because Telános was perfectly melded with the pale stones of one of the six stacked gardens situated about forty yards from the tall elm. Since a snow gryphon was unlikely to be any sort of threat, Cuoré simply ignored him.

Telános often visited Lion Mountain, mainly to see the changes to the terrain. And, indeed, the Mountain, originally intended as a refuge for God's children, was still supernaturally growing, though less so now than in the past, mainly because there were presently more safe places in the world for people to live. The changes had for several decades been rapid, and even extreme, with new hills and valleys popping up practically overnight to accommodate more and more residents. Although the Mountain itself took up no more actual space on the continent than it originally had as one of the mid-sized peaks of the Smoky Mountains, many once-close settlements quickly became distant from one another, with miles upon miles of new farmlands, woods, and even lakes separating them. Quite a few people had moved over the years to stay close to family and friends. Now, the changes were much

more gradual and less noticeable, though Telános' trained eye could tell that a nearby pond was nearly a third larger than it had been on one of his visits the previous summer.

It also took a trained eye to see a tiny wood spirit on the branch of an apricot tree a short distance from the cluster of stacked gardens. The bark burp was called such because of its bouncing movements that made tree bark look like it might be burping. When not in motion, the spirit simply looked like a knot. Although small, at barely the size of a thick quarter, if any unfriendlies were to gain access to the Mountain, the burp—having complete command over trees, vines, grasses, and such—would be capable of defending as well as any fire spirit or water waif could. However, the little burp was unlikely to have to defend much, since the spirits on the borders of Lion Mountain didn't let much of anything evil get past them, only perhaps the occasional gremlin, which most human beings were capable of dealing with on their own.

From his position beside the stacked garden, Telános could see Quin and Meg well enough through a cabin window. The girls were knitting while listening to a bible lesson broadcast on a walnut. Possessing excellent hearing along with his excellent eyesight, the gryphon enjoyed the lesson. And he enjoyed watching the knitting. Indeed, this was how he had picked up the skill for himself, by observing. So far, in addition to his lap afghan, he had knitted a muffler and mittens for his future charge. While he wouldn't be officially assigned as protector for many years, he would put them away until later. *Everyone likes a warm neck and hands*, Telános had thought, as he carefully stowed the items into the trunk at the foot of his bed. He was also thinking of knitting a bedspread for the husband and wife living in Turkey who had raised the Angora goats and spun the beautiful wool yarn for his knitting projects.

After about twenty minutes of watching the mesmerizing knitting activity, Telános shook himself free. *I've dawdled long enough*, he thought, since he hadn't come to the Mountain on this day to observe knitting. Nor had he particularly come to note terrain changes. Instead, he had a specific purpose.

Taking off and heading to a nearby valley, he slowly circled in flight while making a series of dips, during which, he hovered just above the ground in order to breathe on various tall grasses and weeds.

Unknown to most creatures, the breath of a snow gryphon could create frost flowers, which many people absolutely delighted in discovering and taking photographs of, particularly because the lovely shapes often resembled much more than flowers. In fact, more than half of Telános' creations came out looking like long ribbons, elaborate bows, swans, unicorn horns, butterflies, scrolling vines, and even a variety of undersea creatures. But the flower-shaped ones probably were his favorites, particularly those that came out looking like roses, because he absolutely adored roses, of all sorts. Being icy, these roses were, of course, all white, though they did have some interesting tones of blues, grays, and greens mixed in; and when the sunlight shone on them, many held lovely pink and peach hues.

By the time he finished, roughly an hour later, about two thousand frost flowers filled the valley, these lovely artistic creations (like many things visible all around us) lending proof to God's existence. Not only had God given snow gryphons this ability, He had led Telános to make the frost flowers on this day. Due to the uprisings and outpourings of the Supercities in the past spring, there were quite a few new settlers on the Mountain, many of whom had never learned about God or Christianity thanks to the restrictive atmosphere they had been forced to live in for so long. Now, along with the ability to read bibles openly, attend church services, and converse freely with neighbors, many were discovering the Truth and finding their way into the open arms of Christ. Fantastic sights like the frost flowers often helped give a nudge in the direction of believing, and accepting the offer of Salvation. In fact, Telános' creations had the power to melt hearts frozen nearly as solid as the frost flowers themselves.

Landing on an overlook to survey his work, Telános quietly quoted aloud Psalm 147:16-18. "He gives snow like wool; he scatters hoarfrost like ashes. He casts forth his ice like morsels; who can stand before his cold? He sends forth his word, and melts them; he makes his wind blow, and the waters flow."

And, indeed, a small brook was fast flowing far below, snaking its way through the valley floor, bubbling merrily along despite the cold, the water carrying small tinkling ice chunks to some unknown destinations afar, where the valley might not particularly care to sojourn, but the stream found it must.

Telános smiled because the frost of his breath hanging in the cold air had visibly formed the words he had recited. *Yet more proof of God's existence, and the power of His Word*, he thought.

While no human beings were presently around to notice, the words in the air would stay in the valley for some time, and would end up captivating a couple of hikers meandering by in the late evening. One of the pair was a non-believer who, blessedly, would shortly come to accept Christ. The man would always remember the frosty air-words as being part of how he had forever become a treasured member of God's family. He would also remember the lovely frost flowers. With the day being fairly cold, and a good portion of them in the shade, many would last for quite a while.

Snow gryphons sometimes made frost flowers in warmer areas of the world, like the Hawaiian Islands and Madagascar, just to confound people as to how the exquisite works possibly could have formed, this being but a small part of the mystery that God has built into the world, just to make us wonder about unexplainable things, of which there are many, with some serving as a reminder that we aren't meant to understand everything, but we're more meant to simply accept and believe.

The next morning, fifteen-year-old Zinnia Summerhaven, (better known as Zin) ended up discovering the frost flowers on her way to visit Linn at his lab. Actually, it was her gryphon protector, Magsen, who first spotted from the air the white of the ice sculptures standing out amongst the golds and beiges of the winter vegetation in the valley. Being a regular gryphon, Magsen couldn't much hide like Telános, except perhaps in occasionally blending in with a fresh haystack or two; though her golden fur and feathers tended to shimmer even more than bright clean hay in sunshine. Zin was Em's daughter and lived at Doyle Mansion, along with Magsen and her twin sister, Halli, who was Em's protector. Pipac's family also resided at the mansion; and two gnomes lived in a treehouse on the grounds, in company with various other magical garden inhabitants like rain ripples, snoils, snieffs, and bugbrites.

Zin and Magsen only briefly landed in the valley to survey the flowers before deciding to go get Linn, since they felt he also would want to see the lovely ice creations.

Linn was already at work in his lab. He had just graduated from high school, and so could spend as much time as he wanted to on various projects, while gradually taking college courses. There was no hurry with regard to college, as he had come to realize that he often ended up learning more from on-the-job training than from any classes. As a gifted technologist, he didn't even spend much time anymore with his mentors—a machinist named Jitterbug and a biomedical engineer, mostly called Hank, though his real name was Bartholomew. Having already surpassed both men in skill, Linn now mainly only relied on them for collaboration on certain projects, rather than for learning new things.

With regard to high school, Zin still had nearly three years to go; but her schedule was flexible. Being a magician, she had a lot of other responsibilities aside from her education; and school was easy for the diligent and hardworking (like herself) to make up. Quin too kept a flexible schedule. As the Protector of Dragons, she had to, because her work kept her extremely busy as well. She would likely graduate in about a year.

The valley containing the frost flowers had once been only about three miles from Linn's lab. Now, it was more like twelve. Since this was more distance than what he was used to traveling in his airchair, he used an airbike, one specially outfitted with safety straps. On the way, flying alongside Magsen, Linn considered the expansion of the Mountain. His home was still fairly near his lab, which had also remained close to the local church, cafeteria, and various friends. *God knows how to keep people where they need to be*, he thought. This was completely true, as it was mainly only the areas between communities that were still expanding.

By the time Linn, Zin, and Magsen reached the valley, nearly a dozen other people were there. With the discovery of the frost flowers, word was spreading, and not just amongst people because three bigfoots soon showed up as well to admire the icy artworks.

Linn had, of course, brought his camera, and began right away snapping shots. Since Zin didn't have a camera, she encouraged her friend to take plenty of pictures, which he would later share with her, and others.

As the valley visitors wandered about, they gave names to some of the creations: a bunch of crocuses, a pumpkin vine, the tail of a swift, a Christmas bow, three roses, a cornucopia, big gerbil whiskers, a swallowtail butterfly, two sea anemones, a nosegay of pansies, a ladies' fan, a huge hunk of ribbon candy, and so on.

Zin, Linn, and Magsen stayed over an hour, enjoying their time in the lovely setting that many more people were rapidly discovering, along with creatures such as foxes, birds, and enornice.

Before leaving, Zin performed a longevity spell on a patch of about a hundred of the icy flowers, ribbons, butterflies, etc. Because she was such a powerful magician, the ones touched by her spell would last several weeks, even in full sunshine on days with temperatures well above freezing. Watching his friend perform the spell gave Linn a good idea for a possible birthday present for Quin, something Zin could perhaps help him with. Heading back to the lab, the pair swiftly hatched a plan for a joint gift, which was more than appropriate since the three had been friends for many years. In fact, they had once been known as the Three Musketeers, for as much time as they used to spend practically glued together before Linn moved to the Mountain and everyone got just incredibly busy.

In addition to wanting to see her friend, Zin had come to the lab on this day to pick up a new walnut for her mother, who had only an older model and wanted a newer one, which Linn had whipped up in about five minutes the day before. Thus, it was ready to go. Handing the small package to Zin, he said, *See you later*.

Thanks, bye, Zin replied, also giving him a hug before leaving the lab and hopping aboard Magsen to return to home.

By the time the pair was airborne, Linn was already looking at the pictures he had taken on a viewer. There were so many of them, it was going to take some time to sort through them all.

Ethan Stanley happened to be leaving the Mountain at the same time as Zin, though he was heading in a different direction. He might have been riding his favorite horse, Wendi Lee, except for wanting to hurry. Plus, he was heading out over an ocean, so traveling by rookh was definitely more sensible on this day.

Though he was but seventeen, Ethan spent a good deal of time these days away from his home, which happened to be a cabin situated very

near Linn's lab. However, he basically had a second home at the twin plantations (in a boys' dorm), which put him in just the right spot to be available to go on many time-travel missions. In fact, he was already one of the leaders of the TKTs, though not the overall leader because that title belonged to Dell Brinker, Quin's father. And while Ethan would eventually become the overall leader, this fact was not yet known to him because it was an event not set to occur for some time. So for now, we must return to what we know of the present day, where Ethan was on a rookh over the Atlantic, heading for Scotland.

Telános also happened to be out and about on this day, on his way to the U.S., and he spotted the pair, after which, he decided to follow them, out of curiosity.

Ethan was on his way to Scotland to find his friend, Alex Rodriguez, who was also a resident of Lion Mountain, Meg's brother, in fact. Though not quite fifteen, Alex too tended to spend a lot of time away from home these days, for various good reasons, but mainly related to his gift—that of being able to solve mysteries, even great ones. Currently, he was looking into that of the Loch Ness Monster.

With the rookh's keen eyesight helping, Ethan soon found Alex, who was well bundled up because it was presently very cold in Scotland. In fact, it was snowing.

Telános had landed nearby, amidst several mounds of snow. As he listened in on the boys' conversation, he rolled about in the fluffy softness. (Rolling in fresh snow happened to be one of his favorite activities.)

"Nothing yet," Alex reported, with regard to his search for the mythical creature.

Ethan was not surprised. While he knew his friend was a good puzzle-solver, Nessie had eluded even the most diligent of pursuers for over a century, so there was no reason to think that anything would change anytime soon.

"So, what's up?" Alex queried, as he was rather surprised by Ethan's appearance.

"I need help with a special project," Ethan replied.

"Okay, no problem," said Alex, who was pretty much always up for helping a friend. Plus, he could come back anytime to look for the

monster. The lake wasn't going anywhere; and, likely, Nessie wasn't either.

Since Telános was pretty much always up for special projects, he decided to offer his assistance, revealing himself by popping up out of the stretch of snowy mounds and bounding towards Alex and Ethan, who were fairly startled by his appearance; though the rookh, who had been waiting nearby, wasn't, having already sensed the snow gryphon close by.

Shaking loose snow from his fur and feathers as he skidded to a stop in front of them, Telános introduced himself to Ethan, while nodding hello to Alex whom he had met once before, though the gryphon hadn't made a very good impression on the teen on that occasion. In knowing this, Telános hoped to start off on a better foot this time.

Since Alex was a good-natured sort and almost always willing to give folks a second chance, he was willing to accept the offer. Ethan was too, especially in knowing that gryphons were godly creatures, unlikely to be in league with anyone crooked, evil, or any other sort of unsavoriness.

Instead of calling a second rookh, Telános would carry Alex, who might have flown himself on the trip except for the distance of the destination, being back in the U.S. Plus, they were in something of a hurry, and he currently couldn't sustain flying speeds much over fifty mph. Flying was a gift Alex had basically given to himself when he solved the mystery as to how the Chinese dragon is able to fly without wings, after which, he applied the secret to his own body.

In addition to helping with transportation, Telános was good for protection, though the boys could take care of themselves well enough. Ethan always carried his Fifty-One Medallion, a magical object that basically gave him fifty-one chances per year to cheat death; and both teens were well trained in various light, music, and color weapons, with Alex's current weapon of choice being a flute and Ethan's a mirror. Alex also carried a gold rope and Ethan a red one, for utility uses, as well as to serve as back-up weapons.

They were heading to Supercity Ten.

"One of my brothers has been found," Ethan said, as they got underway.

“That’s great!” Alex answered.

“Yes,” Ethan agreed, though he was somewhat troubled. He had two younger brothers, though he hadn’t known either of them, and one was still missing. Both had been taken away from his mother, who had never married but had been forced to bear children as part of the Law of Four; though she managed to escape Supercity Thirteen with Ethan when he was five.

“We’re keeping this from my mom for now,” Ethan added, “just in case something doesn’t go smoothly.”

“I understand, mum’s the word,” Alex replied, being wise enough to know that anything connected to the Supes might very well turn out bumpy rather than smooth. He too had escaped from one of the Supercities, the peril of the journey having claimed the lives of two people who had escaped with him as part of a fairly sizeable group, several members of which had basically become his family since he had no blood relatives left alive, at least, none that he knew of. His parents were both dead; and while his mother had had three more children after him, all had been taken away by the sorcerers. In knowing that Supe-2, where he was from, had a medical facility with a huge organ processing center, he wasn’t quite as hopeful as many others with regard to any of his siblings being found alive.

After the March uprisings the previous year, the Underground Army had set up a task force to locate and reunite family members. Since the task was time consuming, they were doing most of their work in Kivetel, a realm in which time passed much differently than in our own, with roughly eighteen hours in Kivetel equal to one hour of our time. Thus, more was being accomplished than it would have been otherwise. Accessed through one of the magical doorways on Netherwind’s mezzanine floor, Kivetel was also where many people engaged in weapons training, in order to make more progress than they would have simply training at home.

Ethan had just gotten word from Merri Tremaine (a.k.a. General Tremaine), the leader of the Underground Army, as to the location of his brother, and his name. Winston Hardcastle, who was about to turn fifteen, had been adopted by an elite couple in Supe-10 that had been unable to have children of their own. Additional intel had been provided by Heather who, in this time, was working undercover in the

Guild of Hunters, both her training and her gift providing perfect opportunities for her to do much godly work while in the very midst of the enemy. What Heather had learned from her connections was that Winston, who was already a gifted biochemist, was actively working with the sorcerers.

Finding this out was something of a shock to Ethan, who never imagined that his own brother—no matter what situation he might be in and no matter how distant as far as location—might basically be working for the other side, and be in the category of miscreant, as well as terribly lost. However, no one is ever too far gone to be beyond the reach of God’s grace. As long as a person is still living, he or she can always come to Christ and be redeemed, no matter what his or her circumstances, and no matter what ills they might have committed.

While this was definitely a rescue mission, Ethan was not planning to abduct Winston. Instead, he was simply going to tell him who he really was, if he didn’t already know. (At this point, Ethan felt it likely that he didn’t know.) So the trip on this day was basically for initial contact and not to engage in any sort of grab-and-go. Explaining this to Alex and Telános, he added, “So, I hope it all goes well. We’ll just have to wait and see how he reacts.”

As they were coming up on the outskirts of Supe-10, the gryphon and rookh slowed considerably to gauge the safety of further approach; and they judged that, at this time, there were too many demons and nyregs patrolling the skies above the central part of the city for the group to simply fly right in. Also, the day was sunny with few clouds, which meant Telános would have trouble staying hidden. Therefore, the most sensible plan would be to land a fair ways outside the centralization and then enter on foot. In this manner, the snow gryphon could easily find things to blend in with, like pale walls, mounds of rubble, sand piles, etc. Since the rookh could not easily blend in, after landing and dropping off his rider, he decided to leave. Ethan could always call another rookh later, or Telános could carry both boys if needed.

No sooner had the rookh departed than the group had a run-in with two megahobs (supersized hobgoblins) whose camouflage abilities had made one look like a large bush and the other a midsize boulder. Since the beasts could only hold their camouflage when motionless, the pair

soon became their normal fanged, clawed, and lumpy selves as they swiftly attacked.

Telános found he didn't have much to do as Alex and Ethan, wielding flute and mirror respectively, rather nonchalantly took out the monsters, basically in forty seconds flat. Having grown up with these kinds of dangers, they hadn't been much surprised to come across the hobs, especially in a city setting. However, while observing and admiring the boys' skills, the snow gryphon suddenly *did* find something to do, in the form of stomping and shredding four gremlins that had just attacked his ankles. Alex, swiftly donning rose-colored glasses from his shoulder pack, informed Telános of two more gremlins on the approach.

"That's all of them," Alex said, as the gryphon squashed the nasty pair both at once by jumping onto them with his rather meaty rear paws. With gremlins being invisible, even creatures such as gryphons and wind horses most often could only sense rather than see them; therefore, Alex and his glasses were a definite help on this day.

They continued on without incident, of the bad sort that is, because about ten minutes later, they did have something of an incident, in the form of a special encounter with a flashy turquoise dragon that landed directly in front of them. Riding the dragon was fifteen-year-old Trixie Greenspell, also a resident of Lion Mountain and a friend to Alex and Ethan.

"Hey, it's Trixie!" Alex exclaimed. "And Sweet Jarna," he added, flying up to scratch the dragon on her chin and around her horny crest. Other than a few soft gold accents on her nose, wings, and the tip of her spikey tail, Jarna was pretty much bright turquoise all over. Fully enjoying the scratching, she ended up closing her eyes and cooing softly.

Dismounting, Trixie said, "Hey, what are you guys up to?"

Still airborne and scratching, Alex replied, "We're tracking down one of Ethan's brothers."

"Really, can Jarna and I tag along?" Trixie asked.

"Sure," Ethan answered, fully believing that the more friends along on this mission the better. Not only did Trixie possess super hearing, a gift that often proved valuable in various situations, but a dragon would be great for both speed and defense.

And, indeed, right away Jarna's speed came in handy, particularly since dragons were quite a bit faster than gryphons. Carrying both Trixie and Ethan, she zipped right into the heart of the city, easily dodging dozens of nyregs and demons. Sailing along in her slipstream with Alex aboard, Telános was able to fly faster than normal; thus, they made it to their destination, of a large apartment building located in the factory district, both safely and speedily. Upon landing, in order to stay hidden from various unfriendlies, Telános immediately melded himself with one of the concrete columns of an empty pavilion near a factory side entrance, while Jarna shrunk herself down to burnished dove form to be less noticeable. However, since her turquoise color was still somewhat flashy, she soon flew up to perch on Telános' back so that his camouflage could extend to her.

Not wishing to overwhelm Winston with too much company at once, Trixie decided to wait with the protectors while just the boys went in search of Ethan's brother. Entering through a courtyard was the best way for visitors to access the apartments. However, they wouldn't need to make their way up the winding stairs and to the door marked 19D on this day because Winston happened to be in the courtyard, sitting on a bench and reading. Ethan instantly recognized him from a snap Heather had sent to the armband device he often used for reading and to stay caught up with schoolwork. Only one other person was in the courtyard at this time, a man hurrying down a set of stairs to be off to work and nodding a quick hello to Ethan and Alex as he passed them. As soon as the man had gone, Ethan slowly approached the bench, with Alex in tow but keeping some distance out of respect for the delicateness of the situation.

While waiting for the boys, Telános had decided to make frost flowers in patches of weedy grass beside the pavilion, to inspire people. It was rather warmer inside the city than outside, with all of the bustle going on; but these would last several hours at least, and perhaps some until the next day with the approaching night temperatures dipping down to just below freezing.

Sitting at a table in the pavilion as she watched the small ice sculptures forming, Trixie suddenly said, "Oh, it's not going well."

The comment came from the fact that she could hear everything being said in the courtyard. And it was a correct observation, as

Winston was becoming very upset. Not only had he not known he was adopted, even if it were true (which he didn't particularly believe at the moment), he didn't want to be part of any other family, especially not one outside of the Supercities.

"I don't care!" Winston stated. "And, no, I don't want to meet the woman who gave birth to me, if your story is even true. And even if it is, it doesn't matter. I have a good family. I'm not leaving them to go join up with another one!"

"I didn't mean that you should abandon your parents," Ethan said, "just maybe spend some time with us, and get to know us a little. All these years, my mom's never really gotten over having her kids taken away from her. I'm sure she'd love to just meet you, and see that you're okay, healthy and all."

Winston was shaking his head rather forcefully, as he said, "Just leave me alone!" With this, he rose from the bench and bounded up the nearest set of stairs to head to his family's apartment.

Per Winston's request, the visitors did leave him alone. In recognizing how heated things had become, Ethan was at least wise enough not to follow his brother up the stairs to try to press anything further. "I'll just have to try again later," he told Alex as they made their way back to Trixie and the protectors.

Telános had also been listening in, to a certain extent, though he hadn't been able to hear quite as well as Trixie; and he wouldn't have wanted to interfere. He did, however, find the conversation very interesting, as well as sad, the sad part being mirrored in Ethan's countenance as he approached.

"I heard," Trixie said, in a consoling manner, and in wanting to spare Ethan having to talk right now.

And, indeed, he didn't feel like talking. Instead, he felt more like thinking, which was something he had failed to do much of before heading out in search of Winston. In fact, he had practically pounced when General Tremaine gave him the information. Talking to Heather by walnut right away, and receiving the additional info and snap from her a short time later, he had immediately set off in search of Alex.

Sadly, in acting so quickly, Ethan not only hadn't thought things through, he hadn't taken the time to pray. Suddenly realizing this, he chided himself. *What a dunce!* He always prayed about important

missions, decisions, and other such things before taking action, to ask God for wisdom and guidance. Actually, he tended to pray about less-important things too, like which book he should read next and what shoes to buy at the local market. If only he'd prayed and asked for direction this time before charging ahead.

I've probably made a huge mess of something that could have gone a lot more smoothly, he surmised with regret. *This is a good lesson about being impulsive.*

Ethan truly hadn't had any big ideas about Winston leaving the parents who had raised him. However, in thinking about both of his brothers over the years, he had imagined having a close relationship with them if they were ever found. Now, he didn't know what he might do in order to get Winston back, other than pray, and ask God to show him the way. This was something he would do as soon as he got home, in the quietness of his bedroom, which was where he often found just the right amount of peace to counter the many distractions of the world, or when his mind was filled with reliving a particular conversation or event, as it was now.

On the way to Lion Mountain and high over Kentucky, the group suddenly met up with Kemp, who often liked to cruise around on either a nyreg or an airbike looking for trouble. He was on a nyreg today. Although he was from Supe-8, Kemp was actually acquainted with Winston, both boys being part of a little clique headed by Tanner Ellison. Kemp wasn't super-good friends with Winston, but they were close in age, with Kemp being but a year older than Winston.

While Kemp always hated "goody two-shoes," which was what he and his friends often called godly people, he had lately been especially upset. Not only had a particular gifted group of them been thwarting his every move, he had been forced to spend the last part of December and the first part of January tethered by Sync Cuffs to Penelope Coyle, another member of Tanner's little clique. Although Kemp considered Penelope to be a friend (they even lived near one another), she tended to be an irritating one, particularly being thirteen. *An annoying age for girls*, Kemp often thought, not realizing that girls often think the same thing about boys, of various ages.

Sync Cuffs were a rather insidious device, originally designed by sorcerers, but from which the godly had managed to make their own

version. The cuffs linked two people both mentally and physically, to the point that they constantly felt each other's emotions, as well as every bump, scrape, ache, and pain. And the wearers of the cuffs, which could not be unlocked by any means the two miscreants could discover, had to stay within ten feet of each other or suffer excruciating physical pain. Kemp had almost felt like he was losing his mind being that closely connected to Penelope for two weeks straight, which was how long the timer on the locking mechanism was set to before it automatically unlocked. They ended up staying at Penelope's house. Particularly troubling was having to figure out how to go to the bathroom and take a shower. While Penelope's mother had rigged up privacy screens for them in both the bathroom and the bedroom, it had been just an overall maddening and uncomfortable situation.

Ethan, Trixie, and Alex were among those who had been hindering Kemp in the past several months, and he was elated to come across them on this day; though he was also wary, particularly of the dragon and snow gryphon.

Raising his hands to direct the energy he was producing, Kemp immediately pelted his adversaries with flaming darts, followed by a stream of fire nearly equal to what most dragons were capable of producing. With his powers growing as he aged, Kemp likely soon would be able to prolong streams such as this; thus, he would be able to take on dragons for sustained periods.

By thought, Jarna had told Telános to take up position behind her, which he knew to be wise, and so he did, dodging Kemp's meandering flame stream as he did. For the most part, Jarna's fire-resistant feathers and scales would be able to protect both her and her riders, though she did have to keep moving to avoid direct strikes from her foe.

Ethan, sitting behind Trixie on Jarna, was managing to get off a few mirror strikes, though these were missing Kemp and his nyreg due to the evasive maneuvers Jarna was being forced to make. Alex, aboard Telános, was basically too afraid of hitting his friends positioned in front of him to be able to do much good with his flute. Trixie, who was fabulous with weapons (even more so than the boys), also hadn't been able to do much good with her mirror, particularly because Kemp, while directing the flame stream with his left hand, had begun hurling fireballs at them with his right.

However, Jarna was a pretty powerful dragon—in fact, she could be downright scary at times—and her fire was every bit equal to if not more potent than Kemp’s present abilities. Plus, she, like Ethan, had something else on her mind, which meant she was in no mood to stand for any nonsense on this day, especially from a little scamp like Kemp, whom she had had dealings with before. Therefore, employing a terribly-scary blast of fire from her throat, which left both Ethan and Alex cringing, she managed to get the nyreg and evil boy to back off somewhat. Trixie, being used to Jarna and her abilities, was not cringing, and took the opportunity to draw the blue rope she had been wearing coiled around one boot, afterwards very swiftly throwing it like a spear, which nicked the shoulder of the nyreg, causing the beast to list to one side, with the jolt briefly causing a disruption of Kemp’s ability to produce fire.

This was the chance Jarna had been waiting for. Advancing like a blue streak, she bashed into the side of the nyreg, while clawing at the neck of the creature who gave a terrifying scream of pain from the deep talon slashes. While Kemp wasn’t unseated from the attack, he was incredibly unsettled, and so decided he had had enough. Urging the nyreg to flee, and fast, Kemp was basically thanking his lucky stars as they soared away that the dragon hadn’t chosen him to claw, which she might have, except that most godly magical creatures didn’t kill humans unless they absolutely had to in accordance with their protection duties, or unless God directly told them to.

Trixie’s retrievable rope had returned itself to her as soon as she called it; and so, after taking only a brief pause to catch their collective breath, the group was ready to continue on their way.

After dropping off the riders, as Telános made his way home, Jarna headed to one of her favorite caves in New Mexico, a quiet spot where she could sit and think about things, and maybe have a nap; except she wasn’t napping much lately as compared to other dragons because she wanted to help with the godly work of Trixie, her friends, and other types of beings. (In fact, one of Jarna’s most recent adventures had involved a mermaid.)

Gazing up at clusters of bats sleeping in the cave, while trying not to become drowsy from the power of suggestion, Jarna thought over a rather puzzling recent event—one that had to do with the future.

Well, that's what our brains are partly meant for, puzzling over things and trying to work out what's best, she decided about thirty minutes later. With this, she simply opted to pray and ask God to guide her, since her brain was no further along with deciding on anything than it had been before the half-hour bat-watching think-session.

Meanwhile, back in Supercity Ten, Winston had also been engaging in a think-session. More than a little stunned by the two boys showing up and basically dropping a bombshell on him, he hadn't been able to think clearly for the past hour or so. Now that a little time had passed, and with his brain working a little better, he had just about decided that what Ethan had told him was probably true, particularly because he knew that children for many years had been taken away from the commoners in the cities, mainly (from his rather brainwashed perspective) because they couldn't care for their kids properly.

This doesn't change anything, he decided after a bit more consideration.

In fact, Winston and many young people like him actually hated people from the self-sustaining communities. Look at what they had done to the once-beautiful Supercities. Most were in rubble, with only the central parts in any semblance of good working order. Plus, the uprisings had made a tremendous mess of most of the work camps, to the extent that the cities, even months after, were still having trouble getting things like food and heating fuel. Also, there was a horrible labor shortage in the Supes. Even his mother had had to go to work, where she once had been able to just stay at home. In truth, many of the elites were now working alongside those they had once thought of as merely low-class servants.

If they think I'm even halfway interested in abandoning my parents, the people who raised me, they're pretty much crazy, Winston determined. With this, he opened his journal to make a few notes and to try to make some sense of this craziness.

Before today, he had never thought his parents might not be his real parents. But of course they were, whether he was adopted or not. They loved him as one of their own (this being completely true). He just hadn't known that his mother hadn't given birth to him, which didn't matter (as it shouldn't) in his opinion. He was an only child, this being common among the elites of the cities, so he had no siblings he could

ask as to whether or not this incredible story might be true. Plus, all of his grandparents had already passed away. He had an aunt, but she was pretty clueless most of the time, so he doubted if she'd know anything, or be inclined to tell him if she did. His parents being older was kind of lending weight to the idea that he might have been adopted. Maybe they had tried to have children of their own, but couldn't.

"Whatever! It still doesn't matter!" he wrote rather forcefully at the bottom of the page of notes he had just scribbled. In fact, he had written so hard that the pen twice had broken through from one page to the next.

He also had to consider the possibility that the story was a total lie, and that the two kids might have been trying to get him to go with them, to lure him into something. The residents of the Supes had been warned about this kind of thing after the uprisings—that people outside might try to get others out of the cities, for various reasons. Maybe they would want him for his skills, or just information he might possess. After all, he had been working with the sorcerers on various projects for nearly two years now. And there were spies in the cities—this was well known.

In the end, he decided he would ask his parents later. They would both be home around seven in the evening.

Meanwhile, he had nearly four hours to wait until then. Feeling the need to talk to someone, he decided to head by nyreg to Supe-9 to see Tanner, who was involved in a project Winston was currently working on. So they would have more than just the visit of Ethan and Alex to talk about.

Unknown to Winston, someone had been observing him, all day basically. Using a Time Cube and the portal in Esther's cave, a man named Jonathan Witte had traveled back from the same time that the older version of Eizel was from. Consulting an almanac and scratching out a couple of notes as he watched Winston mount a nyreg and take off from a spot near the factory pavilion, Jonathan swiftly followed by stealth airbike. In addition to being completely soundless, the bike extended invisibility to him, and so had him kept hidden for most of the day as he hovered in the courtyard, in the field by the factory, and outside the windows of Winston's apartment. For times when it was necessary to dismount the bike (like when he needed to go to the

bathroom), he was able to hide using a shroud sapphire, one produced by Heather in the future that was very powerful. Like many of the gifted, her powers had grown over the years. In fact, the sapphire was so powerful that not even Jarna and Telános had sensed Jonathan's presence. If Trixie had been specifically listening for him, she would have been able to zero in on the sound of his breathing. But since things like breathing, swallowing, chewing, stomach rumbling, and yawning were noises she had trained herself to tune out, she hadn't particularly noticed anything out of the ordinary, as in, sounds belonging to someone who might be concealed and spying.

Jonathan had not only been watching Winston, but also listening in. Some weeks earlier, he had snuck into the Hardcastles' apartment where he planted an advanced version of an ear orchid (no larger in total than two inches high) into the terrarium where Winston kept his pet turtle. In conjunction with the flower, a tiny earplug gave him perfect reception. Thus, the orchid had so far provided Jonathan access to many hours of interesting conversation from inside the home.

Meanwhile, unknown to Jonathan, another being had been watching him. Standing very near the spot by the pavilion where Jonathan had air-parked his airbike, Etowa had observed the time traveler at various points throughout the day, and was now watching him leave to continue to shadow Winston. So too had this observer watched Telános making frost flowers while the girl, dragon, and snow gryphon were all waiting for the two boys that had gone to talk to the other boy in the courtyard. And Etowa might have found all of what he was seeing and hearing very interesting, except for the fact that he too, like Ethan and Jarna, had something incredibly important on his mind that was basically overshadowing everything else he might have wanted to focus on or think about.

Except for people with certain sight-related gifts, Etowa wasn't visible to human beings, or to dragons, gryphons, and such either for that matter because he was a creature specifically designed to exist outside of time. The few humans that had glimpsed him over the years would have said he looked like an incredibly thin man, but with a wispy airiness about him, as though he might be about to turn into a sylph or a wind waif. Only one other being was like Etowa in the universe, and his name was Boko. Originally made by God as companions and

helpers to one another, Boko had early on in his existence chosen the side of evil, while Etowa had remained on the side of good. Except that there really was no “early on” for either Boko or Etowa, since time held no meaning for them. But because our human brains are accustomed to thinking of things chronologically, we must sometimes describe the actions of these two in terms that we can more easily understand.

The job of this unique pair had originally been to keep various actions on the earth moving along in sync with the Maker’s Overall Plan. Thus, Boko and Etowa had been tasked with giving nudges to people and other creatures, planting ideas into brains, occasionally deterring us from the making of bad decisions, etc. And the pair accomplished these influences mainly through use of magic seeds, which they were masters of creating. When Boko began serving Satan instead of God, Etowa’s task changed to that of countering the evil actions of his former partner. This took the form of playing an incredibly long game (each taking turns with the moves), the outcome of which was inevitable. Since the Lord has already triumphed over Satan, Etowa would definitely win the game.

However, the game had come to something of an abrupt end recently when Boko made a series of careless moves for the express purpose of losing early. Having long had regrets over his choice to follow Satan, he was tired of waiting, and basically wanted to face judgement sooner rather than later, whatever “sooner” or “later” might mean, since he wasn’t exactly sure, having never truly experienced either of these things. Part of Boko’s regrets had to do with feeling like he had basically trapped Etowa, whom he cared about, into playing their practically-endless game; and so he had been happy to lose.

While winning a game might have made some feel elated, Etowa was actually sad, in knowing that Boko would soon be judged, with his fate being the same as that of the fallen angels—eternity in hell, the pit endlessly burning. There wouldn’t be any second chances for him as there were for human beings because Jesus had died for humanity, not for fallen angels or other divinely-created beings that have made poor choices. For them, there was no Savior.

Etowa often felt very unhappy about the fate of his counterpart, and he often wondered if there was anything he might do to change things. He wasn’t allowed to go back to a point in time before Boko made the

mistake of choosing evil to try to dissuade him from this path, particularly because of the issue of free will. (We are all free to choose our own path.) But his brain often pondered if there might be something else he could do so that Boko wouldn't have to suffer such a horrible fate. Sadly, because he and Boko were the only two creatures of their kind, Etowa didn't have any close friends he could ask advice of. And he doubted talking to any of the angels would change anything because the will of the Father would be done, no matter what others might desire.

For Boko's part, since he knew he couldn't change things, he was fully resigned to calmly accepting his fate, feeling, for the most part, that he deserved this punishment.

However, if we indulge ourselves for a moment to take a peek at the not-so-distant future (but one as yet unknown to Boko and Etowa), we might find Etowa not so very sad over this situation after all. While neither of these beings had much hope that anything might change, we, as believers, know that all things are possible with God, and that miracles often wait around the smallest of corners.

Chapter Three

A Little of This, and That

Linn and Quin were both attending a Valentine's Day dance on Lion Mountain being held in the evening near Linn's home in the local cafeteria, a place of many social gatherings for the community. The pair had exchanged gifts two days earlier, from being so excited that they basically couldn't wait. The picture of Cuoré was already hung up in Quin's bedroom, and Linn was wearing his scarf and hat practically everywhere, including in his lab, which had been a little nippy of late. Most structures on the Mountain were designed and sited in a passive-solar fashion, and had wood burning stoves. Plus, huge groves of quick-growing and hard-as-oak Liget Trees, a gift from God specific to Lion Mountain, were still supplying plenty of fuel as well as building materials for the residents. So too had the people of the area discovered another tremendous help: Similar to milkweed fluff, but longer and thicker, the silky strands from the pods of Ginivald Vines (also a gift from God found only on the Mountain) could be used for insulation as good as any from the past like foam, fiberglass, whatever. The fluff was also being used as fill for pillows, mattresses, duvets, jackets, horse blankets, and whatnot. But even with these warming factors, February could be pretty chilly just about anywhere in North America. Plus, Linn tended to sit still for long periods of time in his large and airy lab, so he did get cold fairly easily.

At the party, so that they might be able to dance, Quin sat in Linn's lap as his airchair floated about. This was how they would dance at their wedding in the future as well, though they hadn't even talked about marriage yet, nor would they for at least a couple of years.

Quite a few puck trolls were dancing too, on a small platform near the spot where the musicians were staged.

Several gnome couples were also attending, and had brought huge platters of veggies with large bowls of assorted dip. As long as no one thanked them, or fawned over them with compliments, the gnomes were

willing to stay, and even dance a bit. The veggies and dip were extremely delicious, almost heavenly, so much so that people were tempted to compliment, but were biting their tongues in knowing that this was offensive to the gnomes. As far as their help to the humans on the Mountain, while the men tended various gardens and farm crops, the lady gnomes stayed equally busy looking after trees, corralling pigs and chickens, planting orchards, supervising greenhouse operations, pruning vineyards, and such.

Bear was at the dance, and was actually scanning for Bern who wasn't there because she was working. Although pretty much caught up with projects these days, she didn't much like social gatherings. However, she did show up at the end to get two plates of food to take back to the workshop, for herself and Gabe.

As Bear tried to speak to her, she cut him short with, "The loft rail is done and will be delivered tomorrow, and the door hardware is on the way. But the order for the drawer pulls and cabinet corners will have to wait two weeks because I'm working on bridles, two gates, and shoeing a bunch of ponies."

With Bear starting to recognize that he had feelings for Bern, her brusque manner was a little disheartening to him, especially because he hadn't been making as much of a pest of himself at her workshop lately. Wisely deciding to back off, he didn't offer her the glass of punch he had intended to, instead simply watching her walk away and disappear out the door with her two plates of food.

Ethan too was attending the party, mainly to practice his dancing skills with a couple of friends from school, the girls also mainly interested in practicing, and not so much in anything to do with romance. In fact, Justine Pence had a long-distance boyfriend—in an earthship community in Utah—who hadn't been able to make it to the dance. And Ellen Lisowski was pretty much only interested these days in reading and studying, though she had decided to come to the dance at Justine's urging.

Although the food and music were good, and the dancing and conversation with friends was fun, Ethan found Winston on his mind for most of the party. Since returning from that fiasco-of-a-first-meeting with his brother, Ethan had been praying for guidance, and had been getting the message that he simply needed to wait. Evidently, the

timing wasn't right for additional contact right now. He had ended up telling his mother, mostly because he felt she might end up hearing about Winston from someone else. Although they were considering a lot of options, they weren't planning any quick action because she too wanted to be careful, and heed God's direction. Plus, there was no reason to hurry because Winston was safe and being well-cared-for. Holly Stanley had over the years learned to be patient, especially with regard to delicate situations. In the meantime, she and Ethan were praying together. In fact, they had done so just before he left for the party: "Dear Lord, please help us make good decisions, especially related to Winston. Please guide us and help us to follow Your guidance. Please keep us on Your path, and show us the way—Your way, not ours, Your will, not ours. Please forgive our sins and help us to be good servants. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen."

One thing they had discussed early on, but had decided against, was simply snatching Winston and forcing conversion on him. However, although various means existed, forcing others to convert to Christianity was still pretty rare, mainly because many people didn't consider it fair. God had given us free will so that we could choose for ourselves to follow Him, or not. In questioning the practice of forced conversion over the years, many had argued that if someone was meant to read a book or see a play designed to convert, God would arrange it. So too did He sometimes instruct gifted individuals to use their skills to influence, in a manner similar to how all Christians are called to give testimony and share the Good News. Therefore, many felt that additional human manipulation was unnecessary, particularly because people have the capacity to change; and we often need time to grow. Plus, we're not supposed to be judgmental of one another. We are to leave judgment to God.

As far as Ethan's situation, he had resolved to simply keep praying. Then, if God instructed him to do something, he would. Otherwise, he would just have to leave things alone, for now.

Doyle Mansion had hosted a small Valentine's party in the parlor that had involved a little dancing, but was more for just visiting and eating, the eating being largely what the puck family was focused on. In fact, food reinforcements had been brought in from nearby Wharton Farm because Em and Zin hadn't had as much time for cooking and

baking of late. The spread included huge trays of spicy baked chicken wings with bleu cheese dressing, platters of assorted vegetables with ranch dip, large bowls of parsnip and sweet potato chips, plates of assorted pastries, bins of apples and sticky cinnamon popcorn balls, baskets of poppy-seed rolls and soft pretzels, and a huge seven-layer black forest cake displayed on an enormous glass pedestal stand. The towering dessert was something the pucks could hardly tear their eyes from for basically the entire party, until nearing the end when the cake was finally cut and served.

The whole time the party was going on, in one little corner of the parlor, a tiny cradle with a small occupant was rocking itself. A gift from the genies, the cradle had been especially designed to do this. Heike and Pizzo had at one time thought they were only going to be able to have the twins. But just recently, on New Year's Day in fact, Pipac and Kisi had welcomed a new baby sister, Lista. The reason this puck family (along with many others around the globe) had been able to expand was because more human goodness was present in the world, and likely to continue, this being necessary to feed not only pucks, but all magical creatures, as their primary means of sustenance. (Puck trolls only liked to eat people food; they didn't actually need to.)

The magical cradle had a sound-dampening feature; thus, baby Lista had slept through the entire party undisturbed. Looking in on their sister a couple of times, Kisi and Pipac had to admit she was pretty cute, with bushy blond curls, rosy round cheeks, four stubby little fingers on each hand, and four pudgy little toes on each foot. Kisi had looked a lot like this when she was a baby, but her hair had darkened over the years to nearly match the reddish-brown color of her brother's.

The next morning, despite the merrymaking of the evening before, Pipac was up early because Sal was due to pick him up for another book-search adventure, again to Supercity Ten.

After riding a rookh to the city, with help from an enmouse, Sal (with Pipac riding on his shoulder, as was most common when they traveled) made his way into the downtown area, specifically to a storm drain on a side street that contained a good-sized pocket, which was basically a magical mini-realm triangularly designed and sited by gifted architects and cartographers. In addition to a large library, this particular pocket contained sprawling gardens, one of which thirteen-

year-old Frees Muldoon, a friend of Sal's from the twin plantations, was visiting on this day in order to spurt the plants because this was Frees' special gift—the ability to make plants grow extremely fast. So too could he command vines, shrubs, tree limbs, weeds, and the like to do his bidding.

Simply waving to Frees, Sal and Pipac made their way to the library where they found what they were seeking—an old fairytale book containing an unrevised version of “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice,” which stressed the importance of learning to read more than anything else, but had, of course, been changed over the years to reflect more modern ideals and trends.

In the same way the bible tells us not to change God’s Words, Sal felt it was also important not to change the words of people inspired by God to write them, such as in moralistic fairy tales. Those changing the stories hadn’t merely updated them to make them easier for newer generations to understand, but had totally mutilated the intent behind the works. When explaining to others why he felt so strongly about keeping older versions of books intact, Sal would often refer to Jeremiah 6:16. “Thus says the LORD: ‘Stand by the roads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls.’” Romans 12:9 was another favorite. “Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good....”

After exiting the pocket, Sal and Pipac suddenly found themselves being pursued by two megahobs. Passing a small landscaped yard as they ran, Pipac swiftly brought to life two topiaries that had been posing as regular bushes but that suddenly sprang to life as an elk and a gorilla. Having been awakened by a puck troll before, the pair might have come to life on their own due to Memory Magic, except that vegetation tended to be sluggish this time of year. (Even evergreens are supposed to be somewhat dormant in winter.) As a nyreg swooped down to join the chase—sending five people at the end of the street scurrying and diving for cover—Pipac quickly brought to life a topiary butterfly nearly as large as the swooping beast. Just as the elk and gorilla were tackling, pummeling, and stomping the megahobs, the butterfly soared up to ram the nyreg into the side of a building.

With the three pursuers now aching and disoriented, Sal and Pipac managed to make it to a set of stairs leading down to a cellar safe haven,

which they were ushered into by one of the scurrying and diving people who had watched and waited to make sure the boy and puck made it to safety. By this time, the three topes (as many people liked to call magical topiaries) had already gotten settled back into the landscaped yard by curling, tucking, and rearranging themselves to look like ordinary bushes, albeit large ones.

The encounter hadn't much fazed Sal and Pipac, who were used to this sort of thing. If there hadn't been topes around to help, Sal could have used the flute he was carrying on the hobs and nyreg.

Once the coast was clear, the pair was soon on their way to visit another library. Supe-10, it seemed, was something of a mecca for these secret spots. In addition to numerous trompe l'oeil paintings and a dozen or so sited in pockets, six wine cellars had been turned into libraries. So too did a variety of other spaces serve this purpose, such as a large sewing room in a Victorian mansion and a storeroom in an old mercantile. The camouflaged entrances were much varied as well, including hidden wall panels, walk-through tapestries, and even one mirror that could only be passed through by people holding special bookmarks belonging to the library. Several magical pod structures, triangularly designed to hold much more than their outward appearances of sheds, tool chests, bedroom dressers, etc. might suggest, also served as libraries, though it was a little more common for these structures to hold clinics, cafeterias, nursing homes, and other such places of help and refuge.

Sal and Pipac were on their way to a library in a crypt, which was actually in a rubble area outside of the centralization, but was still heavily used by both city residents and those that had moved to communities outside.

After a couple of hours of scouring the bookshelves, and doing a bit of reading, Pipac and Sal left. While they hadn't found anything they were particularly looking for, they had enjoyed the visit to the crypt.

Once outside, they were just about to call a rookh when a demon that had been hiding nearby in a collapsed brick chimney began chasing them. Demons could be very fast, both flying and on foot, as this one was.

With nothing artistic around that Pipac might bring to life to help them, Sal was on the verge of pulling a flashcard and his flute out of a

pocket, when a girl suddenly came to a screeching halt in front of them, seemingly appearing from out of nowhere. “Quick, go that way!” she instructed, pointing to a pathway between two long crumbling stone walls that Sal could see led to a woody area.

Since he could pretty much tell that this girl was a friend, rather than a foe, Sal hesitated only slightly before following her command. Looking over his shoulder as he ran as fast as he could (with Pipac clinging tightly to his collar), Sal noticed that the girl seemed to be waiting for the demon to get close, before she too took off running in a direction away from the woody area, very fast; though her fast was a lot faster than Sal’s because this was her special gift. In fact, she could already completely outrun a horse (and a demon on foot), and she was working up to sustaining these speeds over long distances.

After getting the demon to chase her around in wide circles, and then leading him into the centralization where he quickly lost track of her in the maze of city streets, the girl returned to the rubble area, and specifically to the woody spot she had instructed Sal to head to and in which he was hiding, while contemplating whether or not he should simply call a rookh and leave, or wait to see if the girl returned. Waiting proved to be a good decision because it only took about twelve minutes in total for her to lose the demon and return to look for the boy and puck troll.

“Kiana Jackson,” she said as she found them, to which Sal gave his name too, before introducing Pipac. Kiana and Sal both also greeted one another using the same triangle hand gesture that the future version of Eizel had used to bid farewell to Naya. Having recently been brought back from Eizel’s time by another time traveler, the symbol made with the thumbs and forefingers was starting to catch on in this time, not only as a standard “hello” or “goodbye,” but also as an expression of general well wishes, like “safe journey” and “God bless you.”

To Sal, Kiana looked to be about his age; though he would later come to find out that she was nearly a year older than he.

“Well, that was a pretty stupid demon,” Kiana said, rather emphatically, rolling her eyes and throwing up her hands while shaking her head. “But, most of them are. I mean, they can fly way faster than they can run; but once you get them on the ground, they just stupidly

stay there, in that mode...but, whatever. So, what are you guys up to today?"

When Sal briefly explained that they were visiting libraries, and why, Kiana immediately offered to help in the search for books. "I like originals too," she said, rather loudly and somewhat overeagerly. In fact, Sal was slightly worried that her voice might cause any other demons that might be in the area to notice and come after them.

He was also feeling a little wary of accepting her help, not because he distrusted her, but more because people who were bookish and somewhat reserved (like himself) often had trouble getting used to the personalities of people who were extremely friendly and forward. However, since Sal wasn't fundamentally opposed to getting to know forward people, he decided to give this new acquaintance a chance.

And he would end up being glad he did because Kiana, who had also been visiting the crypt library on this day, knew of another library nearby that Sal hadn't known about, located in a tunnel in a former military camp that had been taken over by one of the self-sustaining communities after the uprisings. "They've made the camp into a farm," Kiana explained. "And they make cheese in one part of the tunnel; but in another part, there was plenty of room to set up the library."

Kiana, as it turns out, was from a mothership community about eighty miles south of the outskirts of Supe-10; but she often visited the city, which was no problem for her to reach by running, particularly because she had good endurance, as well as speed. In fact, she was thinking about joining the Post Riders, the group carrying mail between communities in the U.S. Although most of the riders generally used some form of transportation like horses (regular and wind), rookhs, gryphons, and the rails, Kiana felt she would probably just run the routes. While this might take a little longer than relying on other means, she didn't think this would be a problem. Already the Post Riders had proven adaptable with regard to the rail system, which was now largely in shambles (mainly due to the activities of gremlins), and thus was no longer a reliable transport option. *So why not have some runners too?* Kiana thought.

While message kites were still popular, and dawn pigeons were still plentiful and willing to carry notes and letters, some people liked the older method of sending and getting mail. Plus, the kites and pigeons

couldn't carry parcels very well unless they were extremely small. With pod packs in wide use, mostly shoulder and belt varieties, many of the Post Riders could carry extremely large items, even heavy ones since the triangularly-designed packs also generally had a lightening spell attached to them.

The tunnel library was only about sixteen miles from their present location. However, knowing this would be a stretch for Sal and Pipac to run, Kiana by thought called to a wind horse she was friends with. A small herd of wind horses tended to hang out in the area, sometimes pushing back storms raised by demons, and other times giving wind thrashings to nyregs, demons, stealth hobs, and such when the nasty creatures were out stirring up trouble. Being close by, Barát responded within fifteen seconds, afterwards carrying the humans and puck to the entrance to the tunnel library in less than another ten.

“Goodbye! And thank you!” Kiana called loudly to Barát as he swiftly departed, leaving behind only his imprint in the form of pale orange, purple, gray, and turquoise streaks in the sky, like soft brushstrokes that would disappear with the next firm breath of wind.

Remarkably, Kiana managed to be very quiet inside the library. (This was something Sal had slightly worried about—that they might get thrown out.)

In roughly an hour of looking, Sal managed to find two books he was looking for.

Afterwards, in not being in any particular hurry to get home, the new friends sat on a bench near one of the goat barns on the farm, in a spot protected from the somewhat chilly breezes of the day.

Sal often carried a pod belt pack filled with snacks (he pretty much had to with a puck troll along on many of his journeys), and the pack on this day held enough for the three of them to have a nice lunch of peanut butter sandwiches, apples, and granola bars; and for Pipac to also have a cheese bagel, carrot sticks, and grapes.

Flipping the pages of one of the books he had just borrowed while they ate, Sal made the comment, “Boy, a lot of fairy tales have the word ‘little’ in their titles. He was specifically noticing two of his favorites: “The Little Matchstick Girl” and “The Little Mermaid.”

“I love, love, LOVE ‘little-themed’ fairy tales!” Kiana exclaimed. “‘The Little Red Hen’ was always one of my favorites growing up.

“And ‘The Brave Little Tailor.’” Nodding with gusto, she then proceeded to shout, “SEVEN WITH ONE BLOW!” by way of quoting the tailor from the story. As if in response to her shout, seven wrens that had been tucked tightly into ground foliage nearby suddenly made a dash in flight for the safety of a semi-distant brambly bush.

In a slightly quieter tone, Kiana offered, “‘The Little Matchstick Girl’ was originally all about the little girl wanting to get to heaven. I remember her grandmother was waiting for her; and the little girl, as she lit matches to try to stay warm, could see the light from heaven calling to her as she was dying. The story was also about greed, and indifference to the suffering of others. The little matchstick girl, huddled up outside against the wall of a home, basically froze to death less than two feet from the warm fire on the other side of the wall that might have saved her life; except she was basically forced to live in poverty, and the people of the time were not very full of charity. But all was well in the end, if I remember, because her suffering ended and she was happy when she inherited Eternal Life and got to see her grandmother in heaven right away; and Jesus too, of course.”

“We sometimes have to endure hardships before we can inherit our eternal rewards,” Sal mused, as Pipac, his mouth full of a big bite of bagel, nodded in earnest. Though Sal didn’t relate this, he was also thinking that a recent rendition of “The Little Matchstick Girl” was not only devoid of real meaning, it was satanic in that it stressed revenge and theft as the answers to wrongdoing and hardship.

“I think the ‘little’ things in fairy tales represent small forces triumphing over larger ones,” Kiana said. “Even the smallest and weakest of us can overcome what seems like monumental evil, like how David slew Goliath. We can all of us make a difference, no matter how small.” Pipac, wide-eyed as he listened, was nodding in full agreement, as this was particularly true of puck trolls, who often made huge contributions to the world. Indeed, though no one was keeping count (except for God), pucks had succeeded in saving the lives of millions of people, by various means, throughout the centuries.

“You know,” Kiana added, “some of the fairy tales that were made into funny versions of the originals weren’t bad.”

“That was fine,” Sal agreed. “But it wasn’t okay for people to ban and destroy originals, just based on social pressure, popular trends, and

stupid laws. That's what I'm trying to fix here. They shouldn't have denied people a chance to read what was originally written. And they shouldn't have watered down everything so much that kids didn't learn anything at all, except for the bad things Satan wanted them to learn, since he was behind all of this."

Kiana did agree with Sal's viewpoint, which was one reason she was willing and happy to help him; another being that she liked to make new friends, particularly ones that didn't seem to shy away from her personality, which she knew could sometimes be a little strong.

With regard to duplicating the books Sal was finding, it didn't take the genies long, though the process in the present did take a little more time than it would in the future. In a couple of decades, the genies would create bookmarks called Restoration Marks, one of which the older version of Eizel had placed into the fairytale book in the apartment of her younger self. The genies over the years had made many magical bookmarks with varying purposes, like the ones allowing access to the Supe-10 library behind the mirror, which had been created by a magician working with a genie.

Although Kiana didn't know Sal very well, she decided to confess something to him. In her spare time, she was prowling Supercity Ten in order to steal certain things from sorcerers and elite families.

"I know what you're probably thinking," she said. "It's wrong to steal; it's one of the Ten Commandments. But, look here." With this, she produced a journal filled over halfway through with scribbled notes.

Evidently, auto-writing was another of Kiana's gifts, and God was giving her clear instructions through the writings. "It's not just the exact items I'm supposed to take, down to the last detail as far the descriptions, but He's giving me exact addresses and the specific times to go to the houses, dens, apartments, whatever to get the stuff when no one's there. I hardly ever come across any resistance on these trips," she stressed. "Then, afterwards, I get the exact information as to where to go and whom to give the items to. And most often, these are things that had been taken from these people, like family treasures, or things they had to leave behind when they left the city that someone else picked up afterwards. A lot of the stuff was taken when people were unjustly imprisoned."

Sal wasn't particularly surprised by what Kiana was telling him. While her actions might have been questioned by some, we are to do what God commands, no matter what. Plus, Sal himself often felt led by the Holy Spirit to do and write things that others might question. However, he could see a need for some skepticism because someone might pretend to have the gift of auto-writing, then do all sorts of unsavory things while claiming to be following God's instructions. But...if this were ever the case...God help that person, because to pretend to be doing God's will just to commit wrongs and serve self...well...that was like people stealing goods and monies meant for charities. And oh what trouble those people are going to be in when facing judgement because God always protects widows and orphans (and others of the needy), and He always punishes wrongdoers who don't repent.

"So I don't think the families and sorcerers that I'm taking these things from should miss them," Kiana added, "since the stuff didn't belong to them in the first place."

Pipac's first thought had been that Kiana might be playing something like a Robin Hood game. But this was, of course, much different than simply stealing from the rich to give to the poor, in that she was basically returning belongings to their rightful owners.

When she had first met Sal and Pipac, Kiana had been on her way to the city to take a few things. Now, Sal was inclined to want to help her, not just because she had helped him, but because he felt this was a God-directed and just cause. Plus, from getting to know her a little, he was truly enjoying her company.

For Kiana's part, she gladly accepted the offer of help, whereupon, she again called to Barát to carry them. Since wind horses were highly camouflaged, often looking like clouds and sunsets and such, the group was not seen as they entered the city, where Barát dropped them off in a busy downtown district, though in an alley so they wouldn't stand out. The wind horse wouldn't be waiting for them while they traversed the city, but they could always call to him when needed.

While she didn't often need it because she was so fast, Kiana produced a shroud mirror from her pod shoulder pack that worked well on this day to conceal herself, Sal, and Pipac on their way first to an office building that was largely deserted from people being out having

their lunches, then to a high-rise apartment, and then to a single-family home in a neighborhood just on the edge of the city's centralization.

The list of acquisitions for this day included a crystal paperweight, a locket, a silver hairbrush, two porcelain Limoges boxes, and a Hummel figurine. "I've gotten a couple of paintings before, and several large stamp albums, but usually I'm only told to take small things," Kiana explained, as she carefully wrapped the Hummel in a soft cloth before stowing it into her pack.

Sal and Pipac thoroughly enjoyed helping their new friend liberate these items. As expected, they met almost no resistance; in fact, none, other than one neighbor in the high rise giving them a scrutinizing look as they exited the apartment. To the surprise of Pipac and Sal, Kiana was actually mostly quiet and unobtrusive in the city setting. But, then, she would have had to learn to be stealthy in order to do this kind of work successfully.

The deliveries, which Barát helped them make, were even more fun than the acquisitions because the people were basically overjoyed to see their belongings again. While it is true that the "things" of this world don't particularly matter in the Big Picture, God sometimes does give us the rewards of physical blessings during our lifetimes. Plus, some of the treasures stolen from these people by the sorcerers and elites were centuries old.

They were just leaving a mothership community in Kentucky where they had dropped off the Hummel when Kiana scribbled a few notes in her journal and asked, "Are you up for one more trip today?"

"Sure," Sal replied, with Pipac and Barát nodding.

"Good," Kiana answered, as they set off again to Supe-10 to obtain a wristwatch and a carved wooden pipe. After obtaining the watch and pipe, they were on their way out of town when they crossed paths in the air with Telános, who was visiting the city on this day in order to check on his future charge.

"Hello, my friend!" Sal called, as he and Pipac both waved to the snow gryphon.

Barát whinnied hello, as Sal introduced Telános to him, and Kiana, who suddenly winced from the sharp pain of an instant and intense headache. "Ow!" she exclaimed, as her right hand flew to her temple.

The headache had been sent by Eizel (the younger version of herself) who was on the rooftop deck of her apartment building. Using spy-specs, she had been specifically scanning the skies for creatures like wind horses. Imagine how elated she was to have spotted both a wind horse and a snow gryphon on this day. But having more of a disdain for godly people than godly magical creatures, she decided to target the girl of the group. While Eizel had only planted the thought of a headache, she was already powerful enough at this age for the headache to take firm hold and cause excruciating pain.

With both Telános and Barát recognizing the danger on the rooftop below, the pair decided to land, doing so actually near the factory pavilion where Telános had created the frost flowers on the day he was waiting for Ethan and Alex. Eizel and Winston actually didn't live all that far from one another; but this spot was out of the line of sight of Eizel, who was still on her rooftop but had lost interest in the group because she was getting a little hungry. And so, she headed to her apartment to make something to eat.

Meanwhile, Kiana was still in a tremendous amount of pain. Thinking quickly, Sal fished in his jacket for a midnight-blue colored pencil and a blank flashcard, upon which, in somewhat soft and fairly broad lettering, he wrote, "quiet and dark." Being natural counters to the light and noise that often cause migraines, the words almost instantly eased Kiana's pain as soon as her eyes read them.

Rummaging in his pack next, Sal produced a Meadowsweet Drop, which was like a lemon drop candy, but made from the herb meadowsweet (from which aspirin was originally derived). Honey from bees charmed by the bigfoots at the twin plantations had been added as a sweetener, along with a bit of magic to make the drop take immediate pain-relieving effect. Magicians often worked with herbalists in order to produce these sorts of fabulous remedies and results. And, indeed, no sooner had Kiana popped the drop into her mouth than the remnants of the headache were completely washed away.

"Thank you so much," Kiana exhaled as she reached out to squeeze Sal's forearm in a gesture of both thanks and relief. After this, she stayed mainly quiet, not only from fear that any excess noise might make the headache return, but also from feeling a little humbled at being so easily and unexpectedly crippled by that evil girl on the

rooftop. In general, Kiana was so fast (having been so even from her toddler years) that not much bad had ever happened to her before. Plus, she always followed God's instructions, walking the path He set before her, which was steady and sure. She also often used bible quotes as reminders to stay on the path, and rely on God to direct her steps. While the bible was filled with quotes pertaining to this subject, Jeremiah 10:23 was definitely one of her favorites. "I know, O LORD, that the way of man is not in himself, that it is not in man who walks to direct his steps." So too was Proverbs 3:6 a treasured verse. "In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths." And, of course, like many people, she took heart in the sense of peace and safety found in Psalm 23:2-3. "He leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake."

In considering what had just happened, Kiana came to the conclusion that we sometimes need to be reminded that we are vulnerable, and need to depend wholly on God, and not on ourselves. Without Him, we are nothing; and we definitely can't make wise decisions without the guidance of the One Who knows everything, sees everything, is in control of everything, and is everywhere at all times. When she really thought about it, she decided that she'd have to be pretty stupid not to consult God and follow His instructions, about everything.

Since Kiana was feeling better, the group soon took off, with Sal and Pipac riding Telános, and Barát carrying Kiana.

Meanwhile, nearby, Winston had just arrived home from his afternoon classes and was having an apple, cut in half and spread with peanut butter, for a snack. Since our last time of meeting him, Winston had indeed found out that he was adopted, his parents being completely honest with him when he asked them. However, this didn't change anything in his mind. In fact, he was adamant that nothing about his life would change; though it already had when the uprisings occurred. Angry over the uprisings, and over this long-lost brother showing up, Winston tried to think of ways he could help the sorcerers get back at those who had disrupted the peaceful lives of the people living in the Supercities. With everything stewing in his mind, he suddenly realized that he was already in the process of doing this, using his gift, because

his work was directly related to getting back at certain people, though in something of a roundabout way.

The project he was currently working on had to do with the labor shortage; and in considering what was shortly to come about as a result of his work, he felt incredibly smug. *This will teach those outsiders a lesson*, he thought. He absolutely hated outsiders, especially from being so brainwashed over the years. Having been taught that he was superior to the commoners of the cities and work camps, Winston, like many others his age, didn't have a clear understanding as to why it was wrong to treat other people like slaves. But in order to *really* teach the lesson, he needed to be successful, which meant he needed to get to work, instead of lollygagging around at home so much. Therefore, after washing his hands from the sticky snack, he changed clothes and headed on foot to a sorcerers' den about six blocks from his home, in order to continue work on his project.

The afternoon shadows were lengthening as Telános and Barát soared out over the open hills and plains south of Supercity Ten. They were flying fairly low, so that the humans and puck could have a good view of the landscape below, when both the gryphon and wind horse suddenly noticed something ominous ahead in their flight path. A flash dragon was on a fast course directly for them. However, before the protectors could react, and just before the falsie reached their position, a tiny bristly creature known as a Bengalburr leapt from the top of an extremely tall cottonwood tree. As Barát and Telános pulled up to halt and hover, the flash dragon gave a terrible scream of pain as the bristle ball landed on its neck.

No larger than the average hamster, Bengalburrs were very fierce; and this one, with his razor-sharp teeth, basically chewed off most of the falsie's fake feathers, along with great patches of scales (equal to about half), in about forty-five seconds flat. The onlookers were fairly cringing from watching the writhing of the beast, and hearing its squalls of pain, which made Kiana's head twinge somewhat; but, blessedly, her full headache didn't return.

As the Bengalburr leapt back to the treetop, the flash dragon streaked away, still in pain because, having just received the equivalent of a super-close razor burn over big chunks of his body, and without the

protection of his scales and fake feathers, the wind was terribly hurting his hide.

Because Bengalburrs were somewhat rare and had catlike stealth, none of this party had ever seen one before; though they had all heard descriptions that generally included words like “vicious” and “ultrafast” and “looks like a cross between a Bengal tiger and a large burr.” This particular one definitely fit the descriptions—having black and orange stripes, being incredibly fast, and sporting sharp prickles all over.

The encounter with the falsie left the Bengalburr excitable and looking for others to take on. And since the tiny creature was not even out of breath after the exertion, he had more than enough energy. Fortunately for our travelers, while most Bengalburrs delighted in taking on evil creatures like megahobs and nyregs, in general, they wouldn’t harm humans, household pets, or godly magical creatures. However, they were not to be confused with anything friendly. In fact, only genies could tame Bengalburrs, often keeping company with them like one might the family dog, cat, or guinea pig. But other folks were wise to keep their distance, as both Barát and Telános took care to on this day.

The humans and puck needed to be getting home for the day. Giving the tree containing the Bengalburr a wide berth, as the group continued on their way, Barát soon broke off to take his charge to her mothership community. As Kiana and Sal said goodbye using the triangle hand symbol, they agreed to keep in touch by means of dawn pigeons and walnuts. Telános then dropped Sal off at Laurelstone before taking Pipac to Doyle Mansion.

Pipac was anxious to spend some time with his little sister, who tended to go to sleep early, so the best time to play with her was definitely before dinner. Already, Lista had a great deal of coordination and could play fast patty-cake. Also, all pucks were born able to throw things, so she could throw a ball, which was what she and Pipac mainly did on this day, playing a game of toss across the music room, Lista from her little floor blanket and Pipac from a spot by the door.

Meanwhile, upstairs in the sewing room, Em was making a little dress for Kisi who was having a fitting while her parents helped Zin make dinner in the kitchen.

Nearing dusk on Lion Mountain, Lyydu observed Bear and Bern having a meeting outside of the blacksmith shop with Astrid, the leader of the Mountain.

Although they were within twenty feet of his position by a tree, the trio didn't see him because he was currently invisible. While there wasn't really a need to hide from anyone on the Mountain, being a shy and private sort, Lyydu often simply didn't want to be bothered by others. Plus, on this day, he had a sort of mission of his own planned, which he preferred to attend to unobserved. Making his way to Baldwin's Valley on the Mountain, Lyydu closely scanned the landscape for the white lion, a shapeshifting creature that stayed in mouse form much of the time and whose coat was actually made up of a lot of different colors. But because the whites and creams were prominent, and because he often looked a bit ghostly from a distance, people for decades had been calling him the white lion, particularly because no one knew if he had a name. Lyydu certainly didn't know, particularly because the white lion was largely secretive. However, since he couldn't become invisible like thunderbirds could, the shapeshifter was fairly easily found by those with keen eyesight, even in mouse form, as he was on this evening.

The white lion was a creature that often liked to keep an eye on Linn, who had never been assigned an official protector by God. This had long puzzled Lyydu, who had been assigned to Charlie Wharton, the chef running several cafeterias on the Mountain, since she was a young girl. With Linn being as important as any others of the godly (if not more so due to his gift of exuding large quantities of goodness needed to feed magical creatures worldwide), why wasn't he more protected? The only answer seemed to be that he *was* being safeguarded, but in less-obvious ways than having a single protector assigned. *By watchmen perhaps*, Lyydu thought, *and certain people looking out for him. And, of course, creatures like wind horses, gryphons, and firebirds tend to spread out their protection duties.*

Lyydu could understand why the lion got attached to the boy. The flow of goodness Linn constantly exuded tended to attract all sorts of creatures, especially small ones like lizards, birds, squirrels, and voles, many of which liked to perch on the arms and back of his airchair when he was out and about. Also, only the other day, Lyydu had observed

rows of wrens and sparrows lined up on the windowsills outside of Linn's lab; and they hadn't just been basking in the warmth on the sunny side of the structure, but were crowding together to be close to the boy inside.

After locating the lion-in-mouse-form in a grassy valley nook and landing beside him, Lyydu by thought explained to the creature that he needed his help. Giving a small nod to the thunderbird, the mouse then hopped onto his back so they could be on their way to their destination, which happened to be one of the mothership settlements just outside the borders of Lion Mountain.

The white lion was incredibly powerful, and one of his skills was the ability to expose demons hiding in various places, including inside of people. On a flyby earlier in the day, Lyydu had sensed a couple of demons in the community, but hadn't been able to find any when looking about for them. Thus, the thunderbird concluded that the nasty creatures might be inhabiting human beings, which happened to be correct.

Neither Lyydu nor the white lion wanted to enter the debate often raised by humans about demon occupation versus demon possession of people, and whether or not either was even possible with regard to believers. Some people thought the strength of the demon and the extent of its power over an individual determined if someone was merely occupied, or if they were fully possessed. However, others didn't believe either was possible in the case of believers, who were already filled with the Holy Spirit. But clearly, some believers had over the years been controlled by demonic forces, whether occupied, possessed, or simply from their minds being influenced. Lyydu knew firsthand that Sam Dellinger, who ran a large pottery studio on the Mountain and who was a good friend to Charlie, had been inhabited in some way in his youth; and he had been a believer at the time. Plus, more recently, a plan involving demons taking control of certain humans had been set in motion and had taken root on Lion Mountain. Blessedly, this had been recognized and the problem taken care of. However, being composed mainly of evil energy, demons could hide in some pretty small places; and they don't require oxygen. Also, a person weakened by various cares of the world, or hardened to sin, might be susceptible to demonic infiltration. Whatever the specific truths behind

the debate, the demons had to go. The thunderbird was certainly not going to ignore the problem; and now, being made aware of it, neither was the white lion.

Once over the settlement, Lyydu cruised about low. While not invisible at the moment, anyone observing him likely wouldn't be much concerned, as thunderbirds rarely posed a threat to anyone, except the ungodly. Though it was getting dark, both the lion and the thunderbird had good night vision. Plus, in being able to sense the presence of the demons, they didn't really need to see much. Making slow circles over the community, Lyydu was eventually able to zero in on the location of the evil creatures.

A group of people on their way to a cafeteria to have their evening meal was only slightly startled when the thunderbird landed directly beside them. However, they were fairly astounded when the mouse leapt from Lyydu's back, shapeshifting in midair to become the lion, his enormous form lighting up like a rainbow as he landed square in front of the group. The rainbow light penetrated the people; and the instant the rays touched the two demons, the filthy beasts quickly exited the husband and wife in whom they had been hiding, streaming out of their noses, mouths, and ears like strings of smoke, but ones sickly green in color, mixed with various shades of gray and yellow. Once free of their hosts, the demons swiftly reassembled themselves into their standard form—sporting wide wings, long claws, sharp teeth, and large fangs. While demons could vary greatly in height, these were each about nine feet tall.

The evil pair might have wanted to fight, to tear the humans and protectors to shreds, except for being deathly afraid of the white lion, especially his rainbow light. And so, they decided to flee, one opting to run and the other to take flight. However, they didn't get far because the one that tried to run was immediately pounced upon by the lion, who dealt with the creature with one swipe of an enormous paw. The other, one of the humans took care of, using a flute to take the demon out at about twenty feet in the air. The magical energy emanating from the weapon sounded like a solemn hymn as it sliced through the neck of the creature who instantly dissipated. The few dribbles left of his evil self that landed in a treetop and on a holly bush would wash away with

the next good rain, as would the small pile of sludgy mess left of the demon that the lion had swiped.

The husband and wife, other than being horrified to discover that their bodies had harbored these evil spirits, weren't too affected. With some solid prayer, reading the bible, good counsel, and fellowship with godly friends, they would fully recover.

Instead of hitching a ride back to the Mountain, the lion simply padded off through the trees to be on his own for a time, as Lydu made his way home to check on Charlie.

Chapter Four

Projects and Dreams

Back in Supercity Ten, in the sorcerers' den near his home, Winston was hard at work on a form of malice that many might consider to be just about as bad as occupation or possession by demons, this being a chemical creation known as a hypnoid, designed to place the brain of a person into an extremely susceptible state whereby he or she would be forced to obey verbal commands preceded by a code phrase that would activate the hypnoid.

Because the hypnoid was designed to target three of the human senses—sight, hearing, and smell—Winston had decided that the delivery system would be a simple glass ampule that would be broken near the face of the subject, within eight inches to be specific. Once cracked, the glass would instantly emit a small flash of light targeting the eyes, the flash occurring simultaneous to a sound like a sharp metallic *click* aimed at the ears. Directly after the flash and the *click*, a nasal mist from droplets inside the ampule would be released and inhaled, the smell being slightly citrusy but also flowery. With the nose, throat, and ears all connected, a tiny receiver would be inhaled with the droplets and would eventually travel to an ear canal to allow the subject to receive the voice commands.

Since we all know how powerful human senses can be—like how the smell of freshly-baked cookies can remind us of our grandmother, or how hearing a song from our youth can make us remember our first date—having three of the five senses affected would allow full mastery over the brain. And since the brain, of course, controls human actions, the sorcerers or others using the hypnoids would be fully able to control their targets, the main intent being to create an army of slaves, and ones much easier to control than the previous commoners of the Supercities and camps had been. The ampules, being less than an inch in length each, would be easy to carry in bulk; and so, many people would be brought under control quickly and efficiently.

Winston had already performed a couple of tests on factory workers. While successful, he still needed to tweak the formula. However, he was confident. Very soon, the hypnoid would be ready to put into full action. And eventually, the use would be widespread, not only to solve the labor-shortage problem, but also to enslave many of the goody two-shoes, to harness their powers, since quite a few had gifts very like those of Kemp, Eizel, Winston, and others working with the sorcerers.

Because the hypnoid could be easily turned on and off with the code phrase, the subjects wouldn't even know they were under anyone else's influence; nor would they remember their actions while under this control. Winston did concede that exceptions might be found amongst the gifted, especially if a person had powers like Eizel's. However, he wasn't too worried; they could still be controlled, if not to the same degree. And if anyone did remember deeds performed while under the influence, he or she wouldn't necessarily know why they had behaved in such ways.

Early on, Winston had thought of making the subjects follow commands of persons wearing the colors of the sorcerers (their robes most often being distinctive shades of turquoise, plum, sage, and mustard); but he had altered this plan upon realizing that the enemy might use the same colors to counter commands. And so, he had opted for the code phrase, of which there would be many, each corresponding to a different hypnoid batch. *The more the better*, he had decided as far as the phrases, since this would lessen the chance of an enemy being able to guess a particular one in order to deactivate a person.

Tanner was also in the den on this day, working on some of his own creations. A conjurer by specialty, he had his own den at his apartment in Supe-9; however, he also liked to work on various tech things, and so ended up traveling on occasion in order to make use of specialty equipment that he didn't have at home. In connection with Winston's project, and under the direction of his mentor, a sorcerer named Vidas Farr, Tanner was set to begin using the hypnoids as soon as Winston finished his tweaks. It wouldn't be long now, only a matter of days.

In talking things over with Tanner, Winston was a little surprised at the coincidence that some of the first hypnoid targets would be people

close to this supposed brother of his. *It's funny how certain things in life can intersect*, he thought.

Winston wasn't likely to give up his hatred for outsiders anytime soon, particularly since so much about the Supes had changed. His family's apartment wasn't very well kept up anymore, since his mom was working and they no longer had a maid. And he certainly wasn't going to do any of the cleaning, no matter how much his parents pleaded and scolded; he had more important things to do. The Supercities also didn't have sports anymore, the athletic teams having been decimated when most of the coaches and players left with the throngs of other uprising escapees. Winston had particularly followed soccer and basketball, and was now sorely missing his favorite sports. However, he did now have more time to work on projects—this was at least something of a consolation for him.

And speaking of sports, Tanner and Winston had gone to a few games together over the years. Taking a break from their work to have a soda, the pair lamented not being able to watch basketball anymore. In griping about other woes as well, Winston brought up his family's lack of a maid.

Tanner lived by himself since his parents and brother moved the previous year to one of the self-sustaining communities, and he actually had a maid, mainly because sorcerers tended to get preferential treatment about these sorts of things. However, he wasn't particularly happy with the amount of credits he had to pay the woman, whose name was Ingrid. Nor was he happy about having to be somewhat polite to her. She had already threatened to quit over his rude manners. "I can easily work somewhere else," she told him. "My services are greatly in demand." At that time, Tanner had to resist turning Ingrid into a toad and feeding her to a nyreg. Not that it would have done him any good because he would have had a terrible time finding someone else to do his cleaning. Plus, the higher-ups would have come down on him like a ton of bricks. They needed to keep people in the cities, not drive them out by abuse and fear. And Ingrid definitely had family that would have missed her; in fact, she was always yammering on about them.

Because both boys were getting in a pretty bad mood discussing the lack of sports and servants, Tanner opted to change the subject, to that of Winston's so-called brother.

“No, I haven’t heard from him again,” Winston answered Tanner’s query.

“Just because you’re adopted doesn’t mean this guy is really your brother,” Tanner stressed, having already told Winston this during their previous conversation about Ethan. “You’d need DNA tests to prove that. So if he shows up again, remember that it might be a trick. He might have found out you were adopted, and is just using that to try to infiltrate, like to get information from you, or to try to get you away from the cities.”

Tanner had had many dealings with outsiders like Ethan, and therefore knew they were perfectly capable of deception, and wrecking important plans. Most recently, a group of them had messed up a scheme he had going on related to the dragons, to killing them that is. Having been totally stopped in his tracks, Tanner was incredibly angry. However, the sorcerers would be getting back at them, both the dragons and the goody two-shoes, in the end. From what his mentor had recently related to him, the flash dragons were rapidly being improved, mainly in firepower, though not necessarily in temperament. However, those modifying the genetics of the beasts were hopeful that this could be improved so that the creatures could then be safely ridden.

“Success is the best revenge,” Tanner said with a smile. “So we just need to keep working hard, to accomplish our goals.”

Winston totally agreed with this; and so, after their break, he set to work with gusto in order to finish his latest adjustment to the hypnoid formula.

Shortly before midnight, Jonathan observed Winston walking home, in fact, passing within four feet of him on the sidewalk; but since he was shrouded by his black sapphire (that was drawing on shadows cast by streetlamps to function), Winston never noticed him. Swiftly consulting an older almanac, Jonathan then made a brief note in a newer one. *Everything’s going according to plan so far*, he decided.

Jonathan’s purpose in going back in time was very like that of the older Eizel. Worried about how much time travel was going on, in keeping watch on certain events of history, he was basically trying to ensure that nothing about the past would change the future significantly enough to affect the course of his own life, and the lives of others that he cared about. However, unlike the older Eizel, whose journey would

involve a series of short time-travel trips, he was taking one long trip that was going on ten years to date. *Not too much longer now*, he thought, of what he liked to call his Hope Project. *Just a few more months, and the future will be set.*

He was taking a youth elixir that many TKTs of his time took on longer trips so as not to age. Upon his return, his body at least wouldn't be ten years older, though his mind probably would be, from having observed many intense things, including the full events of the uprisings, which had included massive slaughter on both sides and which he had been obliged to stay out of, so as not to change things. The one exception, on God's direction, had involved saving a family escaping a work camp from three stealth hobs that had been easy for Jonathan to spot using rose-colored glasses and then to deal with using an advanced mirror weapon mounted on one side of the glasses.

With regard to the issue of trust in God, Jonathan, who was praying regularly, did fully trust Him. However, he didn't always trust human beings; and with good reason, as he had spent a fairly sizeable chunk of his younger years deceived by others, as well as by his own thoughts and reasoning. From his prayers, and from careful listening to God's responses, Jonathan was getting both guidance and reassurance that his Hope Project was on the right track, in keeping with the Father's will.

Winston's progress in developing the hypnoid was actually part of what Jonathan was observing. Aware of several malicious projects in the works at this time by sorcerers and others, Jonathan made no moves to interfere, since he, like Eizel, full well knew that some bad things in life were meant to be. This was true even with the issue of the flash dragons, which the TKTs could have stopped (by going back in time to stop the sorcerers from initially making them), but had been instructed not to.

Arriving home and tumbling into bed, Winston had a very odd dream in which he saw himself sitting on a couch with Ethan and watching a basketball game. They both looked older, like maybe by about ten or twelve years. Next, Winston saw his older self in a playground setting shooting hoops with a younger boy that looked a lot like him (and Ethan too, for that matter) as far as hair coloring and facial features.

In the morning, Winston made notes in his journal, about the previous day's progress on the hypnoid and about the dream, the latter of which he couldn't particularly fathom what it might mean, other than the fact that Ethan had told him his birth mother had had three sons.

So I have two brothers, one older and one younger, Winston thought. *Whatever; no big deal*. Though he did find himself over the next few days wondering what might have happened to his younger brother.

At the same time Winston was making notes in his journal, Bear and Bern, under direction from Astrid, were setting off on a journey together, first to meet up with several others at the twin plantations, and then to take a time-travel trip.

A short distance from the blacksmith shop, Linn happened to be checking on Lyydu's prosthetic foot, which was working fine, needing no adjustments. Observing Bear and Bern leaving the shop together and wearing pod travel packs, Lyydu thought, *That's a recipe for trouble, if I ever saw one*.

Smiling because he had heard the thunderbird's thought, Linn tended to agree; however, he also surmised that Astrid probably knew exactly what she was doing in sending the pair out together on a project. His reasoning was correct, especially because the elderly woman had lived long enough to know a thing or two about human nature.

While Astrid wasn't necessarily acting as a matchmaker in a traditional sense, she definitely knew that Bear and Bern would work well as a team, if not a romantic one, then at least as friends. And the best way to accomplish the goal of "friends" would be to have the pair spend some time together.

Knowing that time-travel trips take no time at all in the present to accomplish, Bern wasn't worried about getting behind in her work, particularly because Gabe could manage things for a while. Bear too was fairly caught up with everything on his to-do list, which was why he had no problem taking a somewhat leisurely pace to the plantations, in that they would be walking, and sometimes running. Both being practically too large to ride a horse—with even creatures like rookhs and gryphons having a little trouble carrying them—Bear and Bern had grown accustomed to basically taking themselves wherever they needed to go.

With regard to speed, both Bear and Bern could run fairly quickly, Bear probably as fast as a bear, and Bern not much slower. While Bern was simply born with her gifts of strength and speed, Bear seemed to have developed his skills as he aged into his late teens and early twenties. And because gifts sometimes did develop later in life, no one ever really knew if his story of how he had been struck by lightning at the same time a bear was struck and died nearby was really true. According to the story, the strength and bulk of the bear were transferred to him at the time the poor creature died. To most people, it seemed more likely that Bear had simply grown bigger, stronger, and faster as he aged. Whatever the case, alternating walking and running, the trip to the plantations likely wouldn't take the pair more than about three days at most, particularly because they both had good endurance.

They arrived at Laurelstone late evening on their second day of travel, having met with little trouble, other than having a handful of disagreements with each other over which were the best routes to take. They had kept to wilderness areas to avoid trouble, skirting settlements and Rubble Cities like Chattanooga and Birmingham that had been in rubble much longer than the outer parts of the Supes, and were prime areas for gangs of miscreants to hang out in, mainly for the purpose of waylaying travelers. Creatures like gremlins and megahobs also liked to hang out in Rubble Cities. Not that Bear and Bern would have had much trouble dealing with rubble gangs, or gremlins and megahobs, except for wanting their journey to be as peaceful as possible, aside from arguing a bit, which was inevitable. They had spoken very little to one another either on the move or when making camp the one night. Wary of setting Bern off, Bear opted to read the bible after their campfire dinner, instead of trying to make conversation.

After a good night's sleep in a guest lodge situated in a pocket on the grounds of Laurelstone, the pair met up early morning with the other TKTs of their team. Nineteen-year-old Muriel Lofto, who had the gift of being able to communicate with animals (mainly telepathically, but sometimes also by vocal means) was the leader, designated as such not only because she was a seasoned TKT, but also because she had spent quite a bit of time in the Mystery Realm, which was exactly where this group was headed. Frees was on the team too, along with a friend of his from the twin plantations, fifteen-year-old Montgomery Winn, who

liked to be called Monte. Often referred to as The Pitcher, Monte was gifted with the ability to throw objects (often even heavy ones) for miles, with great accuracy. Jarna had just dropped off Trixie for the trip, along with a friend of hers from Lion Mountain. Jasper Hughes was fifteen and a gifted shapeshifter. Trixie, Jasper, and Frees had all spent some time in the Mystery Realm and were looking forward to returning.

The Mystery Realm was called such because no one knew exactly what else to call it. Home to two pyramids that Muriel had helped to build, this place of mystery also held twelve canyons containing vast quantities of fabulous gemstones that some speculated might be for the building of New Jerusalem, our future heavenly home.

The members of the team had all been previously instructed as to what to pack for provisions for this mission, which might turn out to be a long one—a couple of months at least—though, of course, they would leave and arrive back through the time-travel portal at nearly the same instant.

Mr. Amir, one of the research partners of the TKTs, had been the one to receive God’s instructions for this mission (in a vision), and he was now prepping the team. Their task was directly related to the fabulous gemstones in the Mystery Realm, in that the team would be harvesting and staging many of them in a certain area for future projects of some sort. “Don’t be surprised if you meet others there for the same purpose,” Mr. Amir told the group, as he did for many time-travel missions. Though in this case, he had actually seen another group of people in his vision helping the TKTs. “And remember not to share too much information with any of them.” While this might have seemed like good common sense for the TKTs, who were always on their guard about the danger of possibly changing timelines, reminders never hurt. “They likely also won’t want to over-share,” Mr. Amir advised, as this had proved the case in similar situations where God had sent extra people to help with large projects.

Because a time-travel trip was imminent, the stained glass window in the small study at Laurelstone, which usually depicted a rose arbor, had changed to display the scene of the destination—that of a wide and hilly valley in the Mystery Realm. After making a departure note in the log book in the study, and after saying the customary pre-trip prayer,

Muriel accepted the Time Key from Mr. Amir, after which, she led the group through the window. Staying closely together, with Bear and Bern bringing up the rear, they ended up in the beautiful valley in what seemed to be early springtime—based on trees budding, songbirds flitting about looking for suitable nesting sites, and crisp (but not too cold) breezes.

Picking a good spot, the TKTs swiftly set up camp. Bear and Bern each had their own tent. Muriel and Trixie were sharing another. And Jasper, Monte, and Frees would be bunking together in a third. It was morning in the valley, the same as it had been at home, and they were looking forward to getting in a full day's work on their project. The valley was where they would be staging the gemstones harvested from the twelve canyons that were about a four-hour hike from their present location.

Since gargoyles could move heavy objects easily over great distances simply using their minds, the TKTs might have wondered why none were on this trip. The answer was simple: Mr. Amir had not been instructed to send gargoyles along. And the TKTs always listened to God's instructions, never trying to outguess Him or make their own plans for shortcuts. While shortcuts might seem appealing, they often are not a good idea, particularly because God always has a plan; and He always makes a way for things to happen when we are following His commands. In this case, the people seen in Mr. Amir's vision would be more than adequate to help with the project. And, in fact, these helpers were already in the Mystery Realm, and had already set up their own camp, which the TKTs would soon discover.

Muriel had just received God's instructions (in the form of a small voice in the back of her head) to lead her team over a hill about half a mile to the camp to meet the people, eighteen in total, ten men and eight women to be precise. And while all eighteen spoke English (so there would be no language barrier), and were very affable, the TKTs at first had a little trouble finding their voices in order to greet their new friends, who were each over nine feet tall, and incredibly bulky besides. In fact, both Bear and Bern looked nearly dwarfed in comparison.

The TKTs would soon discover the women of the group to be just as strong as the men, with all being at least as powerful individually as Bear and Bern, and perhaps slightly more so.

In addition to their awesome strength, the eighteen had brought equipment with them in the form of rock hammers, picks, saws, etc. Five huge sleds and six gigantic carts had also been brought, in pieces, and were being assembled. Nothing hi-tech or electrical had been brought, but just good old-fashioned solid tools like those used for centuries in mines and quarries.

Monte, Jasper, and Frees couldn't even lift the breaker bars that would end up being used not only to break minerals and crystals, but also to hoist them onto the sleds and carts. The boys could, both together, just manage to lift one of the bars, which a couple of the strong women were carrying three of each.

When the TKTs were just amongst themselves, they ended up calling their strong teammates the Large People, mainly because they didn't know what else to call them. Of course, when referring to individuals, they ended up using their given names, which were largely of the common sort like Hannah, John, Ricardo, Tad, and Rose, though Andorria among the women stood out as a little more unusual, in the same way that Newland and Calfog did with the men. In keeping with not sharing too much information, everyone just stuck to first names. The TKTs also never talked about time travel, particularly because they surmised that the Large People probably hadn't time traveled to get to the Mystery Realm. This was correct, as they had simply arrived through a doorway from another realm, but a realm as yet unknown to anyone at the twin plantations, since the Large People were obviously not from Kivetel, Antica, or Erdém, the residents of which the TKTs were all very familiar with, since Antica and Erdém, like Kivetel, were easily accessed by doors on the mezzanine.

The first order of business according to Muriel was a trek to the canyons, which Jasper and Trixie had both seen before, and were therefore slightly less astounded by than the others when first taking in the magnificent sight from a plateau central to all twelve of the canyons, each of which held a different gemstone that included amethyst, onyx, carnelian, topaz, sapphire, agate, chrysolite, jasper, emerald, beryl, jacinth, and chrysoprase.

When the group got at least a little over being stupefied, Monte made a few sketches and took some notes as to the geography of the area—just by regular pencil and pad of paper. Since tech stuff often

didn't work when crossing realms, the TKTs, like the Large People, hadn't brought any devices with them. Monte especially marked the best ways in and out of the massive gorges, the routes of which his companions agreed with later when referring to his jottings.

The beryl, sapphire, topaz, chrysolite, jacinth, amethyst, and emerald canyons were entirely crystalline in theme, while the onyx, agate, carnelian, jasper, and chrysoprase ones contained stones more opaque in nature and slightly more subdued, though these were still polished up more than most raw minerals found in the wild would have been. The quantities were perhaps the most astounding aspect, in likely being more than all of the deposits on earth for any one of the types of gemstones.

They began working in earnest the next morning, mainly in teams of four to six, starting in the onyx, topaz, jasper, and sapphire canyons. Many of the crystals and minerals formed incredibly interesting shapes, very like the arches, hoodoos, bridges, and such the TKTs were familiar with in canyons back home. It became quite fun as they worked to give some of the formations names like Top Hat, Mushroom, Crocodile Snout, Pumpkin Tower, Saucer, and Queen's Fan. Many individual crystals jutting from canyon walls were as large as train cars. These were absolutely brilliant, and even somewhat difficult to look at with the sun shining fully upon them. Quite a few mineral chunks were roughly the size of small houses. Upon hearing God's instructions in their minds, the teams doing the harvesting mainly left the larger specimens alone, while gathering smaller boulders and concentrating on removing slabs from walls of stone.

Each of the carts could generally hold five to six crystal chunks, each about the size of a full-grown hippo, while the sleds were usually loaded with four or five stone slabs roughly fifteen feet long, eight feet wide, and a foot or two thick each. The carts were designed for a single pusher, while the sleds were meant to be pulled by two people. While only Bear and Bern of the TKTs could help the Large People with the sleds and carts, the others could break and move rocks, particularly of the smaller varieties.

Some carts were filled with smaller specimens that would also be needed for whatever future projects these materials might be for. In order to speed up moving some of the stones around, Monte found he

was able to throw ones about the size of basketballs across the canyons to both Newland and Rose for loading onto carts. Jasper's shapeshifting abilities came in handy many times, as he was able to squeeze into some pretty tight crevices in order to help break slabs and chunks loose without damaging them too much. Trixie's super hearing was also a help, particularly with messaging, as she could easily hear all the way from the valley to the canyons. This was particularly useful if someone needed something brought from one site to another, like water or lunch or an extra rock hammer.

The beryl canyon—with its crystals of various shades of yellow, green, and blue—ended up being Muriel's favorite; while the carnelian one—holding stones of red, orange, and brown hues—was undoubtedly Bear's. Jasper almost hated to admit that he favored the jasper canyon; and while there was some speculation that biblical jaspers were more like diamonds (being clear and entirely crystalline, though reddish in color), the ones in the jasper gorge were of the sort the TKTs might commonly find at home. When mulling over the matter, Jasper reasoned that many additional materials—possibly even more amazing, unique, and wonderful than those in the canyons—would probably ultimately go into the building of New Jerusalem. After all, John had had but a glimpse of this future heavenly city when being given the Revelation, as Ezekiel had in his visions.

Working steadily, the teams managed two trips each day to and from the canyons with the six carts and five sleds. Continuing to act on God's instructions, the materials were being staged in twenty-four separate spots spread across the wide valley.

Bear and Bern ended up getting along fairly well together, mainly because they were so busy that they didn't have much time to get on each other's nerves. Early on, Bear tried to help Bern a few times with lifting rock slabs; however, when she made it clear that she neither wanted nor needed help, he ended up simply leaving her to it. This ended up being a wise choice for both of them, and for the teams that certainly didn't need to deal with any bickering added to the stress of their already difficult work.

While the TKTs might have wanted to take a few souvenirs home with them, in the form of bits of gemstones accidentally broken off during the harvesting and moving processes, they all knew not to. Not

only were these fabulous materials meant to remain in the Mystery Realm (at least for the time being), the people of their time had learned not to covet so many sparkly things. Indeed, items of bling had long since lost their appeal to most people of the world. The Large People seemed to hold these principles as well, and were not planning to take any of the stones home with them.

At their campsite one evening, Trixie confessed to Muriel and Bern that she was glad to get away from the school scene at home for a while because a particular clique of girls—that liked to gossip, and sometimes spread lies about others—was making her life pretty miserable, along with the lives of a few others that the clique had decided to target.

“I wouldn’t join in with them when all of this started about six months ago, so they decided they didn’t like me,” Trixie explained. “Now, because they know I can hear everything they say, they end up saying a lot of not-so-nice things. Unless they don’t want me to hear; then they just pass notes to each other.”

“If they give you any physical trouble, let me know,” Bern told her.

“I don’t think they’ll bully me in that way,” Trixie replied. “For one thing, Jarna’s around a lot. And they’d all be too afraid of Chevy to do anything like that. (Fourteen-year-old Chevy Longwood from the twin plantations was not only a weapons expert and all-around combat phenom, she was also Trixie’s friend and mentor.)

“Well, just keep me in mind,” Bern said. “I could at least give them a talking to, if not more.” While she had never been a bully herself, she had certainly run across plenty in her lifetime, especially in her younger years. Now, if she could help defend her friends (which she didn’t have very many of), she gladly would.

“Thank you,” Trixie responded, “but I can pretty much look after myself. I mean, of course my parents always taught me not to fight anyone unless I have to. But if I have to, I will. And I’m pretty sure I’d come out on top. But I think they’re pretty much all talk...mean talk for sure, but no action.”

“Pray for them,” Muriel suggested.

“I will, and have been,” Trixie said.

Speaking of prayer, since the TKTs regularly engaged in campfire bible studies, the three girls took the opportunity to look up and share some bible verses relevant to Trixie’s situation.

“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them,” Muriel said, quoting Romans 12:14.

Bern right away looked up Isaiah 54:17. ““...no weapon that is fashioned against you shall prosper, and you shall confute every tongue that rises against you in judgment. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord and their vindication from me, says the Lord.””

“You could share some of these with those girls,” Muriel said, afterwards reading Proverbs 4:24. “Put away from you crooked speech, and put devious talk far from you.”

“And this one,” Bern offered, of Ephesians 4:29. “Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for edifying, as fits the occasion, that it may impart grace to those who hear.”

Trixie agreed these would be good to share. “If they’ll listen,” she said. “Right now, I think they’re just more interested in talking.”

“They should listen,” Muriel stated, “and want to, especially if they’re Christians.”

“I think they are,” Trixie said, “just wayward ones.”

“Then you might remind them of the Ninth Commandment,” Muriel said, reciting Exodus 20:16. ““You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.””

“Some of them might listen,” Bern input, “especially if a big lady blacksmith sits them down and tells them to.”

“You know, I think that might be a really good idea,” Trixie said jokingly with a big smile.

Trixie, Jasper, Frees, and Monte were all doing some schoolwork in the evenings, their pod packs being capable of holding a lot of study materials. Muriel was taking college courses and had brought a few books with her.

While working on the Materials Project (as they had begun to call it), the TKTs saw quite a few critters very like those from home such as birds resembling sparrows and cardinals, and rodents that looked like ordinary field mice and ground squirrels. However, the Mystery Realm also obviously contained many unfamiliar creatures. A stream meandering through the valley contained extremely colorful fish, some with fins resembling masses of flower petals, and others with long trailing tails similar to those of peacocks.

Something like a small wolf that was very red in coloring had, on occasion, been watching the camp of the TKTs. One afternoon, Muriel took the opportunity to talk to him telepathically.

Hello, she said, approaching slowly the spot by a grouping of rocks where he was crouched. *What are you up to?*

Nothin' much, said the wolf, *just lookin' for rabbits and wond'rin' what you all are up to.*

Well, Muriel answered, *we're putting the stones and crystals in certain places for someone to use later.*

Oh...okay, whatever, the wolf replied. *Got any treats?*

Smiling, Muriel beckoned him closer to the camp, where she gave him some dried apricots from her pack, which the wolf seemed to relish.

Mmmm, good! he said, making a couple of odd faces from trying to get the fruit unstuck from his back teeth.

On another afternoon, Monte played with the wolf by throwing sticks, which took the creature about thirty minutes each to retrieve for as far as Monte was able to throw the heavier ones. After five times, the wolf didn't come back because he needed to be off doing other things. However, he did show up a few more times during the remainder of their stay. In addition to happily receiving various treats, he liked to play tug-of-war with Trixie who had knotted up an old tube sock expressly for this purpose.

After about a month of being in the Mystery Realm, Muriel received instructions that they also needed to harvest some trees from a stretch of woods adjacent to the valley, the logs to be staged in various spots along with the stone materials.

With these new instructions, five of the Large People basically turned into lumberjacks for about a week, cutting enormous trees that greatly resembled pines, oaks, and cedars. The stretch of woods actually looked like it could stand some thinning, and there were plenty of baby trees already in place that would eventually fill in amongst the remaining large ones.

At the time the lumberjacking began, Bear and Bern were still tolerating one another pretty well; though Bern, in thinking it a good idea to put some space between herself and Bear, did decide to help with the trees, not only with the cutting and moving of the logs, but also with the sharpening of the axes and saws.

Bear was fine with this. While he did know a little about logging, he was thoroughly enjoying working with the stone crews. He did, however, end up bringing water to Bern and the others on a couple of afternoons, which were getting warmer.

In truth, Bern was anxious for a little time away from Bear because she could sort of tell that her feelings for him were changing—from the annoyance she used to feel, to acceptance; and from indifference to his strength and skills, to something more like admiration. And while she wasn't quite ready to fully admit these things to herself, she had an inkling that she eventually would. In the meantime, putting some space between herself and Bear meant that she could observe him from a distance, while thinking everything over.

Not long after the lumberjacking was finished, Muriel ended up having a dream in which she saw twenty-four pyramids of varying sizes in different spots spread out across the valley. All were unique from one another, but were, in large part, made from the stones the group had been harvesting. *Many pyramids*, her mind told her. *Oh, and they're called Myramids*, she realized. Doves were also present in Muriel's dream, kind of flashy and multicolored ones. But she didn't know for sure if this meant they were burnished doves, or if they were regular doves that were just super shiny and colorful. In telling her companions about the dream, no one could make much out of it, other than the fact that they were staging materials for what would become known as the Myramids, and that the structures might be connected in some way to either doves or dragons.

While the canyons were about a four-hour hike from the valley, the two pyramids that Muriel had helped to build, one of glass and the other of granite, were nearly a full day's hike in another direction. The glass one was actually a greenhouse called Zoe in which the Tree of Life was growing. The granite pyramid, called Chronos, was connected to the four time-travel portals, though no one knew exactly how it was connected because the pyramid also had something to do with the Realm of Quintessence, where unicorns reside. Many doorways led to this realm, including some inside human brains.

In not thinking it likely they were going to see the two pyramids on this trip, the TKTs hadn't talked much about them. However, on the same night Muriel had her dream about the Myramids, Frees, in a

dream, received God's instructions to go to the glass pyramid, in order to spurt the tree inside. This was something he had done before, so the dream didn't surprise him.

Monte ended up going with Frees early the next morning, with the wolf also tagging along.

They reached the glass pyramid late in the day. The magical greenhouse, growing along with the Tree of Life inside it, was getting really huge. At this time, it was around the size of a largish six-story office building. When Frees entered to spurt the tree, the structure grew approximately another ten feet taller and wider in size.

Even Alex, who had also been to the Mystery Realm (though he wasn't along on this trip), couldn't make much out of the mystery as to how the Tree of Life could be growing here, but have also been in the Garden of Eden. The tree was also in Duodecessence, a realm that one of the doors on the mezzanine led to, though no one at present was allowed to access the realm through that passage.

Frees had pondered a few times as to how much of what people were seeing in the Mystery Realm, and in places like Duodecessence, was real and how much was symbolic. *These places are a little like the bible, he thought, since God's Word is a combination of real and symbolic. At least, many passages can be interpreted both literally and symbolically.*

Remembering from a church sermon that the Tree of Life was basically thought to be the cross, he decided that the tree, like Jesus, could be in any number of places at one time. *Even everywhere at once, he reasoned, since nothing is too hard or too complicated for God.* The tree was obviously a real tree, just like the cross was a real cross. But both were also symbolic.

The branches of the tree, and cross, are designed to spread over the whole world, Frees' mind told him. And the leaves will be for the healing of the nations, he remembered from reading the Revelation. Jesus will produce this healing because He is a healer, the Ultimate Healer.

And what about the twelve kinds of mystery fruit...he pondered. At this time, the tree in the greenhouse had twelve kinds of blossoms, but not yet any fruit. There seemed to be a lot of speculation among various church leaders as to exactly what the twelve kinds of fruit were. From

references to the Tree of Life in the bible, Frees got the idea that, whatever exactly the fruit was, it was mainly intended to nourish and guide our spirits into living a life righteous and pleasing to God here on earth, in order to prepare us for living eternally in His presence, where we will also continually be nourished and guided by Him.

But who knows when this even is as far as a timeline, or if it's outside of time somehow, Frees' mind eventually summed up. Time was basically a mystery everywhere, and especially in the Mystery Realm.

Whatever the reality, in the presence of the tree, Frees felt a calm and peace that was unlike anything he felt in other places. He also seemed to be able to breathe more deeply and think more clearly. This was sort of like how he felt during prayer times, when closely connected to Jesus.

Before it started to get dark, the boys and wolf took a short hike to the lookout tower situated very near the greenhouse. After climbing the steps, from the top of the tower, they could see in the distance the granite pyramid, which looked much as expected to Frees, who had actually helped gnomes build the colorful maze, made of both stone and vegetation, surrounding the pyramid.

A short while later, on the ground again and near the greenhouse, Monte and Frees spread their bedrolls and got settled in for the night, gazing at the stars until they fell asleep. The wolf, curled up with his nose tucked under his fluffy tail, fell asleep nearby while looking at the nearly-full moon.

Starting at dawn the next day, they made the trip back to the valley, the wolf parting ways with Monte and Frees about a mile before they reached their camp.

Although the TKTs and Large People were harvesting most of the materials for the Myramids from the canyons, Muriel also received instructions to take a couple of the teams to a series of enormous caverns inside a mountain in another area of the Mystery Realm, about a full day's hike from the valley. From seams within these caverns, they would be harvesting metals that looked a lot like platinum, copper, yellow gold, and white gold, but were harder than most metals any of the group were familiar with.

Also situated in the Mystery Realm, in a large lake to be precise, were twelve gigantic oysters holding enormous pearls. These, they wouldn't be touching for this project. Jasper and Trixie had seen them before. Like their companions at that time, the pair believed these to be for the gates of New Jerusalem. The visitors this time would not be going to the area of the lake at all, though Trixie vaguely wondered how large the pearls might have grown since she had last seen them. While harvesting materials, they also would not be paying a visit to the sea of magical golden glass that lay beyond the Chronos Pyramid.

Bear one night had a dream (more like a nightmare) in which he saw something heavy falling on Bern, and he ended up thinking it might be a premonition. What was falling on her was made of wood, but was not a tree, so he didn't think it was any of the trees Bern had moved when lumberjacking. No, the item was more like a heavy wooden beam, or possibly more than one. In not wanting to worry Bern, Bear didn't tell her about the dream. However, he did resolve to keep alert and watchful, to try to be on hand to help whenever this event might occur. While something heavy falling on his friend might not kill her, according to what he was seeing in his dream, she would definitely need help, or risk being terribly hurt. And if she was by herself when this happened, she might not be found quickly enough for dragon tears to be used to heal her. The tears had a time limit on them with regard to how quickly they had to be used on a person to either heal or raise the dead; everyone knew this. Plus, the TKTs had recently learned that dragon tears weren't going to work at some point in the future, though how far into the future was still unknown at this point because the person that had come back in time and shared this information had been careful not to disclose too much. Since specifics weren't known, Bear figured that this could happen at any time, just like the approaching Second Coming of Jesus, and so we must be prepared. While a good many people had healing gifts, none with this gift could raise the dead, which meant that mortal wounds probably would end up resulting in death when dragon tears ceased to work.

The whole of the Materials Project took the group nearly three months to complete, during which time they watched spring turn to summer. (Of course, upon returning home, the TKTs would still find it to be winter, since no time at all had passed.) They packed up camp on

a lovely summer morning, saying goodbye to the Large People who would be leaving directly, a day or two hence, after disassembling the carts and sleds.

The TKTs returned through a destination window that automatically appeared when Muriel, carrying the Time Key, neared its location.

Back at Laurelstone, the TKTs were greeted by the same early-morning setting from which they had left, along with Mr. Amir, who had barely had a sip of coffee since the team departed. Muriel, Trixie, and Jasper all shortly left the manor and called rookhs to take them home to Lion Mountain, while Frees and Monte set off for their homes to unpack and then head to their classes for the day.

After a hearty breakfast in one of the cafeterias at the plantations, Bear and Bern set off on foot for Lion Mountain, actually enjoying each other's company, mainly because Bear had pretty well figured out by this time when to give Bern space, and when she might be open to conversation, and even joking. For Bern's part, while they had early on in their acquaintance started off on kind of the wrong foot, she had to admit they had worked well together on the Materials Project. And she was starting to think they might do so when back home again, because there were lots of projects on the Mountain that could probably use their collaboration.

Taking their time on the journey, because they wanted to do a little sightseeing, the trip home took four days.

When Bear dropped Bern off at her cabin, situated very near her workshop, Lydu happened to be nearby; and he happened to notice the friendliness of the pair. To his viewpoint, Bear and Bern had always admired the skills of one another. Now, it seemed they might be starting to enjoy each other's personalities—Bear's being more forthcoming and jovial and Bern's, more introspective and stoical. If this had been a fairy tale, Lydu would have called it, "The Builder and the Blacksmith." *And isn't it just the way of the world that opposites tend to attract*, he thought. *If only on a bumpy road*, his mind added a moment later.

Chapter Five

Birthday Wishes

Trixie hadn't gone to the Valentine's dance on Lion Mountain because the girls of the little gossip clique, currently totaling five in number, had gone. But since none of the five had been invited to the birthday party being held for Linn and Quin at the church banquet hall on the first Saturday evening in March, she was definitely going.

The food and music at the party were just about as wonderful as the company. Being busy with the TKTs, Ethan wasn't there, but Jasper was, along with Zin, though her close friend, Luis, was not. A converted sorcerer, Luis had spent three hundred years under a curse that forced him to live as the rookh known as Westerwing to those on the Mountain where he had chosen to make his home. Although the curse was now broken (by none other than Zin), from having lived so long as Westerwing, Luis could still take the form of a rookh whenever he wanted to. However, in enjoying having his human form again, he was mainly choosing not to these days. Luis was currently spending some time tracking down a few of his ancestors in Europe, where he was originally from. He hadn't made it to the Valentine's gathering at Doyle Mansion either (though he had been invited), mainly because he had found himself lately wanting to be alone. A lot had happened to him in a short amount of time, and the changes were taking some getting used to.

Linn's gift to Quin for her birthday that Zin had collaborated on ended up being six Sterling roses which Linn had acquired from a hothouse in New Hampshire, afterwards giving them to Zin so that she could use her magician skills to turn them into everlasting roses. "Everlasting" in this case meant they would stay fresh for twenty years. The half-dozen had to do with the magicians' magical number being six, and this had allowed the spell used to work better than it would have on, say, four roses, or an even dozen. In his lab, Linn had made the vase, shaped something like a stylized swan. At the end of twenty

years, the flowers would simply dissipate, their essences carried away on a gentle breath of wind, specifically the east wind, based on the life-extending spell being connected to the sunrise each day.

For Linn's gift from her, Quin had knitted a sweater, which turned out somewhat lopsided. This didn't bother Linn in the slightest; in fact, he liked it better than any of his other sweaters. "It's got character," he gushed to Quin, giving her a big kiss.

Zin was nodding her approval as Linn slipped the sweater on over his button-down shirt. "Much better than a regular-old non-lopsided sweater," she told Quin.

At the party, both birthday celebrants made special wishes when blowing out their candles. For Linn's wish, in having known for most of his life that having muscular dystrophy meant he was destined for a shorter life than some, he wished for others to be born with his gift of over-producing the human goodness needed to feed magical creatures. His wish had already basically been granted, in keeping with God's Overall Plan, as two people in the not-so-distant future would be born with this gift. Quin made a secret wish related to the dragons, which would also be granted, mainly because it was selfless. In truth, more of our birthday wishes are being granted than we might think, particularly the selfless ones.

Around noontime the next day in Supercity Ten, a birthday picnic for a boy turning ten years old was happening in a park central to a cluster of apartment buildings. Unknown to the picnickers, the event was being watched by a certain nyreg, distinctive in having a torn left ear. He was not planning any mischief regarding the event; he was simply observing. In addition to enjoying a nice spread of food, a few of the party-goers were kicking a soccer ball around, while others were playing board games that looked to the nyreg to be fairly fun and interesting. No one from the celebration was able to see him because he was some distance away, perched atop a large retaining wall next to an office complex.

A couple of blocks from the picnic, the nyreg happened to notice Eizel leaving her apartment building, this being her younger self. However, in viewing her striding along a sidewalk, the nyreg suddenly remembered seeing a much older version of this person visiting the city a few weeks before. While many creatures might not have recognized

that the two were one and the same person, nyregs tended to be astute in this way. They also had excellent eyesight and a super-keen sense of smell, which made it easy for this one to tell that this was definitely a younger version of the person he had seen near the end of January taking off on an airbike from the rooftop of the same building the younger one had just exited from. On that day, he had briefly followed the woman, but from a fair distance in knowing not to mess with persons having powerful gifts. (He had seen what she had done to the mimic and the nyreg on the roof before taking off. In fact, their heads were still spinning for hours, even after the images of waterfalls, nymphs, rainbows, and such wore off.)

Being much like regular demons, who were not anywhere near as advanced as their mimic counterparts, nyregs tended to have simple brain functions, not capable of much deep thinking. However, a few exceptions existed here and there, like this nyreg with the torn ear, who had long since given himself a name—that of Egykor—since no one else had ever bothered to do so. But whether brainy or not, nyregs could always distinguish a godly person from an ungodly one. Therefore, Egykor knew the older version of Eizel was much changed from her younger self. And he wondered what might have caused this change.

However, in his deep thinking on this day, Egykor even more wondered, *If she can change, could I maybe too?* He for sure thought he might want to. Although he had always done what the sorcerers and their followers had told him to, he didn't much like being such a nasty creature, which most nyregs knew they were, though they didn't much care about being horrible. In fact, most felt satisfied to be fulfilling their purpose—basically, to serve the forces of evil.

Egykor had gotten his torn ear during the uprisings the previous year in a battle against a woman wielding a rope who was escaping Supercity Ten with her young daughter. After the ear strike, in noting that the woman was very skilled, and that she had already managed to kill two megahobs in her path, Egykor wisely backed off. Shortly thereafter, discerning the hopelessness of the situation for the sorcerers, he had fled into the wilderness to hide for a time, only returning to the city some days later when the battles had finally died down.

Egykor's attention was drawn back to the picnic when the candles on the cake were lit, after which, the boy made his wish and blew them out. Although knowing what this tradition meant, Egykor didn't think a birthday wish would work for him with regard to wanting to change because he had not been born, having instead been created. Therefore, he didn't have a birthday. Nor did he know how old he was, though he could remember and count back through about eighteen years of events if he really thought about it.

About a mile from the scene in the park, Telános was perched on the top of a utilities building. In the city on this day to check on his future charge, he happened to notice Egykor watching the birthday celebration. Not getting any bad feelings from the beast—like that he might be planning an attack on the picnic—Telános more decided that the nyreg was simply looking on with interest. Though it still seemed prudent to keep an eye on the creature, which the snow gryphon did, until, that is, his attention was drawn to Winston returning home from a morning of work at the sorcerers' den.

Actually, it wasn't Winston that had distracted Telános, but more someone by the factory pavilion observing the boy. This happened to be Jonathan who had completely relaxed his guard on this day, in that neither his sapphire nor the stealth airbike were in use. Instead, he was simply sitting under a tree and having a sandwich while observing Winston pass through the courtyard entrance to his family's apartment building. Swallowing a bite of sandwich and hurriedly wiping his hands on a napkin, Jonathan then consulted an older almanac, before making a note in a newer one. Though Telános was puzzled by what he was seeing, he couldn't stay to continue observing the scene. Having plans on this day to visit a library in Canada, he needed to get going, so that he could then return home to keep watch on his Time Glass.

Zin was having a busy Sunday at home. After attending a morning church service at the plantations, she was back at Doyle Mansion and helping to make lunch. After the meal, she shared around cake she had brought home with her from the party the evening before. There had actually been five cakes at the birthday party, and no pucks; therefore, there were leftovers, including the huge slab she had brought home, which was enough to share with her mom, Halli, Magsen, and the entire

puck family. And she was saving Sal a piece for the next time he visited.

After cake-time, Zin headed down to her private Magicians' Lab in the subbasement library of the mansion to work on an important project. She had gotten wind of the hypnoid project from Heather, who definitely always had her ear to the ground for new developments in weaponry and warfare by the sorcerers and those working for them.

Blessedly, those on the side of good wouldn't need a gifted biochemist to figure out how to counter the hypnoid. Because hypnosis was in the magicians' domain, Zin would be able to do this.

However, the process was going to be tricky. And even after she managed to develop the counter, figuring out whom to apply it to was going to be a puzzle. *How will we even know who's under the influence?* Zin mullied.

We likely won't know, her mind answered, until a person actually carries out a command, which might be deadly. And even then, unless a person is actually caught in the act, we still might not know who's infected.

With the hypnoid basically creating an advanced form of a sleeper agent, one where the subject wouldn't even know he or she was being influenced, the person could commit all kinds of horrible acts before being put back into sleeper mode again to simply go about his or her daily business as if nothing had happened.

But surely there will be some signs that a person is under the influence, since this is mainly chemical, after all, Zin reasoned.

This was true, as an affected person would sometimes act slightly dazed, like by having a glazed-over look in the eyes, and occasionally have erratic body movements such as a sudden knee jerk or a loss of balance. But these sorts of things might be impossible to separate out from events of everyday life, like the daydreaming many folks engage in, or when people become distracted. And everyone stumbles on occasion, or jerks the head or shoulder to relieve a muscle ache or cramp. Eye twitches too are incredibly common.

So the code phrase both engages and disengages the hypnoid, Zin reminded herself from what Heather had shared.

Heather had also found out a few of the code phrases, which were composed of words unlikely to be uttered during normal conversation.

The phrases couldn't be countered by other words, like from someone with a verbal version of the wordsmith gift (a gifted speechmaker basically). But Zin should be able to find ways to work around this.

Look, a pink-and-purple nyreg, Zin recalled as one of the code phrases. This was, of course, an extremely unlikely thing to be said by anyone since pink-and-purple nyregs didn't exist, the beasts all mainly being the same dark grays and greens in overall color scheme.

Treehouses all live inside of caves. This was another improbable phrase. Zin imagined the overall list to be fairly long. According to Heather, each hypnoid batch was connected to a different code phrase. So a person trying to turn off a hypnoid couldn't simply recite phrases and hope to get lucky before something bad happened, like being killed by the person under the influence.

Zin had to admit the whole concept of the hypnoid was very clever. Therefore, the counter would have to be so too. But in order to be clever, she had to put aside thinking about the complication of how to identify a person under the influence, and simply work on the counter itself. *Work on one thing at a time,* she reminded herself. *I can work on the other part later.*

This turned out to be a good strategy; and, in fact, because Zin was focused on only the one part of the problem, she managed to make the counter in less than two days. The sorcerers and their cronies always seem to underestimate godly people, especially the gifted, in particular, gifted magicians. (And we might even add gifted "female" magicians, since the sorcerers in the past had largely disregarded them.)

Because the hypnoid was designed to affect three of the five senses, in order to break a person out of the hypnotic state, the counter had to target one or both of the other two senses—touch and taste—and in a fairly strong fashion.

On an afternoon visit to Linn's lab, Zin explained, "In order to physically jolt a person out of such a strong hypnotic state, we'd pretty much have to injure them."

"True," Linn agreed.

"So," Zin went on, "since we can't go around body slamming people or bonking them on the head with a baseball bat, I thought I'd better just target taste. And, here it is," she added, showing Linn the counter, "in pill form, super sour and extremely bitter."

The Great Multipliers were already making large quantities for use by the Underground Army, various persons on missions, the Police Corp, the W'eeppers, undercover agents like Heather, and pretty much anyone else in the know. Since Heather's investigating had revealed that the sorcerers would be targeting people to force them to work as cheap labor, many undercover agents in the Supes and work camps would be on the lookout for this happening, so that the hypnoid slaves could be liberated through use of the counter pills.

Zin had a two-fold purpose for visiting the lab on this day: first, to tell Linn about the hypnoid counter; and second, to ask for his help. Two heads were often better than one, especially if one of the two was a brainy head like Linn's. Therefore, Zin very much wanted to consult him about how to be proactive and actually identify early on people who might be hypnoid infected.

"I'll put some thought into it and get back to you," Linn said.

While Zin and Linn were working on this puzzle, they and others would be spreading the word to be on the lookout for persons acting in odd ways, not normal for them.

On the evening of the same day that Zin visited Linn, a celebration was happening in a cabin on a self-sustaining ranch in Wyoming. Sasha Loll, a former resident of Supe-10, was celebrating her eighteenth birthday at a small dinner gathering that simply included her parents and a couple of neighbors.

Sasha and her parents had left Supercity Ten not long after the uprisings. And what a relief the move had been, as the Loll family had never particularly liked living as elites in the city and lording over other people. Sasha happened to have been a good friend to Eizel, who had very few friends, mainly because most people were afraid of her; and with good reason, as she had often, even as early as her grade-school years, horribly abused others through use of her gift.

Always before on her birthdays, Sasha had mainly just wished for the future world to be a better place. Well, that wish was granted when the uprisings occurred, this being the start of a better future for literally millions of people worldwide. This year, she chose to wish for something a little more specific, namely, for Eizel to be saved. She and her parents had recently come to know Christ as their Savior. Now, Sasha desperately wished this for Eizel too. The girls had actually kept

in touch after the Loll family moved, mainly by use of comm-cubes, which were like the walnut devices but a little simpler in design in that they didn't receive broadcasts.

God grants our wishes sometimes, if they are things He approves of. Genies also sometimes choose to grant wishes, if the wishes are in accordance with God's will. A genie happened to be looking on at the dinner gathering, through a cabin window. In this case, however, God would be the one to grant Sasha's birthday wish.

Boko also happened to be watching the dinner through a window, though he was unaware of the genie nearby because genies are often hard to notice. (While not invisible, they tend to keep to the shadows; and they can appear and disappear very quickly at will.) The genie, on the other hand, certainly noticed Boko who was simply out wandering the earth while waiting for God's judgement of him.

As the party was concluding, Boko planted a seed outside the front door of the cabin. This was observed by the genie who knew intuitively that the seed was a good one, rather than bad. Like many of the magic seeds made by Boko and Etowa, this one was designed to influence the brain, which would lead to certain actions.

Unrelated to Sasha's birthday, the seed was intended for one of the neighbors seated at the dinner table, a man named John Weissman who stepped on the pomegranate seed when leaving the cabin. Not five minutes later, he got the strong idea that he needed to go see the doctor living on the ranch right away, this having to do with being gouged in his leg by the sharp point of a dead fallen tree limb earlier in the day. While he had cleaned the wound, and didn't feel like there was much risk of infection, this was a puncture wound. Receiving a shot from the doctor before bedtime, John avoided the tetanus that would have resulted from dirt deep inside the wound. So, all would be well.

Why Boko had decided to make and plant this seed eluded him. He was defying Satan with this action because the fallen angel would, of course, have preferred the man to suffer and die of tetanus. But Boko had just suddenly felt like doing something good, and unexpected, for a change.

Chapter Six

The Hopscotch Incident

Sal and Kiana were now regularly helping one another, this being a good thing for Sal because Pipac had been very busy at home lately, not only helping his mother and Kisi in the greenhouse, but also helping to look after Lista; and by this we mean mostly keeping her out of trouble because she was already crawling everywhere, while looking like she might start walking any day. Indeed, she was already standing up, and then sitting back down again. But with each time of standing up growing longer in duration, her parents and siblings very much feared that she might simply take off running at any moment. While Pizo was doing most of the keeping-eyes-on-her, he needed help from the rest of the family. And they were right to worry because Lista would very shortly start to walk (and run), at which time, she would be very fast, so much so that Kisi and Pipac would sometimes have to employ Halli or Magsen to head off their little sister to keep her from leaving the mansion grounds, an act that would not be safe for her at this young age because she wouldn't be able to defend herself against creatures like hobs and gremlins as older pucks could.

Sal was scheduled to work with Kiana on the first Monday in April. Riding a rookh, he arrived early morning to pick her up at her family's bungalow-style home in the mothership settlement. This was the first time for Sal in meeting Kiana's parents, who were just finishing up breakfast in preparation for heading out to work for the day.

"Remember, I told you about him," Kiana said when introducing Sal. "He saved my life!" (She was referring to the day of the headache.)

Now this was really exaggerated in Sal's opinion. And so he objected. "Helping cure a headache is hardly saving a life."

"Well, I thought I was gonna die," Kiana insisted.

Possibly only one person on the planet might have been louder than Kiana, this being her father who had the same boisterous laugh as she,

but which seemed to Sal to be twice as booming. Surprisingly, Mrs. Jackson was extremely reserved. But despite the quietness, Sal could tell she was a strong woman, and likely the chief planner and decision-maker of the family, which was a correct assumption.

In addition to being loud, Kiana tended to dress a little ostentatiously at home, in bright colors of unusual designs, such as extremely puffed-up shoulders and asymmetrical hemlines. She was still in her pajamas on this day, which were bright purple and orange. Of course, she didn't generally dress colorfully when out and about because she needed to be clandestine whilst doing God's work.

While Sal was visiting with her parents, Kiana donned garments of subdued colors, whereupon, she arrived back in the kitchen. After waiting for her mother to finish a sentence, with her hands on her hips, in a rather bossy fashion, Kiana stated, "Well, what are we waiting for? Let's go."

"Okay," Sal said, popping up out of the kitchen chair. Having already breakfasted, he had declined the offer of a bagel and fruit salad.

Outside, as Kiana was waiting for Barát, whom she had just called and who would be carrying both of them, Sal was on the verge of telling his friend that he thought she was a little rude in rushing his visit with her parents, when she said, "Sorry, I guess I was a little pushy back there." After this, she scribbled a few notes in her journal in order to get directions for the day, as they were first planning to make a few acquisitions of the personal-belongings sort. Later in the day, if they had time, they would be visiting a couple of libraries.

Heading to Supercity Ten and being dropped off behind an office building, Kiana and Sal right away had a run-in with a sorcerer who was exiting the building by a rear door.

"Why aren't you in school?" the sorcerer demanded. Upon meeting silence from the pair, he added, "Well? State your business here."

Kiana was just fumbling to say, "I...um...we..." when Sal pulled out one of his flashers, upon which the words "cinnamon roll and cappuccino" were written in light brown marker. Extra rounding of certain letters gave the suggestion of an actual cinnamon roll and cup, while the tops of the "u" and "i" in cappuccino were elongated and wavy, as though they might be giving off little curling wisps of steam.

At the exact moment the words met his eyes, the sorcerer lost all thoughts of needing to know what the two teens were up to. In fact, he was so consumed with the desire for a cinnamon roll and cappuccino that he made a dash across a lawn and around a corner to hop a tram to the local coffee shop.

At a residential high rise three blocks from the office building, Sal might have needed to use another flasher on the doorman, except the man was fast asleep, curled up on a divan just inside the front entrance.

Obtaining a desk clock and set of twenty-three antique coins from one of the apartments was easy, after which, Sal and Kiana made their way back to the spot behind the office building, which was somewhat secluded and therefore was a good spot to call to Barát to have him pick them up.

On the way, they ended up ducking into an alley to avoid a run-in with Eizel who was trudging down the sidewalk towards them. Ever on the lookout for her these days, they intended to make every effort to avoid contact with her.

Waiting until she had passed, as they again made their way toward the office building, Kiana said, “I wonder why God allows people like her to have these types of gifts.”

“He wants them to be saved and use their gifts for good,” Sal answered. “Converted sorcerers are a good example,” he added, specifically thinking of one he knew from the plantations. Rhett Collier, whom Sal simply knew as Mr. Collier, was helping the godly with all sorts of things like developing antidotes for poisons and coming up with ways to counter various incantations.

“But why doesn’t God take away the gifts when people abuse them, at least until they get saved?” Kiana asked.

After thinking for a few moments, Sal responded. “We can’t understand everything God is doing, but He has reasons for everything. Some bad things are meant to happen, as part of His will.” Pulling out his pocket bible, Sal looked up a quote from Matthew 5:45, which he read aloud. “...for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.”

“So even people like her are part of God’s plan,” Kiana mused.

Nodding, Sal said, “Yes, but we can take heart from Proverbs 10:25. ‘When the tempest passes, the wicked is no more, but the righteous is established for ever.’”

“Plus, struggles can make us stronger,” Kiana suddenly realized, “like how the wind makes trees grow stronger.”

“I wonder too if some of their own actions might somehow cause them to get saved,” Sal went on to say. “I mean, we can’t know everything about people, especially not the elites living in the cities.”

Upon reaching the spot behind the office building, Kiana and Sal unexpectedly met up with Trixie and Jarna who happened to be visiting Supe-10 on this day. Still anxious to get away from the gossip scene, Trixie had been out and about a lot lately. After briefly hearing what Sal and Kiana were up to, she wanted to help, the offer of which was gladly accepted. And they wouldn’t need to call for Barát because Jarna could easily carry three, which she did, flying them lickety-split a distance of about three miles to a spacious rowhome.

An elderly woman was just leaving the home.

Trixie was a great asset in that she could instantly tell that no one else was inside the house. “No one else,” she said. “And there are no pets.” (She would have been able to hear the breathing of people, dogs, cats, and such.) “One of the neighbors has what sounds like a gerbil or hamster. And I can hear people talking down the street, but nothing to worry about in the immediate area.”

Rather than crowding up the home, Trixie stayed outside while Sal and Kiana entered to retrieve a bracelet and five antique hatpins. Finishing their task very quickly, they had a little time to wait for Jarna who was circling and would be meeting them in a park down the block in about twenty minutes to take them to deliver the various items acquired to their rightful owners.

On the stroll to the park, they paused for about ten minutes for Sal to write out the Beatitudes on a wide stretch of sidewalk. He used ninety-day chalk made by the genies and designed to last for ninety days, even when subjected to hard rain (or energy blasts from sorcerers’ staffs). In addition to God’s Word being very powerful, the way the verses were written by this gifted wordsmith would draw the eye, and stay long in the brain, of anyone reading them.

Oddly enough, on this exact sidewalk (and in the exact same spot even), something extremely important had occurred almost exactly eleven years earlier, on another April morning very like this one. And even though the event happened in the past, it was actually tied to the birthday wish of Sasha's eighteen-year-old self. As we know, God often works in unexpected ways. Plus, since He is outside of time, neither past nor future pose any particular trouble for Him with regard to getting things done. So we shouldn't be surprised to discover that the sidewalk event of the past also involved the future, specifically, the older version of Eizel who would shortly be taking the second time-travel trip of her God-led plan to make sure certain aspects of her life remained the same.

The month was also April in the older Eizel's time, as she made her way by rookh to Esther's cave. Arriving early morning (though it was late afternoon the previous day back at the plantations), Eizel accepted Esther's invitation to join her for a breakfast of scrambled eggs and blueberry muffins.

"There's no hurry," Esther reassured her friend. "There's plenty of time for a meal before you go."

In truth, the delay was more a means of Esther helping Eizel to relax before the trip, because she was indeed very nervous, and Esther could tell this. Both the eating and conversation helped. The women mainly talked about time travel.

"When there's such a good chance that people will mess up—and we know they do because we know it's happened—I wonder why God even allows it," Eizel remarked.

Esther herself had once messed up very badly on a time-travel trip. And while she still had regrets over the incident, she knew that God had used the experience to help her grow.

"Even our mistakes can serve a purpose," she told Eizel. "But I think the logical answer as to why God allows time travel is that He wants things to change along certain timelines, as part of His plan. By following His directions, we might even be fixing certain mistakes. Plus, there's the whole mystery of time itself. It's so funny how sometimes we have to look backwards to go forwards, like in learning from our mistakes in order to do better. Therefore, we need to time travel."

With regard to the issue of making pre-trip notes, Esther made the comment, “We won’t even know if certain things change because we won’t remember the other timeline. Any notes you might have made, or even your whole journal, might not even exist anymore if something changes. That’s why—other than the leave-and-return log as a safety precaution so that someone doesn’t get stuck in the past—most TKTs don’t keep notes. I only rarely did.”

“You used to be a TKT?” Eizel asked, in a rather incredulous tone, as she truly hadn’t known.

“Yes, of sorts,” Esther replied with a soft smile.

In fact, most people didn’t know that Esther had basically been the original TKT (as Weatherly as a teenager) particularly because most people were also unaware that Esther, Astrid, and Weatherly were one and the same person, this having occurred from largescale time travel, specifically, long jumps backwards in time for Weatherly to become Astrid, and then for Astrid to become Esther.

When they finished cleaning up after breakfast, the ladies headed to the tapestry in the rear of the cave.

Eizel was marveling in looking up at the enormous wall hanging which held a fairly simple scene—that of masses of roses climbing a garden wall—but was rather complex in detail.

“Roses are completely timeless,” Esther said, noting Eizel’s interest. “But, of course, the fact that they adorn all four time-travel portals is probably more symbolic than scientific.”

Eizel was taking with her a mini Mind Key, which was a smaller version of the original that Merri Tremaine still used on occasion to influence the minds of certain people in accordance with God’s will. Eizel was taking the key because she was not sure if her gift would work on the mind of her younger self, this being her intention. Even though she was going back to a time when she was in grade school, the older Eizel knew that her younger self had been powerful even at that age, and probably powerful enough to resist being manipulated.

Eizel’s main intention on this trip was to make sure her younger self didn’t hurt Sasha in the past. Sasha was the one true friend that had always stuck by her, even when knowing of her evil deeds. And while Eizel wasn’t aware of the exact details, she did know deep inside (from the Holy Spirit telling her) that Sasha was responsible for saving her.

Therefore, Eizel's whole Salvation, her Eternal Life, was dependent on making sure certain things of the past happened the way they had, and were supposed to.

Upon arrival in the past, as expected by the older Eizel, the younger versions of herself and Sasha were playing hopscotch on the sidewalk (in the exact spot where Sal would write the Beatitudes eleven years later). Also as expected, the younger Eizel was becoming angry because someone kept moving her hopscotch pebble, presumably, this someone being Sasha. But Sasha was trying to convince her friend that she wasn't moving the pebble, and that it must be a gremlin. Since gremlins were invisible, one could do this easily. Plus, gremlins were mischievous.

Eventually, Eizel was convinced. And while Sasha had thought she finally convinced her friend, it was actually the older Eizel—nearby and unnoticed in being shrouded by her sapphire—who planted the thought for her younger self to believe what she was hearing. Though what she was hearing wasn't actually the truth because a spreesprite was moving the pebble, not a gremlin, this being a boy spreesprite full of mischief who liked to play pranks. And he had been able to play the prank because he was very fast, and therefore went unobserved when moving the pebble.

So the mini Mind Key hadn't been needed on this day, although having it as a back-up had given Eizel a little extra confidence when actually on the scene. She was relieved that all had turned out well, especially because she knew that her younger self had no gentleness of spirit and little self-control. If her older self had not intervened, the younger probably would have planted a thought into Sasha's mind to make her hurt herself, or maybe have even given her horrible nightmares, either of which would have definitely ended their friendship and possibly Sasha's life.

With regard to our successes, we should remember that God always makes a way for important things to happen, even when we make mistakes, or end up just plain failing. In case the older Eizel failed, Etowa was nearby and was ready with a Zinnia seed that would have helped the younger Eizel calm down and listen to her friend. But due to the success of the older Eizel, this back-up wasn't necessary.

After returning to her own time, Eizel straightaway left Esther's cave on a rookh for home, arriving back at the twin plantations to the beginnings of a lovely sunset. She had prayed before leaving for the trip, specifically asking for guidance. Feeling the need to pray again, she ducked into Laurelstone's small chapel, currently filled inside with a multitude of soft colors from light filtering in through the west-facing stained glass windows. After praising God and thanking Him for His many blessings—including the success of the hopscotch time-travel trip—Eizel simply sat for a time, reflecting on certain aspects of her life.

Her gift had grown over the years even to the point of being able to read the thoughts of others without expending any effort at all. Though, to protect people's privacy, she didn't read thoughts unless absolutely necessary for some sort of emergency, the last time being when a teacher at Netherwind had been severely injured and couldn't speak, but the doctor needed to know exactly what had happened in order to successfully treat the man.

In considering her younger years, Eizel could hardly imagine herself being so rotten. She felt she was probably even worse than the apostle Paul had been when he started off, as Saul, a murderer who horribly persecuted Christians. She had been such a malicious young thing, and who knows (other than God) how many people died because of her gift. While these mainly took the form of suicides from the thoughts and nightmares she had planted, she had also over the years influenced certain people to harm others.

And yet, God has forgiven me, because I am truly sorry, and because Jesus paved the way by dying on the cross, His sacrifice paying the debt for my sins.

What an amazing and indescribable gift. In fact, the only way Eizel had ever been able to describe what she personally felt was through her tears, and with profusely thanking God for His goodness and mercy in sending His Son to save all of the miserable sinners of the world, which includes every human being because, as we know from Romans 3:23, "...all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God..."

While Eizel had regrets (as many of us do), she was wise enough to know that she shouldn't wish to change her early life because it had made her what she ultimately became. Once she was saved, those early experiences, no matter how painful to recall, had served to motivate her

to do better; and they were continuing to do so unto this very day, as she was always striving to find ways to make a positive impact on the lives of others. In truth (when she really thought about it), she had spent much more of her life in the pursuit of good, going on eighty percent of her life now, as opposed to roughly twenty percent of doing bad.

The incredible blessing of God's forgiveness, and second chances, she mused, afterwards looking up Micah 7:19. "He will again have compassion upon us, he will tread our iniquities under foot. Thou wilt cast all our sins into the depths of the sea." She had come across this quote not long after first being saved, and she loved to read it over and over again, resting in the promise of God's love and forgiveness. Isaiah 44:22 was another of her favorites. "I have swept away your transgressions like a cloud, and your sins like mist; return to me, for I have redeemed you."

Looking back in on Sal, Kiana, and Trixie, we find Jarna taking them to deliver the day's acquisitions to various people, and afterwards flying them to visit a library in Supe-9.

While Sal didn't find the story that he was looking for, "The Boy and the Violin," he did find a book of fables containing the original versions of "Belling the Cat" and "The Talking Tortoise." He also borrowed copies of a couple of classic novels—*Moby Dick* and *Great Expectations*—just to read later at his leisure.

After the jaunt to the library, Jarna dropped Kiana off at her bungalow, and Sal at the twin plantations, before taking Trixie home to Lion Mountain.

On the Mountain, as in many other places, word had begun spreading for people to keep watch for anyone acting strangely, who might be under the influence of a hypnoid. However, because many folks tend to act strangely already as part of their daily routines (for various reasons), this was resulting in a bit of chaos. People were now taking note of actions they might not have otherwise, and reporting them to the authorities. As in most of the self-sustaining settlements, the general Police Corps had jurisdiction on Lion Mountain.

Trixie certainly had no idea that she might get caught up in the craziness of all of this, especially since she herself had been on the lookout for oddities. She always walked to school, and on her way to classes the morning after her adventure with Sal and Kiana, she was

seen doing something odd by one of her neighbors who then reported her to the police. This was a neighbor who didn't know her very well, or the action would never have been counted as odd. The morning happened to be very dewy, and Trixie had paused when passing several thick patches of clover. Kneeling beside one of the patches, she gathered dew in her hands several times to rub it onto her face, before rising and again heading on to school.

On her way home in the afternoon, she was confronted by two female members of the Police Corps. Many of the police were as well trained as Trixie in hand-to-hand combat; therefore, the two ladies had only minimal trouble getting hold of her and forcing her to the ground where they force-fed her one of the sour-bitter pills.

Jarna had just arrived on the scene from having sensed that Trixie was in distress from halfway across the mountain. But for the moment, the dragon was keeping back, because she didn't know exactly what was going on. Plus, she wouldn't interfere with the police unless they were actually hurting her friend.

"Yuck! Yuck! Oh, gross!" Trixie cried, making faces as she tried to spit out the pill that had already completely dissolved on her tongue. Next trying to wipe the taste on the sleeve of her jacket, she sputtered, "Why...oh yuck...why did you do that?! I'm not infected!"

Jarna could attest to this. For as close of an eye as she had kept on Trixie in recent weeks, she would have been able to tell if her friend was under the influence of a hypnoid. And she had been with Trixie anytime she had left Lion Mountain lately, so no one could have gotten close enough to infect her away from the Mountain, which was itself protected by the nature spirits, who kept the sorcerers and their followers from getting in and committing mischief.

"Well, then why were you smearing clover dew all over your face in the morning?" the taller of the two officers asked, while handing a water canteen to Trixie so she could flush her mouth.

After rinsing (which was only minimally helpful in clearing the nasty taste), Trixie was reluctant to answer. And if she had been talking to two men instead of two women, she might not have. Sighing, she finally did say, "It's a superstition." (Unknown to some of her neighbors, Trixie was very superstitious.)

Shaking her head slightly in confusion, the shorter officer asked, “What superstition?”

Smiling, her taller companion ended up giving the answer, which was something she remembered her grandmother telling her as a little girl. “If you wash your face in the spring dew, you’ll dream of your future husband.”

Trixie was nodding as the shorter woman replied, “Oh, that’s the same as if you sleep with a piece of wedding cake under your pillow.”

Both women were now smiling; and both apologized to Trixie who basically had to accept the apologies, and forgive, since their intentions had been good, and because she knew they had to be diligent. Plus, no harm was actually done because, other than the extremely bad taste, the counter pill was benign, except for having the ability to break someone out of hypnosis, then also making them immune to any future effects of the hypnoid.

“So, this is the third false alarm in a week,” the taller officer said to her partner as the pair headed off to be about their other business.

Jarna tagged along as Trixie headed home to search for some saltines or pretzels to try to get the rest of the sour-bitter taste out of her mouth.

In a weird way, when she actually thought about it, Trixie was glad to have been “dosed,” as many people had begun calling it because once a person had been given the counter, a hypnoid would have no effect on them, even if twenty or more ampules were broken near his or her face. This was based on the way Zin had designed the pill.

At home and munching on pretzels, Trixie recalled that while in Supe-10 the previous day and heading with Kiana and Sal to the park to meet Jarna, she had been careful not to step on the sidewalk cracks. When Kiana asked her why she was doing this, Trixie had recited lines she remembered from an old nursery rhyme:

“Step never on the cracks,
But only in the squares,
Or else you’ll be eaten by the sidewalk bears,
Who wait patiently for a step on a crack,
So they can have a snack.”

To this, Kiana had laughed heartily, and very loudly, so much so that Sal and Trixie were worried about drawing the attention of unfriendlies.

Wiping laugh-tears from her eyes while dancing about on the sidewalk in order to purposely step on cracks, Kiana pronounced in a rather theatrical manner (attempting to sound spooky), “Ooh...look at me, I’m stepping on cracks! You better come and get me bears, to gobble me up. Ooh...I’m so scared!”

Both Trixie and Sal had found this rather amusing, despite the risk of drawing unwanted attention.

Her thoughts coming back to the here and now, Trixie mused, *I guess I need to be more careful about my superstitions*. Indeed, she felt certain that if the police ended up seeing her walking on a sidewalk with an odd gait, they might try to feed her another of the counter pills. *But maybe I just need to have less superstitions*, she ended up wisely deciding a few minutes later.

As far as keeping on the lookout for anyone acting strangely, many people might have thought Bern was hypnoid infected, in being so nice to Bear lately. At the same time Trixie was having her encounter with the police, Bear was passing the blacksmith workshop, and noting through the open doors that Bern was sharpening a sword, whereupon, he wisely decided not to stop in to say hello, or bother her in any other way. (This was a good decision, as she would have taken this as him being too pushy.) Instead, Bear simply gave a wave and then quickly moved on as Bern returned the wave.

Noticing the exchange, Gabe gave Bear a small nod, recalling a conversation they had had a couple of weeks previous where Gabe had secretly given the big man a little advice pertaining to Bern.

“Just give her some space, and time,” Gabe had offered. “That old saying about ‘out of sight out of mind’ isn’t true. It’s actually the opposite. If you stay away, she’ll wonder why she hasn’t seen you for a while, so you’ll be on her mind. Be nice if you happen to see her, but then walk away. Let her come to you instead. I think she will, eventually.” So far, Bear seemed to be taking the advice, which pleased Gabe.

Bear too was fairly well pleased with things, as the strategy of keeping his distance seemed to be keeping Bern friendly towards him,

and not annoyed. She had at least been of pleasant demeanor when he bumped into her at the cafeteria and casually asked when the dozen door knockers he had ordered might be ready. “Ahead of deadline, actually,” she had replied, “probably Tuesday.”

For Bern’s part, she had been a loner for so long that it was definitely going to take her a long time to ease into having a close friendship with someone, let alone, something more than that.

Chapter Seven

Mermaids, Nyregs, and More

Nearing the end of April, Sal and Kiana were flying about one afternoon on Barát west of Supercity Nine when they happened to see Tanner riding an airbike. On this day, the young sorcerer hadn't been out stirring up trouble, as he often was. Instead, he was returning home from a visit to his parents and younger brother, Patrick, who had moved at the end of the previous year to a large ranch in Colorado. This was only the second time of Tanner visiting them on the ranch, and he was specifically riding the airbike because a person couldn't simply approach or land in one of the self-sustaining communities on a nyreg due to protectors like firebirds and wind horses generally being around to prevent this sort of thing. Even coming on a bike, Tanner was taking a chance because godly magical creatures could sense sorcerers. However, on his first visit, he had sent word ahead that he was coming, so the family was looking for him. This time, Tanner was counting on the protectors remembering that he had been there before, which they did. And so he wasn't interfered with in any way, though the two gryphons that noted his arrival weren't too pleased, and kept close eyes on him during his visit.

While Mr. and Mrs. Ellison were happy to see their son, and Patrick was pleased to see his brother, the three remained wary of Tanner during the visit, not disclosing too many details about their current community, but more talking in general about the large garden that everyone helped with, and about their work with the goats, chickens, and water-collection systems. Tanner, likewise, kept most city news out of the conversation (especially anything to do with sorcerers), instead talking about getting used to living alone, and telling Patrick about a recent concert he had gone to. Also, the Supes were trying to reorganize a soccer league, probably by combining the cities to make regional teams, instead of each Supercity having one, as had been the case before.

As Sal and Kiana were heading into Supe-9 (in search of a keepsake box and a necklace), Sal mentioned that his friend, Monte, had had a run-in with Tanner the previous week.

“Tanner’s been out a lot lately,” Kiana remarked. “I saw him two days ago with that friend of his...the fire guy...oh, I can’t remember his name....”

“Kemp,” Sal replied.

“I ran into him one time when he was out on a nyreg setting fires,” Kiana said. “I outran him for a couple of miles. But then I had to call Barát, who brought a thunderbird with him to put out the fires.”

When Kiana had seen Tanner and Kemp the two days before, the pair had been out looking for hypnoid targets, Kemp being all too happy to help his friend. It wasn’t just the incident with the Sync Cuffs that made him hate outsiders—he had for years—and more so in recent months because of the uprisings, as he was of like mind with Winston that the once-beautiful-and-wonderful Supercities had been completely ruined by these people.

In truth, Kemp and Tanner had been out on several occasions finding suitable targets, mainly healthy men and women ages twenty to fifty. Thus, as planned, many people were being forced to work against their will, and for free, other than being given basic sustenance and materials to perform routine hygiene tasks in order to survive and stay healthy enough to work. At this time, the main concentrations of hypnoid slaves were located in two specific work camps, with the sorcerers planning to expand to more camps, and even the Supes, as soon as they were assured this project was going to be a success. Not knowing that a counter had been developed, at this point, the sorcerers and their followers were pretty confident.

Unknown to Sal and Kiana, and even Barát, Egykor was following them on this day, out of curiosity. He had been getting out of Supe-10 as much as possible lately, for his own safety because he had been refusing to help the sorcerers, mainly in ignoring their calls for rides, but also in not following commands to attack certain targets of their choosing. The evil men had definitely taken note of his disobedience, and one had already tried to change him into a salamander. But thankfully, the incantation had missed and changed a rhododendron bush into a nettle weed instead.

Despite the danger, Egykor was determined to no longer go along with their schemes, having long been disenchanted with the sorcerers. He had lately been thinking a lot about the Big Fight, which was what the uprisings were generally known as among nyregs. In his opinion, the Big Fight (which cost the lives of many thousands of nyregs) had been caused by the sorcerers treating people so badly. And he could definitely relate because his kind were also often not treated well by sorcerers. In fact, they sometimes kicked nyregs for no good reason, like just from being in a bad mood, also frequently yelling at them for no good reason. So, to Egykor's rather superior reasoning (superior for a nyreg that is), he was perfectly justified in defying the sorcerers, even though he had been created by them, a fact which he wasn't too happy with when he really thought about it. But since there was nothing he could do about who had created him, he would have to simply let it go, and focus instead on things he could control, like his own actions.

Telános also happened to be out on this day, and noticed Egykor. In fact, ever since observing him looking on at the birthday picnic, the snow gryphon had been keeping watch for this fellow, and had spotted him several times in recent weeks. On this day, the nyreg didn't notice the snow gryphon, who was too well melded with the clouds for anyone to see him. However, on a particular day, about a week previous, Egykor had noticed the snow gryphon, afterwards giving him a nod as if to say, *Hey, How's it going?* Telános had even nodded back because, well, if this nyreg was going to be civil, he felt he should be too.

Egykor didn't follow the wind horse and two riders for long on this day because he had a specific purpose in coming to Supe-9. On a previous visit, he had noticed in a certain apartment a mother reading fairy tales to her two children. In addition to excellent eyesight and smell, nyregs also have good hearing, and Egykor could hear the stories well enough simply perched on the roof.

The first time he visited, the mother was reading stories with lessons that stressed avoiding laziness because her children had lately been shirking their chores. Egykor had thoroughly enjoyed "Foolish Jack" and "The Lazy Townspeople." But the "Three Little Pigs" was more his favorite because he definitely felt the first two pigs were incredibly lazy, as well as over confident. *It wouldn't even take a big bad wolf to blow down their houses,* he thought, *because one sneeze*

from a nyreg would do it. But that third little pig—now he was really smart. In fact, the story had given Egykor a whole new appreciation for pigs, of the smart sort, that is. Plus, he really liked hearing stories about animals that were smart.

The second time he came to listen, the mother was reading the original version of “The Little Mermaid” to her children. Since the tale was fairly long, she had only read half on that day. Today, the second half was being read. Scratching at his torn ear a little as he settled in to listen, Egykor closed his eyes in order to better picture the events of the story in his mind.

At the same time Egykor was scratching at his ear and listening, something was about to happen at Doyle Mansion involving one of his counterparts, a nyreg without a name and one not mild-mannered like he. In fact, this one was downright mean.

Halli and Magsen were both away on this day, respectively toting Em and Zin around on various errands. Lista had just finished eating about a gallon of applesauce, along with roughly a pint each of strained pears and creamed carrots.

In the back yard, and somewhat close to the house, sat a smallish sandbox that all of the puck family had at one time or another played in, mainly making sand sculptures. However, Lista, in being an adventurous sort, seemed to want to work on big projects, and so lately had taken to playing in a large pile of sand just inside the back gate of the estate. The sand had been carried in recently by Lyydu, using a huge sling and making several trips from nearby Wharton Farm, which he often visited because the children and grandchildren of Charlie and her husband Frank still lived there. Em was eventually planning to use the sand for several projects, like in the mortar for a new section of garden wall, and to make a set of concrete steps for the back end of the greenhouse. But in the meantime, the pile was just right for puck sand-playing.

After depositing his daughter in the pile, Piszo made his way back up to the porch, from which he could just keep eyes on her. Since she was still not quite walking, he felt the distance would be safe enough. Climbing up onto the seat of a chair, he could well see her scooting about the pile, finishing work on a sculpture she had started the day before, which happened to be a huge octopus. The garden was fairly

quiet on this day. Heike, Pipac, and Kisi were working in the greenhouse; and the gnomes were having a late lunch in their treehouse.

However, the quietness wouldn't end up lasting long because Lista was about to surprise her family, and the gnomes, by taking on the mean nyreg; and in a pretty handy fashion because, not only are pucks pretty tough, and resourceful, this one was developing her gifts much earlier than other young pucks of the past had.

Passing by Doyle Mansion a short while earlier, Etowa had planted a tiny thistle seed, which Lista managed to inhale up her nose when putting the finishing touches on the octopus. After a quick sneeze, she swiftly added wings to the enormous creature, which might have seemed odd to some, but to her brain at this moment simply seemed the best way to top off her work.

A few minutes later, as she was cleaning up a little around the edges of the wings, Lista first sensed and then spotted the nyreg in the air over the garden, swooping low on a path toward the sand pile.

Not panicking at all, the tiny puck set to work bringing the octopus to life. By outward appearances, this took the form of her making faces and grunting a little as colorful light sparkles issued from the tips of her chubby fingers, to spread out and settle over the sand sculpture. As Lista's hands flew upwards, the octopus sprang to life to fly up and strangle the nyreg, who couldn't at all deal with the eight writhing arms that were massively strong, not only because sand is a strong material, but also because of the puck magic involved.

Piszo was fairly astounded. On the run from the porch towards his daughter, he hadn't even made it halfway to the pile before the nyreg was already dead. The gnomes too were on the run from their treehouse. One had launched a little glider from the tree, but had also arrived late, only in time to see the remains of the nyreg dissipating in midair, leaving only a small glob of sludge to land in a flower bed. The octopus, meanwhile, was landing in order to snuggle himself back into the sand pile where Lista was getting him magically settled into his proper place.

Heike was also extremely surprised as she headed out of the greenhouse and ran towards the sand pile. Lista was barely toddler age. So this was unheard of—for her to be able to perform skills it had taken her siblings many years to learn.

A few minutes later, as he was carrying Lista up to the back porch, Pizzo was thinking, *We needed to enlarge the sandbox. Yes, it definitely needs to be bigger.* (At this time, since he was still in something of a state of shock, his brain couldn't make much more out of the situation.)

Em would end up enlarging the box, and big enough to need another huge pile of sand that Lyydu was only too happy to carry in, not only for the pucks to play in, but for the octopus with wings to live in, because Lista definitely brought him to life again so that he could move to the new sandbox once it was ready. After the move, Lista sculpted a mermaid to keep the octopus company; and she gave her wings too so that the pair could fly about the garden together exploring.

Meanwhile, back in Supercity Nine, the reading mother had just come to the end of "The Little Mermaid."

Egykor had gotten a lot out of the story, and he almost felt as if it had been written just for him. Since the mermaids in the tale were destined to live for only three hundred years and then simply die and fall into nothingness, what the Little Mermaid desired more than anything else was Eternal Life. Egykor felt, as a nyreg, he might live about three hundred years. And then, what would be his fate?

She was transformed into a sylph in the end because of her sacrifice and love of God, he thought. Egykor knew about sylphs, otherwise known as air spirits; though people didn't see them very often, mainly because air is very hard to see. However, the forms of sylphs were occasionally visible when passing through billows of pollen or smoke; or sometimes their brightness could be seen against the backdrop of a darkling cloud.

But even after the mermaid was transformed into a being that could inherit Eternal Life, Egykor realized somewhat sadly, *her journey into forever was delayed somewhat due to the wickedness of mankind on the earth.* The Little Mermaid, as a sylph, had to continually flit through people's houses; and whenever children were behaving well, her time on earth would be shortened by one day. But each time a child was bad, a day was added to her time on earth. So her only hope for reaching heaven was for people to become kinder to one another, to live for God and others, more than for selves.

As the mother was placing the book on a shelf, she was reminding her children of this. “Let’s finish our chores for the day, and cheerfully, so that the Little Mermaid gets to heaven more quickly.”

Of course, newer versions of the story weren’t anything like this, being more about the mermaid desiring the love of the prince and focusing on her earthly life, not on eternity. And this was why Sal was so passionate about getting back to the originals of fairy tales, because he felt they actually meant something, whereas, the rewrites did not.

Like many good stories, “The Little Mermaid” in its original form was very motivating. Egykor definitely felt motivated. The Little Mermaid wanted to be something different than what she was, and it happened. He wanted to be something different than what he was. He didn’t like burping acid and having long claws that made people fear him, not to mention being expected to help the sorcerers and their cronies do mean things to others.

Could a change be possible for me too? he wondered. *Can I rise above to be something more than I am, and maybe, just maybe, eventually inherit Eternal Life?* From having just heard the story, he certainly thought this might be possible.

However, as too often happens when we’re feeling very motivated toward good things, too much thinking (along with certain forces of evil) can end up bringing us down. And sure enough, this was about to happen to Egykor.

If the Little Mermaid can change, why can’t I? he decided very determinedly.

Because you’re a nyreg, not a mermaid, his inner voice answered. This was, of course, the voice of doubt (and Satan), which all creatures can hear. We have to choose not to listen; and if we accidentally hear this voice, we have to choose not to believe. Instead, we are to believe in God, and trust in His promises.

Feeling a little less motivated (though not totally deflated), Egykor took off from the roof. Getting some air under his wings made him feel better, and like he might still have a chance at something more for his future, something good, despite being created to be something not so good.

In not being in any hurry to get back to Supercity Ten, he just kind of flew around aimlessly, ending up hovering over a work camp just

north of Supe-8 where a sorcerer was about to employ hypnoid ampules on two men that appeared to be strong and healthy, and so likely would make good work slaves. While Egykor didn't exactly know what the sorcerer was up to, he knew it couldn't be anything good, and so he decided to help the two targets by landing and blocking the sorcerer's path. Flapping his wings and shooting acid on the ground in front of the sorcerer's feet (because he didn't want to hurt him, just keep him from reaching the two men), our favorite nyreg next dodged a blast of energy from the sorcerer's staff, after which, he took off flying, very fast, while also looking downwards to happily note that the two men had managed to flee the sorcerer, making it safely about twenty seconds later to the entrance of a pocket into which they swiftly disappeared.

Egykor was particularly satisfied in knowing that the sorcerer would never dare enter the pocket because none ever did. Even nyregs knew not to go into them because no evil creatures entering these mini-realms had ever made it out alive to tell about it. This was competently true, as many pocket communities had their own rules, including systems of justice, along with trained fighters willing to protect the lives of those inside at all costs. And as if that weren't bad enough for creatures like megahobs and nyregs, behemoths were known to live in pockets. While these gentle giants never hurt godly people, they easily had ways of dealing with evil creatures. *Well good for them!* Egykor thought, of the behemoths. *To pick the side of good and stick with it!*

Funny, while this nyreg wasn't transforming in any physical sort of way (and life most often isn't like a fairy tale), in some ways it seemed Egykor was changing—in his thoughts and actions at least. And, as we know, from small changes can come much bigger things, especially because miracles often wait around the smallest of corners.

Spotting a flash dragon in the sky in the distance, Egykor changed his flight path slightly to avoid an encounter with the creature, while also shaking his head somewhat sadly at what the sorcerers were capable of creating. Falsies were even meaner than nyregs, making the world a worse place, not a better one.

Jonathan happened to be out near this scene on his airbike, which could outrun a nyreg, but not a falsie. And, he had been careless in that the stealth feature of his bike was not employed. Easily noticing the airborne man, the flash dragon came streaking towards him at near

lightning speed. However, spotting the false, Jonathan managed to go to stealth mode fairly quickly, though not quickly enough to avoid a blast of fire from the beast. His shroud sapphire might have provided some shield protection, except that another object he was carrying ended up usurping the magic of the stone. This was often the case with magical objects—whichever was the most powerful tended to trump any and all others. Blessedly on this day, Jonathan had in his pocket a super-powered dime that was much like the regular shield dimes produced by bagicals, but was ten times the strength, which meant the false's fire couldn't harm him, whereas, if he had only been carrying the sapphire, he would have at least gotten somewhat scorched.

Working with Luis in the future, Zin had made many of these dimes for use by the godly. In the present, she had already begun to discover that many wonderful things could come from a magician and a sorcerer working together. And this would only grow as time passed. Though, if this was a fairy tale, their collaboration might have been considered an even odder one than that of the builder and the blacksmith. In addition to working on projects together, Zin and Luis were destined for an even deeper connection. However, this would come along rather slowly compared to many relationships, and definitely much more slowly than Bear and Bern becoming more than just friends. Zin and Luis would also marry much later than Quin and Linn, mainly because both the magician and the sorcerer mainly stayed married to their work for many years before thinking seriously about expanding their partnership.

Jonathan, on his way to Supercity Ten, landed by the factory pavilion a short while later, where he folded and pocketed his airbike before taking up a sitting position under his favorite tree. Telános, in Supe-10 to check on his future charge, once again observed Jonathan consulting an almanac. However, employing his shroud sapphire a few seconds later, he swiftly disappeared from sight. Winston happened to be leaving his apartment building on an airbike at this time. A minute later, no longer able to catch Jonathan's scent, Telános surmised that the man had left to tail Winston. While the snow gryphon might have wanted to follow, out of curiosity, he suddenly felt a need to be getting home to check on his Time Glass.

On the flight home, Telános contemplated that although he wouldn't be officially assigned for many years, he was already keeping something of an unofficial watch on his future charge. In doing so, he had been struggling with the promise he had made to this individual, especially over the past few weeks because the time was fast approaching when he might have to kill this person. For this was the promise the snow gryphon had rather too hastily agreed to—that he would kill his future charge, if that person hadn't become a Christian by the time the sands in the Time Glass ran out.

To Telános' brain, the reasoning behind this request from the future was sound: Due to the possibility that time travel might change things along certain timelines, his charge was worried about not being saved, and thus would continue to commit malice that would harm even more people than had originally been hurt.

Human beings can get themselves into such messes, Telános thought. Of course, at the present time, his future charge didn't even recognize that being ungodly meant being in a mess, and one leading to certain destruction, even perdition, otherwise known as hell. *And now I'm in a mess too*, he realized.

When he really thought about it, Telános was frustrated, even angry, at being put in this position; and over the past few weeks, he had come to a decision. It came down to it, and time ran out before his charge was saved, he would pray and seek God's direction. Then, if God told him to keep the promise, he would. He would have to, if God told him to; and then that would mean Telános had done the right thing. While it would be unusual for God to command a magical creature to kill a person, Telános very well thought He might, especially in the case of someone misusing a powerful gift and causing massive amounts of harm to countless others over the years.

For solace while waiting, Telános had been reading the bible more than he normally did; and this was helping his frustration. He particularly found comfort in God's promises, of which there are multitudes in the bible suitable for each of us as individuals. Isaiah 40:31 was definitely one of his favorites. "...but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint." (Already having wings like a gigantic eagle, Telános actually thought

this quote a little funny as applied to him personally.) Psalm 55:22 was another quote that he absolutely loved. “Cast your burden on the LORD, and he will sustain you; he will never permit the righteous to be moved.”

In addition to reading the bible, more than anything, Telános was praying daily that his charge would be saved by the time the sands in the Time Glass ran out. While we’re not supposed to be a pest to God—because He hears our every prayer, and so we don’t really need to repeat ourselves—Telános believed God expects us to be persistent in our petitions to Him, particularly ones pertaining to others.

In contemplating both promises and prayers, Telános’ mind told him, *God is Faithful and True, and He always keeps His Word. And He always answers our prayers, even if we don’t always like the answers.*

Although the skies were rather dark as he approached home, the moon was very bright, and Telános happened to see a moonbow in the distance, standing out brightly against the clouds. (Other than occurring at nighttime, a moonbow was just like a daytime rainbow.) Having seen very few moonbows in his lifetime, Telános took this as a sign from God. Since rainbows in the bible were associated with promises, he took the moonbow to mean that God would help him, no matter what, even if the promise to his charge needed to be carried out.

So that was the answer all along—to ask for God’s help, and then just do what He tells me, Telános thought, suddenly feeling very relieved. (In truth, this is the answer to all of our problems, including ones we make for ourselves, but we often forget this.) Now feeling a lot less frustrated, and even very secure, another quote from the bible suddenly sprang to mind, from Zechariah 9:13. “He will wield me like a warrior’s sword.”

Meanwhile, back in Supe-9 where it was still daylight, Sal and Kiana were finishing up a busy afternoon that had involved even more than a necklace and a keepsake box. Based on Kiana’s auto-writing, they had also acquired two cameo pins, an antique doll, a silver snuff box, and a set of crystal salt cellars.

Kiana arrived home in the evening to the news that one of her neighbors, a Mr. Porter, had been dosed by the Police Corp earlier in the day, the result of people all over the place becoming hypnoid-suspicious of one another. In truth, Mr. Porter was under the influence of

something, but not a hypnoid. Instead, he was just plain drunk, and being unruly, as he often was. However, some good was destined to come from the mistake. After the ordeal of being force-fed the sour-bitter pill, Mr. Porter was now ready to get help for his drunkenness.

“From what I can tell, he deserved it,” Kiana’s father stated. “He’s not just a drunk; he’s a mean drunk.”

Kiana tended to agree, having noticed on many occasions Mr. Porter cussing and bullying others, most especially his wife and children. Even people who didn’t act like this when drinking alcohol needed to be wary because drunkenness was definitely a sin in God’s eyes. Plus, people often act totally different than their normal selves when drunk—careless and insensitive both in words and in actions, or sometimes worse. There were plenty of cases in history where people had lost their whole families over alcohol use, or caused terrible accidents that claimed the lives of others. And all for the sake of drinking, which seemed insane to Kiana because she couldn’t imagine any sort of pleasure being worth the terrible mental and physical pain to others, let alone the loss of someone’s life. It might be worth noting here that drunkenness, like bling, had lost much of its appeal in society by this time in history; and so this sort of thing was actually somewhat rare in the self-sustaining communities. Even among the elites in the cities, alcohol was mainly only used in moderation. Also, most college students by this time had recognized the evils of drink, and so were not doing a lot of this sort of partying.

Blessedly, with help from his pastor and friends, Mr. Porter would stop drinking, permanently, and become much kinder to friends and family. And, he wouldn’t have liver and kidney disease, which he had been heading towards while drinking.

In Kiana’s community, Mr. Porter had not been the only one recently to have been wrongfully dosed. In fact, four people in the past week that were not hypnoid infected had been force-fed the counter pills.

“The police have to do their jobs, and err on the side of caution,” Mr. Jackson said, in defense of the mistakes.

Kiana’s mother was of a slightly different opinion with regard to the matter. “I wonder if hypnoids might just be an elaborate hoax by Satan designed to make us distrust one another,” she quietly stated, after

which she quoted 1 Peter 5:8. “Be sober, be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking some one to devour.” She next looked up and read Galatians 5:15 to her husband and daughter. “But if you bite and devour one another take heed that you are not consumed by one another.” Romans 16:17 also seemed to fit. “I appeal to you, brethren, to take note of those who create dissensions and difficulties, in opposition to the doctrine which you have been taught; avoid them.”

This was certainly something to think about, because Satan often works on the hearts and minds of people precisely to cause division amongst even the godly. Plus, no one in the self-sustaining communities had, as yet, seen any proof that hypnoids were real, and not just a rumor.

However, many people, including those living at the twin plantations, were about to discover the hypnoid issue to be very real, and not a hoax.

Sal had been dropped off at Netherwind by a rookh just as the sun was setting. Heading to one of the cafeterias to meet his parents for dinner, he was fairly startled out of his skin by an explosion in one of the greenhouses situated a short distance behind the manor house. Blessedly, having finished work for the day, no one was in the greenhouse at the time of the explosion. However, the damage was extreme. In fact, the entire structure was going to have to be rebuilt. Someone had deliberately set a bomb. In Sal’s day, most explosives were fluidic in nature; and someone had set a liquid bomb, simply in a bucket that was normally used to mix fertilizer.

Upon investigating, the Underground Army discovered the residue of the explosive to be military grade, which meant that this was likely an inside job. Since moles had been few and far between over the years, Merri Tremaine surmised (correctly) that this was probably someone acting under the influence of a hypnoid. Though, of course, the bomber wouldn’t even know that he or she had committed this act. Since Merri couldn’t tell who might be affected, the simplest solution was to tighten security around weapons, especially various types of explosives.

Although there were facilities worldwide, a system of canyons underneath Netherwind and Laurelstone held the headquarters for the Underground Army, as well as fairly sizeable operations for all four

divisions of the military. Being trustworthy in general, many people living at the plantations had access to these caverns. For instance, the TKTs often needed access to military tools such as the bagicals, the Mind Key, etc. for their work. So too did many magicians and scientists work with military equipment and personnel. Also, quite a few civilians engaged in weapons training in the underground facilities.

However, always being proactive and progressive, Merri had never been one to shy away from making changes, including implementing new rules. So, for the time being at least, access to the caverns would be limited. Already, many military members (including Merri) had been dosed voluntarily, just to be on the safe side. Most security personnel had lined up right away for this. Also, until the hypnoid issue was resolved, military members were always to work in pairs, with at least one of the pair being a person who had taken the counter.

Merri was confident that the saboteur would eventually be exposed. In fact, in meeting with several security officers, she smiled and quoted 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.””

Chapter Eight

Roustabouts and Lazeabouts

The beginning of May marked the arrival of two special individuals on Lion Mountain. Colter and Velasquez, both men in their early thirties, were roustabouts, which meant each was basically a jack-of-all-trades. Among pretty much all of the self-sustaining communities, roustabouts were highly sought after, not only because of their skills, but also because they were incredibly hard-working, often putting in fourteen-hour days during the time of their hire, in this case, the entire summer and possibly running into the fall if their help was needed for various harvests and construction projects. Roustabouts tended to go by one name, most often their last, which was the case with Colter and Velasquez; hence, no one ever knew their first names.

Many people on Lion Mountain greeted the somewhat long-term guests with the triangle hand symbol, which was wholeheartedly returned, as the pair was looking forward to being part of the community for a time. Since it was but mid-morning when they arrived, after tossing their travel packs into the cabin they would be sharing, the men right away got to work—Velasquez in repairing plumbing in two cabins and wiring at the local church, while Colter set off to a nearby farm to build fencing, plant beans, and prune a hillside of blueberry bushes.

Based on what jobs were done, and who benefitted from them, people chipped in to pay the credits owed the roustabouts each month, with a few people paying in goods such as material for a new coat and metal for a set of knives. There was no need for anyone to make the coat or knives for the roustabouts, as Colter and Velasquez were perfectly capable of making these items themselves; though they did occasionally need to borrow tools such as a sewing machine. Over the next four to six months, they would end up doing far too many jobs in total for us to list here, though included in the list would be roofing, fixing a windmill, canning tomatoes, carpentry, various stonework

projects, making shoes, drying seeds and herbs, moving rocks, window glazing, doctoring livestock, weaving, and woodcarving.

On this, their first day, the roustabouts did quit work slightly early, in order to attend an evening outdoor barbecue being held in honor of their arrival. Linn, Jasper, Ethan, and Trixie all attended. Jarna was there for a time, in dove form and perched on the back of a bench; but she ended up leaving early, anxious to be home.

At the present time, Jarna wasn't as much hanging out in volcanoes and caves like other dragons. Instead, she had established a home base in a rainforest, in a large and sturdy treehouse that she had built with help from several gnomes living in the area. She had decided on this raised dwelling in order to keep a certain object in her possession safe. This happened to be a countdown Time Glass very like the one Telános was keeping watch on, except for hers being smaller in size by about a third. Also like the snow gryphon's, Jarna's Time Glass was tied to a promise. In fact, what she had on her mind lately was exactly the same thing that Telános had on his because she had made pretty much the exact same promise to her future charge as he had to his.

Covered with leafy vines, the treehouse was even further concealed by having a dense canopy of tree branches above the structure and a fair amount of vegetation below; thus, Jarna felt confident that the Time Glass would remain safe in this location. And it was extremely important for it to remain safe because if the magical glass were broken, she would forget the promise.

While Jarna didn't have furniture like Telános, she did have a nice big rug to curl up on at home. She also had a large genie-made candle designed to burn for eight hundred hours. After lighting it with a small puff of fiery breath, she gazed at the reflection of the flame in the Time Glass, her mind mulling over many things.

While she had never had one in her keeping before, Jarna knew a thing or two about Time Glasses, such as that they were made by powerful beings like sorcerers and magicians, and that each glass was designed for an individual purpose. Jarna also knew that her future charge wouldn't even know about the Time Glass which, like the one Telános possessed, was mainly designed to bind a promise to the specific magical creature who had made it. And while all Time Glasses were in some way connected to time as human beings know it, they

were not directly related to traditional clocks or calendars, but were more connected to specific events destined to occur along certain timelines. Also, in addition to the Dimension of Time, others of the Sixteen Dimensions—Mystery, Life, Death, Heaven, Hell, Creation, Destruction, etc.—could be connected to the function of a Time Glass.

Jarna's glass had been a special delivery back in March. She had been sleeping in her favorite cave in Mexico, curled up next to a small fire situated beneath a natural chimney in the cave. Suddenly waking and gazing at the fire, the turquoise dragon received a message in the flames to go to the rainforest, and to a specific spot. This was how God often spoke to Jarna, though she also occasionally also received messages simply from hearing them in her brain.

Esther, whom Jarna was very familiar with, had made this particular Time Glass that had been delivered to the forest by a rookh carrying it in a sling. The magical sand inside was from Erdém, the desert realm inhabited largely by genies and gnomes, though a few small settlements of human beings also lived there. Erdém held many types of magical sand such as a spout that acted like a pen and frequently spelled out messages in the dunes for various desert inhabitants. So too did a particular enormous pit hold sand capable of trapping demons, even after the sand was moved to other places. All sand used in the construction of Time Glasses came from Erdém.

Oddly enough, at the exact same time that Jarna received her Time Glass, three genies of Erdém had been delivering one to the Mystery Realm.

Like Telános, the request for the promise had basically been sprung on Jarna; and since this was her future charge, she pretty much felt like she had to agree. However, she definitely felt very conflicted. To help with this, Jarna had been praying and reading the bible a good deal in recent weeks, which had helped her determine that God would be the One to dictate what needed to be done, not her future charge. As in the case of Telános, upon simply deciding to trust in God, Jarna had started to feel a lot more settled.

One of the tricks of a Time Glass involved giving clarity of thought to the one keeping watch on it; therefore, Jarna found herself thinking more clearly when in close proximity to the glass. Her mindset at present was that she simply needed to exercise patience. *We can't rush*

these sorts of things, her brain told her. However, patience in her case wouldn't involve a lot of sleeping-the-days-away, like it might for many other dragons, especially because Jarna was determined not to be lazy. Except most dragons, even when sleeping for decades straight, were not considered lazy. They were just not supposed to be involved in a lot of activities at this time. There would be more for them to do when Jesus would come again in the Endtimes.

In the future, dragons would be called upon to help remake the earth with fire. Dragon fire was getting hotter—many dragons had noticed this—and Jarna wondered if this might mean that the Second Coming was near, and hastening. *It might be*, she reasoned. However, she also speculated that hotter dragon fire might be more related to the issue of the falsies. *If there are more of them in the future, dragons will need to be better equipped to deal with them.* Since she couldn't possibly know about the future (unless God decided to tell her), she decided simply to focus on the present (a wise decision), which meant mainly keeping her Time Glass safe, along with helping Trixie and her friends whenever possible, in keeping with not being lazy.

Meanwhile, back on Lion Mountain, the barbecue was just wrapping up. And on the subject of laziness, quite a few people were not helping to clean up, but were simply leaving. Sadly, with the huge influx of new settlers after the uprisings, many communities were experiencing a problem with laziness. All people escaping the Supercities and work camps had been welcomed, and were given food, shelter, clothing, and medical care. However, after an initial period of settling in, people were expected to take jobs within the community. Some had not. This was of course in direct contrast not only to what the roustabouts stood for, but also to biblical teachings. Aside from the extremely elderly and severely disabled, everyone was supposed to work, and not simply live off of the generosity of others. To many on Lion Mountain, these idle people were known as lazeabouts. In truth, the issue was already being dealt with by Astrid working with various pastors, but it was sometimes a gradual process to get across the importance of being productive and working.

Carrying loads of plates to the cafeteria nearby for washing, Trixie noticed that those sneaking off without helping were some of the same people that had been sponging off others for months now. However,

she wasn't too upset. In fact, she was actually smiling because she knew exactly what would eventually happen. Whatever excuses were being used, if people didn't work, they wouldn't much longer be able to eat. The bible made this rule very clear, spelling it out exactly in 2 Thessalonians 3:10. "If any one will not work, let him not eat." And the leaders on the Mountain always followed the rules of the bible. Eventually, the lazeabouts wouldn't be given food or cafeteria credits, and they wouldn't be allowed to come to events like the barbecue.

Proverbs 19:15 also came to mind as Trixie was wiping down picnic tables. "Slothfulness casts into a deep sleep, and an idle person will suffer hunger." *Actually, there are lots of proverbs pertaining to laziness*, she thought, as she also recalled Proverbs 10:4. "A slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich."

Two nature spirits happened to be in a copse of trees adjacent to the picnic area. While it often took a trained eye to see the spirits, Trixie had actually heard them before looking around for them. Currently about the size of a boulder marble, the fire flux looked much like a tiny ball of flames rolling slowing back and forth across a wide stone, while the water wisp had taken the form of strings of mist gently billowing over a pile of leaves. While their movements might have appeared to be somewhat lazy, Trixie knew that the spirits on Lion Mountain were anything but. In fact, most were incredibly industrious in their protection duties. She smiled in noticing that the two were trying not to get too close to one another, which made a lot of sense. While the wisp probably wouldn't have been able to extinguish the flux, and the flux likely wouldn't have been able to dry up the wisp, they were naturally wise to keep some distance, particularly because each could grow to gigantic sizes if needing or wishing to.

On her way home, Trixie's mind hit on a bible verse that had to do with both laziness and gossip, 1 Timothy 5:13. "Besides that, they learn to be idlers, gadding about from house to house, and not only idlers but gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not." *Gossip is a sin that stems from idleness*, she realized. *Because people have too much time on their hands, they end up filling it with unproductive and sometimes mean things.*

While gossip was not confined to the younger generations, because of her particular situation, Trixie saw the problem as having centered

itself amongst the young in her community. Blessedly, only one of the clique girls had been at the barbecue. Because it was hard to gossip with just one person, Trixie had been spared any malice from Whitney Pramm, who had for the evening kept to the company of her family—her parents and an aunt—while mainly ignoring Trixie, though the girls did occasionally cast glances at one another.

Trixie did have friends at school, most of which were doing their best to stay away from the gossip scene, while advising her just to ignore what was being said.

“Just pray, and let God deal with them,” Jasper had recommended. “Also, starve the gossip. Don’t react, and don’t respond with anything that might feed the rumors.” This was particularly good advice because malicious people often tended to say that anyone who was quick to deny something was probably guilty of whatever it was he or she was being accused of.

Ethan had suggested that she quote bible verses to them, which sounded like a good idea, but was easier said than done because it’s often difficult to approach people who don’t like us.

In truth, the girls of the clique were actually jealous of Trixie, particularly over the dragon that had basically adopted her. None of them had a dragon as a friend, and protector, albeit an unofficial one, since Jarna would eventually be assigned to another. Trixie herself wouldn’t have anyone assigned to her during her lifetime. However, this didn’t mean she wasn’t protected because angels often looked out for her in matters of safety.

But it wasn’t just the jealousy with regards to the clique because Trixie had hit it on the nose when connecting laziness with gossip. The girls truly didn’t have enough to do. Being kids of elites that had left the Supercities to join outside communities, they had few chores and other responsibilities. Sadly, parents often pamper, protect, and try to please their children, instead of teaching them certain skills they will need for the future, like cleaning, cooking, budgeting, etc. Parents also should let their kids fail on occasion, so that they can learn the coping and problem-solving skills needed for the future when, as adults, they inherit more responsibility and life becomes harder.

Of course, not all of these girls’ parents were on the wrong track. However, it’s often hard to change bad habits, especially in strong-

willed teens. Having basically been taught to be lazy, they would now have to be untaught, which was taking some effort on the part of their parents.

Trixie was basically too busy to be lazy, particularly at home where her twin toddler brothers tended to keep the household hopping all of the time. Arriving home from the barbecue, she read a bedtime story to Peter and Matthew. “Goodnight, and don’t let the bedbugs bite,” she said while tucking them in after the story.

As both boys repeated the saying back to her, she smiled because she understood every word. For a long time, the twins had just been babbling; and while they seemed to understand one another, the rest of the family had no idea what they were saying. Now, that was definitely changing.

While brushing her teeth before bedtime, Trixie had to consider (because it just popped into her brain from God laying it there) that it was probably really hard for those from the Supes to start new lives on the Mountain. In addition to having to make new friends, life in any of the self-sustaining communities involved hard work; and not just hard work, but having to learn a lot of new things, like how to maintain water tanks, how to garden, how to can and dry things, how to mend clothing, and lots of other stuff city folks probably never had to do before.

And it often takes time for people to change, Trixie reminded herself. She knew this firsthand with regard to her superstitions because she had been trying for several months to get better about certain ones, like not being so careful about skipping every thirteenth step on a set of stairs, and not crossing her fingers every whipstitch for luck. While her efforts were working, it was definitely taking time to change her habits.

Also popping into her brain as she was teeth-brushing was that she just needed to be as nice as possible to the clique girls, in keeping with the concept of Proverbs 25:21-22. “If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat; and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink; for you will heap coals of fire on his head, and the LORD will reward you.” *That’s repeated in Romans 12:20*, she remembered from a recent bible lesson (and from the Holy Spirit telling her). *Anything repeated in the bible is bound to be very important.*

As she was dropping off to sleep a short while later, the Holy Spirit also told Trixie, *Just keep praying and listening to God, and He will tell you exactly what to do.*

And speaking of hearing from God, Ethan woke up two days after the barbecue very excited because, in a dream, God had directed him to have another go at contacting Winston, this time with a specific plan. In the dream, he had seen himself giving his brother a snapshot of Winston as a baby.

After breakfast, trying to stem his excitement somewhat as he headed on a rookh to Supe-10, Ethan rehearsed several times in his mind what he wanted to say to his brother, which helped him to calm down before actually meeting Winston again.

Mr. and Mrs. Hardcastle had already left the apartment for the day by the time Ethan tentatively knocked on the door. Winston answered fairly quickly, and actually didn't seem all that surprised to see his brother; but this was because he had actually expected him to show up again sooner than this, and was more surprised that he hadn't.

"Mom just wanted you to have this." Ethan said, as calmly as possible, though he was somewhat nervous and his voice did sound a little out of breath as a result. "We understand if you don't want to be part of the family," he went on, "but if you ever just want to talk or tell us anything, just send us a kite message and we'll arrange to meet you...and your parents...if you want."

"Okay..." Winston said, somewhat slowly as he accepted both the photo and the kite, which was a foldable model (about the size of a standard deck of playing cards) and so could be kept discreetly in a dresser drawer.

Smiling as he said goodbye, Ethan added, "The kite is programmed to come right to us on Lion Mountain, so you shouldn't have any problem reaching us."

"Okay, thanks," Winston said, since he didn't know what else to say.

After watching Ethan bound down the stairs, and then seeing him from a window hop on the rookh that was waiting outside for him, Winston placed the photo and kite into his bottom dresser drawer while pondering that he could have used a hypnoid on his brother, who wouldn't have been any the wiser and then could have been easily

controlled. (And what an advantage that would have been, since Ethan was one of the leaders of the TKTs.) However, something had told Winston not to do this. It wasn't brotherly affection holding him back, but rather something more like simple caution. Plus, Winston had to consider that there might be some value in having a future connection with his birth family. Therefore, he probably shouldn't do anything malicious or underhanded with regards to them.

For Ethan's part, he was not unaware that his brother might commit some sort of malice against him. He knew he was taking a chance, particularly with regard to the kite because Winston could use it to send a deadly snake, or a bomb, or something cooked up by Tanner that might be even worse than a snake or a bomb. However, Ethan felt it was worth the risk, as a start towards him and his mom possibly having some sort of relationship with Winston in the future.

Back at the Hardcastles' apartment, noticing his socks and t-shirt from the day before lying on the bedroom floor, Winston was suddenly struck with the thought of how lazy he had been in just tossing them there the night before, especially since his mother had been incredibly busy with work lately and hadn't had much time for cleaning. Keeping this in mind, he picked up his room. *I can at least do that*, his mind told him, *since it's my room and I'm the one making the mess in here*. He also took a bag of trash to the apartment chute as he was heading out to classes for the day.

About a week after the roustabouts arrived on Lion Mountain, Velasquez was visiting the local library, currently housed in a large building not too far from the church. He was not at the library for his own leisure or interests, but rather because he was expected at a babysitting job for the evening, and he planned to read to the four children that he would be looking after for about five hours straight. Reading through a couple of pages in a book of fairy tales, Velasquez put the book aside with disgust. This was a book published fairly recently—for fairy tales that is, about thirty-five years past—and the story of "Stone Soup" had been completely mutilated to include the theme that all people who were not elites needed to be on welfare. Having a whole lot of able-bodied people on welfare was one of the main reasons it had been so easy for the sorcerers worldwide to develop

the Supercities and enslave people inside them who had become dependent on the handouts, and lazy.

Velasquez well knew that the original story of “Stone Soup” was about all people working together, with everyone contributing, to meet the needs of the community and make everything run smoothly. Shaking his head, the roustabout actually slipped a note into the book encouraging others to look for an original version of the story, and stating that this one was likely to be a bad influence on people.

About ten minutes later, Velasquez had picked a more suitable volume of fairy tales, one having the original story of “The Little Red Hen,” which was one of his favorites because it was about selfishness, laziness, and taking others for granted instead of appreciating them. On his way to the babysitting appointment, Velasquez made a quick, prearranged stop at a cabin to give a man a haircut.

The day after the babysitting job, Velasquez helped Colter finish digging a well and building a patio.

The next morning found Velasquez working with Bern and Gabe for the day in the blacksmith shop, to help complete a couple of projects that had unexpectedly come Bern’s way.

In the afternoon, Bear decided to visit the shop, in order to bring Bern a bunch of wildflowers he had picked over lunchtime. As he approached the shop and noticed that Velasquez and Bern were working together on something, Bear suddenly found himself feeling very resentful of the roustabout who was spending time in close contact with the woman he admired; and this manifested itself not only in the ugly feelings inside the pit of his stomach, but also in a tremendous scowl on his face. Gabe happened to be leaving the shop, on his way to deliver a newly-repaired plow harrowing blade to a farm, and he managed to head off Bear before the builder reached the entrance to the workshop, which was a good thing because Bern certainly wouldn’t have appreciated any sort of jealous confrontation over what would amount to practically nothing.

“Hang on there, big fella,” Gabe said, steering Bear away from the scene. When they were firmly on a path leading away from the shop, he assured Bear, “There’s nothing to fret over. Like, in six hours, he’ll be done and gone. Plus, there’s the age difference. She’s not interested in someone fifteen years younger.” Gabe also told Bear that the out-of-

sight strategy was working. “She asked about you last week—if I’d seen you lately. So just keep giving her time. Maybe wait two weeks and then bring her flowers.”

Having cooled down considerably, Bear tended to agree, especially since Gabe’s previous advice seemed to be producing good results.

As Gabe headed on to the farm, Bear dropped the flowers off at Linn’s lab, before heading off to work on a roofing job for the afternoon.

It was very good that Bear was heeding Gabe’s advice because Bern was definitely starting to think of Bear much more kindly, both in a personal way and with regard to his skills. In fact, in lately admiring a room addition he had just completed for one of her neighbors, she was thinking of hiring him to build a deck off of her bedroom. While this might have been a good job for a roustabout, it was also one that Bern had decided she would rather reserve for a friend.

Meanwhile, looking in on our favorite nyreg, we find him acting very much like a roustabout. In addition to thwarting sorcerers, he had lately been performing a variety of tasks such as fixing a tractor broken by a gremlin, throwing rocks at megahobs that were chasing people, and laying a stretch of heavy pipe for a drainage project in a farm community. At the same time Bear was roofing, Egykor was helping a tamed orc with moving a woodpile.

Orcs tamed as orclings (mainly by genies) were not dangerous to people. In fact, they were destined to perform good deeds such as chores. Mainly keeping to wooded areas, many took up residence on the outskirts of mothership communities. However, while they didn’t mind performing chores, they were certainly not good-natured about it. In fact, they were often downright grumpy, as this one was today. While still allowing the help, he was glowering the whole time, also half-heartedly waving Egykor away with grunts and shakes of his head. But what the orc lacked in pleasantness, the nyreg was more than making up for, bouncing along in a happy and smiling fashion while carrying and carefully stacking the wood pieces.

Late in the afternoon, when flying over a work camp, Egykor ended up dodging gunfire from three members of the ESS, the Enforcement Services Squad, which was still officially in authority, though most people in the self-sustaining communities weren’t recognizing it as

such. As he was with the sorcerers, Egykor had lately been refusing to help the ESS; so now, they were after him as well.

I might be killed at any moment! Egykor thought, almost giddily, because he was actually enjoying the thrill of defying the so-called authorities. True, he was being fairly reckless; but it was such fun to help people, no matter the danger. In fact, even when dodging bullets, he felt rather gleeful.

Evening found Egykor landing in a hilly wilderness area, basically to hide from the ESS and sorcerers for a time. Finding a nice ravine to tuck into, he just sat for a bit, thinking, specifically about wanting to be something else. Oddly enough, like demons, nyregs were capable of shapeshifting, and so could at least look like something else if they wanted to. However, taking on another shape took a fair amount of energy, especially to hold the shape, and most nyregs were fairly lazy. Plus, their standard animalistic form—roughly the size of a large horse, but with wide powerful wings that were sharp and scaly—tended to be most comfortable for them.

In truth, the laziness issue among nyregs somewhat extended to Egykor as well. If he had wanted to fix his torn ear, he would have had to expend constant energy to hold the shape of the fixed ear. And he didn't really feel like putting forth that much effort. He had only shapeshifted a handful of times in his whole life, when hiding from sorcerers in his early years because he often didn't feel like answering their calls for rides even back then. *Why don't they just hop on the back of a regular demon*, he used to think. But he knew the answer to this. Nyregs were slightly faster in flight than their demon cousins; plus, they knew how to use winds to obtain faster speeds, a skill in which regular demons were seriously lacking. However, neither nyregs nor regular demons were anywhere near as fast as creatures like gryphons and thunderbirds. For this reason mainly, nyregs seldom tried to impersonate godly creatures. *Why bother impersonating them if I can't go as fast*, Egykor had decided. Also, his kind couldn't change their coloring, only their shape, and so couldn't attain a true likeness. Being mainly various sad shades of dark gray and green, with only a little yellow coloring on their underbellies, nyregs generally couldn't look like flashy golden gryphons, or even steely bluish-gray thunderbirds. And they certainly couldn't take on all the colors of a wind horse. Plus,

wind horses were basically airy and floaty looking; therefore, a solid creature like a nyreg would have tremendous difficulty trying to look like one. So with regards to being something else, for the time being at least, Egykor would simply have to content himself with acting like something other than a nyreg, rather than looking like a different creature.

At around the same time Egykor was tucking himself into the ravine, Patrick was just wrapping up his after-school chores. There was no laziness in his new community; and this was fine with him because he liked working in the gardens, learning about crops, helping with the livestock, etc. They were having a busy spring, and he had recently helped with the birthing of both baby goats and cows, otherwise known as kids and calves, respectively.

When his family had first come to the ranch, those in charge told them upfront that the bible makes it very clear that idleness is a sin and that all are expected to work. At that time, one of the leaders had quoted Proverbs 12:24 to them. ““The hand of the diligent will rule, while the slothful will be put to forced labor.”” While that was a good proverb, Patrick liked one he had recently learned at school even better, Proverbs 15:19. “The way of a sluggard is overgrown with thorns, but the path of the upright is a level highway.”

Idleness was not healthy for anyone in any setting, and especially not for those living in the self-sustaining communities because everyone needed to contribute in order for everything to function well. Plus, it was simply not right for some people to wear themselves out, while others were sitting around being lazy and taking advantage.

Just as Patrick and his parents were sitting down to dinner, two of the ranch cowboys were making a rather shocking discovery of a murder victim, a twentysomething man who had been stabbed in the back and whose body had been stashed in a toolshed.

After calling for the healer of the community, one of the cowboys was reciting Mark 4:22. ““For there is nothing hid, except to be made manifest; nor is anything secret, except to come to light.””

The healer was in time to revive the victim using dragon tears. Sadly, the man had no idea who had stabbed him.

However, the perpetrator would be discovered the very next morning, while in the act of trying to commit another murder. The

criminal was a middle-aged woman on a hypnoid, who had no idea what she had done, and so was completely horrified after being dosed and brought back to her right senses.

This event had most people on the ranch, including Patrick and his parents, lining up to take the counter. Post Riders in the past couple of weeks had been helping to distribute large quantities of the sour-bitter pills to communities all over the US; and the ranch had just three days before received enough doses for all people living in the area.

Chapter Nine

More Acts of Malice

Three days after the ranch murderer was exposed, several heliostat mirrors at the twin plantations were smashed to pieces. These were part of a complex system designed to channel light into the caverns used by the Underground Army.

The event had seemingly occurred out of the blue (as the saying goes) because no one had been around. After hearing the loud smashing and tinkling noises of the mirrors breaking, those discovering the carnage had seen no one in the area; though Merri, while investigating, did confidently quote Ecclesiastes 12:14. ““For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.””

Ethan, who was also present during the investigation, followed up with Matthew 10:26. ““So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known.””

On the afternoon of the same day, several people at Laurelstone became sick from drinking poisoned water from a tank that had been tampered with. Blessedly, all survived, and the particular tank was easily pinpointed, afterwards being drained and cleaned.

The following morning, several genie-made devices were found to be missing from a technology lab situated on the grounds at Netherwind. These were no problem to recover, as the folks working in the lab simply had to inform the genies, who had magical ways of keeping tabs on the things they make. Therefore, the genies simply made the items vanish from wherever they ended up after being purloined, to reappear in the lab again almost instantly. Investigating this crime was as tricky as the others for Merri. Everyone who had been on duty in the lab had been dosed with the hypnoid counter, and no one else had been seen entering or leaving; therefore, she surmised that the person who had stolen the items had been disguised to look like one of the regular lab workers. With this in mind, she naturally thought of a mimic. Likely, one had somehow infiltrated. Also likely, this wouldn't

be a problem for long, as any demons entering the plantations were always quickly found out and dealt with. However, she was puzzled because demons generally couldn't get past the gargoyles, bigfoots, firebirds, and such that were constantly on protection duty.

Although presently unknown to Merri, all three incidents—mirror breakage, water poisoning, and lab theft—were hypnoid acts. In many cases, those controlling the influenced persons were not having them act out against any specific targets or for any specific reasons. Therefore, the terrible acts on the ranch, like many others being committed across the country, were basically random, intended to cause general panic and chaos, a strategy that was more than working because people were generally panicked, and a definite air of chaos lay over many communities. However, because the sorcerers had a particular hatred for the twin plantations, from having never been able to get the upper hand over anyone living there, we might surmise that the malicious events at Netherwind and Laurelstone had been carefully planned, which was the case.

However, unlike many other places, fear and mayhem were always kept in check by the cool heads of those running the show at the twin plantations. In this case, Merri and Dell got together right away to brainstorm. Since they couldn't tell exactly who might be under hypnoid influence, short of giving everyone at the plantations the counter pill, which seemed a little extreme, what might they do?

Aside from military personnel, the majority of which had voluntarily taken the counter by this time, few people at Netherwind and Laurelstone had been asking to be dosed to prevent being infected, or be cured if they were already infected but didn't know it. And this was the same in most communities. Not anxious to have to endure the sour-bitter pill, few people were lining up for the counter in any kind of proactive way. For many, it was simply hard to imagine that they might be infected when they felt perfectly normal. It was like one of those denial things: "I feel fine. Surely I'm not under the influence of a hypnoid."

Merri and Dell ended up having to break off their brainstorming early upon receiving news that the propellers of two wind turbines had just been smashed.

The culprit was the same person who had broken the heliostats. However, unlike the mirrors, no investigation would be required to try to determine who had committed the crime because a bigfoot had actually witnessed the event.

“So that’s why no one saw anything,” Merri said, upon reaching the scene of an okra patch about a mile from the turbines, where the bigfoot was calmly sitting on Monte (whose arms and legs were flailing) to keep him detained while waiting for someone to administer a counter pill to him. The bigfoot had been pruning pomegranate bushes a short distance from the okra patch from which The Pitcher had thrown the grapefruit-sized stones that smashed the propellers. This was also the spot from which Monte had assaulted the heliostats, situated even farther in the distance than the turbines.

It was a good thing they had the counter pill because the code phrase of Monte’s hypnoid would have been nearly impossible to guess: Gremlins don’t like cherry pepper pickles. Administering the sour-bitter pill herself, Merri simply waited as Monte ceased struggling a few seconds later and finally came to his senses. Aside from spitting and sputtering from the nasty taste in his mouth, and feeling a little disoriented, he was fine; except for being naturally upset from discovering that he had been a hypnoid victim. In truth, he would feel helpless and frustrated for some time, in realizing how easily he could be controlled and not even know it. However, talking with Mrs. Bohanen, the counselor available to the TKTs, would end up helping with this issue. In addition to having no memory of his malicious acts, Monte had no idea how he had been infected, which happened during his recent run-in with Tanner, who had gotten close enough to him to employ an ampule.

Meanwhile, back on Lion Mountain, on the same day Monte was caught and dosed, a magnifier and two other tools went missing from Linn’s lab. Other than visits from a few friends during the day, no one had been seen entering or leaving the lab, which led Linn to think a gremlin had made off with the tools, in order to break them. This would not turn out to be correct because, like what had happened at the lab at Netherwind, the theft was definitely hypnoid related. However, since Linn’s missing tools had not been made by genies, they couldn’t be magically recovered.

On the last Friday in May, at Laurelstone, a military captain was attacked by someone attempting to bludgeon him from behind. Since the captain was well trained to defend himself, he was not seriously harmed. However, because it was dark (still early morning) and he had been struck from behind, he was not able to identify the attacker who had fled immediately after the strike.

By this time, many people were on the lookout for suspicious activity; therefore, a high school teacher under hypnoid influence didn't manage to break a stained glass window at Laurelstone, but was instead caught in the process of hiking up to the house wielding both a flute and a lead pipe, either of which would have done the trick in breaking the window, which had been a specific target of the sorcerers who had recently started to figure out that many of the windows of both manor houses were definitely something more than they appeared to be. Blessedly, a gargoyle on top of Netherwind spotted the would-be window destroyer. Without even moving, Yami, by thought energy, rolled a boulder in front of the teacher to block his path. This was noticed by a female gryphon named Lolane perched in an oak tree at Laurelstone. Since many gryphons also have energy producing-and-directing abilities (though not mental ones like gargoyles), she was able to keep the potential window smasher pushed back simply by using a few flaps of her wings, while telepathically calling to two members of the Underground Army who were passing a short distance away. Immediately relieved of the flute and pipe, the teacher was quickly dosed. When searching the home of the teacher, military personnel discovered liquid-bomb residue, which led them to believe this was the bomber of the greenhouse, a deduction that was correct.

The warm and humid weather of June had just begun when the attacker of the captain ended up being discovered while in the process of trying to commit a kidnapping in Netherwind's school gymnasium complex, which was largely unoccupied at this time, with the area that generally held fencing, weightlifting, and indoor archery activities being completely deserted, other than the intended kidnapping victim.

The would-be kidnapper happened to be Jasper, acting under hypnoid orders to abduct a ten-year-old girl with a gift something like Kiana's, except Roxanne Franklin was fast with her hands, instead of her feet, which meant she could perform certain hand and finger tasks

very quickly. In truth, the sorcerers were having some difficulty getting to those living at the plantations in order to infect more people with hypnoids, which they very much wanted to do, especially the gifted. And they were leery of having those already on hypnoids carry ampules. Not only might this lead to easy discovery by others, the infected persons themselves, when not being controlled, might become suspicious upon finding an ampule in a pocket or a dresser drawer. Therefore, the simplest solution seemed to be the abduction of some of the targets, who could then be returned home none the wiser once the hypnoid took effect.

Trying to sedate Roxanne with something in a syringe, Jasper was having some difficulty sticking her with the needle. Although his shapeshifting ability meant he could shift his arms thin enough to get out of most people's grasp, because Roxanne was so fast when grappling with him, she was able to keep one step ahead of his arm movements, while also slapping him over and over again in the face to try to snap him out of his controlled state, which she recognized because of the glazed-over eyes and the largely emotionless look on his face. The situation might have been a stalemate for a time, except that a puck troll in the nearby trampoline gym heard Roxanne's cries for help and the slapping noises.

Running to the scene, the puck ended up throwing four fencing masks and two tennis shoes at Jasper in rapid succession, the shoes hitting him in the head and stunning him enough to break his hold on Roxanne and make him drop the syringe, after which, she ran to get help.

Once Jasper was dosed and brought to his senses, other than a sore head from the shoe bonks and a nasty taste in his mouth, he was fine; though, like Monte, he would be troubled for some time over the issue of being controlled, and would end up having several conversations with Mrs. Bohanen. Also like Monte, Jasper had no idea as to when or how he might have gotten hypnoid infected, which happened after a TKT trip about a month previous. On his way home to Lion Mountain, he had stopped to help a traveler pull a cart out of a ditch. This was seemingly an old woman, but was actually a sorcerer. In truth, the sorcerers didn't just use their transfiguration spells on others. They

often transformed themselves into the likenesses of others to commit various forms of mischief.

Using the Mind Key on Jasper, Merri discovered he had been the one to assault the captain. He was also responsible for the poisoned water tank and the thefts at the tech lab. Able to impersonate others, and squeeze in and out of places he really shouldn't be, he had been able to get by various security personnel.

Jasper's code phrase, like Monte's, was also something that would have been almost impossible to guess: The tallest high rise is one story tall. While the sorcerers had a way of keeping track of their word play, and the ampules were color and number coded to match the phrases, without someone knowing their system of keeping track of the codes, the hold of the hypnoid could not be broken. Plus, even if the phrases could be guessed, those in control could simply employ them again to have the ones infected continue to act under their command. Thus, having the counter was truly a blessing; though it would be even better if those under the influence could somehow be identified before acting out. As yet, Zin hadn't made any progress on figuring this out. Nor had Linn come up with anything since their initial discussion of the matter.

Sadly, the brainstorming of Merri and Dell hadn't yet resulted in any good ideas either. Because the Mind Key was much more powerful than a hypnoid, they had considered trying to use the key to discover who was infected. But this wasn't practical because there were simply too many people living at the plantations, especially since the key had to be in close proximity to a target to be effective. So, if the malicious acts continued, the only solution might be to have the counter administered to everyone.

In the second week of June, another hypnoid-infected person connected to the plantations ended up being revealed. This happened to be Naya's charge, seventeen-year-old Birch Hathaway, who regularly worked as a TKT. Birch had the ability to calm storms, and he usually got his instructions from God as to which ones to calm and which ones to leave alone. Mainly, he was supposed to calm demon-produced storms; and Naya knew this. Therefore, she was naturally suspicious when noticing that he left three demon-produced storms in a row alone, ignoring them completely. Naya herself was able to hear God's voice clearly, especially when listening intently, so she knew exactly what she

needed to do. Despite Birch's protests, she flew him to Laurelstone. After depositing him on the lawns, she telepathically conveyed to Dell who happened to be nearby that she thought Birch was being controlled, which was correct. He had been infected during an encounter with a group of ESS two weeks previous when on his way to the plantations on an airbike. His hypnoid phrase was another unlikely to be guessed by anyone: Rainclouds only lay over desert plains.

With regard to Birch's TKT activities, if we flashforward to the time in which the older version of Eizel was living, we find an older Birch still going on time-travel missions, as he had for most of his life. And with older Ethan being incredibly busy, Birch sometimes acted as a leader for the group.

In this future time, on a muggy June morning very like the one in which Birch's younger self was being dosed with the sour-bitter pill on the lawns at Laurelstone, Jonathan was just departing on his ten-year time-travel adventure, using the tapestry portal in Esther's cave in order to keep the trip secret from both Ethan and Birch. That same day found Birch filling in for Ethan as leader and sending out several teams of TKTs to various points of time in history.

In keeping with what often happened when he was in charge, Birch found himself wishing he could go back and warn his younger self not to make certain mistakes, in particular, a devastating one. However, he knew he could not go back and change what had happened. For one thing, God at that time was already in the process of arranging for someone else to at least partially fix the problem, so He certainly would not have condoned any meddling. Plus, at the time the mistake happened, Dell had been in charge of the TKTs and had said a firm, "No!" to Birch's idea about going back to try to set things to right. And so, Birch simply had to live with his mistake, which was difficult, but was evidently meant to be, if only as a reminder not to make other ghastly and careless mistakes because, indeed, after that doozy-of-a-one, he had been a lot more careful.

The incident had occurred on a trip the TKTs made to save a particular person from a car stuck in low-water crossing during a flash flood. Birch was not sent on this trip to calm the storm that was producing the rain, but more because of his connection to Naya, who wasn't assigned to him at that time in the past (indeed, Birch wasn't

even born yet) but who ended up helping with the rescue. Only a couple of miles from the low-water crossing, a summer camp situated on a river was also experiencing flooding. With his limited reasoning, Birch couldn't see how it could be wrong to calm the storm, basically saving fifteen camp-goers from drowning; except that this wasn't what he had been sent to do. And so, while calming the storm, he definitely had an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach that he was doing something he shouldn't. He should instead have prayed and waited for an answer from God before acting. Sadly, he hadn't. While it might seem harsh for so many kids to lose their lives, two of the fifteen were future serial killers.

The mistake very much illustrated the danger of listening to ourselves instead of listening to God, our own reasoning instead of His. This applies to all decisions, but is especially dangerous during time travel because of how drastically our actions can change the future. Blessedly, God knows that even the best of us can make mistakes, and He forgives. Also, He can and does fix our mistakes. In this case, He eventually directed Weatherly to deal with the problem, which she did by sending two teams back in time on extended missions. However, she wasn't able to save all of the boys' victims, a fact which sometimes still haunted Birch. Now, in addition to not being able to go back and reverse things, he also couldn't go back and warn his younger self, no matter how much he might have wished to.

On the subject of changing things in the past, at this point, we might take a moment to look in on a scene featuring older Ethan going back in time to engage in a daring rescue of his youngest brother from an organ harvesting facility that was well protected by ESS, demons, and sorcerers, along with many evil medical personnel participating in this particularly ugly chapter of human history.

Taken from his mother shortly after his birth, Joel Stanley had been killed at age six for his heart, liver, lungs, and kidneys that were then given to elite children in need of them. And large sections of his skin went to a twenty-something burn victim, also from an elite family. Ethan had been well into adulthood when he and his mother finally learned what had happened to Joel. Now, the rescue was on, and was successful! Except that it never actually happened because this was merely a daydream that Ethan's brain occasionally enjoyed engaging in.

Like Birch, he knew full well that he couldn't go back in time to change things unless God directed him to. We can all have fantasies, but we most often shouldn't act on them; and we definitely can't go back and change timelines unless God tells us to. So, no matter how many times Ethan might fantasize about saving Joel, he would always need to resist the temptation to act.

Meanwhile, back in the present, and on Lion Mountain to be exact, Linn was just discovering two more tools missing from his lab. At the same time he and Quin were hunting around for his missing tools, at the local church, a man named Rufus Edisen was presenting an argument to his pastor, who happened to be Jasper's father.

Later, when recalling the conversation, Pastor Hughes shook his head sadly because it seemed even godly people could succumb to laziness and excuses. Although Mr. Edisen had been a long-term member of the church, he had recently stopped working (as an electrician) and was now mainly just living off of handouts from well-meaning neighbors.

"The Endtimes are probably close at hand," Mr. Edisen had said. "So why should people work so hard? I mean, it's all going to be gone here pretty quick, right?"

Mr. Edisen had then engaged in a long list of events he had observed in recent decades—blood moons, plagues, horrible hailstorms, persecution of Christians, and such—that were described in various places in the bible as being signs of the End.

This was basically an old argument because people, for centuries, had been claiming they were sure that the Second Coming of Jesus was right around the corner, with some further deciding and declaring, "So why bother?" And clergy in various parts of the world had heard this question applied to many aspects of life: "Why bother working? Why bother teaching anything to children? Why bother brushing our teeth?"

In the case of Mr. Edisen, Pastor Hughes had told him, "We can't know exactly when Jesus will come again. Just like the debate if the rapture and Second Coming are the same thing or two separate events—I don't think we can know for sure. There are good arguments on both sides. But we won't know facts until certain events actually happen. Some things in the bible are completely straightforward; some things are not, like this. We will only fully understand when God chooses to

reveal it to us. In the meantime, we must simply believe, and live as we're supposed to, which means working to support ourselves."

Sadly, it was clear that Mr. Edisen had set his mind on this issue and was not planning to work again anytime soon, which meant members of the community were going to have to stop the handouts in order to make any kind of an impression on him.

This argument had surfaced recently in many more places than just on Lion Mountain. In Kiana's community, her minister had just had to counsel a woman who had adopted Mr. Edisen's attitude, telling her, "I think some parts of the bible are cryptic precisely to keep people from guessing exactly when Jesus will return, and then using their assumption as an excuse not to hold a job, do laundry, eat right, save up credits for an emergency, and so on."

In many cases, the argument was merely an excuse for engaging in laziness, as well as gossip. In response, many pastors were preaching lessons from 2 Thessalonians 3:11-15. "For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work in quietness and to earn their own living. Brethren, do not be weary in well-doing. If any one refuses to obey what we say in this letter, note that man, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. Do not look on him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother."

In addition to warning people, then shunning them and stopping the handouts, Pastor Hughes was teaching that "do not be weary in well-doing" meant that we shouldn't wear ourselves out to provide for people who are lazy. His interpretation was apt, as it perfectly fitted the overall intent behind this passage in the bible. "Instead of wearing yourselves out for these people," he advised his congregation, "put your energies into something more worthwhile, especially because it doesn't truly help anyone for others to enable them, to basically feed their sin, along with their mouths."

At the Hardcastles' apartment in recent days, Winston had started to do a few more chores, especially in noticing how tired his mother seemed to be lately. He certainly didn't want to make any extra work for her, and so he had been placing dirty dishes into the dishwasher. He had also taught himself how to work the clothes module that washed, dried, and folded clothing. *Huh, it's pretty easy*, he thought, since there

were few buttons to push after loading the module. And it was plenty easy to remove the clothes after, in order to store them in their proper cabinets and drawers.

Winston had, of late, been spending some time with the son of one of his mother's coworkers, this having come about when his parents had invited the family, who were commoners, over for dinner. While Winston had initially thought it strange that his parents were making friends with these people, he had to admit he was enjoying shooting hoops with Darrel Todd who was a year older than he. (In truth, many elites were mixing more with commoners in all of the Supes, as both work and living situations were becoming more equal.) The Todd family lived in a residential low rise less than a mile from the Hardcastles' apartment building. The low rise had a community garden, and Mr. and Mrs. Todd had been sharing garden produce with Winston's family. Darrel had also brought over candles during a recent power outage, a somewhat common occurrence these days due to the activities of gremlins.

On the third Saturday in June, after running both the duster and sweeper around the living room, Winston fell asleep on the couch, and he had a dream in which he and Ethan (as older versions of themselves by probably twenty years) were riding horses together, just out in the countryside across plains and then along a tree-lined river.

Waking a couple of hours later, Winston contemplated the dream, which he found to be very odd, not only because he had never been on a horse in his life, but also because he had never wanted to ride one. He knew that many of the self-sustaining communities raised horses for transportation, farm work, and even companionship. But since he had never been to any of these places, or even seen a horse close up, he couldn't imagine why his sleeping self might have wanted to engage in such an activity.

Dreams don't necessarily have to mean anything, he decided after a time. *Sometimes they're just wild imaginings*. However, in recalling the basketball dream, and putting this together with Ethan's most recent visit, Winston did wonder if maybe he was subconsciously considering using the kite to contact his brother and birth mother. *But to what end?* he wondered, since he still didn't feel inclined at all to get to know them.

At this point, he couldn't imagine that any of his dreams might be a kind of foretelling because, like a lot of science-minded people, he wasn't inclined to think in supernatural ways that might include such elements as prophetic dreams.

At the same time Winston was pondering the horse-riding dream, a woman under hypnoid influence in a mothership community in North Carolina was attacking her brother with a red rope, while he was defending with a blue one. Sizzling with energy and light, the snaking ropes flashed purple as they clashed over and over again in midair. Both siblings happened to be members of the Police Corps, and so were fairly evenly trained and matched for this blazing scrapple. However, in trying not to hurt his sister, the brother did receive a fairly deep gash on one arm.

Blessedly, an elderly man nearby heard the fight and came to help. Using a flute, he managed to disarm the sister who was then quickly immobilized and dosed, after which, an elderly woman in the community who could heal by touch (a gift Quin also possessed) healed the brother's arm gash.

Again, like many others, the policewoman hadn't thought she could possibly be infected. In now realizing how much in error this kind of thinking was, all area members of the Police Corps (along with many ordinary citizens) soon lined up to be dosed.

By this time, the sorcerers had noticed that their adversaries were managing to break some people permanently out of hypnoid influence. However, this wasn't going to deter them from continuing to infect as many people as possible, especially because they were making progress with regard to the labor shortage, particularly in a few select camps whose workers currently consisted entirely of hypnoid victims. Keeping these people isolated made it very easy to control them. Thus, the slaves were back; and the sorcerers very much intended them to stay.

Chapter Ten

Doves and Myramids

At around the same time the brother-sister rope battle was going on, Lista was running around the gardens at Doyle Mansion. She had begun both walking and running about a week previous; and while her parents could usually catch up to her, Kisi and Pipac were having a bit of a hard time. Since she needed to stay within the walled estate for safety, Halli and Magsen were a great help in managing to catch her right away when she got through one of the gates to the outside. The gryphons were also helping her climb the back steps, using their beaks and talons to pick her up by the back of her bloomers or play pants, the waistbands being sturdy enough for this kind of hoisting. Of course, they wouldn't need to help with the steps for long, as her legs were quickly becoming strong enough to manage the types of hops and leaps that generally carried older pucks up and down stairs.

Lista was cooling it somewhat in bringing her sand sculptures to life because the garden had been getting a little crowded of late. However, earlier in the day, she did awaken a dove she had just made, a large one, around six feet high with a wingspan of about fifteen feet. After only a short flight, the dove decided to land to simply perch in a tree and occasionally coo (these being the preferred activities of many doves).

It was coming up on late afternoon when the dove suddenly got very excited, the coos becoming louder and swifter in succession, almost like imperative bleats. Lista definitely noticed, as did the sand mermaid, octopus, and a winged giraffe she had recently completed and awakened. Glancing about, Lista noticed a falsie in the air heading straight for the mansion, a fact her brother and sister lounging on the back porch didn't notice because the house was obscuring their view. While Lista might have had her sculptures fly up to meet the approaching invader, her brain was telling her that the fire of the falsie would be too hot for her sandy friends. She also instinctively knew that the mansion was in danger, especially the roof, still covered after all of

these years by cedar shake shingles. So, in a flash, Lista awakened her mother's life-sized bronze sculpture of Zapor, the gryphon that had been Em's protector for many years but that had died in a battle during the uprisings. Since there was a portrait of him in the parlor to keep the mansion residents company, the garden statue mainly stayed settled by Heike, particularly because the heavy wings posed some danger to the windows of the shed and greenhouse. But Zapor's help was definitely needed on this day, and Lista knew it.

The fire of the flash dragon couldn't harm the bronze statue short term, and in slamming into the beast several times, the gryphon managed to severely disorient him. However, being very heavy, Zapor couldn't fly for long. Observing the scene and knowing that the bronze statue would soon have to land, a gnome living in a garden on another estate nearby helped bring down the false using a high-powered slingshot loaded with a stone roughly the size of a bowling ball.

Hearing the ruckus outside, Halli and Magsen were just emerging from the upstairs library via the balcony. However, finding nothing to do because the flash dragon had already dissipated, the sisters ended up right away going back inside to continue reading.

In truth, Lista shouldn't have been able to override her mother's magic on the settled statue of Zapor. But since she was very powerful, and was gaining in power, she had somehow managed to. Being wise enough to know that the bronze sculpture shouldn't be trotting about the garden, Lista again settled Zapor with a few simple scrolling magical light sparkles emitted from her fingertips; and so, he was back in his proper place in no time. Therefore, Kisi and Pipac, having only just managed to reach their sister's spot in the garden, like Halli and Magsen, basically had nothing to do.

In considering the growing danger from flash dragons, Em firmly decided to replace the shake shingles on the roof with slate ones, and right away, the very next day, in fact. Several area gnomes and bigfoots were happy to do the work, under the supervision of a puck carpenter named Mr. Timmer. With magical expertise added to solid construction techniques, the project was completed in less than six hours.

The roof replacement coincided with some rather special construction going on inside the mansion. The genies were adding a room to the den in the wall where the puck family resided, this being for

Lista since Kisi and Pipac already had their own rooms. Starting early in the morning, the genies were finished by noon, and that very afternoon found Heike picking out several rolls of dove-themed bamboo wallpaper at the print shop at Netherwind.

The next morning, both Halli and Magsen were away from the mansion when Lista managed to escape the estate through the front gate. With a fairly large head start, her parents were going to have some difficulty in catching up to her. Blessedly, Em was still a pretty fabulous runner; and so, she was able to run down the little puck, who had managed nearly half a mile of a sprint before Em managed to catch her.

Worried that Lista might end up in Georgia one day before anyone could catch her, Em was considering hiring Kiana to do a bit of puck babysitting, just to give everyone else a little break from all the chasing because, not only was Lista fast, she was wily. In fact, she was becoming expert in hiding—under leaves, amongst flowers, behind rocks and buckets, in the root cellar, and so forth—before taking off again and making folks chase her.

And speaking of Kiana, she was actually at the mansion early morning two days following the roof replacement and den room addition. She was waiting for Sal, who was finishing up an essay-writing session with his mentor; then the friends were planning to visit a library in Supe-6 before heading off to liberate a shaker box, pewter candlesticks, an embroidered bookmark, and three exquisite dove figurines from an elite home in Supe-9.

Strolling around the gardens, Kiana admired the sand dove, currently perched on a wall. Next, sitting cross-legged on the lawn next to the octopus and listening to the mermaid tell a story involving a shipwreck and pirates that were called corsairs, Kiana nodded emphatically (sometimes gasping as well) at each exciting turn of events being described. The octopus too was completely engrossed, even clinging to Kiana with a couple of tentacles while covering his eyes with two more to try to block out visions of some of the scarier scenes, such as a drowning and a kraken attack. Holding onto each other, Kiana and the octopus managed to make it to the conclusion of the tale, in which a kidnapped woman was rescued and returned to her husband, the captain of the boat that was shipwrecked. Thus rescued,

she wasn't made to walk the plank for refusing to marry the head corsair.

Before departing on their outing, Sal and Kiana enjoyed a breakfast of French toast, ham, and fruit salad with Em, Zin, and the pucks. To Em's babysitting query, Kiana replied that she would be delighted to come sometimes to help with Lista.

On the days when she came over the next few months, instead of simply chasing, Kiana ended up running with Lista, to basically explore large areas outside of the estate. In addition to tiring out the little puck, which helped her sleep better both at nap and night times, the outings helped quench a bit of Lista's curiosity. Consequently, she gradually became more content to stay at home, unless going out somewhere with her parents, Kisi, or Pipac. Also during some of Kiana's times at the mansion, she ended up helping the portrait of Zapor put on puppet shows to entertain Lista, this being a natural outlet for Kiana's somewhat theatrical personality.

The final week of June found the team that had helped the Large People stage materials for the building of the Myramids setting out once again to the Mystery Realm, but not on a time-travel mission this time. Rather, they were going through the doorway on the mezzanine leading to this realm. Though sometimes referred to as the Thirteenth Door (because it was discovered much later than the original twelve), it wasn't exactly a "thirteenth" because the entrance and exit doors of the hall actually made the doors total fifteen in number. In case we might be wondering, the Thirteenth Door didn't bother Trixie, mainly because the doorways weren't officially numbered. Jasper and Monte had been getting back to their normal routines, though they were still troubled on occasion over their hypnoid ordeal. Staying busy, like with this latest mission, actually helped quell certain unpleasant thoughts and worries.

Jarna ended up being an addition to the party that had originally only included Trixie, Muriel, Monte, Jasper, Frees, Bear, and Bern. Of course, she needed to be in dove form to enter Netherwind, traverse hallways and stairs, and make it through the invisible mezzanine doorway that was briefly exposed by glittering magical Reveal Powder that had been developed by Zin. Once exposed, the door was unlocked by Muriel using a shapeshifting feather from Cuoré that could work as a key in just about any lock.

On the other side of this magical passage, the door was situated in a boulder located on the plateau central to the twelve gemstone canyons. Perched on Trixie's shoulder, Jarna decided to stay in dove form for at least the first part of their journey. Again, it was springtime in the Mystery Realm, though a little later in the season than when they had first arrived to stage materials. The setting was early morning, as it had been at the plantations at the time of their departure.

As on their previous trip, the group had limited information as to their task, and even less this time than they had before the Materials Project. In thinking they were likely going to be helping to build the Myramids, the team had prepared for a long visit by fully stocking their pod packs. However, they would find most of their provisions to be unnecessary because their time in the Mystery Realm would end up being fairly short. In truth, God had given them limited information because He wanted to surprise them. And, indeed, in trekking to the area of the Materials Project, the entire party was incredibly surprised (as well as completely speechless) to discover all twenty-four pyramids already fully built. And not only that, but the whole wide valley looked like a gigantic well-manicured park, like one that might surround a large cluster of museums. Elaborate carved wooden benches were just calling for people to sit beside flower beds containing unusual greenery and blooms. Likewise, fancy footbridges seemed to be patiently waiting for visitors to cross ponds and streams filled with enormous lily pads and other exotic plants, as well as fishes of unique varieties. Many lovely, lush trees were present that hadn't been there before, providing a fair amount of shade, in addition to acting as homes for various critters. A black squirrel with extra-pointy ear tufts chattered at the group from one tree. Surprisingly, Muriel had no clue as to what he might be saying, though Frees correctly guessed that he was just telling them "hello" and "welcome."

In a recent dream, Muriel had seen troops of gnomes working on the Myramids. Upon finding her voice, she told her companions, "I thought the dream meant we'd be helping them with the project. I didn't realize they would be doing the whole thing. Wow!"

The others were fairly astounded as well; though they really shouldn't have been because gnomes had over the years proven more

than capable of constructing some pretty incredible things, like the maze surrounding the Chronos Pyramid.

“God has many helpers,” Bear declared. He had actually assumed they would be meeting up with the Large People again, since that seemed practical to him—to have large and super-strong people helping with a sizeable project. *Limited thinking*, he decided privately, which was perfectly correct, as human brains were completely limited in comparison to the way God thinks, and acts.

“So we’re here for another reason,” Jasper remarked.

“So what might that be?” Frees’ mind wondered aloud.

“We’re here to explore,” Trixie stated eagerly, in something of an amazed tone because it seemed perfectly obvious to her that the Myramids were basically beckoning to them.

Realizing she was probably correct, the others quickly became as excited as she to have a closer look at the structures, a couple of which were composed entirely of one gemstone, though most were a mixture of the stones, with interesting patterns worked into the designs such as intertwining scrolls of beryl, jasper, and chrysoprase weaving their way through a mainly amethyst pyramid. Another had an onyx top and bottom sandwiching stones of jacinth, topaz, and carnelian that formed something of a stair-step checkerboard pattern. All of the Myramids were square pyramids (having a square base and four triangular sides), but were a mix of sizes with the smallest being roughly the size of an ordinary barn and the largest being about the size of a standard baseball park with a fair amount of spectator seating. Rather than just open entryways, all of the pyramids had doors, with none appearing to have locks, at least as far as the visitors could discern at this point.

The group decided to enter a largely carnelian and topaz pyramid that was nearest first. Inside, they discovered one enormous room filled with flowers of all sorts—some familiar, some not—growing on all of the interior walls, and the floor that also held an emerald stepping-stone path winding its way to the center of the room in which was growing an enormous rose bush sporting glittering white flowers, so large and bright that the visitors were basically squinting and had to shield their eyes somewhat from the intensity. Sunlight was filtering in through many of the gemstone blocks in the walls, but was not overly bright, more like pleasant morning light through which anyone might yearn to

take a leisurely stroll. In the protective shadow of the intensely-white rose bush, a smaller bush held roses of many colors and many shapes including varieties resembling tiny buttons, elegant hybrid teas, and bold standards. Gazing at the scene, Jasper thought of bright and powerful angels watching over human beings that were smaller and more delicate, and yet were each special and unique, as well as much loved and protected by the Father and all his Heavenly Host.

Exiting the flower-filled Myramid through a door opposite the side they had entered, the group discovered a formal garden containing seven large pyramid-shaped rose bushes covered entirely in blooms, with no leaves at all visible. Each was a single color in theme resembling those of a rainbow with the green, blue, orange, and indigo ones really standing out to the visitors, since these were not traditional colors for roses growing in their realm. Jarna was smiling inside in thinking of the seven original dragons, each corresponding to a different color of the rainbow.

Deciding to take a tree-lined, raised, wooden walkway leading off from the garden, after about a quarter of a mile, they came to a mostly beryl and sapphire pyramid with accents of jasper and chrysoprase. Inside, they discovered an elaborate sand and rock garden, the vegetation of which was mainly succulent in variety, though with some yucca-like plants mixed in, along with a few stout trees of interesting shapes such as those that older, much-weathered-and-twisted bristlecone pines might form. Unknown to the visitors, the sand inside was magical sand from Erdém. In fact, various places in the Mystery Realm contained sand from that realm, having been funneled in through a special doorway by means of a magical sand twister developed by both genies and gnomes.

Exiting the pyramid on the side opposite from where they had entered, the group next made their way into a walled garden, passing through an elaborate metal gate made from some of the metals they had harvested from the caves. Lastly through the gate, Bern was very admiring of the craftsmanship. Bear had already taken note of how well such things as benches and footbridges were made. So too had they passed a couple of sturdy wood-and-stone outbuildings, very unique in style. From what Bear's brain could discern, they were a little like log cabins in construction techniques, but with something sleek and more

contemporary added, as though art deco and mid-century modern elements had been mixed in. Just inside the gate were several fountains, each surrounded by clusters of knot gardens containing low shrubs, mosses, and a great variety of blossoming ground cover. The center of the walled garden held a larger knot garden, explicitly representing a sand dollar in overall design, and containing even more varieties of plants than those inhabiting the smaller knots, including some resembling poinsettias in colors of soft gold, pastel pink, and pale purple. A cherry tree in full vibrant-pink blossom stood adjacent to the sand-dollar garden. In its limbs, five white doves were perched and sleeping. By thought, Jarna conveyed to the other members of her party that these were regular doves, not burnished ones.

In one corner of the walled garden, the visitors discovered twelve statues carved from huge chunks of chrysolite, topaz, and onyx. While mainly abstract, four of the statues did resemble the human form. Wandering outside of the garden and into a wooded copse, they found another set of gemstone statues, also abstract, except for one that was definitely a bird of some sort, and another that Muriel and Bern decided was a beaver.

For some reason, the members of the group suddenly got the idea that looking inside two of the Myramids was enough for right now, and that they needed to be moving on to something else, perhaps related to doves, or maybe to dragons since Jarna was along on the trip. And while they were all getting this inkling, Trixie was the only one who heard an actual audible message carried to them on the Four Winds, which are present in our realm as well, and often carry Winged Words, though we must be actively listening in order to hear them. To Trixie's ears, the message was simply one breathy and resounding word, "Oysters," and she knew exactly what this meant: They needed to travel to the lake containing the twelve gigantic pearl-filled oysters.

However, it was getting rather late in the day; and so the team decided to camp for the night, doing so just outside the walled garden in a large patch of lush lawn grasses that Frees felt likely were evergreen, but of the sort that probably never needed any type of mowing, watering, or other tending to. This was an idea that they all got regarding the park-like setting—that the flowers, plants, trees, etc. could somehow care for themselves. In truth, the visitors were partially

correct in this assumption because the vegetation, even in the formal gardens, needed very little care. The care that was needed was currently being supplied by area nature spirits; though their presence, and their horticultural activities, mainly went unnoticed by most others in the Mystery Realm, including passing guests.

That night, Muriel had a dream in which she saw in detail the twenty-four Myramids being constructed. Surprisingly, the project hadn't taken much longer than the staging of the materials had taken; but this was because the gnomes had help, not just from equipment such as their magical leverage pulley systems and gauntlet stone cutters that resembled large colorful gloves, but from friends, including genies, gargoyles, and puck trolls. In the dream, Muriel saw swarms of gnomes everywhere—building, directing, and even some airborne in their little gliders surveying the work going on below. Several large eagles were helping to launch the gliders. The genies were mainly working inside the Myramids, while the pucks were mainly outside, taking on the woodworking and metal projects. This was a time-travel mission, and the gnomes and their friends had used both the tapestry portal in the cave in the Himalayas and the mirror portal in the stone-and-timber lodge in Africa's Great Rift Valley.

While Muriel's dream was a good one, Monte ended up having a hypnoid-related nightmare, in which he committed two murders while under the influence. Numbering about a dozen so far since he had been dosed, according to Mrs. Bohanen, the bad dreams would get better over time. In contrast to Monte, Jasper was more troubled by his waking thoughts, and was actually finding refuge in his sleep and in various escapism dreams, like ones in which he was rock climbing or hiking. Since all human beings are highly individual, the hypnoids were bound to affect people differently, including during periods of recovery.

Heading to the area of the oysters in the morning, the group chanced upon a small red wolf very like the one they had met on their earlier trip.

Hello, Muriel greeted the wolf in the same manner she had the previous one. *What are you up to?*

The wolf's answer was much like that of his predecessor. *Nothin' much, just chasin' rabbits and wond'rin' what you all are up to.*

We're on our way to see the big oysters in the lake, Muriel replied.

Okay...whatever, the wolf said, after which, he tagged along for a time, chasing sticks thrown by Monte, until tiring of the game a couple of hours later and simply wandering off.

They reached the lake around lunch time. Even though they were expecting the sight to be amazing, the visitors were still astounded. Just about filling the entire lake, the twelve oysters were quite a bit larger than Trixie and Jasper remembered, each now approximately the size of a four-story apartment building. One of the oysters was halfway open, providing a partial view of the lustrous creamy-white pearl inside.

As they were admiring the gem's gleam and perfect roundness, Trixie suddenly got another wind message, again, a single breathy but extremely clear word, "Greenhouse."

And so, after a quick lunch of peanut butter sandwiches and apples, the team set off on the path toward the Zoe Pyramid.

On the way, Bern put forth the idea that New Jerusalem might already be built and that the materials in the Mystery Realm might simply be remnants, now being used for other purposes.

"If that's true," Muriel answered, "certain people who were hoping they'd get to help with the construction of our future home are going to be disappointed." She was smiling at Bear, since she knew he hoped to be one of the builders.

"But they wouldn't have added the gates yet," Monte said, "since the pearls are still here."

"Maybe they won't add the gates until we're all ready to be inside the city, at the very End of the Endtimes," Frees remarked.

Of course, they all knew that the various speculations might be well off, since no one except God knew exactly how things were going to play out at the End, which was really more of a Beginning than an End—the Beginning of our Eternal Lives. Plus, since time often isn't what we think it is, the physical also might not be. The exact nature as to how we will be transformed in the End was still a complete mystery to human beings, though some fully-sanctified people (those wholly connected to and sharing the powers of their personal unicorns) were close to understanding what our bodies in heaven might eventually be like.

In truth, most human brains couldn't even come close to accurately predicting what either our future home or our future selves might be

like, though we can know that both will be more amazing and glorious than anything we can possibly experience or imagine on earth, no matter how much beauty we might encounter or how many blessings might come our way during our earthly lives.

They reached the glass pyramid in the late afternoon. The greenhouse was slightly larger than Frees and Monte remembered. Muriel was astounded, since she hadn't seen it for a while; it was easily five times larger than she remembered. Jasper and Trixie too were quite amazed. Bear and Bern hadn't ever seen the Zoe Pyramid, but were very impressed.

Frees at this time wasn't getting the idea that he needed to do another spurt on the Tree of Life, though he, like his companions, certainly wanted to have a look at the tree in all of its large and blossoming splendor.

Inside the greenhouse, as the others were circling and admiring the tree, Frees simply sat on a stone bench, lost in thought. Added to his earlier ponderings about the cross and the Tree of Life, he was considering our future physical transformation. *We probably won't be much like our current selves*, he decided. Frees personally thought we might become creatures of light and magic, with not much of anything solid mixed in; though he knew his brain was probably limited in this thinking. *We're supposed to use our brains more, and consequently use more of our brains*, he reminded himself. (This was an old saying that many children were taught early in school.) *But that's a whole separate issue—the unused part of the brain, where all of the unicorns are hiding*. (This was according to another old saying). *Or is it really separate?* he suddenly wondered.

Joining his friends as they wandered back outside, Frees continued to mull. *It's not just our brains, it's our eyes too. God designed our brains and our eyes; and both are incredibly specialized, which is probably how we can see things that are real as symbolic, and vice versa. So is that how the tree can be in multiple places, because of how our eyes and our brains work? Or is the whole Mystery Realm maybe just symbolic and not actually real?*

Frees was jolted out of his ponderings when both Bear and Trixie noticed something odd nearby. A group of colorful doves had formed a dove pyramid (similar to a waterskiing or cheerleading pyramid) on the

ground beside the trunk of a tree resembling a Spanish oak. There were fifteen doves altogether, and they were sleeping while cooing softly in their sleep.

By thought, Jarna conveyed to her friends why doves sometimes form these pyramids. *They do this to stay warm in colder areas.* She had specifically seen doves do this in both Siberia and in the Andes in Patagonia. *Dragons form pyramids too sometimes to stay warm.*

Jarna also related that these fifteen were burnished doves, which seemed obvious to the group after she mentioned it, given the intense metallic sheen of their feathers.

“What would dragons be doing here?” Jasper asked.

“The same as in our realm, sleeping,” Bear responded.

“But, what else?” Jasper wondered.

“That’s a good question?” Monte remarked.

“Appropriate for the Mystery Realm,” Trixie input with a somewhat mischievous smile.

Regarding the overall purpose of their trip, the group was mainly getting the idea they were being given a treat—that of seeing the finished Myramids, and getting to see the oysters and the Tree of Life. However, in the back of their minds, they also felt they were there to see something else, something incredibly important. Therefore, common sense soon dictated that they needed to climb the lookout tower nearby.

The structure was large and sturdy enough to fit all of them at once, though Bern and Bear had a little difficulty squeezing through certain turns on the winding stairs.

From the top of the tower, they didn’t even need the spy glasses Monte had fished from his pack to see the all-important thing they were meant to see—a third pyramid situated halfway between Zoe and Chronos. And it suddenly came into all of their brains (including Jarna’s) that this one was called Moira, meaning, Destiny.

This pyramid had actually been present when the group was staging materials for the Myramids and when Frees and Monte had climbed the lookout tower before; but they hadn’t seen the structure from the tower because it was smaller, as well as obscured by a line of trees. At that time, Moira had been only about twelve feet high; now, it was more like twenty-five. Although the Chronos Pyramid hadn’t yet shown any signs

of growing, evidently, the Zoe and Moira ones were designed to do exactly that.

With plenty of daylight left, the team decided to head to the new pyramid, reaching the site in right around two hours of a hike.

Moira was mainly metallic in structure, with many of the metals that were worked into intricate patterns in the sides resembling those the team had harvested from the caves, but with even more varieties included here. Indeed, in circling the structure, they found some that resembled green gold and magenta-tinged platinum, along with many shades of copper and bronze. The outside of the pyramid was also adorned with cut jewels, some large and some small, and of many more types than had been used for the construction of the Myramids including some resembling extremely fiery opals, along with several clear but pinkish gems that the group felt were probably jasper diamonds.

The pyramid contained a single metal door on the east side that was open about four inches, but seemed to be stuck in that position.

“It’s probably supposed to be all the way shut,” Muriel said, “and it’s probably meant to keep people out.”

“But we’re obviously meant to see something here,” Bear stated.

The others agreed, including Muriel.

Shapeshifting, Jasper squeezed through the door opening, emerging again about four minutes later with a huge smile on his face and declaring, “You’re all gonna want to see this.”

Working together, Bear and Bern were able to muscle the door open to about half way so that they could all enter.

Inside, with the exception of Jasper because he already had seen, their mouths all fell open. Even Jarna was open-mouthed at the sight of the Clock of the Universe; and it popped into all of their minds that this was a baby, being grown here, much in the same manner as the Tree of Life had started out and was maturing in the Zoe Pyramid.

Though much smaller than the one in the Realm of Undecessence, the device was very recognizable as being the Clock of the Universe by both its shape and its complexity. Indeed, standing in awe, the visitors were captivated by the multitudes of glistening jewels adorning thousands upon thousands of sprockets, pins, wheels, etc. in types of metals that would have been too numerous to count as far as variety all

in one sitting. Several windows high up in the pyramid allowed just enough light into the room to bathe the entire clock in a gentle glow.

Muriel had visited the clock in Undecessence several times, and she knew that the full-grown version was counting down, likely because the world was closer to the Endtimes. By close observation of the baby, she could tell that it was counting up. However, she also knew this didn't necessarily mean they were in the past. In fact, many people speculated that the Mystery Realm was somehow outside of time, particularly because no matter how much time people entering through the mezzanine doorway spent in it, they always returned to discover that only three minutes had passed at home.

Jarna knew a thing or two about the Clock of the Universe. For instance, she knew it was not a time-keeping device, but was more related to events happening within time all over the universe. To her mind, the clock was basically a magical device that helped keep things moving along according to God's Overall Plan. Therefore, since the clock had more to do with actions than with time, thinking of it in terms of past, present, and future was not all that helpful, since these were not particularly good indicators of anything.

Because certain dragons helped tend the clock, making adjustments on occasion, Jarna was the one who worked out what dragons might be doing in the Mystery Realm. *They probably help look after the clock*, she told the others.

The baby clock was situated directly in the center of the smooth golden floor of the pyramid. Well off in one corner sat a sizeable object that Jarna recognized as a Time Glass, but one much more elaborate than the one currently in her keeping. In fact, it was shaped much like a mass of twisting roots (or perhaps branches), though it did still have something of an overall hourglass shape to it. As the only one of the party to have seen a Time Glass, Jarna told the others what it was, though she didn't divulge too much, mainly saying that Time Glasses were often connected to promises, and were mysterious, made for different purposes. She was actually being truthful in not giving too many details, since she couldn't imagine what this one might be for. She didn't think it was a countdown device; but, of course, she couldn't know for sure because it might be. To her, it looked way too complex for simply that, though she did reason that countdown might be one of

its functions. The swirling magical sand inside was from Erdém, like that in her own device, except for having a multicolored tint to it. Looking closely, one could just see tiny gemstones in more colors than the rainbow mixed in with the grains of sand. The glass also contained much more sand than Jarna's, which would make sense since this one was considerably larger.

After roughly fifteen minutes of being inside, the visitors left the pyramid. Since they weren't getting any idea that they needed to do anything specific, other than just see the clock and Time Glass, they didn't feel they needed to stay too long.

Outside, Bear and Bern wrestled the door closed to the same position it had been before; again, it seemed stuck in that spot.

"Maybe the clock needs ventilation," Monte suggested.

"Or maybe the burnished doves need a way in and out," Trixie ventured.

This seemed a good guess to everyone, including Jarna.

With sundown rapidly approaching, the group decided to camp by the Moira Pyramid for the night. After enjoying a nice meal of pasta and sautéed vegetables, with a dessert of oversized chocolate chip cookies produced from Bear's pack as a surprise for everyone (he had even baked them himself), they fell asleep under the half moon and bright stars.

While sleeping, Muriel had a dream about the third pyramid getting built by genie metalsmiths and gemologists, along with a few others that she was unable to make out in the shadowy landscape of her dream, though these mysterious others had forms resembling humans.

The next morning, the group got the idea that they were done in the Mystery Realm for now. They had simply been there to become aware of the existence of the completed Myramids, and the Moira Pyramid.

Their journey back to the door on the plateau took two days.

Upon entering the mezzanine hallway, as expected, only three minutes had passed from the time of their departure. Jarna was especially pleased with this because she was feeling a great need to be home to check on her Time Glass. In fact, she was leaving right away to head to the treehouse; thus, a rookh would have to take Trixie home.

Monte and Frees immediately set off for classes for the day, grabbing a quick breakfast along the way, since it was still fairly early

in the morning. Scheduled for a time-travel trip the next day, Muriel and Jasper weren't heading home to the Mountain at this time, and so they didn't accompany Trixie, whose rookh took off around the same time Bear and Bern left the plantations on foot. They would be walking and running their way home, as they had before.

At the same time Trixie was flying home, Telános was outside of his cave in the Himalayas enjoying the late afternoon sunshine when he happened to see a dove pyramid about a mile in the distance. He was able to recognize that these were regular doves, not burnished ones. *They're keeping warm*, he thought. *None of that for me*, his mind added, as he suddenly decided to take off to a higher elevation in search of a patch of powdery snow to roll around in for a few minutes before returning home to have an early dinner.

Back on Lion Mountain in the afternoon, Trixie's mother ended up contacting Muriel at the plantations by walnut. Trixie had been expected at home, but never arrived. She also wasn't in school, and she wasn't answering her walnut. Muriel ended up simply telling Mrs. Greenspell she only knew that Trixie had left by rookh in the morning, presumably to go home.

A little later, when there was still no sign of their daughter, Mr. and Mrs. Greenspell began actively looking for her. The rookh that had brought her to the Mountain was easily tracked down; however, he hadn't noticed where she had gone to after he dropped her off at a spot near the community cafeteria.

While her parents were not quite ready to panic, they were definitely concerned. Not only was Trixie still not answering her walnut, she wasn't answering her parents simply calling out loudly to her, which she could generally hear even from a couple of states away, given her gift.

Meanwhile, most people were not yet aware that anything might be wrong and were thus not yet helping to search for Trixie. In Linn's lab, a visiting Quin was just asking Linn a question she had been pondering for some time. "Why are airbikes called 'bikes' when they have three airwheels each?"

"Mainly just out of tradition I imagine," Linn replied, "because older bicycles all had two wheels. And people weren't going to call

newer models ‘tricycles’ because that just sounds too juvenile, like something only for little kids.”

Quin was nodding as she input her own idea as to the answer. “Plus, the wheels on airbikes are in-line like a traditional bike. And the main two wheels are larger than the third, so it’s still a lot like a bike. Also, the airwheels are not even visible when in motion, so the rest of it looks like a bike, though a little more like a motorbike than a pedal one.”

“Very good,” Linn said in response, as his girlfriend had just outdone him in analytical thinking, which was rare, since she was more of a fanciful type, less prone to reasoning things out in any sort of structured or scientific manner. Neither were philosophical concepts her strong suit, since she was more of a dreamer than a deep thinker.

Mrs. Greenspell had just shown up at the lab to ask for Linn’s help, while Trixie’s father was visiting the cabin housing the local Police Corps office to notify them of his daughter’s disappearance.

Trixie’s walnut was a newer model with a locator feature, which Linn was able to zero in on using a tracker device. However, following the tracker, they found the walnut simply lying in a thick patch of grass near the cafeteria where it had evidently been dropped.

Quin had just sent out a mind call to Cuoré who was sleeping in his favorite bigfoot cave back at the plantations. Since she hadn’t needed to check on any dragons in recent weeks, she hadn’t seen him much lately. Also, she felt very safe at the plantations and when visiting friends on the Mountain, so she had basically given him leave to catch up on his napping while she mainly rode an airbike everywhere she needed to go in recent weeks.

Cuoré arrived in roughly five minutes to pick up his mistress. As Quin was hopping aboard, she told Linn and Mrs. Greenspell, “He can help us look for her, since dragons have good eyesight and a fabulous sense of smell.”

Unfortunately, in scanning the entirety of Lion Mountain, and a good-sized area outside of its borders, the white dragon could neither see nor smell Trixie. Neither did Quin find her while scanning with a super-powered spyglass that Linn had recently developed. When it started to get dark, the pair was forced to abandon their search for the night.

Meanwhile, back at the Greenspell household, in addition to calming Peter and Matthew, who were constantly asking for their sister because they too had been expecting her home earlier in the day, Mr. and Mrs. Greenspell basically decided the only thing productive they could do for the time being was pray, which was exactly what they did, far into the night, asking for the Father's help in protecting Trixie, and in bringing her home safe and sound, and as quickly as possible.

However, despite much prayer, and the efforts of many diligent searchers, the mystery as to what happened to Trixie Greenspell was not destined to be revealed for some time.

Chapter Eleven

Rebirth from Rubble

The first two weeks of July found Alex helping to look for Trixie, along with Zin who had been cooped up in her lab a lot lately, and so welcomed a chance to get out; though she could have wished for a better situation in which to do so than in having to search for a missing friend. Alex briefly wondered if any of the girls in the little gossip clique at school might have had something to do with Trixie's disappearance; but since the police had thoroughly questioned all of them, this seemed unlikely.

After searching for ten days straight and finding nothing, both Zin and Alex were pretty well frustrated; and while they weren't entirely giving up, they did end up falling back into much of their normal routines. Thus, on a particular Tuesday, after a full morning of classes at the plantations, Zin was back hard at work at home in her Magicians' Lab in the afternoon when she had a surprise visitor.

Patrick had just arrived in the back gardens on an airbike, and he had an orange tabby cat with him. "It's Tanner!" he said, of the cat, in a fairly frantic and harried tone.

"Okay..." Zin answered, not quite believing what she was hearing. However, from what she could gather over the next couple of minutes of Patrick's rather disjointed explanation, Tanner had accidentally changed himself into the cat from one of his incantations backfiring on him.

As Zin was beckoning Patrick to sit down with her at the back porch table, he said, "I was just coming to visit him and I saw him try to put a spell on a strange man on an airbike."

The strange man happened to be Jonathan, whom Tanner had been tailing upon observing him outside of Winston's apartment complex. Deciding this stranger was up to no good, after following him to the outskirts of Supe-9, Tanner had tried to change him into the cat.

“So the spell just backfired on him somehow,” Patrick went on, repeating some of his earlier words, but in a slightly calmer manner at this point. “I don’t know why.”

In truth, Jonathan’s super-powered dime had deflected the spell back onto Tanner.

“Good thing cats can land on their feet from pretty high up,” Patrick added. “I mean, his bike folded itself right away, and he fell probably about twenty feet.”

“He seems okay,” Zin said, examining the cat that was currently squirming in her lap.

While many people might have wanted to leave Tanner as a cat, Zin knew this was not the right thing to do. Plus, she did want to help Patrick, not only because he seemed so upset, but also because she knew he was a pretty good kid, despite having the misfortune of being brother to a malicious sorcerer.

“I was actually still miles away from the city,” Patrick said. “I’m glad I saw what happened.”

For years, Patrick had been prudent about hiding his gift of heightened senses from pretty much everyone, other than a couple of other gifted people who had been able to recognize that he had enhanced eyesight, hearing, etc. However, upon moving to the ranch, he had let his parents and a few others in on the secret. His gift was turning out to be a great help on the ranch. Only the previous week, he had spotted a wayward lamb that had strayed over two miles from the flock. Also, back in April, he had been able to smell the first wisps of smoke from a grassfire. Raising the alarm quickly, Patrick helped two ranch hands contain the fire before it could get out of control. So too had he been able to smell when Mrs. Marley was making jam in May, which he offered to help with and thus ended up with a couple of large jars for himself and his parents.

While Zin could tell that Patrick was hopeful and counting on her to help, she had to tell him, “I can’t change him back. I’m not a sorcerer...I mean sorceress, or prophetess...whatever the right term is for a lady sorcerer. Magicians usually can’t undo things like this done by sorcerers.”

Although Patrick was disappointed, he wouldn’t be for long because his magician friend was a quick thinker. Zin did know a prophetess—

Esther. However, her cave in the Himalayas would be a rather a long jaunt. She also thought of Luis, but knew he would be difficult to track down in Europe. Her brain ruling out Esther and Luis as good options, Zin next thought of Rhett, whom she made a quick walnut call to at the plantations.

Agreeing to help, he hopped on a rookh, arriving at the mansion about ten minutes later with an amused expression on his face. No stranger to Tanner's antics over the past few years, Rhett was actually somewhat pleased to see him in this predicament. Maybe it would teach him a lesson about the dangers of impulsively attacking people.

Using a simple incantation, along with magical green light emitted from his staff, Rhett was able to change the cat back into Tanner, after which, the older sorcerer left to be about the remainder of his business for the day.

In somewhat of a dazed state from the transformation, Tanner sat quietly at the table with Zin and Patrick, who was offering him a glass of water.

On something of a whim, because she had one handy, Zin decided to use a mini Truth Key on Tanner, to find out if he knew anything about Trixie's disappearance.

"Are you kidding?" Tanner stated. "I've been trying to avoid her for months, ever since the scarf thing." (During a skirmish with Tanner the previous year, Trixie had managed to strike him with a color scarf designed to cause severe depressive symptoms.)

"So you haven't seen her lately?" Zin pressed.

"No, and since she can probably hear me coming from about fifty miles away, how would I even get close without her knowing?"

Trying to be helpful, Patrick asked, "But would you tell us if you do see her, or hear anything about her?"

In somewhat of an exasperated tone, Tanner replied, "Why would I want to see her? I mean, it's not like I'm going out of my way to be bested by the same girl over and over again!"

Zin was somewhat smiling because she knew he wasn't just referring to Trixie, but to her as well, since she had won most of their magician-sorcerer duels over the past couple of years.

Instead of feeling sorry for his brother because the mini Truth Key was making him disclose things that he never would have wanted made

known, Patrick actually found himself rather pleased at seeing Tanner taken down a notch or two, from his normal smug, prideful, and over-confident self.

Zin, on the other hand, did have a little sympathy for Tanner; and so, to keep the situation from becoming any more embarrassing for him, she put the mini Truth Key aside. She had gotten what she wanted out of him. As long as he didn't know anything about Trixie's disappearance, she didn't see any reason to torment him further.

Patrick had brought Tanner's airbike with him. Since Tanner was not anxious to endure the company of Zin or his brother for even one more minute on this day, as soon as he was released from the hold of the mini Truth Key, he hurriedly left. Patrick, on the other hand, accepted Zin's invitation to stay for dinner before heading home to the ranch shortly thereafter.

With regard to Jonathan, after being attacked by Tanner, he didn't wait around to find out what happened to the cat. Instead, after taking care of a small piece of business in Supe-9, he returned to Supe-10 to continue to keep an eye on Winston, who was central to his Hope Project, since they were one and the same person. Indeed, Winston was the younger self of Jonathan, who had changed his name later in life. Now nearing the end of his ten-year trip, Jonathan was even more attentive to Winston's activities, constantly checking and rechecking events recorded in the seventeen almanacs of his younger self that he had brought with him to the past in a pod pack. He hadn't had to intervene very often over the years to make sure things stayed the same; but he had a few times, with one of these being a large fix when Winston was eight and nearly got himself killed by a gang in the Rubble City that had once been Pittsburg. This was something that hadn't happened to Jonathan in his youth (he had never been to Pittsburg in all his life), and thus required intervention so that Winston wouldn't die and Jonathan would continue to exist. Jonathan didn't know what had caused this change in the timeline, but did surmise (correctly) that it might have something to do with the frequent travels of the TKTs, his concern over the groups' activities being exactly what had prompted his own personal time-travel trip.

Because of the Pittsburg event, and various other things that had happened in the past ten years, Jonathan, like Eizel on each of her trips,

was a little unsure as to what he might find upon returning home to the future. Would he even exist anymore? And would he be saved? And would he have the same family, including a wife, two children, and a granddaughter. Despite thinking about these things, he wasn't terribly worried. He had been praying, reading the bible, and listening to God's voice this whole time, as well as tuning in to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Thus, he was pretty well assured that he had been, and was still, on the right track. Hopefully, this being his "Hope" Project, he would find things at home much the same as he had left them.

Upon returning home, though Jonathan wouldn't particularly know (because of how alterations to past timelines worked), a few things had changed, though none of these would be to his detriment. In fact, he would have another granddaughter who had not been part of his original life. And this new addition wouldn't be a surprise to him (also because of the way time-line alterations worked). Indeed, he would remember her birth, as well as all of the major events of her life up to age eighteen, which was where she stood upon his return. What Jonathan also would never know was that God had arranged everything, starting with planting the thought into his mind to take the trip back and be proactive with regards to monitoring the activities of his younger self to make sure they stayed much the same as he remembered.

As far as Winston's recent activities, he and the sorcerers had definitely gotten wind of the hypnoid counter by this time, and had even gotten their hands on some samples. However, upon careful analysis of the pills, they came to the conclusion there was nothing they could do to counter the counter, which was evidently incredibly well made. This shouldn't have been surprising to anyone, since magicians, especially powerful ones like Zin, were often capable of cooking up things likely to trump anything the sorcerers or their followers might be capable of creating. And, indeed, the sorcerers weren't particularly surprised; but they were angry, as well as incredibly determined, and perhaps even more so than magicians were skilled. Thus, their minds were already awhirl in plotting their next move. Sadly, given history, this was likely to be something even more malicious than the hypnoid. In response to the situation, Winston decided there was something he could personally do, which was work on another type of hypnoid, one more difficult to

counter. And he had been busy in his lab for the past few days doing exactly that.

In returning to the search for Trixie, Colter and Velasquez had been engaged in looking for her for the past couple of weeks. But since she could be anywhere in the world, this was probably not the best use of their time. So, deciding that the police were probably the best ones to handle the ongoing search, the roustabouts soon returned to their normal work activities.

Meanwhile, looking in on the older version of Eizel, we find her about to take her third trip through the tapestry portal, back to the summer just after the uprisings, at the time when Sasha and her parents were making plans to leave Supe-10 and go live on the Wyoming ranch.

Shielded by her sapphire and standing nearby, Eizel was looking in on a scene of her younger self and Sasha taking a stroll through the rubble-strewn streets of Supe-10, before very much clean-up had taken place after the carnage of the attacks and mass exit of most of the city's residents. The malicious young Eizel was just targeting a passing utility worker, in order to plant ugly thoughts into his brain, when Sasha picked up a chunk of concrete rubble nearly the size of a cantaloupe and forcefully said, "Stop it! Just stop it, or I'll bash you in the head with this! Then you'll never be able to do that again!"

This was the exact time that the older Eizel needed to act so that her younger self, who was incredibly angry over the threat, wouldn't hurt Sasha by planting nightmares, thoughts of suicide, or other horrible ideas into her mind.

Sasha is the one person who has always stood by you, the older Eizel directed at the brain of her younger self. No matter how much wrong you've done, she's always been there for you; she's never deserted you. She's basically your only real friend, and you certainly don't want to lose her.

Her anger subsiding, the younger Eizel thought, *If only everyone had a friend like this.* With this and other benevolent notions about Sasha lingering in her brain, Eizel learned rather quickly to appreciate her one true friend, who was definitely unlike others such as Tanner and Kemp, who were completely self-centered and spent their time pretty much only looking out for themselves.

Much more so than the hopscotch game, the elderly Eizel felt the rubble incident was basically the beginning of her rebirth. Of course, she was quite a few years older at this point than when the girls had been playing hopscotch, old enough at least to start thinking about what might really be important in the world, people like Sasha for instance. Though Eizel didn't even know much about God and Jesus at the time, and definitely hadn't been saved, this was the incident that had gotten the ball rolling in that direction, at least got her thinking in a less-selfish manner, particularly in realizing afterwards that she very well could have badly hurt Sasha, perhaps even have killed her by planting thoughts of suicide into her brain.

After watching the two girls move on, heading home for the day, Eizel picked up the chunk of rubble that Sasha had threatened her younger self with. Taking it home with her, she placed it in a special spot in the garden behind her cottage. *This was the beginning of it all*, she thought fondly, gazing at the stone, *the beginning of my Eternal Life*. With tears in her eyes and a huge lump in her throat, she went inside to pray, giving thanks for many things including Sasha, the stone in the garden, the time-travel trip, and coming home safely. Later, while making dinner, Eizel was suddenly struck with the thought of how odd it was that a chunk of rubble could have such meaning and be so important, that something beautiful could come out of a seemingly worthless piece of debris lying around Supercity Ten.

Though the rubble incident had been the beginning of Eizel's new life, she didn't fully know the extent of Sasha's involvement. If she had, she'd have had another reason to be incredibly thankful for not hurting her. Shortly after moving to Wyoming, Sasha started doing research in various libraries, on a variety of subjects, one of which was mind manipulation. One day while visiting the Magnolia Archive in Mississippi, she learned of an object called the Mind Key, which could evidently plant powerful thoughts into the brain. Tracking down Merri Tremaine, she tried to get her to use the magical sphere to convert Eizel. (Since Sasha and her parents had just become believers, they were anxious to try to save as many others as possible.)

For Merri's part, she was one who generally resisted forcing conversion on anyone, unless God directly told her to. Praying on the matter, she didn't get His direction to do this. However, she did feel led

to intervene in another way. Using a shroud mirror to get close to Eizel in Supe-10, Merri used the Mind Key to convince Eizel to plant only pleasant thoughts into the minds of others for the rest of her life, the only exceptions being if she needed to use her gift in matters of defense, when either her life or the lives of others might be in danger.

Merri's trip to Supercity Ten to intervene with Eizel had only just occurred in the present, at around the time of Trixie's disappearance. While not feeling bad in any way, Eizel was fully confounded, as to why she was suddenly going around planting kind and happy thoughts and dreams, while being unable to plant nasty ones. Indeed, upon hearing of a bigfoot in Montana suffering terrible pain from an injury, she went with Sasha to visit the bigfoot, in order to plant soothing thoughts into his brain that greatly helped to ease the pain.

A week later, meeting a girl in an earthship community who had lost her parents to a flash dragon, Eizel planted warm and comforting thoughts into the girl's mind of her mother and father being with God in a wonderful place called heaven. (Even if Eizel didn't believe in God and heaven herself at this point, she knew many others did.)

Meanwhile, older Eizel had again been reflecting on her rubble trip. If things hadn't gone according to plan, she might have been tempted to kill her younger self, which was exactly what her protector would be doing in the past if all didn't continue to go well, for this was the promise that Eizel had exacted from Jarna in the rainforest. At a certain time, fast approaching, if younger Eizel hadn't converted to Christianity, then Jarna would kill her, mainly to limit the damage she might do to others over the years (since she didn't know about Merri's intervention), and because older Eizel basically couldn't stand the thought of living her ongoing life as she had in her youth, filled with evil, instead of good.

Just one more trip to go, Eizel thought. Then everything will be secure. The future will be set and stay the same. I hope.

Have faith, her Inner Voice told her. As Eizel took a deep breath, a bible verse about faith and hope came to mind, Hebrews 11:1. "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

Eizel might have thought she was ensuring that certain things about her past wouldn't change; but in actuality, she was making those things

happen, in acting exactly as God was leading her to act, in the same way He was also leading Jonathan. (Eizel's gift of planting thoughts was, of course, incredibly puny in comparison to the way God can work on our brains.)

Back in the present, sitting and knitting in his cave in the Himalayas, Telános was filled with a strong hope that he wouldn't have to keep the promise he had made to Jonathan—that he would kill Winston if he hadn't converted by a certain deadline coinciding with the sands in the Time Glass running out.

After turning the heel of the sock he was working on, Telános put his knitting aside, shortly afterwards leaving the cave to briefly check on his future charge in Supe-10. Able to see through the window of the apartment, he observed Winston wiping down the kitchen counters. Jonathan, shrouded nearby, was also observing this, while taking note of the appearance of the snow gryphon.

Telános didn't stay long, instead deciding to be off on another errand. Recently in his travels, he had observed an artist at work in his studio in a mothership community in Massachusetts. Dominic P. Siegel had lately taken to painting entirely with ashes, of various hues, though the ones most readily available to him were the grays, blues, pinks, and creams that were most common among ashes. Telános thought Mr. Siegel's work was absolutely lovely, particularly his exquisite use of shadow and light, and he couldn't resist introducing himself to the artist in order to tell him this. On a visit the previous week, Mr. Siegel had asked Telános to pose for him. Today, the gryphon thought he could spare the man a little time, also taking the opportunity to bring him some ashes from a Vermont cabin that had been destroyed two months previous by a flash dragon.

Jonathan, in his recent travels, had noticed a basket maker in New Hampshire dyeing reeds and wood strips with ashes for use in various projects. He had also observed a weaver in Iowa using ashes to dye wool for blankets and window coverings. It seemed this was a lovely new trend that was catching on. *Creations made from destruction*, Jonathan thought with a smile. While certainly different than his own endeavor, he saw these works as Hope Projects. *Like mini ones*, his mind told him.

After sitting for Mr. Siegel for two hours, Telános checked on the progress of certain building efforts going on in what had once been Richmond, Virginia. Four houses had been completed since his last visit. Rebuilding was currently going on in Rubble Cities all over the world. What had once begun as bigfoots and gnomes making gardens and parks out of the rubble—to pretty up the former cities, making them less welcoming to gangs and more so to decent folks—had turned into human beings helping, along with some deciding to stay and make homes for themselves so that the Rubble Cities could take on even more new life. To Telános’ view, the rebuilding made a lot of good sense, since there were plenty of materials to work with—bricks, stone, metal, glass, rubber, etc. This was the way many of the original earthship communities had started, making use of such things as old bottles, tires, wiring, and such.

Esther had recently seen similar rebuilding going on in Rubble Cities in Europe, South America, and Australia; and it reminded her of Isaiah 61:4. “They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.”

Possibly some of these cities were not so ancient, such as those in the U.S. and Australia, though many ancient cities had fallen into ruins during the rise of the Supercities.

Having just arrived back from a series of time-travel trips, Esther was reflecting on much more than cities being re-inhabited. The trips had involved making sure early versions of mimics and print doubles were made. Though conceived of by Satan, sorcerers had been the ones to design and create these specialized demons. Esther, on God’s command, had actually been helping because, despite being horrible, these creatures were definitely meant to come into being.

While she never would have questioned God’s plans, or His commands, she did think it the oddest thing that she had fought mimics and print doubles a good portion of her life; and now, she was helping to create them. And, it was actually easy for her to do this. As a prophetess and conjure woman (basically a female sorcerer, albeit a Christian one) she had easily infiltrated the ranks of the sorcerers of the past. She even gave prophecy of success of the projects in order to motivate her male counterparts to work harder at these foul creations.

Esther could guess at God's reason for what He was having her do. The mimics and print doubles had been a catalyst for sorcerers gaining power. Impersonating various humans in government, these specialized demons had made sure certain laws were passed, and made sure the Supercities and work camps came into being. Sadly, the enslavement of much of the human race inside these cities and camps needed to happen, to draw people back to God. Leading up to that point, people had strayed so far from His commandments, and what He had intended for us.

God had given His Son to save us; yet, people were treating this sacrifice and His Word like trash. Even many Christians were straying, picking and choosing from the bible, only wanting to have their ears tickled, living fleshly lives while excusing, and sometimes even applauding, all kinds of sinful behavior, along with persecuting those who were stringently sticking to the teachings of the bible. Laws were changed, to include banning moral teachings from schools and even homes. Parental rights were changed, to the point of some parents being convicted of abuse and thrown into jail for teaching their children values from the bible. If these and other evils hadn't happened, if people hadn't digressed so far into sin and irreverence, it might have been a different story, and a lot of suffering could have been avoided. But sometimes God has to take drastic measures to get our attention.

In Esther's opinion, this whole thing began when bibles were banned, and people were not allowed to worship the Lord freely and share their beliefs freely. For many years, people were not allowed to even mention the Ten Commandments, or expound that this was the way we were supposed to live; though most folks would not have wanted to live in a society that was not following these basic rules pertaining to human behavior. Tragically, because the minds and hearts of so many had turned from God's Laws, and from Christ, God had no choice but to give them over to their evil desires and ways, which ultimately led to their fall.

The suffering inside the Supercities and camps had definitely brought people back to Him. Not only were many now being saved, steadfast believers caught up in this whole experience had been strengthened. *Like wind strengthens trees*, Esther thought, which was apt, since godly people all over the world were rising like oaks of

righteousness. *Out of brokenness comes wholeness and strength*, she reminded herself, which could apply to rebuilding of many sorts—health, houses, attitudes, relationships....

Older Eizel left for her fourth and final trip through the tapestry portal a mere two days after returning home with the chunk of rubble. She arrived in the past at right around the time Trixie disappeared. While Eizel knew what had happened to her, she also knew better than to interfere in this situation in any way.

Eizel didn't know what Merri Tremaine was up to in paying a visit to the apartment of her younger self at the very same time she was arriving. However, in noticing that Merri had the Mind Key with her, Eizel quickly surmised what this leader of the Underground Army was probably up to. And then, it suddenly made sense, as to what had happened to her long ago with regard to suddenly only being able to plant kind thoughts and not nasty ones.

Because the shroud mirror Merri was using was very powerful, Eizel was only able to see her by using rose-colored glasses of a special design. Well shrouded by her sapphire, the older Eizel was making sure to stay quiet and unnoticed while inside the apartment; though she had to resist laughing at the scene because she found it rather funny that she should be hiding in shroud from another shrouded person that was hiding from her younger self who was lying on the couch and reading a book.

Older Eizel definitely needed to curb her urge to laugh because she needed to be there, to make sure her younger self would be susceptible to the influence of the Mind Key. She accomplished this by giving younger Eizel the suggestion to fall deeply into sleep, which occurred so quickly that Merri was rather surprised, as well as slightly suspicious as to why this had suddenly happened. However, swiftly ascertaining that the situation in the apartment was still safe, Merri proceeded to use the Mind Key.

Unknown to anyone in the apartment, Jarna was looking on, sitting in dove form on an outside windowsill and peering in through the glass. Based on her excellent dragon eyesight, she could faintly see the two shrouded forms in the apartment, hovering over the girl asleep on the couch. It was a good thing older Eizel didn't see Jarna, or she might

have lost control of her contained laughter in thinking of yet another unseen presence in this situation.

It was also a good thing that older Eizel had made this trip because, awake, her younger self might very well have resisted the mind intrusion. Although the Mind Key was very powerful, Eizel at age nineteen was also so.

Merri accomplished her task in short order (about three minutes), after which, she left the apartment to head outside to rejoin the rookh that was waiting for her.

Older Eizel followed a couple of minutes later to travel by airbike to a secluded area outside of Supe-10. After stepping through her destination window to home, she handed the Time Cube to Esther who was waiting for her, also giving the elderly woman a hug in both thanks and relief to have her entire mission now complete.

As a surprise, Jarna was waiting outside the cave to take Eizel home, Esther having called to her just as Eizel was setting out on her trip. Confident that all would go well, the conjure woman had decided that Eizel might like the company of her protector on her journey back to the plantations. At home, as far as Eizel could tell, nothing had changed, and she felt very satisfied that her overall mission was a success.

Meanwhile, back in the present, Jarna also felt satisfied, especially in just having read a message in the flames of a small campfire that all was well with regard to the future. While she would still be keeping watch on her Time Glass for the next few weeks (until the sands ran out), she felt tremendous relief that she wouldn't have to keep the promise she had made to the older Eizel back in January, actually only about a mile from the location of the treehouse. In addition to the flame message, Jarna could hear God telling her in her brain that various influences, including the use of the Mind Key, would definitely work to convert Eizel in a matter of a few short weeks. As far as specifically how the conversion happened, in planting good thoughts, Eizel very rapidly started having good thoughts, one of these being to go with Sasha to see a play called *Crimson Damselfly* being performed in a mothership community. Being specifically designed to bring people to Christ, the play was what ultimately saved Eizel.

When not keeping watch on her Time Glass, Jarna had been out over the past couple of weeks helping to search for Trixie. Finding nothing, not even any clues, she had been praying very hard for her friend to be found safe and sound, and soon.

In truth, Trixie was about to be found, but not by anyone actively looking for her; and this would come about from Boko planting a radish seed that Kiana would inhale early one morning, right before sitting down to do some auto-writing on a bench just outside her home.

After scribbling for a minute or so, Kiana was puzzled. She knew she needed to go to Charlotte, North Carolina; but she was getting just an address, and not a description of items like she normally got. In knowing that Charlotte was a Rubble City, she started to get the idea that the task she was being given on this day was something unrelated to her normal activities of reclaiming lost treasures for their owners. She also got the idea that this was more important somehow. And, indeed, it would be more important, since the reclaiming this time would be the treasure known as Trixie.

“So this is something different and more important,” Kiana stated, talking to a mockingbird nearby. “I feel it in my *bones*.” (Even though the word “bones” only had one syllable, it seemed like it took about twelve seconds for her to say it, since she was being very dramatic in her manner of speaking to the bird.)

Kiana was also feeling as though she would like to have Sal along in going to Charlotte, since he was coming on many of her trips these days. After having breakfast, Kiana made a walnut call to Sal.

An hour later, Barát delivered the pair to the Rubble City. Though the streets were barely distinguishable as streets (being deteriorated and overgrown), they found Julep Circle, and even a stone address marker indicating number Forty-Seven, which was the exact address they were looking for. However, the house no longer existed. Amidst sections of partial stone walls, they found only the remains of a house and some of its contents—old shingles, bricks, cracked PVC pipes, a rusty ladder, wheelbarrow, smashed-up light fixture, etc.

Barát, on the other hand, had just found the something else—under a great pile of broken tiles and chunks of concrete—this being the body of Trixie, who was dead and decomposing by this time. The wind horse had actually smelled the corpse first, before looking for it. As they

uncovered the body, Sal recognized Trixie's boots and the color of her hair. Upset and trying not to panic, his hands were shaking as he fished in his belt pack for a vial of dragon tears and the thimble to measure them. Kiana ended up having to help because his hands were so unsteady, and the tears had to be measured precisely. However, Trixie was beyond the point that dragon tears could restore her and the dose that trickled down her throat didn't work.

Since Kiana didn't know Trixie, it was a little easier for her to stay calm, and this helped to calm Sal as they brainstormed what else they might do, other than simply inform Trixie's parents and arrange for the body to be taken back to Lion Mountain.

Barát ended up being the one to discover the answer when he sensed the overhead presence of Lyydu, whom the wind horse called to. The thunderbird had actually been out searching for Trixie. Landing within five seconds, Lyydu was quickly off again within another two seconds, giving no explanation and leaving so quickly that his departure was simply a gray blur against the sky, accompanied by a crack of thunder.

Sal, Kiana, and Barát were baffled for fully four minutes until the thunderbird returned, bringing with him the white lion in mouse form. As Lyydu landed, the mouse leapt from his back, shapeshifting to lion form as he landed on the ground next to Trixie's body.

Briefly lighting up like a rainbow, as he had when exposing the demons, the lion breathed upon Trixie's body, which started to restore itself to whole and healthy within seconds. Indeed, in less than a minute, she was sitting up; and other than having dirty clothes, she was much her old self. His rainbow light fading, the lion simply padded away, his brain having suddenly decided that he should pay a visit to the flowers in a gnome garden on the other side of Charlotte.

Unknown to those in the rubble of Julep Circle, Boko was nearby, watching. However, he didn't stay long, soon setting off at a brisk saunter to keep an appointment with Etowa. Although the pair had finished their real-life game some time ago, they needed to finish the one they had engaged in throughout the centuries during their leisure time. Ketto Benasakk was a game that might have been likened to chess, but was much more complex in having twelve floating game boards, and seven armies complete with a host of magical creatures

acting as helpers and protectors to the knights, pawns, bishops, queens, and such. Boko and Etowa were down to their final turns of what had amounted over the years to a very close match, and the pair was looking forward to bringing the game to a conclusion, having been given leave to do this by the Father before Boko faced judgement.

Meanwhile, returning to Trixie, we find her getting her bearings while having sips of water from a bottle Kiana had handed to her. After about ten sips, taking a deep breath, she said, "You mean it's been over two weeks?"

"Closer to three now since you went missing," Sal confirmed.

As though a cloud were being lifted from her brain, Trixie suddenly recalled what had happened. "It was Quin," she stated. "She lured me here and then took me out with her gold rope."

Even though a lot of surprising things had been happening because of the hypnoid situation, Sal and Kiana at first found this difficult to believe. But it was indeed true. No sooner had the rookh dropped Trixie off by the cafeteria on the day she disappeared, than she met Quin, who told her about a lovely patch of frost flowers she had discovered earlier in the day in North Carolina which she wanted to visit again in order to take a few snapshots. Since Trixie was always up for outings of this sort, she didn't hesitate to accept Quin's invitation to go along; and the girls right away set off on airbikes. Since Quin had been riding an airbike a lot lately while Cuoré was evidently off somewhere sleeping, Trixie didn't think anything odd of this. After killing Trixie, Quin had covered the body with debris so that it wouldn't easily be found.

Kiana, Sal, and Trixie pretty quickly reasoned that Quin was under hypnoid influence, which was correct. The fact that no one had yet figured out that she was infected was almost as surprising to Trixie as the surprise attack had been. Though feeling sore, and a bit unsteady from not having used her legs for so long, as she struggled to her feet with Kiana's assistance, she stated, "We need to find out where she is, before something worse happens."

"What could be worse than murder?" Kiana wondered.

"Well, before she does it again then," Trixie replied.

Sal was already on his walnut, calling Ethan whom he knew was at the plantations for the day and from whom he discovered that Quin had a short while earlier set off for Lion Mountain to visit Linn.

After helping Trixie clamber aboard Lyydu, Kiana hopped onto Barát behind Sal. As the wind horse and thunderbird took off toward the Mountain, Sal tried to call Linn, but got no answer.

Already hard at work in his lab, Linn had just been relieved of his walnut by Quin, who was in the process of trying to stab her boyfriend with a dagger. She couldn't have managed a successful attack before now because Linn had been working on several projects lately with Jitterbug and Hank, and thus had pretty much had constant company in his lab of late. On this day, he had been alone when she arrived.

Blessedly, Linn was no weakling, and was managing to put up a good fight for the knife, while also trying not to seriously hurt Quin.

While Barát and Lyydu were very fast, making it to the lab in two minutes flat, Meg was actually the one who managed to save Linn, arriving a minute before the group from Charlotte.

Seeing the struggle, Meg knew she needed to act quickly. However, even though she had been training lately with a flute, and had one on her belt, she was reluctant to use it in knowing that the difference between stun and kill was often a fine line with music weapons. With her limited experience, she might accidentally kill either Quin or Linn, or both.

Linn had just managed a hard shove against Quin, who stumbled back from his airchair a good twelve feet. In a flash, Meg tossed out a handful of double-pointed knitting needles that she had been carrying. These landed on the floor (with musical tinkling) directly in the path of Quin's feet as she rushed toward Linn still wielding the knife.

Slipping on the knitting needles (as one might on a well-placed banana peel), Quin dropped the knife while landing on her back, which stunned her just long enough for Meg to keep her on the floor and turn her over, after which, Meg bound Quin's arms behind her back using Linn's much-loved and lopsided sweater that he had just tossed to her. (In truth, God had led Quin to knit the sweater not only to help keep Linn warm, but also to help save his life in this situation.)

Kiana, Sal, and Trixie had just arrived; and Sal happened to have a supply of sour-bitter pills in his belt pack, one of which was quickly force-fed to the struggling Quin.

Upon coming to her senses, Quin had no memory of attacking Linn, or killing Trixie, and she had a hard time believing that she had done these things. She also almost couldn't believe she had been under the influence of a hypnoid, which she had been infected with during a brief run-in with Winston shortly after her birthday. Quin didn't know Winston, and hadn't thought anything further of their passing meeting outside of an earthship community in Pennsylvania, where Winston happened to be scouting for work-camp victims. Cuoré hadn't been with Quin on that day, or he likely would have been able to alert her to the fact that the boy was a miscreant.

Quin had taken the tools that went missing from Linn's lab, afterwards delivering them to a designated drop-spot outside of Supe-10. Blessedly, the ones she pinched were not all that new in design or important; thus, the sorcerers that ended up with them weren't able to learn any trade secrets from them.

When her friends finally managed to convince her of what had happened, Quin was crying, almost uncontrollably, from the shock and horror of having murdered Trixie and nearly so Linn.

As Meg set off for home, and Trixie left the lab to reunite with her parents and brothers, who were overjoyed to welcome her home, Sal and Kiana stayed with Linn and Quin. However, after about thirty minutes of Quin's continual weeping, when it became clear that no one at the lab was going to be able to comfort her in the near term, Sal and Kiana came to the conclusion (and managed to convince Linn) that Quin should be taken home to her parents, who would be the best people to help get her started on the road to recovery. This was a wise decision because Quin was certainly feeling the effects of having been hypnoid infected more than either Monte or Jasper had, and she would continue to be deeply troubled for quite some time.

Accompanied by Sal and Kiana on Barát, Lydu delivered Quin to her parents, whom Sal explained things to, after which, he and Kiana headed to their homes.

Quin was calmer late in the day, basically having cried herself out and had a long nap, afterwards reading the bible and praying, which

helped her feel much better. In her bedroom before dinner and gazing at the everlasting roses on her dresser, she was further comforted by their beauty which, oddly enough, was a complete opposite to what her hypnoid code phrase had been: Roses are an ugly flower.

Although feeling somewhat better, Quin was incredibly sorry that she hadn't been proactive and taken the counter pill early on. Like many people, she just hadn't been able to imagine that she might be infected.

Chapter Twelve

Promises Sprinkled with Wishes

The last Saturday in July found Zin in her lab, finishing work on a hypnoid detector. From studying a single ampule that had been fairly easy for Heather to obtain, Zin had been able to zero in on the chemical base of the hypnoid. From there, with a little diligence, she had been able to develop the detector which, if brought within six hundred feet of an infected person, would cause uncontrollable sneezing. Then, a few seconds later, the affected person's ears would start ringing loudly. Both the sneezing and ear ringing would continue until a counter pill was applied. Zin was confident that this would make those under hypnoid influence seek medical help, since people can't sneeze forever, or tolerate constant loud ringing in the ears. The active component of the detector was actually a liquid, which Linn had designed a casing for. Combined, the liquid and casing formed the unit that Zin was calling the detector.

Not much larger than a thick piece of blackboard chalk, the genies would easily be able to multiply these units. Based on military intelligence, the hypnoid use was presently contained to the U.S., in which the sorcerers had been experimenting before moving their operations abroad, which they hadn't yet done. Thus, members of the Underground Army and Police Corps would shortly be able to find and liberate many hypnoid victims. While it might take a while to reach everyone in the widespread Supercities and camps, those under hypnotic control and being forced to work would soon be freed.

However, sadly, this would not be an end to the situation because Winston had just finished making a new type of hypnoid, one capable of altering the memories of its targets, even to the point of erasing some memories altogether. While this new version wouldn't end up being used on as large a scale as the original had been, the sorcerers would still find it a valuable tool for use against the godly.

On the same Saturday Zin was finishing work on the hypnoid detector, Winston was visiting Eizel at her apartment. While she was making tea and setting out a plate of cookies for them, a book in a stack on an end table drew his eye. “Can I borrow this?” he asked.

Feeling magnanimous of late, at least enough to share books, she replied, “Sure, go ahead.”

Unknown to either Eizel or Winston, the book in question had once been mystery novel, but had been changed by the magic of a genie-made bookmark placed on page fifty-four of the book. Now, it was a copy of *Graham Rumpole*, which was more of an historical romance than anything else, though with a few elements of fantasy and mystery thrown in. Eizel had many books, including quite a few she had not yet read. Not recognizing the title, she briefly wondered if maybe Sasha had left the book for her to read. Sasha had brought a couple of books with her on her last visit. This was, of course, not the case because this was the second book older Eizel had placed a bookmark into, specifically, a Transformation Mark, which was a little stronger in magic than a Restoration Mark in that it could completely change the cover and full text of a book. Because *Graham Rumpole* was rather lengthy, the transformation had taken three minutes, whereas, shorter books into which Transformation Marks were placed generally only took one minute each to change. Also unknown to either Eizel or Winston, he had stepped on a sunflower seed just before entering her apartment; and this was what had drawn him to the book and given him the strong urge to want to read it.

When Winston left the building an hour later, Telános happened to be observing. With his fabulous eyesight, even from a mile away, the snow gryphon could see the title of the book his future charge was carrying; and it suddenly occurred to him that this was the answer to everything. *God works in such incredible ways!* he thought.

Telános knew enough about modern literature to know that anyone who read *Graham Rumpole*—a banned book at this time—would be saved. In fact, the book had been banned precisely because the sorcerers knew the power it contained.

So how could he make sure Winston actually read it, and didn’t just end up putting it aside? Not knowing about the sunflower seed Boko had planted, Telános was worried that Winston might do just that—put

the book aside. Like many teenagers, he could easily get bored, or simply distracted. In putting his mind to this problem, after thinking for only a couple of minutes, Telános suddenly thought of the answer: *Use a hypnoid on him to make him read it.*

With his excellent camouflage abilities, the gryphon was able to sneak into a sorcerer's townhouse to swipe an ampule, and have a peek at the ledger containing the color and number listings for the code phrases. With regard to using a hypnoid, Telános thought it funny how something so malicious could end up being used for something good. He also thought Winston's code phrase was hilarious: A chainsaw gives excellent haircuts.

Getting close to Winston in the sorcerers' den where he worked was easy. After employing the ampule and using the code phrase, Telános then simply commanded Winston to read *Graham Rumpole*.

Reading in long stretches, he finished the book in two days. Unknown to Telános, his future charge only would have needed to read to a particular sentence just past mid-way in the book, this being the point that tipped the scales in the direction of being saved, as opposed to continuing to serve Satan.

Once he was sure Winston had finished the book, Telános again snuck close to him in the den to employ a counter pill by slipping one into a sandwich Winston was eating, afterwards leaving quickly so that his future charge wouldn't see him, which wasn't likely given that Winston had just swallowed the pill and was now spitting and sputtering while rolling around on the floor in disgust at the horrible taste in his mouth. Once he recovered somewhat (about ten minutes later), Winston assumed he had accidentally inhaled fumes from something nearby being cooked up in a beaker on a palm stove by a sorcerer, who was also in the lab, but was having a nap on a divan in a back room.

Because *Graham Rumpole* didn't work instantly, like a puff of magic (or a counter pill), instead working on the mind gradually and at different rates based on individuals and their unique circumstances, Winston being saved would actually take a few weeks. This didn't trouble Telános. Even if the sands in his Time Glass ran out before that time, the eventual save was assured. Thus, he would never have to keep his promise.

The snow gryphon had, however, just fulfilled a promise he had made to himself—that he would do everything in his power to make sure his charge was saved. In truth, Telános also felt compelled to help other human beings onto the path to heaven and away from the one to hell. God only does give people so many chances to repent and accept His Son. While the number could be a lot for some, each person is unique. The number might be five, or it might be five thousand. Since we can't know, we shouldn't take chances.

Shortly after Winston finished reading *Graham Rumpole*, he had an odd dream that was rather disturbing, but that also intrigued him. He was standing on a hill looking at a white robe dipped in blood that was draped on a wooden cross situated on the hill. Patches of frost flowers were growing around the base of the cross, and a white sparrow (thought to be a magical bird) was perched in an oak tree nearby. In the sky above the tree, strings of clouds spelled out the words, “The Kingdom of Heaven is at Hand.” Winston didn't know this was a phrase from the bible. He also didn't know this was a prophetic dream leading up to his being saved.

If we take a peek around a small corner of his future, we find Winston eventually becoming Jonathan Witte, changing his name fairly late in life, after his adopted parents died of natural causes both in their early eighties. Jonathan was his original first name, the one given to him at his birth. Witte came from Holly Stanley marrying a man named George Witte (in the not-so-distant future actually). Because Jonathan very much liked his stepfather, he decided to take his last name. Plus, this gave him something in common with his younger brother who was born two years after Holly and George married. This was the boy in Winston's earlier dream, the one playing basketball with him and Ethan.

Jonathan actually didn't know he had been saved by a borrowed book and from Telános employing a hypnoid. He assumed the save had come from his younger self eventually using the kite to contact Ethan, more out of growing curiosity than anything else. But then, their relationship grew, with Winston quickly succumbing to his brother's positive influence. Strangely enough, upon learning from Heather of the new type of hypnoid that worked on memories, Ethan considered using one on Winston, in order to make him forget his adoptive family. In the end, Ethan didn't. Rather, this was simply a fantasy his brain

briefly engaged in. While using a weapon against its creator might be a tempting thing, especially for a good cause, Ethan knew it wouldn't be right, at least not in this case. At the time he was thinking of this, he hadn't yet heard from Winston. However, continuing to pray on the matter, he was getting the strong idea that he soon would.

On the subject of borrowed books, Lyydu had just pinched one from a library in Maryland, in order to present it as a gift to Bern, whom the thunderbird was growing in fondness for. However, the gift wasn't because of the fondness, but more because God had told him to do this.

The book was an old volume of fairy tales that Sal had actually just taken a time-travel trip back nearly two hundred years to alter. With help from a genie bookwright of that time, Sal added a story he had just written called "The Builder and the Blacksmith," the setting of which was a mountain village in the U.S.

Flipping through the book, Bern found the addition sandwiched between "Sleeping Beauty" and "Snow White," and she smiled to discover that the blacksmith character was a lady roughly her age.

And the builder is a large man, about Bear's age, she quickly noticed, with some suspicion. Reading further, she discovered other similarities to her and Bear. While the names of the main characters were not Bear and Bern, the tale was about two people with certain skills who originally disliked one another, but then grew to realize they could accomplish great things by working together, including building a tower for an exiled Prince and saving his life from an assassin.

Extremely skeptical, Bern examined the book closely. It was definitely an old one, with a loose spine and yellowed pages, some torn and crumbling around the edges, so it seemed unlikely that anyone could have added the story in order to play a joke on her. Plus, based on Lyydu's nearly constant stoicism, Bern felt him the least likely creature in the world to be involved in a practical joke. However, in checking the copyright date in the book, she thought, *There probably wouldn't have even been any lady blacksmiths a hundred and ninety years ago in the U.S.*

But you never know, another voice in her brain told her. *There have been many women throughout history that were ahead of their time, and even some writers ahead of their time in creating strong female*

characters. (She was specifically thinking of Éowyn in *The Lord of the Rings*, and pretty much all of Jane Austen's heroines.)

Despite the possibility that she was being pranked, Bern enjoyed "The Builder and the Blacksmith." As she finished reading the story, she placed the book on a shelf in her bedroom before heading out to keep an appointment she had made with one of the roustabouts.

"She's helping Colter fix Cantwell Bridge," Gabe told Bear, who had stopped by the blacksmith shop to inquire about a piece of angle iron. "The bridge needs new metal as much as it needs new wood."

As though a light bulb had just turned on in his head, Bear suddenly realized, *That's it! That's the scene from my dream! She's about to get hurt!* He had been patiently waiting for this moment all this time, ever since seeing the heavy wooden beam falling on Bern, which he now recognized as being part of the old truss bridge.

Dashing out of the workshop, Bear ran faster than a bear, reaching the bridge just in time to keep the collapsing trusses from falling on Bern and Colter, the latter of which scrambled for pieces of timber nearby to support the structure that Bear and Bern together were struggling to hold up.

After steadying the bridge, and catching their collective breath, the trio set up warning signs before heading to the blacksmith shop to pick up some pieces of hardware needed for the repairs. With Bear helping Bern and Colter, the bridge project would only take two days to complete.

Finishing at the bridge late afternoon on the second day, as Colter set off to his next job—that of tilling a field for a late planting of sweet potatoes—Bear and Bern decided to have an early dinner together, during which, they mainly discussed Bern's proposed deck project. However, while having dessert, they ended up joking a bit.

"You know," Bear said, "in the Swiss language, Bern means bear. So we basically have the same name."

"Except my name is really Bernadette," Bern replied.

"And mine is actually Cal," Bear suddenly remembered, though his early name seemed very ancient to him, since no one had called him Cal for probably twenty-five years.

At home after dinner, her mind mulling on the fairytale book, Bern decided that it was probably from God. *He's sending me a message.*

From various early experiences in life, she didn't particularly trust men. However, she could pretty well feel God telling her that she could trust Bear. While a friendship with him likely wouldn't be much like a fairy tale, it would be worthwhile.

If we take a quick peek around a small corner of their future, we find them working on many more projects together, even traveling sometimes to do so. With so many skilled craftsmen on Lion Mountain, they could certainly take the time to expand their reach, especially since many mothership and earthship communities were in need of both builders and blacksmiths.

At the same time Colter was tilling, Velasquez was working on building two new stacked gardens. Taking a water break, he also took the opportunity to scold an onlooker nearby named Henry who was obviously a lazeabout, given what Colter had observed over the past few weeks.

“It is God's gift to man that every one should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil,” Colter said, quoting from Ecclesiastes 3:13. “That means God expects every able-bodied person to work. So you should work.” (In general, roustabouts were not shy about sharing their opinions.)

“I'm doing just fine without it,” Henry replied.

“Even Adam and Eve had work to do in the garden, before they got thrown out of it,” Colter answered. “Be careful you don't get thrown off the Mountain.”

At the same time Colter was scolding Henry, Quin was visiting Zin at Doyle Mansion. Although doing better by this time, she was still troubled over what had happened. She was also confused, as to why the shield sapphire implanted in her ankle and the mini Mind Key she always carried hadn't been able to protect her from getting infected.

Zin ended up telling her that the shield sapphire and mini Mind Key were not designed to repel something like a hypnoid. “The sapphires are mainly for deflecting physical attack. And the mini Mind Key was designed to protect from someone trying to read your thoughts or plant thoughts, not against hypnoid control that works more on the senses than it does on brain activity.”

While this made perfect sense, after considering, Quin's brain came up with a slightly different explanation that was basically a moral to her

story: *Only God can truly protect us, not trinkets, not devices, not even a white dragon, but God alone.*

Cuoré was also still recovering from the ordeal. He too had been horrified upon discovering what had happened. While waiting for Quin in the garden, sitting quietly next to the statue of Zapor, his mind was filled with guilt. He still couldn't believe he had been off sleeping, even though Quin had given him leave to, telling him that she just wanted to spend time with Linn and didn't need protection at the lab. Cuoré knew he had unwisely let his guard down. In addition to the guilt, he was incredibly mad at himself. As Quin's protector, he should have been more attentive. Obviously, Naya had not been fooled by Birch. Neither should he have been fooled by Quin.

No matter how much he might like to sleep, Cuoré was now vowing to stay awake more. Even aside from protecting Quin, he felt he should, especially with the time of the End nearing. In multiple places in the bible, Jesus had told His followers to keep watch because He would be coming back soon. While no one could know exactly when this would be, Cuoré could feel the time hastening. *So I need to be awake and alert*, he reminded himself. In truth, dragons in general were sleeping less these days, in readiness to be called into action by the Father.

The next morning, as Cuoré was taking Quin for a ride to get some air before her classes started for the day, the pair was surprised to pass Tanner on an airbike.

Completely ignoring both the girl and the dragon, on his way to see his brother, Tanner was incredibly angry, having just discovered that his mentor had recently attempted to use a hypnoid on Patrick. Vidas, through his network of informants, had found out about Patrick's gift of heightened senses and had wanted to recruit him. What an asset the super hearing and eyesight would have been to many of the sorcerers' schemes. However, by the time Vidas, in disguise, managed to get close enough to deploy an ampule, Patrick had already taken the counter, so the hypnoid didn't work on him.

In earlier days, Tanner might not have cared if his brother became a hypnoid slave. However, he had in recent months been missing his family; and he was starting to feel protective of them, including their new life, especially because they seemed so happy. And, deep down, he wanted them to stay happy. Plus, Vidas hadn't even told him he was

targeting Patrick. That was probably what was irritating Tanner the most—the fact that his mentor would have kept this secret from him.

Tanner had never gotten along well with his mentor. Now, he was so angry with Vidas that he had decided to throw a little monkey wrench into things. He had always been something of a rebel among sorcerers, so why not stir things up more, to get back at his mentor, and maybe teach him a lesson. Tanner had decided to tell Patrick which work camps the hypnoid victims were concentrated in. He knew his brother had many connections among the godly, even friends, like the magician that Tanner so hated; though he was feeling somewhat grateful that Zin had helped get him changed back when his spell backfired. He had recovered from the cat ordeal; however, as Rhett had predicted, he was being more cautious. And he was definitely rethinking a few things. For so long he had struggled in everything, never seeming to get ahead and being thwarted at every turn by the godly, including the girl on the white dragon. On another day, Tanner might have wanted to blast the pair with his staff; except today, his brain was on something of a mission. Maybe it was time for him to take a step back. Maybe he was on the wrong path. This was a little hard for him to believe, but was starting to look like this might be the case, even if he didn't want to fully admit it.

As soon as his brother left, Patrick shared the information Tanner had given him with Zin, who immediately contacted her Aunt Merri. Over the next two weeks, over seven hundred slaves would be liberated from hypnoid influence in four camps, all thanks to Tanner, who would end up going back and forth like this—from malicious to helpful, and back again—many times over the coming years, before finally getting his feet firmly on the narrow path. With regard to his wishy-washiness, everyone has to start somewhere in making life changes. And sometimes we have to start over, because we all can and do make mistakes. Blessedly, God knows our frailties, which is why He gives us second chances, and sometimes third, fourth, and so on. In Tanner's case, it would be many years before he would be saved, and make a complete turnaround, mainly as a result of a blessed diamond. But that is a story for another time.

On the same day Tanner was spilling the beans about the specific work camps, Trixie was having lunch at the cafeteria with Alex.

“My mom has a new favorite bible verse, Psalm 84:11,” she said. “For the LORD God is a sun and shield; he bestows favor and honor. No good thing does the LORD withhold from those who walk uprightly.”

“That’s one of my favorites too,” Alex replied.

“Evidently, that’s what kept her and my dad going when I went missing,” Trixie explained.

Praying almost constantly for her safe return (because people are supposed to be persistent in prayer), her parents had actually been confident that the Lord would grant their petition. Somehow they knew their daughter would be coming home, but they also knew they needed to be patient.

Patience was also needed with regard to the gossip issue. In fact, Trixie had just attended a bible study on this subject that stressed three P’s—Prayer, Politeness, and Patience—as all being important in dealing with gossip. The teacher, Mrs. Pape, also advised quoting bible verses to gossipers and specifically recommended 1 Peter 3:10. “For ‘He that would love life and see good days, let him keep his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking guile....’” Proverbs 12:22 was another of her favorites. “Lying lips are an abomination to the LORD, but those who act faithfully are his delight.”

Mrs. Pape went on to say, “People really can’t refute God’s Word. In fact, it’s been my experience that most people ended up dumbfounded when confronted with Scripture about their behavior.”

In actuality, the gossip scene had gotten much better recently for Trixie. With what she had just been through, most of her peers at school, including the clique girls, were not anxious to add any more stress to her life. In truth, her scare had been theirs too, since this could have happened to any of them. In fact, when Trixie went missing, Whitney Pramm had actually prayed for her to be found safely. Whitney had always been one who was skeptical of “the whole God and Christianity thing,” as she liked to say. However, because her prayer with regard to Trixie had been answered, she now had a whole new outlook on the spiritual world. She was at least willing to look into things more.

For Trixie’s part, she wished only the best for all of the clique girls. Even when recalling some of the nastier things they had said about her,

she was forgiving. Of course, it helped for her to remind herself that it often takes time for people to change.

Over the years, when various gossips resurfaced, Trixie also reminded herself about the three P's, actually adding a fourth on occasion, the P of Promises, specifically those from God, as He does promise to always help and protect us, even as pertaining to such things as gossip.

Whitney eventually ended up volunteering at the cafeteria, which was partly run by volunteers. Later, two others of the clique, based on the positive example of their friend, ended up volunteering at the church daycare.

Alex, it seemed, was getting ready for another trip to Scotland, being fairly well caught up with his schoolwork and other projects, and he was excited to tell Trixie that he was getting close to an answer regarding Nessie. "God often does reveal mysteries to us," he said, afterwards quoting from Daniel 2:27-28. "No wise men, enchanters, magicians, or astrologers can show to the king the mystery which the king has asked, but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries...."

Smiling, Trixie ended up reciting Job 12:22. "He uncovers the deeps out of darkness, and brings deep darkness to light."

"That's fitting for Nessie," Alex replied, "since Loch Ness is really deep."

As Alex set off for a math exam, finished with her classes for the day, Trixie headed home to read a couple of fairy tales to her brothers before their naptime.

Speaking of fairy tales, this might be a good time to look in on Egykor, who was visiting Supe-8 and looking in on a birthday party for an eight-year-old girl from a roof with a clear view of a window that perfectly framed the celebration. This time when the cake candles were blown out, Egykor decided to make a wish, even though he still didn't think that birthday wishes really applied to him.

A genie happened to be in the area. Since genies can read the thoughts of those making wishes, he knew what Egykor wished for: To become a sylph. Thinking this very interesting of a nyreg, the genie decided to grant the wish. (Genies sometimes do grant wishes, if we're wishing for the right things.)

All of a sudden, as Egykor took off from the roof, he became a sylph! This happened in a quick and silvery flash, as his nyreg form simply disappeared, becoming instead a stream of cool and fragrant air, in which much of his essence still remained, along with so much more, like incredible powers that he would swiftly discover.

As a brand-new air spirit, soaring over houses and treetops nearly as fast as lightning, Egykor felt almost as if he had always been a sylph, but had simply been trapped in another's body; and he vaguely wondered if this was what persons in heaven might feel like, having reached their longed-for and eternal destination after living so long in their temporary, earthly shells. He was rather glad his old shell was gone, particularly the torn ear, which would never trouble him again. Indeed, even the memory of it was gradually slipping away.

Returning speedily to Supe-10, Egykor decided on a mission. He was now going to guard the city, and help people whenever he could. With more energy than he ever had before, he felt a new sense of spirit and renewal, particularly in knowing that he would now inherit Eternal Life. However, set on his new mission, he wasn't sure it mattered to him (as it had to the Little Mermaid who became a sylph) as to how quickly he left earth to slip into the Eternal Journey. While he did hope that the children he chanced to encounter in his travels would behave nicely, in fact, he felt he would be perfectly content to remain on earth for as long as God wanted him to. Whilst here, he would spend his time countering the activities of creatures like flash dragons and megahobs. Maybe he could work on the minds of other nyregs. If he could change, they could too; and some of them might want to. Egykor would come to discover that sylphs can impart very airy (and persuasive) thoughts.

In truth, the powers of sylphs were growing along with those of other magical creatures. And this was exactly what Pizzo was pondering at home while watching Lista play in the sandbox. Not only were pucks becoming more powerful, and developing their powers at younger ages, he knew that dragon fire was getting hotter. Also, gryphons were starting to be born with more magical tricks. (Briefly looking at the future of Telános and Halli, we find their offspring to have more powers than their parents.)

But it wasn't just powers that were growing because even new godly creatures were coming into being, such as the gryphix.

Something of a cross between a gryphon and a phoenix, Pizzo had just become aware of one living in Russia. While phoenixes weren't often seen in the world of today, gryphixes would shortly become plentiful. Pizzo didn't exactly know how he knew this, but he could feel the truth of it in his bones, and he wondered if this might be the answer to dragon tears ceasing to work in the future, because gryphixes would have the power to raise the dead. In considering this, the puck remembered an old saying that made him smile: *When God closes a door, somewhere He opens a window.*

While Pizzo mainly viewed his ponderings as daydreams, many of them were actually prophetic visions of the future. For instance, he knew his grandchildren would be even more powerful than his children, and that the breath of future snow gryphons would not only produce frost flowers, but also buzz blizzards, snow funnels, and freeze furls. So too would regular gryphons of the future not have to use their whole wings to direct energy to move large objects, because just a tiny flick of a single feather would end up doing the trick.

Pizzo had been reading the bible for many decades. At first, he had mainly just liked the historical stories such as Joseph rising above his circumstances and the angel closing the mouths of lions to protect Daniel. However, he had been reading the gospels more intently in recent years, along with the words of the prophets. He had also read the Revelation many times, and had seen events in his lifetime that seemed very like the ones described in that book. Putting this together with the gifts of both humans and magical creatures getting stronger, while he knew he could never work out any sort of exact timeline, he wondered if the End might be very near. Certainly, Christians in the past fifty or so years had suffered massive amounts of persecution, which was one of the signs of the End. And Jesus Himself in the Revelation said He was coming soon. In fact, the statement was repeated several times in that book. *God always keeps His promises*, Pizzo reminded himself, though the question remained as to what exactly "soon" meant. Since he didn't know, Pizzo simply prayed (persistently) for as many people to be saved as possible before the End, and for magical creatures to stay strong. *Just like human beings, God has a special plan for us too*, he thought, before deciding to join Lista in the sandbox in order to make a sculpture of his own, which turned out to be a gryphix.

The pair only quit playing in the sand late in the day, to join the rest of their family (pucks, humans, and gryphons) inside the house for dinner, after which, Zin had a special surprise for the pucks—Magical Flying Cupcakes.

“They’re sprinkled with wishes,” she said of the double-sized cupcakes, each topped with triple-thick frosting and a lit candle. In addition to flying about the mansion, supposedly, if the pucks could catch a cupcake before the candle burned down, they would get a wish. As all five trolls set off to chase the cakes about the house, Zin brought out a dozen more cupcakes that didn’t have a flying spell put on them for the rest of the family to enjoy.

Speaking of wishes, we might take a moment to look in on Etowa. Because of the way time worked for him (often a little weirdly), he had actually forgotten that God, many moons ago, had promised him that if he won the game he was playing against Boko (the real-life one), he could have any wish granted. When God reminded Etowa of this prize, he didn’t hesitate to wish for Boko to be saved. In his opinion, his counterpart deserved a second chance, particularly because he knew that Boko would have wished to have made a better choice for himself way back when. Boko and Etowa had just finished leisure-time game which, unlike the real-life one, Boko had won. Oddly enough, because of his regrets, Boko felt satisfied to have lost the real game; though it did feel nice to win the leisure-time one.

When his wish was granted, Etowa almost couldn’t believe the solution had been so simple. Upon reflection, he somewhat likened this situation to that of many humans. We spend a lot of time worrying, and even struggling, when we really just need to sit back and trust in God to take care of things, because He will, if we let Him. God even tells us to let Him do this, in Psalm 46:10. ““Be still, and know that I am God.””

Looking in on the older Eizel, we find her first great-grandchild had just arrived, a little early in fact, by about two weeks, but healthy and strong nonetheless. Penny Rose, it seemed, was just anxious to meet everyone, and so had decided to be born early.

Sasha and Heather were coming later in the day to the hospital room to see the new baby. Jarna was already there, in dove form, perched on a table filled with flowers, mainly roses.

At home later, while stowing the shapeshifting feather that Jarna had given to her years before into a safe in the basement of the cottage, Eizel found herself again looking back at the past, though more now with relief rather than worry. Having intended the *Graham Rumpole* bookmark as a back-up for herself, she never knew it was what ended up saving Winston. She did, however, know that God often works very mysteriously in our lives.

Meanwhile, back in the present, on the third Monday in August to be exact, Jarna's Time Glass had just vanished, simply melting away as the sands ran out. The one in Telános' keeping would end up doing the same in roughly four weeks.

On the same day Jarna's Time Glass vanished, Esther happened to be paying a visit to Telános in his cave. Because she had made the Time Glasses for both Jarna and Telános, the conjure woman was in the know about their promises. Although Telános still had a bit of time to wait until the sands ran out in his glass, Esther already knew that the snow gryphon was not going to have to keep the promise connected to it. And so, there was definite cause for celebration, which was why she had brought a blueberry pie for them to share. As Telános made hot cocoa to go with the pie, Esther produced a special gift from her robe—a fifty-year everlasting white rose that she had just made for him.

When his guest left about an hour later, Telános set to reading three tiny books he had just found, each not much larger than a thick matchbook. Even with his good eyesight, he was using a magnifier to read the tiny print, while gently turning pages with the tip of one steely talon. The books contained stories, some of them rather like fairy tales which, of course, Telános enjoyed very much.

After finishing two stories, Telános paused for another cup of cocoa. Sipping, he considered the three books, which he had found while gathering ashes for Mr. Siegel from an old library that Torch Squads had destroyed several years back. Sitting on the bottom of a singed shelf amongst piles of ashes, the three tiny books were not at all burned. They weren't even dirty, having not a single speck of soot on them. Given the complete destruction of the library, Telános was quite amazed that these little books had survived. Now, they were getting something of a second chance.

It's like a little miracle, Telános decided.

A mere moment later, as he felt a cool and fragrant breeze pass through his cave, another thought entered his head. *Miracles often wait around the smallest of corners.* (And sometimes they even wait in the smallest of bookmarks placed on page fifty-four of books.)

“But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is thy faithfulness.”

“For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why we utter the Amen through him, to the glory of God.”

—Lamentations 3:21-23, 2 Corinthians 1:20



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