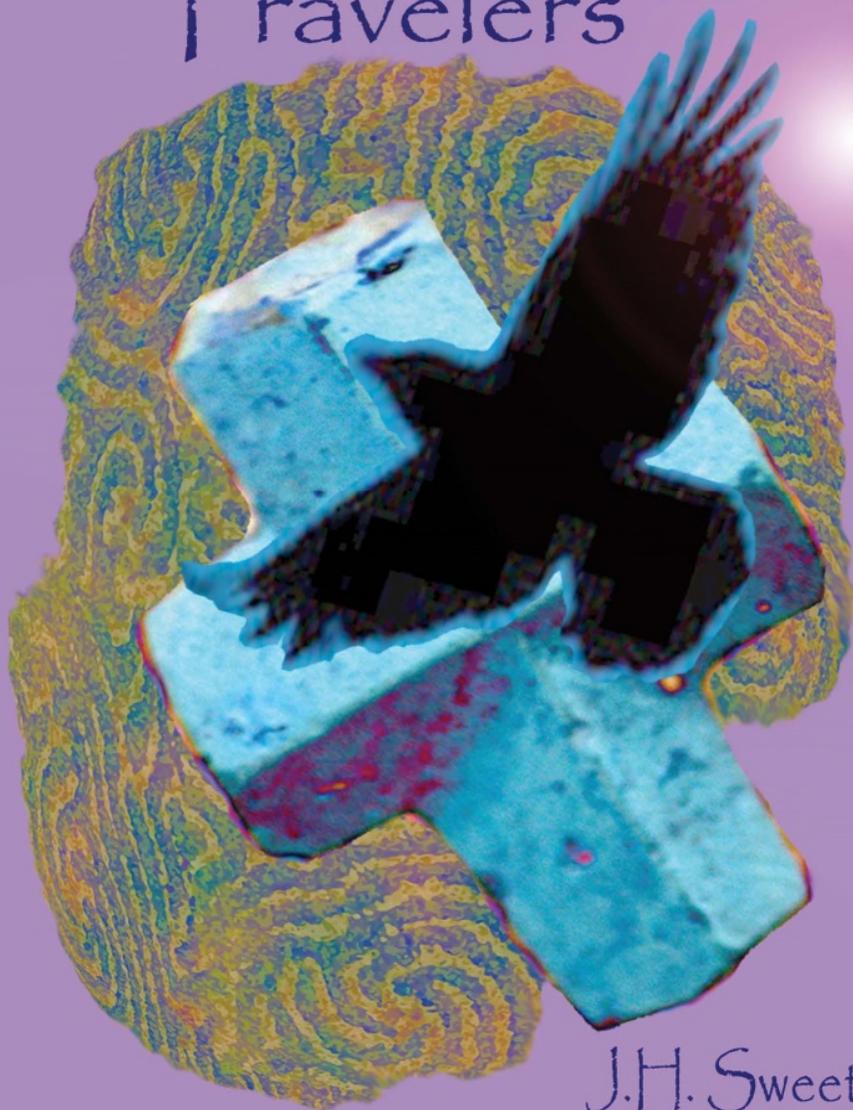


Time Key Travelers



J.H. Sweet

Clock Winders Series

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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

“He changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings; he gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding; he reveals deep and mysterious things; he knows what is in the darkness, and the light dwells with him.”

—Daniel 2:21-22

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Chapter One

Ethan in Charge

“I’m not exactly sure why Ethan sent me along,” Muriel remarked to Michele, who was swiftly moving granite boulders simply by thought-energy and by raising her hands to direct their path. So too was she using her gift of seeing things in the eye of her mind to retrieve the huge stones from piles near an enormous granite dome situated several miles in the distance, completely out of her line of sight. She was placing the stones she was moving into a circular arrangement surrounding what would eventually become a fairly sizeable building site.

“Maybe you’re supposed to learn something from those birds over there,” Michele suggested, gesturing. “Ask them if they have anything important to tell you.”

As Michele started moving another boulder, Muriel did just that, using her gift of being able to communicate with animals, birds, lizards, and such. While this mainly involved telepathic communication, she was often able to twitter, chatter, meow, grunt, thrum, etc. in order to actually verbally speak to the various creatures.

Reporting back a few minutes later, Muriel said, “Other than the fact that the fruit is ripe in the smaller of the two northern valleys, and the bird with the long tail had a brood of four in the spring, they had nothing to tell me.” Most of the birds were unlike any she had ever seen before—fluffier, more colorful, oddly shaped, and much varied as far as size—so she didn’t exactly know what to call them (wrens, hawks, chickens, sparrows?) other than something like long tailed, short beaked, or blue headed.

“Then I have no idea why you needed to come with me, Mrs. Ingram,” Michele said with a smile, setting a boulder down with a whooshing thump and a shake of the ground.

“Probably just for the pleasure of your company, Ms. Bahns,” Muriel joked. She actually preferred her fellow Time Key Travelers to

simply call her by her first name, and so she often threw last names back at the younger team members when they used hers.

“Muriel, I mean,” Michele answered. It had just always seemed odd to her: for a person around her age, thirteen, to address someone of grandmother age by their first name.

Actually,” Muriel said, “one of the speckled birds did say something about pretty canyons, a couple of days’ hike from this spot.”

“We’re not supposed to explore while we’re here,” Michele reminded her teammate.

For fun, while Michele worked, they ended up playing a version of the cloud-pictures game using the boulders, instead of clouds, as they were soaring in.

“A rhino,” Muriel said.

“A sofa,” Michele named the next one, since they were taking turns.

“That one’s just round, so we’ll call it a moon,” Muriel offered. (This particular moon was around the size of a small house.)

“An acorn squash.”

“A bean, a big spotted one.”

“A lion.”

After roughly an hour, the circle of boulders equaled enough for the upcoming project. Both Michele and Muriel received this information from the little voice in the back of their minds that they often heard on time-travel trips. And so it was time for the pair to return home to their own time.

They didn’t exactly know where or when they had traveled to, though it was certainly the past, since time travel to the future wasn’t thought to be possible. At least, no one time traveling had ever gone to the future, unless doing so unknowingly.

Moving to a particular spot about a hundred yards from where the circle of boulders had been formed, they stepped through the destination window as it appeared.

Arriving back at nearly the exact moment they left (because time-travel trips took no time at all in the present to complete), Muriel handed the Time Key to Ethan, who immediately stored it in a small safe built into the wall of the upstairs study at Laurelstone Manor.

Michele immediately headed off to classes for the day while Muriel lingered in the study, plopping down onto the couch and gazing at the

stained glass window that was the portal through which trips back in time occurred. With no trip imminent, the scene of the window was simply the familiar one of a rose arbor with a stone bench situated beneath it. When trips were about to occur, the scene changed to that of the destination, either from God making this happen through various of His servants setting up the destination windows, or through use of the time-setter that magicians had created for this purpose.

Ethan Stanley had been the leader of the TKTs, which were what Time Key Travelers were often called, for over twenty years, having been appointed to the job by the previous leader, Dell Brinker.

Shuffling books and maps around on his desk, and moving a few things to a nearby shelf, Ethan remarked, "I don't know how General Dawson managed in here for so many decades; it's just too small." The study was indeed one of the smallest rooms in the two-story house that also had an attic and a basement.

"She had that big office in the caverns," Muriel reminded him. "But you're right; she did a lot of her strategizing from here, if I remember rightly."

"Dell did too," Ethan said.

"I guess people just get used to things," Muriel decided after a moment's thought, "like how a lot of people prefer small houses."

"They are easier to keep clean," Ethan had to admit. His house was pretty small, and he actually liked that he didn't have to spend a lot of time and energy cleaning it. "I'm out of here for the day," he soon said, gathering maps and the time-setter, which needed an adjustment.

And so he headed to the Magicians' Lab down the hall to drop off the device before taking himself to his roomy office located in a pod structure situated in the courtyard formed by the stone walls of the burnt-out wing of the manor house.

The pod was triangularly designed by gifted architects and magicians to hold much more than its outward appearance (of roughly the size of a small garden shed) might suggest. Inside, the building contained a large office, meeting room, counselor's cubby, costume depot, kitchen, bathroom, and a small library facility.

Even though Ethan's office was large, it was somewhat cluttered because, while many people used armband devices for things like reference and communication, a good many electronics didn't work in

this time. This had been foretold by many prophets as occurring closer to the Endtimes, the result not only of an increase in solar flares, but also powerful EMPs emitted by huge pods of leviathans in the earth's oceans. And so, many people were forced to rely on things like paper maps and traditional books in order to do their jobs. Computers were still used, but only those designed by magicians and gifted technologists worked well; and there was no guarantee that this would continue, or that other magical things available to God's children would still function in the long term. Such was the case with dragon tears, which had ceased working to heal and raise the dead over a decade past.

However, while certain things might have been waning, the powers of the gifted were stronger than ever, such as Michele's. Based on the earth element, her abilities were very like those of gargoyles in that she could move huge amounts of earth and stone simply with her mind; though she occasionally did touch things in connection with using her gift, such as when neutralizing the flame flutes that were still sometimes used by sorcerers and their associates. Earth was a natural counter to fire, and so this was an easy task for her.

Muriel had tagged along to the office in order to have a cup of coffee with Ethan. "Why did you send me along with Michele?" she suddenly thought to ask. "I sort of felt like a fourth airwheel." (The saying had changed over the years from "fifth wheel" to "fourth airwheel" because most magically-designed transportation devices like airbikes and airbuses had only three wheels each.)

"Just for company for her," Ethan answered. "She tends to take a lot of solo trips, so I thought she might like a companion. Plus, I thought you might like an outing. You haven't been anywhere for a while."

"True," Muriel answered. "I've been cooped up with the horses, peafowl, and sheep a good deal lately, listening to their stories."

After finishing the coffee, Muriel got up to leave, saying, "I need to get Ashton's birthday party planned. Fifteen is a milestone."

"He's resting right now, just got back from a trip," Ethan said. "And he needs to take another one pretty quick here, after he finishes a writing project—three chapters."

“That’ll probably take him three weeks,” Muriel said, in knowing her grandson’s disdain for writing. He much preferred flying about on dragons.

“He’s already making progress,” Ethan assured her. “It’ll be much quicker than that, and it won’t interfere with schoolwork.”

“Oh, I know that,” Muriel replied. “His mother and his mentor make sure of that.”

Ethan smiled as the woman left, particularly in thinking about Ashton’s mentor, Quinlyn Brinker, because the trip Ashton had just taken had a great deal to do with her, in specific, her younger self.

Not only had the mission involved saving dragons, which was Ashton’s job as the current Protector of Dragons; but also, Quin had gotten a message from God that Ashton had to be sent back slightly earlier, to save none other than his Grandmother Muriel from an attack by megahobs, which were basically giant hobgoblins that had excellent camouflage abilities when not in motion. While the actual “save” came from the shapeshifting white lion residing on Lion Mountain in Tennessee, Quin knew that God often worked in mysterious ways; and so she always followed His instructions, which usually came to her through daydream visions, dreams, and auto-writing, the latter having been the case this time. Simply letting her hand write God’s instructions in her journal in a freeform manner, she rarely even knew what words had been written until she read them afterwards. Since God, of course, knew the white lion would save Muriel, perhaps Ashton simply needed to be there to see what his grandmother looked like as a young woman of nineteen, so he could know to stay clear of her during his stay on the Mountain. In the area for over a month on this particular time-travel trip, he had had a couple of near run-ins with her.

Quin hadn’t changed her name when she married, which was actually rare in this time. But even her husband, Chase Linn (who was always called Linn), had agreed that Quinlyn Linn sounded at little funny. And so, he wholeheartedly agreed that she should keep Brinker as her last name, which her dad, none other than the previous leader of the TKTs, also agreed with. Quin and Linn never had children, and he ended up passing away in his fifties because, in this time, persons with severe forms of muscular dystrophy still led shorter lives than those without such a condition. Having been confined to an airchair since his

toddler years, he had lived just about as full of a life as he could. As a gifted technologist, as early as his preteen years and throughout the rest of his life, he had kept busy designing things like prosthetics, communication devices, airbuses, and such, many of which were still used in this time. Linn had another gift, that of exuding human goodness in great quantities, which had been crucial for most of his life as a means of feeding magical creatures, who were sustained by the goodness in mankind. Now, two others possessed this gift; and so there was no danger of any magical creatures starving from lack of food.

Looking in on the younger Muriel in the very time Ashton was on hand to save her from the megahobs, we find her leaving Lion Mountain and heading off to Netherwind and Laurelstone for a planned time-travel trip.

She arrived at the twin plantations five days after leaving the Mountain, from having taken a few hikes and camping out, before hopping on a rookh for the rest of the journey. In this time, the giant magical blackbirds were plentiful and were always available to carry godly travelers around. Like dragons, rookhs were able to communicate with human beings by thought; and so a person had only to call by thought to have one generally arrive in less than a minute. In being able to communicate with birds, Muriel had a slight advantage with rookhs over other human beings, and one arrived in less than five seconds in answer to her call.

At Laurelstone, after visiting the Labyrinth Library and getting settled in guest quarters, she met up with Ethan, his younger version of course, who had just arrived at the plantations on his favorite horse, Wendi Lee. The younger Ethan, like the younger Muriel, lived on Lion Mountain; but he had come to the plantations because he was scheduled to go on a series of time-travel trips, one of which was the same mission Muriel was scheduled for.

“I had a little scare with megahobs as I was leaving the Mountain,” Muriel told Ethan. “Blessedly, the white lion was in the area and took care of them for me.”

“Wendi Lee and I had a perfectly peaceful trip here,” Ethan said, though what Muriel had related didn’t surprise him. Although many megahobs had been killed earlier in the year during the uprisings that liberated many people from imprisonment in the Supercities and work

camps, great multitudes of the giant hobgoblins still roamed the earth, along with masses of gremlins, demons of various sorts, and nyregs—the winged beasts that many sorcerers, demons, and other miscreants used for transportation.

The last part of August in Alabama tended to be hot; plus, rain in recent days had made the area humid. When stepping through the arbor window with two other TKTs in the late afternoon, Ethan was hoping it would be cooler in Supercity Four, the site of their destination. Being April when they arrived, Supe-4 was definitely cooler than August was at home.

The two other members of his team were both boys who lived in pockets (magical mini-realms) at the plantations. Frees Muldoon was thirteen, and his special gift was the ability to make plants grow. In addition to being incredibly green thumbed when sowing and tending to various plants, he had but to speak to them to get them to grow incredibly fast. His gift could work by touch as well, but he more often simply spoke to flowers, trees, vegetables, ivies, bushes, mosses, and such.

Montgomery Winn, who preferred to be called Monte, was fifteen. His gift was the ability to throw objects long distances, sometimes for miles, with great accuracy. In his younger years, his mother had speculated that he had a bit of puck troll in him, particularly because young boys could be somewhat mischievous, reminiscent of pucks. Monte was sometimes known as The Pitcher, in the same way his friend, seventeen-year-old Cecilia Landris, was known as The Sparrow, based on her ability to be inconspicuous to the point of nearly being invisible. While Cecelia lived on Lion Mountain, she often went on time-travel missions.

While all human beings have gifts, Ethan wasn't gifted in the same way his companions were, though he was fully able to lead missions of this sort, which he would today. Though only a year older than Monte, Ethan was definitely the leader, as he was on many trips these days, this having come about as he demonstrated certain skills on various missions over the past two months or so. To Dell, as valuable as any supernatural gift was the ability to make decisions, and correct ones, quickly. So too was Ethan organized, thoughtful, and able to improvise, a necessity on

many trips because, as we all know, events don't always go as planned, no matter how much research and other preparation is done beforehand.

In addition to leading, Ethan was along on many trips for protection. Not that he was any better than others with the music, light, and color weapons the godly used. No, it was more that he had a form of supernatural protection, in the form of the Fifty-One Medallion that he always carried. A bagical (a magical bag) had produced this object, made from an old bowling medal, because this was the special trick of bagicals—the ability to make ordinary objects into magical ones. And this object was specifically for Ethan, and no one else. When carried on his person, the medallion afforded him fifty-one chances per year to cheat death. Sometimes, he simply came back to life after being killed. Other times, mortal wounds healed up for him very quickly. On other occasions, he just narrowly missed incurring injuries that would have resulted in death. Ethan recorded all of these incidences, keeping careful count each year so that he didn't go over the magical number of fifty-one.

However, being a clever thinker, he had figured out that he could time travel and not much worry about running out of chances because they started over again each year, including the years he traveled to as a TKT. So he mainly would only have to be careful if he went over and over again to a particular year, which was unlikely to happen. And even if he did, since he would continue to keep a log of all of the chances he used, he would still be able to remain safe, simply not going to a particular year again if his fifty-one were exhausted.

Dell was fascinated when Ethan first presented the idea to him of how advantageous the medal could be for use in past years. Now, having worked with this young man for a time, the leader of the TKTs was already thinking of Ethan as possibly being his replacement in the future.

Frees, Monte, and Ethan had gone back in time two years, and their trip to Supe-4 had a two-fold purpose. First, using shroud mirrors to conceal themselves, they traveled throughout the city to various gardens secreted inside pockets and pods where Frees used his gift to make the plants spurt. This was mesmerizing to watch as blossoms actually turned into tomatoes, squashes formed on plants in mere seconds, and cucumber vines ran squiggly races to nearly smother their hills in

greenery. The fast growth would help provide for the masses of slaves inside the city, who were practically starving from lack of food.

After visiting gardens for a full day, the trio spent the night in an underground facility housing the elderly, where they listened to men and woman reminisce about the olden days, when there was true freedom in the world such as the freedom to read the bible and openly worship God. Also, in general, there had evidently been enough food to go around amongst hard-working people of the past.

In the morning, the TKTs headed across town to perform their second task, that of delivering a large pack of shroud mirrors to the Aid Governor (AG for short) of the city. This was the person in charge of hiding people in various pods and pockets. The AG often coordinated with members of the New Underground Railway (NUR for short), which generally helped to arrange escapes from the cities and work camps.

Though the pack contained nearly two hundred mirrors, it was no trouble for Ethan to tote around, being triangularly designed (like pods and pockets) to hold much more than its appearance might suggest, and with a lightening spell attached to alter its weight to that of practically nothing.

They had waited until last to deliver the mirrors because they had been using three of them to travel safely around the city to visit the gardens. Now, the only problem was in making their way back to the destination window without the shroud mirrors, which they had to leave because the city residents needed them far more than the TKTs did.

A hairy vetch ended up hopping on Monte's shoulder, which helped conceal him because the natural camouflage ability of the creature was able to extend to others. However, the camouflage wasn't strong enough to cover three, and in Supercity Four, hairy vetches were not super common, so this left Ethan and Frees still exposed.

Thus, as they might have expected in a hostile environment, they soon met with trouble, from a nyreg making fly-bys overhead spitting acid at them. Blessedly, Frees was carrying a shield dime. While looking like a perfectly ordinary dime, the bagical-produced item could protect those carrying it from various types of harm, even bullets. In this case, the acid simply slipped off of Frees' shoulder (not even affecting his shirt) and landed on the ground, smoldering and hissing as it worked its way down into the pavement about three inches. Ethan

wasn't carrying a dime on this day; but he was good at dodging and managed not to get hit. Using a loose building brick, Monte managed to take out the beast with one throw.

With its head nearly knocked from its neck, the nyreg crashed in a courtyard, drawing the attention of a couple of mimics who were impersonating factory workers, mainly to spy on the commoners in the hopes of catching any that were breaking various laws such as those forbidding the practice of Christianity. The sorcerers and their servants were also always on the lookout for women evading the Law of Four, which was forcing them to produce a minimum of four children each, with most of the babies taken away from their parents to be raised as slaves, and in some cases to be used as organ donors for the elites.

While Dell mainly tried to line up TKT missions with the skills of the participants, others could go. For younger people without a lot of experience, this was true provided they worked hard in school and kept up with their weapons training, which all children started in their grade-school years. Monte knew he wouldn't often specifically be needed to throw things on time-travel trips, and so might not be a good candidate for the program; but he was good at history (his favorite subject) and had taken a great interest in time traveling. This earnestness led Dell to give him a chance. And despite not being sent along primarily to throw things, his skills ended up many times proving an asset, especially in the Supercities and camps where it wasn't always wise to draw attention to the team by using ropes, mirrors, and flutes, these being the most common of the magical weapons. In addition to ropes sizzling and sparking when in use, musical sounds almost always issued from wielded flutes, while mirrors flashed brightly as energy charges were emitted. So too did the crashes and blasts of the strikes tend to draw attention.

Noticing Frees and Ethan (but not the camouflaged Monte), the mimics came running swiftly towards them, shifting as they did so to their normal forms—that of winged demons with fangs bared and claws flashing in preparation of slashing and slicing the teens, whom the mimics felt certain were up to no good. Otherwise, they would have been in school or on a job somewhere, not out on a city street just meandering around.

Weapons among the commoners were outlawed in the cities and camps. Keeping this in mind, TKTs were often wary of drawing theirs too quickly and giving themselves away. And so, Ethan's throat ended up slashed by the claws of the mimic that had charged him with near lightning speed.

Frees had managed to slow the one on the run towards him by commanding a tree nearby to reach out a low branch to trip the demon. Monte then used a dagger to kill the tripped demon that dissipated in mere seconds, leaving only a small pile of greasy-looking sludge on the ground. Next noting the approach overhead of two more nyregs, The Pitcher took them out with loose bricks much as he had the first one, with one throw each.

The mimic that had slashed Ethan had turned his back on the fallen boy, but soon found his own throat sliced by none other than his victim, whose neck had rapidly healed, allowing him to rise and kill his attacker with a utility blade from his belt.

In case we might be wondering how many of his chances Ethan had used two years back, he had consulted his records prior to the trip and discovered he still had two left at the end of the year. So he was safe traveling to this time, with a buffer of two when they left home, and now one.

They had been wise not to draw the magical weapons they were carrying, as twenty members of the Enforcement Services Squad (commonly called the ESS or, informally, Snakes) and about fifteen demons were a mere block away. Though these demons were of the ordinary sort, lacking the intricate shape-shifting abilities of mimics, and not anywhere matching the skills of print doubles (the most advanced of all demons), they were nonetheless deadly.

Blessedly, the TKTs were very near their destination window. Leaving the hairy vetch behind (with a pat of thanks on his head), they were soon through the window and back home in Laurelstone's study where Ethan made a note in the log. All TKTs either leaving or returning were required to log their trips. This lessened the chance of anyone getting stuck in the past. Since the missions took no time at all, a person could basically be stuck back in time for years and years without anyone at home even noticing; and so this safety precaution had to be adhered to by all.

Frees immediately set off again on a solo time-travel trip where he visited a tree in a glass greenhouse shaped like a pyramid. When he arrived, the tree was merely knee high. Speaking to the tree for only a few moments, by the time the green-thumbed boy left, the tree had already grown twelve feet.

Ethan was just leaving the study as Frees returned to Laurelstone to make a brief entry in the log and hand the Time Key to Dell who locked it up because it wouldn't be needed again on this day. Monte had waited for his friend so that they could go to the cafeteria together. Both boys were excited because this was rotisserie chicken night, and cherry pie, and fresh steamed broccoli. Broccoli was absolutely one of Monte's favorite foods; and because of the large greenhouses at the plantations, fresh broccoli could pretty much be had year round.

Early the next morning, Ethan found himself going on a trip with a rookie. This being her first mission, Lidia Drower had done some research in preparation, not necessarily about the specific trip, but more about traveling with the Time Key in general. While studying up in the pod library in Laurelstone's courtyard, she made the following notes in her study binder:

“The arbor window portal is four feet wide by seven feet high with the bottom only eight inches from the floor to allow easy step-through. The window displays the scene of the destination and is set by godly helpers (angels, genies, and a mysterious being outside of time) or by people using the time-setter, the accuracy of which has increased over the years as far as time and location to within one hour and one mile of the desired destination. While many trips are set by God, He allows TKTs to make some of their own decisions, and this is why use of the time-setter is allowed. The Time Key is round and activates the portal. The key is made of stone, is green in color, and is about the size of a largish boulder marble. To activate the key to unlock the portal (the passage through time), at least one of the TKTs on each trip must make skin contact with the Time Key that also needs light to activate it. But this can be only a tiny bit of light, like faint starlight. Time Key Travelers must stay close together (within three feet of each other) when passing as a group through the window. The rules for leaving through the window in the study are the same for the return windows that

automatically appear when in close proximity (within six feet) to the Time Key. Destination windows always have a time limit attached to them so they can't be used forever, but the time can vary from as short as five minutes to as long as five hundred years. Most TKTs say a prayer before going on a mission, one that has been used for decades: 'Heavenly Father, please show me the way, and help me to do Your will. In Jesus' name, Amen.'"

Not only had Lidia been in the library doing research before the trip, she had visited the counselor associated with the TKTs. Mrs. Bohanen's office or "cubby" as she liked to call it was situated next door to the pod library. Time-travel trips could sometimes be troubling, even traumatic. Often, it was simply good to have someone to sound things off of, particularly because it could be disorienting to be away from home for sometimes months at a time, only to arrive back with no time at all having passed.

Since this was going to be a simple trip, Ethan and Lidia didn't need to consult any of the research partners. These were people who didn't particularly want to time travel, but did want to be involved; and so they did much of the research before the TKTs set out. Mr. Amir was one such individual, and he liked to work basically around the clock. In addition to doing meticulous research, he had frequent visions, seen in shiny surfaces, relating to upcoming trips that included the exact timing of them and sometimes the exact participants, this information being something Dell also received from visions, though his came mostly through dreams. The pair often shared information, which helped to reinforce that they were hearing God's voice clearly and not relying too much on their own decision-making or planning abilities. God was fully in charge, and all TKTs needed to be aware of this. Reminders were helpful so that mission participants didn't let their own desires and range of experiences cloud their judgment.

While Ethan and Lidia didn't need to consult a research partner, they were going back in time far enough to necessitate a visit to the costume depot. Two superfast seamstress sisters worked there, Patty and Petunia Malcom. The sisters were under the direction of a talented puck troll tailor named Mr. Siggerino, who delighted not only in detail and accuracy, but also in the fashion sensibility of the garments. In

other words, dresses should be both pretty and functional, the functionality being in such things as hidden pockets in which to store weapons and other gear. Likewise, men's suits needed to be sleek and chic, while also allowing enough freedom of movement for such activities as running and fighting.

Patty and Petunia were also talented hairstylists and often made use of their skills to help dress the hair of various mission participants. In less than fifteen minutes, the TKTs were outfitted and ready to go, with Mr. Siggerino himself giving Lidia's up-do a final flourish by adding a feathered comb to her braided bun, and doing this by standing on his tippy-toes on the shoulder of a dressmaker's manikin in order to reach her head.

Lidia's special gift involved languages. At age fourteen, she could already speak, read, and write over forty languages fluently, while also knowing basic conversation skills of many others. When first introduced to an unfamiliar language, she could often learn to converse in a fundamental fashion within just an hour or so.

They were going to Italy on this trip, and so the fact that she already knew Italian was going to be a great asset. Their mission: to find and retrieve a book that didn't exist anymore due to the banning and destroying of many books. Torch squads had been just as busy burning books as they had been art over the last approximately fifty years; and so, many written treasures had been lost. For older books that hadn't ever been made into e-books, this meant total loss; therefore, some time-travel trips needed to be taken to recover lost literature.

After saying the familiar prayer, the destination window took them to an alley in a mid-sized city in Italy well over two hundred years into the past. From the alley, they made their way to a library where it was no problem for Lidia to conceal the book they were rescuing in a pocket inside her skirt. They didn't particularly consider this stealing, but more that they were borrowing the book much like anyone might from a library, in this case, to save it from destruction so that it would still exist in the future. Other than Lidia briefly speaking to a couple of people on the street in order to ask for directions, they made no contact with anyone of the past.

They arrived back home without incident. The library had been largely unoccupied and easy to access; and they hadn't run into any

danger on the streets, which was not surprising since megahobs, stealth hobs, and nyregs didn't exist in that time. Demons were plentiful, and gremlins were starting to be so as well; however, these creatures were not out in the open as much in centuries past.

This being very early in the morning, well before breakfast, Dell was not yet in either his office or the study. Ethan, as one of the leaders of the TKTs, had the combination to the safe, into which he stored the Time Key after watching Lidia make the log entry of their return. The pair then returned their costumes to the depot. Ethan, who was bunking in one of the dorms at the Netherwind-Laurelstone Schools, then went to his room, while Lidia delivered the book to the Labyrinth Library. The genie bookwrights working in the library were going to duplicate it. Known as the Great Multipliers, the genies often did this, which was one of the main reasons bibles were still so plentiful, despite millions being destroyed over the years by the sorcerers.

Lidia was smiling on her way to breakfast because her first time-travel trip had basically been a breeze, and she was looking forward to going again the next morning.

Chapter Two

The Glass Pyramid

Ethan may have been new to time traveling, but he was starting to hear God's voice in the back of his mind very clearly, this gradually coming along with most TKTs, some faster than others. Based on his own assessment, he was shaping up nicely as a leader. At least, he was comfortable in this role, and comfortable relinquishing it on occasion, at times when others were either more experienced or had skills better suited to a particular mission or situation. The TKTs had to have several leaders, obviously, because one person couldn't go on every trip. While the numbers of missions tended to fluctuate, in any given week at least fifteen were undertaken, with twenty-six being the current average two years running. Once, when Weatherly (a.k.a. General Dawson) was going back to counter a lot of the activities of print doubles, ninety-seven trips had occurred in one week. Weatherly had felt obliged to work this hard because many people were being framed for murders and other crimes they didn't commit. Able to imitate people right down to their fingerprints (hence the name print doubles), the demons had no problems facilitating these deceptions. So too were they able to manipulate elections and commit many assassinations, which Weatherly had also worked to counter.

Ethan was already thinking he might be destined to do time-travel missions long term, like as a regular job, and he was considering eventually moving to the plantations. He had just over a year of high school left, after which, he would probably move. His mother would likely stay on Lion Mountain, having grown attached to the area and the people. Being basically an only child, Ethan was a little wary of leaving her alone; however, he would be able to regularly visit her, the distance being relatively short to travel by rookh or wind horse. Several herds of wind horses in the region liked to cart people around as much as the rookhs did.

Holly Stanley had actually had three sons from being impregnated in a medical facility in Supercity Thirteen, which was generally what happened to unmarried women when being forced to comply with the Law of Four. She eventually escaped the city, afterwards making her way to Lion Mountain with Ethan, her eldest son and the only one she had been allowed to keep. After the uprisings and outpourings of the cities and camps, a network had been established to reunite children with their families. However, her other two children had not yet been found. While she and Ethan both had hope, they weren't even sure if the boys were still alive.

Lidia was packing a pod pack for her second time-travel mission using a list a research partner had made up. While no costume would be needed, since the trip would likely take several weeks, a certain amount of clothing, food, and other necessities would be required. Because she was new to the TKTs, the research partner had made a special list for her of the other participants that included their ages and a brief description of their gifts. Since she already knew Ethan and Cecelia, she focused on the other names: Muriel Lofto, age 19, communication with animals; Otto Tremaine, age 50, gifted architect; Henning Kosch, age 14, Sapphire Boy with a shield gift who can cry sapphires that either shield or heal; Zinnia Summerhaven, age 15, gifted magician who likes to be called Zin. FYI: Otto is Zin's uncle.

Seven altogether with me, Cecelia, and Ethan, Lidia thought. And we're a diverse group as far as skills and ages, and probably personalities too.

The arbor window had changed as expected, and had actually begun displaying the new destination just after Ethan and Lidia returned from their trip to Italy. However, going back several weeks, Dell had been alerted to the necessity of this mission by Otto who often had visions as to his architectural projects, sometimes by way of dreams, and other times through a form of auto-writing which Otto liked to call auto-designing since he was basically drawing things with God guiding his hand. The design for the glass pyramid the TKTs were going to build had come from both a dream and auto-designing. First seeing the construction and finished product in a dream, Otto had then engaged in auto-designing to draw the plans for the project.

Magicians had made the glass, and gifted metalsmiths had worked the metal. The materials had already been delivered to the construction site overnight by a group of TKTs making a series of careful trips through the window with loads of the glass and metal. Due to the quantities, this had been an all-night project, and those who had made the deliveries were now resting.

Based on Otto's dream vision, others would be there to help with the construction. He didn't know who these people were or where they might be from, though he did know they would arrive on their own. Therefore, the mystery wasn't something he needed to ponder over; rather, he simply need to trust. But even with the extra help, the project would likely take a full month; and so, all TKTs would be carrying pod packs holding a fair amount of gear and other supplies.

Otto didn't at all think it odd that this seven-member team wasn't comprised of people well-versed in construction because he knew that God often worked in mysterious ways. Possibly, this crew needed some hands-on building experience, or maybe their skills would be valuable on the trip. Certainly, it would be a help to have someone along who could talk to wild animals, particularly because Otto's dream vision had shown the site to be a wilderness area. And a language specialist would be an asset to just about any team. Henning would be protected when handling the glass and metal, and his sapphires would be able to heal others in case of injury. If Ethan were injured, his body would heal itself because of his medallion; plus, he was a quick thinker and handy with tools.

When the TKTs arrived, tents were already being erected at the site by twenty-four people, these being the mysterious others who were going to help with the construction and who had come early to receive the glass and metal materials and begin making camp. Given their appearances, and the fact that several languages were being spoken, it was obvious that the twenty-four were not all from the same place. In fact, they had arrived in little groups, much as the TKTs had. One of the groups had brought scaffolding, which was already being assembled. Another group had wheeled in carts of tools that were being unloaded.

As brief introductions were made, the TKTs began unpacking some of their own gear and setting up tents, after which, Otto produced his design plans so they could get started. The plans were on paper,

specifically, bamboo paper because this was most available and sustainable. Because they sometimes ended up in other realms in which electronics and other mechanicals might not work, TKTs often reverted to the old ways. Plus, many people were trying not to rely too much on gadgets in knowing they weren't likely to work in the future. Already, gremlins were a huge factor, in breaking just about everything they could get their invisible claws and teeth into. So too were solar flares, leviathan-produced EMPs, and magnetism mixers (devices specifically designed by the sorcerers to disrupt electronics) affecting many mechanicals.

The reversion to older ways was true of construction techniques as well, which was why only tools that had been around for hundreds of years had been brought to the site. Even if Otto had brought the tools himself, he would have chosen this route because the TKTs had to be careful when interacting with others. Because time travel could impact the future in unexpected ways, they couldn't simply let someone of the past see or use futuristic equipment.

Lidia was obviously along because of the language issue. While most of the twenty-four were speaking English, several could only converse in their native languages. This included one Swedish person, three Hungarians, two Japanese, and two people speaking an African dialect that she wasn't familiar with, but that took her less than a day to master well enough to converse easily with the pair, and interpret for others.

As they began the project, it became clear that all of the little groups were on a mission from God (many people were actually reading bibles and praying openly on their breaks), but all were careful not to disclose too much about themselves. The TKTs got the idea that many (if not all) of their new friends might also be time travelers, but they were being as careful as the seven not to disclose too much. Cecelia, Zin, Muriel, and Lidia, who were sharing a tent, liked to speculate that some had actually arrived by unicorn, a much less common way to time travel than the arbor window, which was one of four portals known to exist. Currently, the TKTs only had access to the one at Laurelstone, though they didn't doubt that the other three were probably in use as well by others of God's children.

With regard to not disclosing much, the TKTs never advertised their travels, this being a way to safeguard the Time Key and arbor window, though the sorcerers by this time pretty well knew that the godly had a means of time traveling and that their activities involved the twin plantations. Blessedly, as had been the case for many decades, Netherwind and Laurelstone were fully protected by magical means. In addition to an abundance of magical weapons and experts at using them, creatures such as gryphons, gargoyles, firebirds, and bigfoots were constantly on guard.

Ethan and Otto were co-leaders on this particular trip. Ethan was keeping the Time Key safe and coordinating many of the daily living activities, while Otto was overseeing the construction which Ethan was also involved in. Cecelia ended up having to wear a bell on the hem of her shirt because people kept running into her.

While most of the workers tended to spend their free time in their own little groups, Zin ended up befriending a young man named Luis Abril that she guessed was around twenty years old. He spoke English but had an accent that sounded European, though she couldn't tell exactly where he might be from; and in keeping with the basic rules relating to time travel, she didn't ask. However, because they were spending a lot of time together, he ended up disclosing to her that he only had a year to live and that this trip was like a treat for him, as a final thing he was getting to do—to help make something pretty amazing in the time he had left.

And, in truth, the structure was shaping up to be something pretty wonderful; though whatever it might be for was still a mystery to the group at this point. Most of the team members simply saw this as a glass pyramid that might be related more to art than to function. At this point, they didn't know it was destined to be a greenhouse, and an incredibly special one, set to house the Tree of Life as it grew from baby to adulthood.

They also didn't know that they were in what was to become known as the Mystery Realm, a place mysterious in many ways, not the least of which had to do with time. As Zin herself would come to discover, visitors entering and leaving by multiple doorways only found themselves gone from home for three minutes each trip, no matter how much time they actually spent in the Mystery Realm. Nor did the group

working on the pyramid know they were in a realm housing materials for the building of New Jerusalem, the wondrous city of the future where all of God's children were destined live. Jesus was already preparing this eternal home for us, but many people believed God might let some of His children help with the construction. We're going to have jobs of some sort in the hereafter, so why not some in construction?

The pyramid would end up taking a little over five weeks to build. This was what was known as a square pyramid, having four triangular sides with a square base. Constructed entirely of glass triangles, of varying sizes, the pieces were held together by a metal framework; and the structure contained four doors, one set into each side. The floor was also made of glass triangles, but had a large area in the center open to the earth. Finished, the structure would end up being nearly fifty feet high.

Most working days were pleasant, though there were a few incidents along the way such as when a large piece of glass slipped from Muriel's hands while she was high up on the scaffolding. One person below her received a shoulder gash, which was swiftly healed by one of Henning's sapphires. The healing stones had to be in direct contact with a person's skin in order to work, unlike the shield sapphires he produced that worked more on a principle of close proximity, since people could carry them in pockets or have them set into jewelry and still be protected. Henning had been hit by the falling glass too, but his gift had shielded him. A couple of days later, one of the Swedish workers sprained her ankle, which was also healed by a sapphire in a mere four seconds.

Ethan, Cecelia, Lidia, Henning, and Zin usually took some time early mornings and late afternoons to stay caught up with schoolwork using pens, paper, and real books since they hadn't brought any tablets or other reading devices with them. There had been plenty of room in their packs for these items; plus, this was probably the way kids of the future were going to have to learn everything anyway, so people might as well get used to it.

Muriel acted as something of a tutor since she was already done with high school and had started taking college courses. On a few occasions, Lidia ended up helping Zin and Ethan with their French homework.

The nights were not cold, but the groups generally lit campfires using dead wood to aid with cooking and drying clothing that had been washed in a nearby creek.

One evening while roasting marshmallows with Ethan and Lidia, Zin related what Quin was up to at home. “The female dragons are really sick, with some strange illness, and she’s working on the problem with Alex and a Sapphire Boy named Ashton Ingram who came back in time to help. He’s from around fifty years in the future, I think.”

Ethan had briefly met Ashton who was staying at his home on Lion Mountain while Ethan was at the plantations.

While Lidia knew Quin, she didn’t know Alex Rodriguez, though she had heard of him. He was the boy who could fly, though flying evidently wasn’t his gift, but rather something he had learned. His actual gift was the ability to solve mysteries, one of these being the ancient mystery as to how the Chinese dragon could fly without wings, the secret of which he had somehow managed to apply to his own body.

While keeping to themselves in the evenings (because all of the groups recognized this as the best way to avoid sharing too much information), the seven TKTs often engaged in campfire bible studies. One of their discussions centered on the false prophets and false teachers that had recently been plaguing various communities, including some located in the pockets on the plantations.

“They’re basically the same thing,” Otto responded to Ethan’s query as to what the difference was between false prophets and false teachers. “Some people say they have visions of the future, so their teaching might more be called prophesying. Others just teach false information, from who knows what sources, while pretending to be in close communication with God. Whatever the title, if they are spouting things that contradict the bible, they are false.”

“This was bound to be a problem when the cities and camps emptied,” Henning said.

Ethan agreed. “With so many newcomers to all of the communities, we’d have to expect a few bad eggs to pop up and try to lead people astray.”

“Pastor Dellinger has been spending a lot of time in the pockets and in some of the earthship communities lately trying to counter the false

teachings,” Otto offered. (Pastor Dellinger happened to be Quin’s Grandpa Ben.)

“It’s been a struggle, from what I hear,” Cecelia input.

“What are they teaching that’s false?” Lidia wanted to know, since this was the first she had heard of the problem.

“Like that only 144,000 people in total will ever reach heaven,” Muriel said. She had recently heard this both in a mothership settlement and in a large farm community.

“That’s way too few,” Lidia immediately said, “because the saved in heaven come from everywhere, the whole earth.”

Cecelia was rifling through the pages of her bible to find Revelation 5:9. Finding the passage (which referred to Jesus), she read part of it to everyone. ““...for thou wast slain and by thy blood didst ransom men for God from every tribe and tongue and people and nation....””

Otto then related, “Revelation 21:25 says that the gates of New Jerusalem are never shut.”

Muriel was nodding as she said, “There’s room for all in heaven.”

As another example of false teachings, Zin offered, “Some people say there’s no triune God and that anyone who believes in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as three entities, as well as one, is worshipping other gods.”

“That’s an old argument that I think stems from the fact that the word, trinity, is not in the bible,” Otto said. “But God is definitely in three personas. The bible, from beginning to end, makes this very clear.”

Since the bible warns that an upsurge of false prophets will be a sign of the end, the discussion was bound to lead to questions and speculation about the Endtimes.

“Do you think they could be near?” Lidia asked.

Otto was smiling as he answered, “Many people think we’ve already been in the Endtimes for centuries, and that we’re now only waiting for the return of Jesus and the events that will follow.”

Zin and Ethan both were scratching out notes as Otto mentioned a few books in the bible to read about events of the Endtimes, other than in the Revelation. “Daniel, Ezekiel, Luke, Malachi, Zechariah, Matthew, Joel, Isaiah....”

Cecelia had recently read all of the Book of Revelation, and she made the comment, “To me, it’s all such a mystery, mainly the symbolism. Two lampstands, seven bowls, the little scroll, ten horns...it’s very confusing.”

“Pray and ask God to help you understand it,” Lidia suggested.

“I don’t think He wants us to understand it all,” Henning offered.

“Right,” Zin agreed, “because if people knew every detail, they’d try to manipulate things.”

“So the mystery is built in, on purpose,” Cecelia surmised.

Zin was nodding as she said, “I think so, to protect us from ourselves.”

“Like if someone knew who the antichrist was,” Henning speculated, “they might try to kill him as a child. But he has to exist and come to power for the prophecy to come true.”

“And if someone knew exactly what the mark of the beast was, they’d avoid it,” Zin said. “Then Satan could just make the mark something else that people wouldn’t think to avoid. He’s very clever.”

“So we need to be clever too, to avoid falling into his traps,” Muriel told her friends.

“I think the mark of the beast is just a way of thinking and acting,” Otto said, “unbiblical thinking and acting. And when the Revelation talks about being sealed on the forehead for God, to me, this is a way of thinking too. We’re either sealed for God’s purposes or marked for the devil’s schemes.”

“Could it be that simple?” Lidia wanted to know.

“Good versus evil is a simple concept,” Otto replied. “Attaining Salvation is simple, so why not other things of the bible too? My personal opinion is that we tend to overthink things.”

“But back to Lidia’s original question,” Ethan said, “Jesus Himself said only the Father knows when the end will come.”

“We should be wary of trying to work out a timeline,” Otto warned, “because people have been trying to do that for centuries. However, time isn’t always what we think it is. Take the TKTs for example, how we always arrive back exactly when we left. We could take a hundred trips in a day, and they could be a hundred years each in duration.” (No trip thus far through the arbor window had ever lasted a hundred years, but one mission had taken nearly three decades to complete.)

Muriel agreed. “When the bible mentions three days and a half, three years and half, a season, a time...I don’t think we can know the exact meaning of these time periods, especially because we’re told that one day is as a thousand years to God, and vice versa. So what is an hour or a year to Him? We can speculate, but we can’t know for sure. In some bible prophecies, one day symbolically equals one year; but it’s not true for all bible prophecies.”

“The bottom line is that we won’t know when the Endtimes will be, or exactly how long they might take to play out,” Otto said. “So we just have to be prepared. And we do this simply by following God’s commands.” He then looked up and read aloud part of Ecclesiastes 12:13. “‘Fear God, and keep his commandments; for this is the whole duty of man.’”

With this, the discussion ended and they all went to bed.

In their free time, the TKTs did a little exploring, though they didn’t wander too far from their camp. The area was somewhat rocky, but with plenty of rich soil like healthy farmlands. Patches of forest were nestled into rolling hills through which lively streams wound their way to some unknown destination. The days were breezy, but not overly windy. It rained a few times, but nothing torrential. The mild temperatures and overall fresh greenness of the landscape gave the impression of late springtime. Some birds were nesting in the area, so spring was probably a good guess as far as the season.

Muriel enjoyed conversing with various animals, though none had anything particularly interesting to report, other than simple day-to-day activities relating to such things as digging, eating, napping, etc. A small bobcat kept bringing her half-eaten rodents, and seemed confused as to why Muriel wasn’t eating them. At one point, something that looked like a small bear (but one extra fluffy and nearly pure white) got into their food stores, and Muriel had to give him a talking to. As the various groups worked on the pyramid, she would often interpret bird trills, squawks, chirps, and twitters, along with squirrel chatters, and the lowing noises that the deer in the area occasionally made.

Several times, the group spied an elusive creature that looked like a tiny horse, barely knee high; but even with Muriel calling to him, she could never get close enough to have a good look at him. Using The Sparrow as camouflage and sneaking up very quietly, she finally did get

close to the tiny horse, whose multi-colored coat was shimmering in the sunshine. When the breezes picked up, his tail and mane looked like rippling rainbows; and his hooves shone like polished steel as he pawed the ground and grazed. In this close of proximity, Muriel tried to talk to the little creature telepathically, but he only got scared and bolted. However, they did observe him several times over their remaining weeks sneak somewhat close to the camp out of curiosity to watch them.

Lidia was enjoying getting to know Zin, whose mother was the famous writer, E.R. Tremaine, Otto's sister, who was most commonly called Em. Zin was adopted, which was why she had a different last name than her mother.

Taking a walk with Luis one afternoon, Zin noticed how happy he seemed to be, smelling wildflowers and chuckling at the antics of a couple of squirrels. While often quiet, everything about him seemed pretty content, despite his time on earth being so short. When Zin remarked that he had such a good attitude about this, Luis replied, "Everyone eventually dies. How we live our lives, no matter how short, is what's most important." He also quoted Romans 14:8 to her. "If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's."

Zin noticed her uncle occasionally casting glances in her direction. Since he knew he could trust her, he hadn't felt the need to lay down any rules in connection with her spending time with this young man; but he would definitely keep an eye on her, as any uncle would. Zin could just about bet he would also tell her mother about this friendship since brother and sister were very close. Otto often stayed at Doyle Mansion, since it was his childhood home. Also, because he had no wife and tended to travel a great deal, it was a good place to work from and find rest between journeys. Since Zin had always imagined herself married to her work (as a magician), her Uncle Otto needn't have worried. In fact, she had never had a boyfriend; and at this point in time, she couldn't even consider having one for as busy as she tended to stay with both school and work.

At the end of five weeks, the pyramid was complete and they broke camp, with many of the little groups simply trudging off through the hills to destinations unknown to the TKTs. Those that had brought the

scaffolding were carrying only half of what they had brought and would return later to retrieve the rest.

After hugging Luis goodbye, Zin was somewhat tearful as she went to help her friends pack up their gear.

The destination window was situated about half a mile from where they had made camp. Just before stepping through to home, the TKTs looked back at the pyramid, beautiful and glittering in the sunshine, like a fabulous gemstone nestled into the green hills.

Although she was somewhat tired, in keeping with her always-busy lifestyle, as soon as Zin returned home, she headed to her private Magicians' Lab, situated in the subbasement library at Doyle Mansion, to work on a lozenge to help the female dragons. While she couldn't cure them, she could at least ease their discomfort. Once complete, Zin would ask the genies to make enough of the lozenges to treat all of the sick dragons; and she would end up helping Quin distribute them.

Chapter Three

Storm and Whirlwind

Two days after the group returned from building the pyramid, a thunderstorm began pounding the plantations.

“Sorry, I can’t calm this one,” sixteen-year-old Birch Hathaway told Dell and Mr. Amir in the pod office. For this was Birch’s gift—the ability to calm storms. However, he was only allowed to on God’s orders. Demons were able to raise storms, and these were mainly the ones Birch was supposed to counter. While God occasionally gave him the okay to subdue tornadoes, hurricanes, blizzards, and such, this didn’t happen very often.

Mr. Amir, in particular, was unsettled by the thunder and lightning. He had long been afraid of storms; if not afraid, then extra jumpy, this stemming from childhood when his home in a mothership community was hit by lightning and burned to the ground. At present, he was cringing at nearly every crash of thunder and flash of lightning.

While the people at the plantations were all tucked safely inside and away from the storm, Birch’s thunderbird protector, Naya, was soaring about overhead enjoying herself. She absolutely loved this type of weather.

Coco Riley was also in the pod office on this day, awaiting direction from Dell and Mr. Amir as to a series of time-travel trips she was scheduled to go on. Though Coco and Birch were the same age, since he was from West Virginia and she from Montana, they didn’t know one another very well. Since the TKTs as a whole came from a wide range of places, many didn’t end up working together very often, if at all.

Coco had a protector assigned to her too, a wind horse named Agzata. However, after dropping off her charge at Laurelstone, Agzata was heading for home. Though she couldn’t be hurt by a thunderstorm, she didn’t particularly like being in the middle of one. Plus, she needed to be getting back to watch over the self-sustaining ranch where her mistress lived. With Coco likely to stay for several days at the

plantations, she could always call by thought to her protector when finished with her missions.

Coco's special gift was the ability to block ugly thoughts and dreams planted mainly by demons, but also sometimes by gifted individuals abusing their powers. One such person was eighteen-year-old Eizel Gibson, who lived with her family in Supercity Ten. Coco had made it a special project in the past year to tail Eizel whenever possible to block the thoughts and dreams she was planting.

However, Eizel had a friend named Tanner Ellison, a sorcerer who lived in Supe-9 and with whom she spent a great deal of time. Though a year younger than Eizel, Tanner was very powerful, as far as young sorcerers go, and he had recently developed an enhancer pill that allowed his friend to get past Coco's blocks. Therefore, it now wasn't good use of Coco's time to continue to shadow her rival, especially because Eizel had, of late, been curbing some her malicious tendencies (mainly due to the influence of a friend). However, in the past, she had been extremely active. And so, Coco had lately been working with Dell to counter some of the past malevolence of Eizel whose specialty had long been nightmares. Once planted, these evil dreams continued to plague her targets to the point that many people either went crazy or committed suicide.

Simply by taking trips into the past to tail Eizel, sometimes for a couple of months at a stretch before returning home, Coco had been able to block hundreds of incidents of abuse so far; and she only had to be within two hundred miles of her opponent in order to block her. Eizel's range was actually much farther; in fact, she had only to sight a person once to be able to plant thoughts into his or her mind from halfway around the world.

In going back three to four years on a series of trips, Coco had been careful not to run into her younger self. She was using rookhs to travel, so as not to confuse Agzata, or task the wind horse with protecting two versions of herself. Coco also had auto-writing as a gift, which helped her to know where her younger self was so that she could avoid any possible encounters. Sometimes she heard God's voice in the back of her head like many of the TKTs did, but more often she simply scribbled in her journal to get information. The auto-writing also led her to Eizel when she lost track of her on occasion.

Coco had taken all of her time-travel trips thus far solo. Now, Dell now thought it might be good experience for her to work with others, the first time simply being with Birch.

The pair traveled back to a time about five years past when several earthship communities in Arizona and New Mexico were suffering under the onslaught of storms produced by demons who were also busy planting ugly thoughts.

Not only did Birch calm a number of storms, and Coco block masses of ugly thoughts, the team distributed hundreds of crosses from pod packs to the communities. These were very powerful demon deterrents, as the creatures couldn't stand to be in close proximity to them without their ears, eyes, noses, throats, and skin burning with excruciating pain.

In keeping their distance from the crosses, the demons weren't as easily able to plant thoughts. When they tried to raise more storms, Birch easily calmed them, often as quickly as someone might turn off a fan by unplugging it. A few of the demons got so upset at having their storms instantly calmed, over and over again, they turned on each other, snarling and fighting, and basically tearing each other to pieces.

When first arriving in one of the smaller communities, Birch and Coco came under attack by over a hundred demons at once. Using their weapons, and with help from armed residents of the community, they ended up defeating the swarm in a mere ten minutes of fighting. Birch had lately taken to a mirror as his favorite weapon, this one pocket-sized but very powerful, particularly on a sunny day, which this was because he had just cleared a storm. Coco presently favored a flute. While not as flashy as the ropes she was also proficient with, the lovely sounds of the flute ranged from those reminiscent of battle hymns to folk music to soft lullabies, depending on the circumstances. On this day, a series of notes slashing through the torsos of two demons at once sounded a lot like a wedding march to her.

They stayed nearly a week in total in the various settlements to help get the situation under control. People in many of the self-sustaining communities were often very accommodating of godly visitors. In some, small hostels or guest cabins were available. Others times, visitors were simply welcomed into private homes.

Returning through the destination window, Birch and Coco greeted Dell, who had only had one sip of his coffee while the pair was gone.

“You two ready to go again?” Dell asked, as Coco was making the log entry of their return.

“Sure,” Birch responded with Coco nodding just as Henning entered the study.

The Sapphire Boy went with them to another demon-infested area some twenty years into the past, in Canada, where Henning distributed shield sapphires to a large community. The stones were capable of shielding people from both physical and mental attacks.

Blocking ugly thoughts while there, Coco at one point wondered if she might be sensing Satan himself, sowing seeds of doubt and fear that seemed stronger than those of ordinary demons. However, these were nothing she couldn't handle. “Resist the devil and he will flee from you,” she quoted from James 4:7, doing so aloud because she knew that Satan couldn't read her thoughts; and she wanted him to know that she was aware of his presence. The ugly thoughts immediately ceased as Satan did indeed flee. Not only was the quote absolutely true, Satan basically couldn't stand hearing words from the bible.

Hearing God's voice clearly in the back of his mind, Birch was not allowed to calm an afternoon hailstorm that hit the community. Instead, the TKTs just waited it out, after which, they returned home.

Heading out again right away, Birch and Coco joined Lidia, as stowaways on a boat bringing parts of the Statue of Liberty from France to the United States for assembly.

Intent on sinking the ship, four gremlins were aboard the boat. However, they were soon found out by Birch and Lidia wearing rose-colored glasses. Produced by a bagical, these special glasses allowed wearers to see invisible and camouflaged creatures. Once discovered, the gremlins were easily dealt with by Birch's pocket mirror. A mimic was also on board, impersonating a steward. Because of the ugly thoughts he was planting, Coco was able to zero in on the demon who was unable to hold his mimicked shape for long periods of time. Once exposed, he was easily dealt with by Lidia using a blue rope.

A horrendous sea storm that blew up halfway through the voyage might have sunk the ship, except for Birch calming it. This was a real storm, not a demon-produced one; but on this occasion, God had

allowed him to use his gift because no halcyon was in the area to calm the storm, and it was important for the boat not to sink.

Reflecting on the crated metal pieces that would soon become part of Lady Liberty, the TKTs had to wonder where their liberties had gone.

For their entire lives in the U.S., there had been virtually no free speech, no protection, no privacy, nor any other freedoms related to a democratic republic because these had all been taken away, not only by the sorcerers in the past three or four decades, but even before that by radical activists, atheists, and others forcing their own little petty agendas down people's throats and tearing apart our Constitution. Somehow, in the Land of the Free and the Land of the Brave, they had managed to take freedoms away from anyone who disagreed with them, while bullying their opponents with threats and even violence. This seemed to the TKTs like leaping backwards in time, not by time traveling, but simply by warped and evil thinking. What a mess our wonderful country had become. Instead of improving, it had become a land of tyranny and fear.

The trio was tired when they got back home. Lidia, who had been somewhat seasick for most of the voyage, still felt a little queasy. According to Dell's schedule, Birch and Coco were done for the day, and Lidia wasn't scheduled for another trip for a couple of hours. And so, Lidia set off to home for a nap, while Coco, who was staying at the plantations for a time, headed to the Labyrinth Library to get caught up on some of her schoolwork. Birch, on Naya, headed home to West Virginia. With nothing scheduled for him for a couple of days, he was anxious to see his family and sleep in his own bed.

A mere ten minutes after the team returned from their sea voyage, Ethan and Henning were preparing to step through the arbor window with Chevy Longwood, a fourteen-year-old weapons phenom. Though she lived on Lion Mountain, Chevy often stayed at the plantations to train, take TKT trips, and work with others on their weapons skills. Just before departing, Henning handed each of his teammates a shield sapphire. Stowing the pea-sized stone in a pocket, as Chevy did likewise with hers, Ethan didn't protest, even though items like dimes and sapphires didn't generally work for him because the power of his Fifty-One Medallion tended to override other types of magic. Upon arriving at their destination, the base of an active volcano in Costa Rica,

both he and Chevy were supremely glad for the extra protection because the heat in the area was tremendous.

As Henning immediately began scaling the fiery mountain, that wasn't actually spewing lava but was heavily smoking, Ethan and Chevy took care of business on the ground by engaging a huge swarm of evil creatures from a Demon Pocket (basically an evil mini-realm), the doorway of which was situated just inside the mouth of the volcano, which was where Henning was headed.

The TKTs had traveled back in time about eighteen years to this spot. A few settlements existed in the area of the volcano that had only recently become active. Though these were situated some distance away, the nasty creatures from the Demon Pocket were something of a current plague to the people of the region.

Ethan and Chevy were wearing rose-colored glasses to see the gremlins and stealth hobs that were mixed with the megahobs and demons.

Chevy was obviously on this trip because of her skill with weapons. Wielding two ropes at once against the hordes, her leaping and spinning might have been likened to traditional martial-arts drills combined with ballet, with a little rhythmic gymnastics too, based on the use of apparatuses, in this case, the weapons. The ropes twisting and writhing under her expertise were moving so quickly, they looked like red and gold blurs of light, though ones crackling and flashing, especially when making contact. Trying to stay out of her way, Ethan took up a position behind her to take shots with his flute at the creatures outside of the immediate range of his teammate's onslaught.

Once she thinned out the herd somewhat, Chevy switched to using a flute and a mirror in combination, which allowed her to reach the more distant of her foes in order to prevent their advances. With things well under control, she paused to take a sip of water from her shoulder pack before continuing to fight. Ethan took a drink from his own pack as he also paused to check on the progress of Henning who was nearly three-quarters of the way up the side of the mountain by this time.

The Sapphire Boy had taken a route well away from the heavily-trodden path the evil residents of the Demon Pocket generally used to travel up and down the side of the mountain; and so he was meeting with no resistance, though a couple of demons on the ground had

noticed him and were flying up to his position. Blessedly, Ethan was able to take them out with his flute so that Henning could continue on unhindered.

Unlike Ethan and Chevy, Henning was not much bothered by the heat. His mission: to plant an explosive mirror at the entrance to the Demon Pocket, thus destroying the way in and out. While there might be other doorways to this pocket, sealing this one would help keep people in the area safer.

Unfortunately, just after planting the device, which was set to explode in twelve minutes, Henning slipped, falling to a ledge inside the volcano some forty feet below the rim of the cone. In this position, he was very near a pool of lava. While Sapphire Boys could be in close proximity to lava and not get hurt, this type of exposure needed to be of limited duration. In a few short minutes, the heat would kill him. Already, his skin was shining brightly blue as his gift tried to fight the onslaught.

He wasn't hurt by the fall. However, he doubted he could climb to safety in time to save himself because he was already being overcome by the heat. Even if he could climb up, reaching the rim would likely coincide with the explosion, which would probably knock him back into the volcano, or just kill him. While tough, he was not tough enough to survive a mirror blast of that magnitude in close quarters.

Taking a deep breath, Henning simply decided to pray. If it was his time to meet the Father, so be it. If it wasn't his time, he would simply have to trust that God would send an angel to save him.

As it turns out, it was not quite time for Henning to meet the Father. However, the save on this occasion wouldn't come from an angel, but rather from a Diamond Girl soaring into the volcano on an airboard—a transportation device related to airbikes as far as the mechanics involved, but that looked like a small surfboard—which she quickly folded and pocketed as she landed on the ledge beside him.

Henning had never seen this girl before, who looked to be around his age; nor had he ever met a Diamond Girl. Because he had never seen an airboard before, it flitted through his mind that she might be from the future, which was correct. Sent by the future leader of the TKTs (Ethan's older self), Aube Metz had indeed traveled back in time.

“Keep hold of my arm,” she commanded as she helped him to rise and climb. In contact with her skin, her shielding extended to him, and he felt remarkably cool.

Of course, Henning thought as they climbed, *diamonds are harder than sapphires, so she’s more protected than I am.*

As they made somewhat awkward progress (because it was rather hard for him to climb while holding onto her arm), he tried to explain about the explosive they were heading towards; but she merely shushed him with, “I know, just climb. Just trust me.”

Aube was in some danger too from the conditions inside the volcano; however, since gifts were getting stronger with each new generation, Diamond Girls of the future were able to withstand more heat than in previous years, and even direct contact with lava for short periods of time.

Making it to a higher ledge, though not quite to the rim, they were almost out of time; the explosion was imminent. Since airboards were only designed for individual use, the one Aube had brought couldn’t be used as a means of escape. However, to save them, she had something else up her sleeve, literally. With Henning still clasping her arm for protection, she pulled from the cuff of her shirt a device that looked like a sleek version of an old-fashioned duck-call, which she blew. Within five seconds, a pale green dragon that had been sleeping deep inside the volcano swooped in beside them. As Henning hopped onto the creature behind the Diamond Girl, they were whisked away just as the explosion occurred, with the tough feathers and scales of the dragon’s wings helping to protect them from rocks thrown by the blast.

Outside of the volcano, like a flashing green streak, the dragon headed to the ground to drop off the humans about five hundred yards from the location of Ethan and Chevy who had just wrapped up the fighting by killing the last four megahobs and two airborne demons of the swarm.

As stunned as he was from everything that had just happened, Henning was speechless, unable to even thank the Diamond Girl for her help.

For her part, after stowing the dragon-call back up her sleeve, Aube simply smiled while making an odd hand gesture, like a triangle, with her thumbs and forefingers. After a small nod of farewell, she then

walked a short distance away, where she stepped through a destination window displaying the scene of Laurelstone's study that appeared as soon as she neared the location.

From everything that had just happened, oddly enough, Henning found his mind on the dragon-call, which had sounded much like a bird cooing. *Well, that makes sense*, he thought, *since dragons are burnished doves*.

The call would be developed in the future. While the TKTs were generally careful about exposing people of the past to future technology, Aube basically hadn't had a choice in this case, particularly because the future Henning, whom she was good friends with, had told her this was exactly the way the save had happened. Linn would end up designing and making the dragon-call in about six years' time.

Henning did manage to thank the dragon, doing so by thought because he was still speechless, though his normal sensibilities were returning, to the point that he was now able to notice that the green dragon had lovely bands of light purple on his neck, as well as creamy orange splotches on his wings and nose.

The dragon was just taking off to return to the volcano as Ethan and Chevy made it to Henning's location.

Breathlessly, Chevy asked, "Was that a Diamond Girl?"

Finally finding his voice, Henning answered, "Yes, one from the future, and from Laurelstone. I saw the study window."

"A future TKT," Ethan said in wonder. "Time travel within time travel, that's pretty neat." He then hastily checked that he still had the Time Key in his pocket, as it was slightly confusing to think that the magical sphere could be in two or more places at once, which was perfectly possible, just like people could be in more than one place at once when time traveling.

Swiftly heading to their own destination window, the trio returned to home, where the storm was still raging. A thunderbird could have cleared the storm, and wind horses could have pushed it back, but they were not allowed to. The bigfoots of the plantation were out in the midst of the wind, lightning, and torrential downpours moving rocks around to control erosion and direct some of the flash flooding. They were also shoring up barn doors and hen houses while calming the horses, goats, chickens, and such. A couple of the pockets on the

plantation were also experiencing stormy weather, as conditions inside the mini-realms were much like any other places on the planet, having their share of droughts, snow storms, tornados, and the like.

Ethan immediately handed the Time Key off to the next team.

Dell had decided this was a good time for a lot of trips because people couldn't work in the gardens or fields anyway, and they also likely wouldn't want to be out doing much of anything else. With so many trips taking place, the hallway outside the study basically had a line of TKTs ready to go, while many others were prepping in the second-floor library at Laurelstone, as well as in the caverns used by the Underground Army.

Mostly, the arbor window simply changed as soon as a person or team made it back from their mission. However, for the times it didn't change right away, Dell used the time-setter to set destination windows. In wanting to get ahead, he and Mr. Amir were making out ambitious schedules, with as many as thirty-five trips taking place in a single day.

Shortly after returning from the volcano trip, Chevy headed out again, this time with Frees and a thirteen-year-old named Salvatore Ricci, Sal for short. A protégé of E.R. Tremaine, Sal was a gifted wordsmith. Already, many of his books (produced by genies in many camouflaged forms) were in Supercities and camps all over the world, this being especially important in the recent past since many books were banned and access to them in general was limited, particularly children's books, as the sorcerers were intent on indoctrinating children into their own ways of thinking. This did not include free thinking or imagination; and so, many creative and inspirational works had been destroyed in recent decades.

The team went back three years to distribute books that looked like sea shells and refrigerator magnets to Supercity Five, being careful only to hand out books Sal had already written by that time, in this case, a series he had penned at age nine called *Chef Miguel's Magical Kitchen*. In the stories, quite a few magical creatures such as grimmpts and gryphons worked with a group of children to keep a soup kitchen, under the direction of a magical chef, up and running. In addition to whipping up fabulous concoctions out of practically nothing (because Chef Miguel and his friends lived in a shantytown of a Supercity and had very few resources), the characters helped thwart bad guys like mimics and tax

collectors. Solving problems and battling evil, they were able to provide much for the poor of the city, bringing joy to many in difficult circumstances.

As the TKTs made their way around the city, Frees helped a few gardens along while Chevy dealt with various demons, gremlins, and such that they bumped into.

In addition to handing out books, Sal used chalk to write bible verses on sidewalks to help inspire people. When passing a huge laundry facility (needed in the cities because the elites hardly ever did their own laundry), the TKTs noticed masses of suds sneaking out of doors and windows from several overflowing washers that had been loaded with too much soap. With help from a wind horse who was visiting the city for the day, Sal spelled out bible quotes with the soap suds along streets and walkways. Though the suds wouldn't last long, the clean marks they made on the pavement allowed the messages to remain for a while.

The sorcerers absolutely hated it when things like this happened, because there was basically nothing they could do to counter it. People would be inspired, and find courage and hope, not only because God's Word has such awesome power, but also because the shapes of the letters and ordering of the passages by a wordsmith added to the effect.

In a field adjacent to a factory, the boys worked together while Chevy kept watch for any unfriendlies. With Frees whispering to patches of grasses and Sal guiding him in a cursive-writing pattern, they swiftly had Matthew 11:28 spelled out from taller grasses standing out from shorter ones. "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." They soon repeated this with mosses growing on the side of a large warehouse, after which, the TKTs returned home.

Ethan, Coco, and Lidia were next up to go. They traveled eleven years back in time to a poultry farm in Mexico to help a group of people escape. Whilst there, the TKTs witnessed a sorcerer turning a man into a dog, which he then killed. Although they might have wanted to help the victim, they were there strictly for the group of escapees. Lidia was particularly upset not to be able to help the man/dog, to the point that she got a terribly-upset stomach; though she ended up thinking it might be leftover queasiness from the earlier sea trip.

Upon returning home, Lidia had no time to dwell on the Mexico unpleasantness or her upset stomach because she was right away scheduled for another trip with Ethan that also included Monte.

They traveled to a war-torn Syria some fifty years in the past where it was a common practice for evil men of the Islamic State to horrifically abuse young boys by knocking out their teeth in order to sodomize them without being bitten. Many of these boys also had their eyes put out so that they wouldn't be able to later identify their attackers.

The TKTs managed to save a particular seven-year-old boy from three of these evil men. Using rubble from the city, Monte was successful in disarming and then knocking unconscious two of the men. Ethan ended up having to kill the third, doing so with a knife instead of his flute so as not to draw the attention of other members of the Islamic State in the area.

Good thing Ethan and Monte were there because Lidia was so horrified to see the young boy, who blessedly still had his teeth and eyes, she basically wouldn't have been able to fight. Ethan, in noticing that she was upset (as she had been on the Mexico trip as well), was watching her closely. She was still able to do her job, interpreting for them as they were getting the boy to the safety of his family. More troubling to her than this situation was the fact that they couldn't save all children of this country, from various crimes.

Before the trip, a research partner had spent some time prepping them; and the TKTs knew they were going to be able to save the one boy, but not his younger brother from another group of evil men two months later.

During the prep session, they learned of many atrocities committed by radical Muslims of this time. Children were recruited by terrorist groups; others were stolen and forced to fight, often being used as suicide bombers. Missionaries were regularly attacked and killed. Many beheadings were occurring. Christian schoolgirls were kidnapped and forced to recite passages from the Quran before being sold into slavery, this being a particularly bad time in history for human trafficking.

When people were displaced and fleeing to other countries as refugees, many among them ended up committing terrorist attacks, rapes, and other crimes in their new homes. Muslim women were often

not allowed to do anything without their husbands' permission and frequently wore concealing clothing, not necessarily for modesty reasons, but more to hide the bruises, welts, and cuts they received from being abused.

While the majority of Muslims were not violent, many were either too afraid to speak out, or believed in the ideology and therefore thought the radicals among them were justified in their actions.

This was nothing new as far as the Islamic faith, but was actually history repeating itself, as Muslims had tried many times throughout the centuries to conquer and force satanic beliefs on others. As history had shown, they were never peaceful. Those living somewhat sheltered lives and believing themselves to be part of a peaceful religion were deluding themselves because at the root of their religion was a jihadist way of thinking that was about violence, this being in stark contrast to the peace that Jesus promoted.

Ethan was watching Lidia because he knew that newer TKTs had to learn that they couldn't just go back in time and stop every atrocity because some had to occur, as part of a much larger picture. In the case of the two brothers, the horrors committed against the younger would spur the older to reject the evil roots of his culture and religion and act to help many people, not just his own family. He eventually discovered the truth of Christianity, and converted, bringing many of his country along with him. Making a huge impact in his lifetime, he saved thousands from terrorists' acts. But he might not have done any of this if his brother had not been attacked and maimed.

The media at this time was actually playing down incidents such as this, while often calling anyone who dared to speak out against a culture that allowed and even promoted such abuse, phobic and bigoted. So the world basically needed people like this young man to stand against such prevalent evil.

Sadly, corrupt world leaders at this time were largely ignoring the horrors, rather than stopping them. Some were even telling people, "Don't demonize something you don't understand," referring to the Muslim faith, despite the fact that the murders, abuses, rapes, terrorist acts, and so on were completely wrong. Many people at this time were promoting all religions as being equally valid and all gods as being the

same; but certainly, our God, the Living God, is not the same as the god of Islam.

Blessedly, many people had the courage to speak out, with a common response to the smug and condescending “don’t demonize” cliché being, “We will absolutely demonize anything that is truly evil and demonic.”

As a counter to this, atheists and other misguided people often accused Christians of being judgmental. While God will be our ultimate Judge, human beings must stand up for what’s right and reject what’s wrong, no matter the opposition. And the opposition was indeed strong, with the world at this time full of violent bullies promoting every kind of evil, and many people wearing blinders to the truth.

However, we shouldn’t be surprised, because evil things like this tended to cycle. According to Mr. Amir, who had extensively studied the Ottoman Empire, Muslims had gained strongholds many times throughout history, by the sword, slaughtering and subjugating many. This was one reason why it was so important to counter false teachings in the self-sustaining communities, many of which now had large Muslim populations from those settling after the outpourings of the Supercities. In general, Muslims were welcomed in any of the communities. However, the violence and abuse were not. Many of the Islamic faith chose to set up on their own because they didn’t want Christians constantly witnessing to them. However, in being helped by Christians to set up independent communities, some contact couldn’t be avoided, which led many Muslims to question whether there could be another way, perhaps a better way.

Upon returning from Syria, the three TKTs immediately headed to the costume depot to get ready for their next mission, which would also include Cecelia who was already being outfitted for the trip.

As Ethan was waiting his turn to be dressed, he called home to check in with his mother using a device called a walnut (because of its shape and size).

Disconnecting a few minutes later, Ethan felt a little guilty. When offering for Ashton to stay at his house while he was gone, he hadn’t warned him about the motherly smothering he would probably receive. And, indeed, Holly Stanley was doing a good deal of smothering, mainly in the form of overfeeding Ashton. *Well, a little smothering*

might be good for him, Ethan ended up deciding, in remembering that the visiting Sapphire Boy had looked a little thin.

When prepping the team in the meeting room in the courtyard pod, Mr. Amir was jumping at practically every clap of thunder.

The TKTs ended up in medieval Norway where they saved several people from being sacrificed as part of a pagan ritual. While this sort of thing was becoming less common, there was still much paganism being practiced in this part of the world at this time. The people they saved were destined to become Christian.

Back at home, Lidia was glad to be done for the day. Her stomach was still bothering her, and she was feeling anxious and worried, though she wasn't exactly sure what she was worried about. So far on the trips, she and her friends hadn't encountered anything that they couldn't handle.

Reading the bible always helped when she was feeling unsettled, God's Word being a true shield against the troubles of the world. All of Psalm 91 was about the Father's protection, and was so comforting that she read it twice. Line 11 was her favorite. "For he will give his angels charge of you to guard you in all your ways."

Overnight, the rains stopped; but while the storm might have ended, the whirlwind of time travel continued with many teams lined up for the morning, one of these being a duo consisting of Lidia and Chevy. Lidia hadn't slept well, but was nonetheless ready to go early, just before dawn. After making the log entry and saying the familiar prayer, the pair stepped through the window to a time roughly fifty years past to prevent a sixteen-year-old girl from texting while driving.

Chevy simply took the phone from the girl in a parking lot before the teen had a chance to get into her car; and when the girl protested loudly and tried to get it back, Chevy would have none of it. "Yes, I'm stealing your phone from you," she said, "so that you won't text while driving and kill someone," for this was exactly what would have happened if the TKTs hadn't intervened.

Lidia basically found the situation amusing, as she merely stood back and watched. Few people would have dared challenge Chevy, who was well-versed in many forms of combat. So it was unwise for the girl to fly at her, cussing and clawing in an attempt to get the phone back.

With one swift move, Chevy had her opponent on the ground, subduing her and telling her to calm down. “This is for your own good, trust me.”

When Chevy let her up a few moments later, the girl didn’t again try to fight for her phone, but simply ran off to find help, which she wasn’t able to do before Lidia and Chevy returned home through the destination window, taking the stolen phone with them.

The girl did get another phone right away, and did have an accident from texting while driving. Blessedly, she didn’t kill anyone, though she did cause injuries. Sadly, since her parents could afford a good lawyer, she didn’t even get into much trouble and was soon at it again. Having basically gotten away with this dangerous behavior—that she learned from watching her parents who also liked to text while driving—she didn’t see any reason to stop. While this was against the law, the laws evidently didn’t apply to her. The next time she caused an accident, she lost one of her legs, which the TKTs couldn’t prevent because they had only been instructed by God to prevent the earlier accident, which saved the life of a four-year-old boy.

With a break of about forty-five minutes before she was scheduled to go again, Lidia had breakfast, after which, she made her way back to the study for her next trip that she would be going on with Ethan, Cecelia, and Monte. Mr. Amir met them in the hallway outside the study to give them the specs of their mission.

A group of TKTs directly before them had just made it back, looking a little war torn and ragged in being scraped up, dirty, flushed, and out of breath. Whatever they had just been through, Ethan’s team didn’t envy them.

Stepping through the window, they ended up just outside of a small village in Tanzania about sixty-five years in the past where they saved a ten-year-old albino boy from having his arm cut off because the body parts of people with albinism were used in witchcraft and tended to sell for a lot of money. After saving the boy from his attackers, the TKTs delivered him to a safe place, sadly taking note of several children missing limbs in the communal tent dwelling. At this time, it was hard for poor people in Tanzania to get prosthetics; and so these children would likely have to live the rest of their lives without such.

Shaking his head, Ethan said in scorn of the devil, “Witchcraft, just another false religion people are led into.”

Cecelia chimed in with, “This is so demonic and evil, I don’t see how people can be ‘led’ into it. They must just be evil to start with, like maybe raised that way.”

Lidia was too busy interpreting to give an opinion; but deep down, she was very troubled, not just about the horrors they were encountering, but in wondering if she was going to be able to handle seeing much more of them. This was basically overwhelming for her, and the only thing preventing her from crying (even sobbing) was keeping busy with doing her job for her team.

Ethan again noticed she was upset. They all were, but Lidia in particular seemed most bothered by what they were witnessing. He knew she had lived in a pocket community all of her life, and had largely been sheltered from a lot of the unpleasantness outside, such as the megahob and nyreg attacks the plantations had experienced over the years. Plus, she had never even been to one of the Supercities or camps before time traveling. And it was one thing to read or hear about the violence and oppression, it was another thing to actually witness the atrocities firsthand.

This was truly haunting to her—how evil people could be—and by the time they stepped back through the window to home, she was almost uncommunicative, to the point that she didn’t speak unless someone asked her a direct question. Being finished for the day, she soon left for home where she also kept quiet, so much so that her parents became worried about her.

The storm at the plantations might have ended, but the clean-up and repairs were only just beginning. Fallen tree limbs were being gathered, with the smaller ones being made into mulch and the larger cut into firewood. The manor houses had weathered the storm well; but several barns and cottages needed fixes to their roofs, as did Netherwind’s massive treehouse. While helping with the clean-up and roof mending, Henning was reminded of the last line of Nahum 1:3. “His way is in whirlwind and storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet.”

Although several time-travel trips were scheduled for the next day, Lidia was not going on any of them. On Ethan’s suggestion, she instead went to talk to the counselor who explained to her what she basically already knew before becoming a TKT because Ethan had warned her. “We can’t save everyone, and we have to follow God’s commands on

the trips. Otherwise, we can really mess up the future from meddling in the past.”

Additionally, Mrs. Bohanen helped Lidia realize that she was not just feeling upset over witnessing bad things, but she was also depressed, her main symptoms being not sleeping well, feeling constantly worried, and not having much of an appetite.

“No, it’s not just leftover seasickness,” Mrs. Bohanen said with a smile. “A nervous stomach is often the result of anxiety.”

Lidia had also been distracted of late and hadn’t wanted to do much of anything fun, like go to a play she had been invited to by a friend. These too were symptoms of depression.

“Take a break from time travel for a bit,” Mrs. Bohanen advised. “Get back into your old routine and concentrate on your schoolwork.”

“But I really want to do this,” Lidia said, “to put my gift to good use.”

“You probably just did a little too much to start with,” Mrs. Bohanen replied. “Some people have to ease into it, like getting acclimated.”

Mrs. Bohanen also recommended that Lidia keep reading the bible and even gave her a list of uplifting scriptures, which of course there are thousands of in the bible, so she didn’t really need a list, but it was nice to have all the same.

Lidia was heading home just as Cecelia and Birch were leaving through the study window with twelve-year-old Ford Longwood, who was Chevy’s brother and who had super eyesight as his gift.

They traveled back in time barely a year to stop the malice of a gifted fifteen-year-old from Supercity Eight named Kemp Fischer who had the ability to produce fire and who had started one in a mothership community in Ohio by setting alight a barn and a large pile of timber.

Ford spotted the smoke two states away, which was much farther than various spyglasses could extend. Calling three rookhs to take them to the scene, the TKTs arrived in less than five minutes.

Traveling by nyreg, Kemp was not alone. A friend of his, twelve-year-old Penelope Coyle, was hovering beside him on a second nyreg. She was also from Supe-8, and her gift was very like that of wind horses in that she could produce and sustain gale-force winds. From her position above the community, she fanned the flames Kemp had created.

With her assistance, the fire was already spreading to several more piles of timber and a furniture workshop whose craftsmen, along with a couple of patrons, were evacuating. A cafeteria and clothing shop nearby were also in danger; if left unchecked, the fire would have engulfed the entire community probably in less than an hour.

While Birch couldn't raise storms in order to make it rain, thunderbirds could. In keeping with being careful, he didn't call Naya, but instead enlisted the aid of Lyydu from Lion Mountain. As Birch called to him by thought, Lyydu arrived in less than thirty seconds to produce a downpour that completely suffocated the fire, also drenching the two miscreants and their nyregs who were hightailing it away.

This was before Lyydu lost a foot in a dragon fight and got a prosthetic one. While the TKTs might have wanted to warn the thunderbird, they knew they couldn't. There must have been some reason Lyydu was meant to lose his foot. And after, he was fully as mobile as before, and seemed just as happy, though he had been surprised because thunderbirds were hardly ever injured.

Birch's younger self in this time was busy calming a storm in Wyoming; otherwise, he and Naya could have taken care of the fire here. Because the younger Birch and his protector tended to stay busy, the slightly older Birch would end up making a series of seventeen solo time-travel trips in order to thwart the actions of Kemp and Penelope, who would eventually give up on attacking the self-sustaining communities in being tired of getting countered (and drenched) every time they tried to do so.

Cecelia and Ford had come with Birch today because the fire was not the only errand of their trip. Once the fire was out and after thanking Lyydu, who swiftly departed, the TKTs on the rookhs headed to Scotland's only Supercity situated in the area that had once been Edinburg, where the slavery, oppression, poverty, and other unfair conditions were just as bad as in any of the Supes around the world. Blessedly, as in nearly all of the cities, Edinburg had a strong NUR presence.

Rookhs generally didn't enter the Supercities and work camps that were guarded by multitudes of flying demons and nyregs because, while the giant blackbirds had absolute stealth as far as sound, they couldn't

become invisible. Even in the black of night, there was much danger in the skies.

However, with the assistance of shroud mirrors and several enormice (giant magical mice who, like hairy vetches, could extend their camouflage abilities to others), the TKTs were able to help NUR members sneak dozens of people out of two work camps on the outskirts of the city and get them safely to a pocket community about two miles away. Cecelia's gift was of course a tremendous help, as she was able to do exactly what the enormice could. Ford's eyesight was a great asset in keeping watch for ESS personnel and patrolling mimics so that they could avoid run-ins with the unfriendlies. So too did he spot a sorcerer on a nyreg some twenty miles away, which allowed the group to hide until the man passed by overhead to a safe distance. Birch mainly helped corral and direct the enormice who tended to get a little overexcited (and disorganized) in their efforts to help the human beings, whom they absolutely adored.

Destination windows to home didn't appear unless the TKTs were finished with their task. When the window in this case didn't appear, Birch was the one who heard the small voice in the back of his head telling him that eight people inside the city walls were still awaiting escape. This was no problem, as the TKTs, NUR members, and the enormice still had energy enough for another trip, which was completed well before sundown.

The destination window appeared after this, allowing the TKTs to return to their own time where Birch and Ford headed off to have breakfast at one of the cafeterias, while Cecelia headed home to Lion Mountain. Though she needed to let Zin know about a trip they were both scheduled for in two days, she didn't stop at Doyle Mansion. She would send her friend a kite message instead, this being Cecelia's preferred method of communication. Being somewhat shy, she didn't as much like using the walnuts, but preferred the magical kites, or occasionally dawn pigeons, which were as plentiful and roughly equal in speed to the kites.

Chapter Four

Mazes Abounding

Cecelia did end up sending a message to Zin, but not about the planned time-travel trip. Instead, she sent a warning about something she had just learned of from a friend in Supe-9, the friend being none other than Tanner's eleven-year-old brother, Patrick. Being a much different person than his brother, Patrick was often keen on thwarting Tanner's malice. And because he had heightened senses as a gift, including super-powered hearing, he was often able to listen in on the plans Tanner was making.

Patrick had thus far kept his powers secret from family and friends, so Tanner never suspected he might be overheard when scheming with four of his friends, one of which was fifteen-year-old Heather Finn, who lived in the same high rise as Tanner and who was trained as a Stone Hunter. In the same way the sorcerers in charge of the Supercities had Dragon Hunters working for them, so too did they have Magician Hunters, Genie Hunters, Unicorn Hunters, and Stone Hunters. The smallest faction within the Guild of Hunters, Stone Hunters were nonetheless powerful, their job being to seek out godly persons with jewel-related gifts (such as Sapphire Boys and Diamond Girls) to either destroy or capture them. Heather herself was jewel gifted. With her powers corresponding to a black sapphire, she had a shroud ability that allowed her to disappear into shadows of all sorts, this concealment making her perfectly suited to being a hunter. She could also cry sapphires that were able to shroud others.

Tanner's plans also included Kemp and Penelope, along with a friend of theirs from Supe-8, fifteen-year-old Devin Helm who, like Heather, had a jewel gift. With his powers connected to a pearl, Devin had tremendous fighting grit, along with the ability to control and manipulate water. He also had amazing water skills that allowed him to swim nearly as fast as a sailfish and hold his breath under water for up to two hours at a stretch.

Cecelia's warning was about an imminent attack by Tanner and his friends who were targeting the group working to heal the dragons, mainly because Tanner himself had caused the dragon illness and was intent on stopping anyone trying to fix the problem. The targets included Zin, Quin, Alex, Ashton, and two of their friends, Jasper Hughes and Trixie Greenspell, both fifteen. Jasper was gifted with shapeshifting abilities, and Trixie had super hearing even more powerful than that of Patrick.

Having a heads up about the attack, and armed with a few details more than just the specifics of when and where (that very evening and just outside the borders of Lion Mountain), the godly group was able to counter Tanner and his friends, particularly with the help of Cecelia, who also got Chevy involved. Also, quite unexpectedly, help arrived from the future in the form of Michele, who was good friends with Ashton and who had been sent back by the older Ethan to help counter a fire started by Kemp.

Once the situation was under control, Cecelia made sure to tell Zin about the upcoming time-travel trip they were both scheduled for.

Chevy only spent one night at home on Lion Mountain before returning to the plantations the next day to conduct classes in the Weapons Room, also known as the Realm of Quadressence, accessed by one of thirteen magical doorways on the mezzanine floor of Netherwind Manor. The "room" was actually an enormous training center that had the ability to expand based on the needs of the trainers and trainees. After teaching two ropes classes, Chevy helped the jujitsu instructor demonstrate several advanced fighting skills.

Henning was in the jujitsu session, but wasn't learning or practicing very well because his mind was on something else. Ever since returning from the volcano mission, he couldn't seem to stop thinking about the Diamond Girl who had saved him. He didn't even know her name, but he remembered every detail of how she looked, particularly how she shone, lighting up the inside of the volcano and reflecting the colors of the lava, ash, rocks, and smoke. Obviously, he had developed a crush on her, even though he knew she was from the future, and probably hadn't even been born yet. Even with these obstacles, he couldn't help but admire the girl who had risked her own life to save his. Alas, the pair in the future was only destined to be good friends, not just because

of the age difference, but also because Aube would end up marrying Ashton, who was also destined to be a good friend to Henning.

Finished with her training classes for the day and anxious to check on a special project, Chevy made her way across the fields to a pod structure that looked like an ordinary tool shed but that was actually a weapons depot, and one that included an entrance to the vast system of caverns and tunnels used by the Underground Army. The plantations were still a muddy mess, but much progress was being made as far as clean-up and repairs thanks largely to the efforts of the bigfoots. After wiping her feet on a mat inside the pod entrance, she made her way to a series of newly-excavated tunnels and compartments. About a dozen oodus (giant magical wormlike creatures) were hard at work boring through rock (and eating some of it for fun) to make the passageways and chambers that would eventually form a maze similar to the Labyrinth Library, but one especially designed for training. While not as large as the library, the Training Maze would still be quite extensive, with over forty miles of tunnels in total. Chevy was excited because the project was nearing completion. Already, training elements were being added in the form of simulators, puzzle projectors, and other such challenges. Soon, trainers would be able to set exercises, organize races, and hold war games.

After checking on the project and scratching a few oodos' backs in thanks, Chevy made her way to one of Laurelstone's classrooms where she was set to give a lecture to a group of third graders on secondary color weapons—these being the green, purple, and orange ropes and other textiles like scarves, blankets, and neckties—as opposed to the primaries of yellow, blue, and red that were the most common. The class was also learning about the many varieties of music weapons. In addition to the flutes that were most popular, Chevy had brought a pod pack containing examples of drums, maracas, strings, horns, triangles, etc. After the classroom session, the group headed outside to find a somewhat dry and less muddy place for a few demonstrations, which Henning ended up helping with.

The next day found Zin and Cecelia ready to head out on their scheduled time-travel trip, which would also include eighteen-year-old Ron Sibley who was eidetic, that is, gifted with perfect memory. While Zin often rode an airbike to the plantations, on this day, her protector,

Magsen, had brought her because she wanted to visit the Labyrinth Library. (Almost all gryphons loved to read.) Magsen's twin sister, Halli, who was Em's protector, came along as well because she too wanted to use the library, the tunnels of which were generally large enough for gryphons to traverse, provided they kept their wings folded.

The TKTs were set to travel back about a hundred years; therefore, a visit to the costume depot was in order. While waiting for Ron to get outfitted, the already-dressed girls talked, and Zin ended up telling Cecelia that the glass pyramid they had recently helped to build was actually a greenhouse called Zoe, and was home to the baby Tree of Life.

"Wow," Cecelia responded, in awe.

Zin also told Cecelia about two trips she had just taken into what was being called the Mystery Realm, where Zoe was situated. "Time inside is very mysterious, along with a lot of other things," Zin said.

"And the doorway to this realm was on the mezzanine all the time, but nobody noticed it until now?" Cecelia asked.

"It seems so," Zin replied.

The girls also talked some about Luis, and Zin told Cecelia that she hoped an elderly conjure woman living in the Himalayas, who was making the cure for the dragon illness, might someday be able to make a cure for Luis as well.

"But you don't even know where he was from, or even what time period," Cecelia said. "How would you ever find him again?"

"I'm going to leave that up to God," Zin said, with confidence, in believing that He had put into her brain that the conjure woman, whose name was Esther (no last name), might be able to help. Also, after helping her friends obtain a leaf from the Tree of Life (needed to make the dragon cure), God had led her to take the second trip into the Mystery Realm to retrieve another leaf, which she currently had stored safely away in a Chinese puzzle box and which she felt would eventually be needed to help cure Luis. Zin had also been praying about the situation. Now, she just needed to be patient and trust that God would guide her along the path to helping Luis, in His own good time.

With regard to the people that had helped the TKTs build the glass pyramid, Cecelia speculated that they might have come through doorways similar to the one on the mezzanine. "Unless they were all

time traveling, like we were,” she said, since that was still a possibility, and one that Zin thought was more likely correct.

Once Ron was ready, the trio made their way to the study, and from there, to a museum in Austria. Ron spoke conversational German, so they didn’t need a language specialist like Lidia who was evidently taking a short break from time traveling.

In preferring to mostly hang out in libraries, Ron didn’t go on many time-travel trips. However, per Mr. Amir, he was needed on this day; and the TKTs would shortly find out why.

As they meandered through the museum, Zin’s eyes were immediately drawn to a glass case containing a distinctive wooden box, very like five others she had recently helped her friends working on the dragon problem unearth in several select graveyards. The box, almost certainly made out of wood from the remnants of Noah’s Ark, was basically shaped like a shoebox, though a bit wider and flatter.

The lid of the box was raised to display a model of a stone pyramid situated in the center of an intricate maze. The maze and pyramid were also familiar to Zin who had just seen the full-sized versions of both inside the Mystery Realm in a location not too far from the glass pyramid.

“A square maze with a square pyramid in the center,” Ron observed in a hushed tone, just before Zin (also quietly) told her companions about the pyramid with the maze surrounding it in the Mystery Realm.

“We can’t steal the box,” Cecelia whispered to Ron, “so you’ll have to memorize what’s inside it.”

Ron had already received these instructions in the back of his head and had already started the task, with the three of them clearly understanding why this was necessary. When setting out to explore the pyramid in the Mystery Realm, they would need to be able to find their way through the maze, which was so complex, likely only persons with a familiarity of it would be able to reach the center.

However, the museum curator was urging them to move along. Though they were forced to oblige, The Sparrow soon snuck Ron back to the model so that he could continue to memorize the maze. Zin too returned, using a magician’s mirror trick to stay hidden.

Twenty minutes of memorization gave Ron everything he needed. Like his companions, he was fairly amazed at the detail of the maze,

which had different levels, two in some places, three in others, with up to five in some sections. The different levels were formed from rock ledges that were also flourishing with both greenery and flowering vegetation, this being basically a hedge maze and a stone maze in combination. The pyramid itself contained very few details, in fact, nothing that needed memorizing; however, the thought did pop into the brains of all three TKTs that the pyramid was named Chronos. And Zin specifically thought it might have something to do with time travel, though she didn't know where this idea had come from because it was more of a faint inkling than a pop.

“So, we're being led back into your Mystery Realm,” Cecelia remarked as they stepped through the destination window to home a short while later.

Upon their return, Zin told Dell and Mr. Amir that she knew exactly where the real maze and pyramid, represented by the museum model, were located. Both men agreed a trip to the Mystery Realm was in order, but not before a map was made from Ron's memorization of the maze. Mr. Amir also felt some research was needed, which Dell concurred was very wise, particularly because they hadn't yet received any additional direction from God regarding the maze and pyramid, other than the initial vision that had led Dell to schedule the TKTs for the Austria museum trip.

Zin had been truly amazed to see the box; but upon reflection, she didn't know why she should have been because she knew God's timing was always perfect. In this case, her prior trips into the Mystery Realm enabled her to recognize the importance of the model in the glass case, which was something she might have overlooked otherwise. *This is the Clock of the Universe ticking along*, she thought, in knowing that God has every event, everywhere, working in perfect sync with His Overall Plan.

A couple of days later, Zin found herself taking another time-travel trip. Alex was going along on this one and was happy to be staying busy while waiting for the conjure woman to make the dragon cure, this evidently being a complex task that was taking a full week. Once made, Alex would be helping Quin distribute the cure to the sick dragons. Quin already knew Zin wouldn't be helping with that task, since her plate was rather full these days.

“She knows you’re busy right now, and we can handle it,” Alex reassured Zin. Linn had even said he wanted to go along to help Quin, Jasper, Ashton, Trixie, and Alex. So this was a good-sized team. They would also be safe, particularly with three dragons along. In addition to the protectors of Quin and Ashton, namely Cuoré and Bibor in turn (who were both boys and who were respectively white and purple), a young female turquoise dragon named Jarna had recently attached herself to Trixie.

Zin had smiled when Alex mentioned Linn going along. “So,” she said, “you’ve coaxed him out of his lair for a bit of fresh air.” (This was a common joke amongst the friends, since Linn tended to stay holed up in his lab a lot.)

Alex had lately been feeling a little insecure with regard to use of his gift. However, in keeping busy doing worthwhile things, he was feeling much better. Being asked to help with a time-travel trip was a confidence-booster in and of itself. Whether or not he ended up solving any great mystery, he was still contributing, which was fulfilling. He knew quite a few boys his age that seemed content to just do an endless string of fun and mindless activities that didn’t amount to much in the world. But this was not something he wanted to do. Rather, he wanted to be out fixing problems and making improvements.

Ethan, Zin, Alex, and Chevy were all stuffing large rolls of bamboo paper, along with cans of adhesive, into pod packs to get ready to head out.

“Banners of some sort,” Chevy speculated.

“No, billboard signs,” Ethan said, before demonstrating that three strips from the rolls put together formed messages that they would be covering several billboards with on their trip to a large city some fifty-eight years into the past.

After stepping through the destination window and arriving at a point very near the first of the billboards, the TKTs simply stopped to stare, speechless, at the message currently being displayed on the board that read, “Life is too short; so have an affair.” It was nighttime, but the message was lighted, and so was very prominent.

Zin was the first one to find her voice. “Is this sponsored by a group of divorce lawyers wanting to drum up some business?”

“No,” Ethan responded, “I think it was a dating service, specifically for people wanting to have affairs.”

Chevy was shaking her head sadly as she quoted Proverbs 6:32-33. ““He who commits adultery has no sense; he who does it destroys himself. Wounds and dishonor will he get, and his disgrace will not be wiped away.””

Alex ended up reciting Proverbs 6:27-28. ““Can a man carry fire in his bosom and his clothes not be burned? Or can one walk upon hot coals and his feet not be scorched?””

The task of the TKTs was to cover six billboards located in various spots around town with the bamboo paper printed with biblical quotes, one of these actually being the first line Alex had recited.

Traveling the maze of city streets at night was fairly easy because the TKTs all had experience with using public transportation of the past such as buses, elevated trains, and subways; though former large cities were very different than the Supercities of their own time. Not only were the Supes much larger, far fewer individual vehicles such as trucks and cars were present because the Supercities and work camps relied mainly on rail systems. Traveling as a group, the TKTs were relatively safe on this trip, particularly because they were unlikely to encounter demons and gremlins; and because megahobs and nyregs had yet to come into being.

Alex’s ability to fly came in handy, though all members of the group found it fairly easy to climb and perform their task of covering the nasty messages with nicer ones.

Anyone observing the TKTs from roads and walkways below simply thought they were workers changing the billboard messages, which was often done at night in this particular city. On the few occasions when Alex was hovering to do his work, onlookers glancing up simply assumed he was dangling on a harness that wasn’t particularly visible at night.

On the same day the TKTs were on the trip to cover billboards, Zin’s mentor, Marlon Hornbuckle, was on his way to Lion Mountain to visit Linn in his lab. Like Zin, Marlon had been a magician phenom. Now only in his early thirties, he was one of the most powerful magicians in existence; though his protégé was gaining on him and had

even managed to surpass him in some aspects such as curse breaking and mirror tricks.

Marlon had lately been working with Linn to create a Trap Maze for use by Demon Hunters. A recent addition to the Underground Army, the hunters were using many tools such as crosses, bibles, and traditional weapons of ancient metals like swords and daggers that had proven over the years particularly deadly to demons. Sand dollars could expose demons by spontaneously breaking when in close proximity to them, and certain people who were gifted with the ability to sense the locations of the creatures were working with the hunters. Linn had recently developed a Demon Repellant that was proving useful. The Trap Maze would be a way of luring in some of the wilier demons that tended to hide instead of coming out into the open, including ones possessing people. The size of the trap didn't need to be large, since demons didn't hold much actual matter and instead were composed mainly of evil energy. Also, applying pod technology was easy. Roughly the size and shape of two decks of cards put together, the trap would be capable of holding dozens of demons, which would benefit hunters on longer trips; and the maze design would help keep the creatures largely separated to prevent them from fighting one another.

In the simplest terms, the trap contained a sort of magnet capable of piquing the curiosity of the demons who would be irresistibly drawn to it to become trapped in the maze once they entered. Working on this project for the past month, Linn finally had a prototype ready; and Marlon was taking it back to the Underground Army for testing, from which they would likely end up making a few tweaks before asking the genies to multiply the device for widespread use amongst the hunters. Although many demons had been killed in the uprisings, it was an easy task for Satan and his followers to create new ones; and so God's children had to continue to be diligent and proactive in their efforts to keep evil in check. After all, the Endtimes could still be thousands of years away; and human beings needed to find ways to survive in the meantime.

Two days following the billboard trip found Zin and Chevy heading out again as TKTs on an afternoon excursion, this time with Cecelia who declared, "Girl Power, at its best!" upon discovering who her teammates were.

Going only about two months back in time, they ended up in Tasmania, very near a sorcerers' den situated in a cave, which they infiltrated with ease, Zin by using mirror tricks, Chevy with a hairy vetch perched on her shoulder, and The Sparrow simply by use of her natural gift. Wearing rose-colored glasses, the girls could see each other.

Once inside, they set about liberating a few newer tech devices. The sorcerers were always working on things like the Ring of Truth that could force others to tell the truth, and weapons like the flame flutes. Even with two sorcerers present in the den, the task of the TKTs was pretty easy, particularly because one of the men was napping on a couch and the other, engrossed in his work, seemed largely oblivious to things disappearing from, very nearly, right under his nose.

The girls were mainly on a weapons hunt on this day, and Chevy knew exactly what to take and what to leave. Though she had a large pod pack, she didn't need to fill it because the godly already had samples of many of the items in the den. Zin and Cecelia were there primarily for back up; though upon receiving a nod from Chevy, Zin did procure a large disc-shaped device, which she stored in her own pack. Quite a few godly weapons were strewn about the den, the sorcerers having acquired them in the spring when the Supercity uprisings occurred worldwide. These, the girls didn't take, in knowing that many hundreds of color, music, and light weapons had been left behind during the outpourings of the cities. Not nearly as creative and clever as magicians, the sorcerers likely wouldn't be able to duplicate the weapons with any success. Also, being largely impatient and often lazy, the ungodly weren't likely to put in the hours upon hours of training needed to master use of these weapons. So it little mattered that the sorcerers and their subordinates had them in their possession.

Chevy shook her head when Cecelia pointed to a mini version of a flame flute. Since they already had several larger specimens, this one wouldn't be needed.

After returning to their own time, Zin invited Chevy and Cecelia, who were heading home, to her house for dinner. Since Doyle Mansion was on the way to Lion Mountain, the girls gladly accepted.

Riding airbikes on this day, they covered the roughly fifty miles in around fifteen minutes to land in the back gardens where Halli, Magsen,

and the mansion's longtime-resident puck family greeted Zin and her guests. As Pizzo and Heike went inside to help Em make dinner, Kisi and Pipac challenged Chevy and Cecelia to a game of team bean-bag toss, girls versus pucks. Since the twins were throwing just about as well as their parents these days, the guests basically didn't stand a chance, though Chevy, who could throw just about as well as any boy, did give the pucks a run for their money; except in this case, they were playing for a large bag of licorice all-sorts that Zin procured from her room as a prize for the winning team.

Inside a little while later, with the twins still munching all-sorts (and occasionally throwing them at people), the group enjoyed homemade vegetarian pizza, fried green tomatoes, and tossed salad. Halli and Magsen didn't generally have meals with the family, and were in the upstairs library reading, though they did join the people and pucks on the back porch afterwards for dessert.

While having huge banana splits, the group found themselves talking about the Endtimes, the discussions of which tended to cycle over time, but were definitely prominent of late due to a recent eclipse, blood moon, and two large hurricanes.

In this day and age, young people were always interested in the opinions of their elders. While Em was not too ancient (being only in her sixties), she had definitely lived long enough to know a thing or two. One of the things she ended up sharing really seemed to stick in Chevy's brain. "I think the events leading up to Jesus' return are going to be very subtle, and might even have already been happening."

"Why would they be subtle?" Chevy asked.

"Because Jesus Himself said He will come 'like a thief in the night,'" Em replied. "So the things leading up to His return can't be all flashy, like a countdown to a ball dropping or a missile launch."

After she explained it, the others tended to agree with her reasoning.

"So the main thing is for everyone to be prepared," Halli input. Like human beings, gryphons also didn't know when Jesus would come again; but most magical creatures did know that it could happen at any moment. And so it was important for as many as possible to be saved as soon as possible.

Cecelia had been looking in her bible for a specific passage, 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17, which she read to her friends. "For the Lord

himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord.”

“Some people don't believe in the rapture,” Zin slowly mused.

“Why not?” Chevy wanted to know.

“Because the word, rapture, isn't in the bible,” Cecelia offered.

“Not in any of the translations?” Chevy asked.

“I don't think so,” Cecelia replied.

“But if it's described in the bible,” Chevy said, “no matter what name people give to it, how can they deny it?”

“I think when people debate the rapture,” Em responded, “the question is not necessarily *if* it will happen, but *when* in the sequence of events. And maybe what form it will take. Some believe it will happen before the Great Tribulation; some say after. And we don't exactly know how we will be transformed when we're caught up with Jesus. I think some of the confusion stems from the fact that the bible is not exactly in order as far as how we think of time; and it's mysterious, just like time itself.”

As they were pondering this, Magsen suggested, “For the things that are mysterious, just pray and ask the Holy Spirit to help you understand. But keep in mind that a lot of things related to the Endtimes are meant to remain a mystery until they actually happen.”

“And no matter what we speculate or debate about symbolic and mysterious things,” Em offered, “the most important thing is to accept Christ, and repent of our sins because He is faithful to forgive us; and then we are forever part of His family.”

Cecelia and Chevy left for home shortly after this.

Three days after the visit to the sorcerers' den in Tasmania, Zin found herself in a duel with Tanner who caught her alone out on her airbike in a secluded stretch of countryside on her way home from the plantations. She had been flying low to the ground where he was hidden amongst a grouping of trees with the nyreg he had flown in on. Throwing a piece of pipe, Tanner disabled her bike, from which she was thrown. Blessedly, several bushes broke her tumbling fall.

Having dealt with Tanner successfully over several encounters so far, Zin wasn't much concerned, even with the wind knocked out of her. In accordance with classic magician-sorcerer dueling etiquette, they bowed to one another, after which, she immediately took up her usual defensive posture. Since his initial strike hadn't involved magic and therefore wasn't considered an official move, she would let him go first because this was what she was most comfortable with.

Smiling, he used his staff to transform a large rock into a charging boar, which Zin simply sidestepped then hid from using a mirror trick. With the time limit on the boar set at a mere thirty seconds, there wasn't much danger that the creature would be able to locate her to charge again before the three-minute time limit of her mirror trick ended.

Although he had never bested her before, Tanner had recently sought advice from an older sorcerer who was extremely proficient in dueling. As a counter to the mirror trick, using a Shroud Pellet from his pocket, he produced a thick cloud overhead that completely shut out the light for a wide area. Since the mirror tricks of magicians depended on at least a small amount light being present, this ended Zin's trick earlier than she had anticipated, forcing her to make her next move without having much time to think.

As she turned half of the thick overhead cloud into six puffy-but-tough armed warriors to charge at Tanner, she was somewhat surprised when he tossed out a heat bomb (that looked like a large glowing green peach pit) to dry up the cloud warriors in less than five seconds, leaving only a few wisps of steam behind.

His speedy move again caused Zin to have to act more swiftly than she had expected. This time, when she threw out a playing card—a three of diamonds that turned into three red-hot spears flying towards her opponent—he countered with a simple ice spell emanating from his staff that knocked the spears to the ground before they even got to within twenty feet of him.

As Zin sent two origami cranes retrieved from the hem of her jacket towards him, the cranes gaining in size as they flew, he tossed out a folded paper of his own, in the shape of a small disc, that not only dissipated her cranes as it sliced between them in midair, but also reached her with lightning speed to smack her flat on the forehead, where it remained stuck.

The paper disc was one of Tanner's more sadistic creations and was, in fact, a Mind Maze. As it made contact with her forehead, Zin immediately found her brain lost in a series of glistening white corridors, of which there was no end in sight. Fully under the power of the Mind Maze and having no control over her body, she fell to her knees. In such a state, Tanner would easily be able to kill her.

Although her brain was fighting to free itself, she was only able to manage a few vague thoughts, one of which was that she should simply pray, since she couldn't do anything else at present. And, in a foggy sort of way, her mind did call out to the Father, just as her body started to fall forwards.

Suddenly, Zin found herself lifted up by something large that had grabbed her by the shoulders of her jacket. The jolt of being lifted seemed to break some of the spell assaulting her brain. Her hands fumbling at her forehead, she managed to free herself from the paper disc, which she hastened to crumple and tear in half to deactivate it before dropping it to the earth.

Her first thought was that Magsen had managed to save her; however, in glancing up, she realized that a rookh had hold of her, this being none other than Westerwing, whom she was very familiar with.

Most rookhs didn't have names, but Westerwing did because of a special skill he possessed—that of being able to fly forty times faster when traveling west than in any other direction. Rookhs also generally didn't have home bases, but Westerwing tended to stay in the vicinity of Lion Mountain where he often carried Ethan and Alex around, as well as Cecelia, Jasper, and Trixie on occasion.

After dropping Zin off at Doyle Mansion, Westerwing returned to the scene of the duel to pick up the airbike, which had folded itself to pocket size; but since the eyesight of rookhs was very good, he managed to find it fairly easily in the brushy area. Tanner and his nyreg were already on their way home, and so weren't there to hinder him. Not that Westerwing would have much minded if they had been there, since he had the ability to outrun them.

By the time Westerwing delivered the airbike to Zin, she had collected herself enough to be able to thank him. Simply giving her a short nod, the rookh immediately took off to head home to Lion Mountain.

In her bedroom later, Zin felt incredibly humbled; and in reflection, she decided that the defeat was actually a good thing, because it had taught her a valuable lesson. She had felt very confident when beginning the duel, but she now realized that her self-reliance actually stemmed from a certain amount of pride in having never been defeated by Tanner. Being overly self-reliant was never wise and was actually sinful, particularly as related to pride, which God absolutely hates. *I have to rely entirely on God, because I have no power at all without Him*, she reminded herself.

Thinking over the moves of the duel, she also realized that she was pretty much using her same old bag of tricks. *So it's time for something new*, she decided.

Tanner was pretty upset these days because nothing he was doing seemed to be turning out right. Not only had a rookh just deprived him of the best opportunity he might ever have of permanently getting rid of his arch rival, he had recently lost several battles against the group trying to heal the dragons. Plus, he had lately started to get the feeling that his parents and brother might be scheming against him. In misusing his gifts, Tanner was serving Satan. If he had chosen to recognize this, which many people on the side of evil don't, he might have wondered why the devil wasn't taking much notice of him or helping him in any way. The answer was simple: Satan cares nothing about his subjects. Since most are already bound for hell and are unlikely to convert, he doesn't need to give them any special treatment, which is why he often chooses not to spare them from devastating illnesses, crippling accidents, natural disasters, and other such horrors.

In addition to being upset, Tanner was confused from having noticed that Zin, as she was carried away by the rookh, had somehow managed to rid herself of the Mind Maze, which she shouldn't have been able to shake off. Once the disc made skin contact, it should have stayed completely stuck and activated for seventy-two hours straight based on the way he had designed it. *Only a sorcerer should have been able to counter the Mind Maze, so how did she do it?* he wondered. *Could she be more powerful than any other magician that ever lived, and half the sorcerers too, to the extent that she can just easily throw off a powerful device like the Mind Maze?*

Surely not, his brain answered after a few moments' thought.

After more contemplation, he ended up deciding that there must have been some flaw in his design. It was only the second Mind Maze he had ever made. Being a complex project, he must have simply made a mistake somewhere along the way. *Like maybe the time limit ended up being seventy-two seconds, instead of seventy-two hours.* Whatever the case, he would simply have to continue to look for new ways to win a duel against her because he was never going to give up.

If we take a moment to look in on Ethan's older self, we find him sending out a team of TKTs on a mission over a hundred and fifty years into the past to make sure that the maze in the box was placed in the right museum in Austria. The model had actually been made by the older Ron who had taken up building dioramas in his mid-thirties. Using one of the five boxes found in the past in the graveyards, he had spent nearly a year making the model of the pyramid and maze that he knew was important to get just right for his younger self to memorize. The TKTs, in costume and speaking fluent German, donated the box to the museum, along with a printed story, framed up, describing the maze and pyramid as having once existed in the gardens on the grounds of a castle in Austria that had been destroyed in WWII. The museum was happy to have the model, and didn't at all question or doubt the authenticity of the story, since there were many beautiful castles and gardens in Austria, quite a few of which had been destroyed during WWII.

Back in their own time, the TKTs returned their garb to the costume depot where Mr. Siggerino was still in charge, and where Patty and Petunia were still enjoying their creative work, which was being helped along by a lady bigfoot who was truly a master of zippers, buttons, linings, embroidery, and other such details.

The older Ethan sent another team out just after the Austria travelers returned. The second team ended up in Supercity Nine where they made their way to the home of Tanner, who was just a young boy at the time. The TKTs didn't see Tanner, who was in school; instead, they paid a brief visit to his mother, who was given a blessed diamond, produced by a Diamond Girl.

Mrs. Ellison at the time was newly pregnant with Patrick. Since hardly any of the elite families of the Supercities had more than one child, she was seriously thinking of aborting him. However, the

blessing the diamond bestowed on her ended up being the continued life of her second son. The moment her fingers touched the stone, she understood clearly that the child she was carrying was fully a human being, with a soul, and was not just something that could be thrown away like trash. Not only that, but she suddenly knew his name. “Patrick,” she breathed, as the realization hit her.

The TKTs didn’t tell Mrs. Ellison that Patrick would be gifted, but they did tell her that God loved both her and her unborn child very much. At the time, this was an incredibly foreign concept to Mrs. Ellison, who was a longstanding atheist and who would continue to be so for many years to come. However, in observing as the boys grew that her younger son had qualities quite different than his brother, she had recently started thinking about investigating this thing called Christianity, particularly now that the laws in the Supes had relaxed slightly with regard to things like bibles and religious gatherings. But even more than this, the family was thinking of moving out of the city, possibly to a farm or ranch somewhere. Since Tanner was nearly an adult and would be on his own soon, this seemed like the right time to make a big change. Mr. and Mrs. Ellison hadn’t told Tanner of their plans, and likely wouldn’t until they were just about ready to move; but Mrs. Ellison was just about to share the information with Patrick, who she hoped would be receptive to the idea of moving.

Chapter Five

Cliff Dwellers

A week later, Zin was at Netherwind to pay a visit to her mentor when she happened to run into Alex, who was just about to head out on a time-travel trip. He was excited to tell her that the dragons were all well again; and Ashton, who had had a bit of a scare with illness himself in recent days, was also well and healed. “He’ll be leaving in about a week,” Alex said. While Zin had already heard all of this from having had a walnut conversation with Quin, she listened politely because Alex seemed so eager to tell it.

Because they were alone, with no one else within earshot, Alex also shared with Zin something shocking that she did not yet know (because Quin had felt a need to be careful when using the walnut). Evidently, Heather, the Stone Hunter that had seemingly been after Ashton, was actually on their side. Alex also warned Zin not to let the information slip to too many people, so that Heather could stay safe while continuing to pretend to be a part of Tanner’s little clique and while carrying on working with the Guild of Hunters. “Ashton evidently knew all along,” Alex related.

After pondering this new information for a few moments, Zin suggested, “Maybe he knows Heather in the future.”

“He’s not likely to tell us if he does,” Alex said. “He’s being pretty careful about what he says, as all TKTs should be.”

Zin was nodding as Alex also related something interesting he had just discovered about Devin, from Heather providing the information. “He can control the poison-grit part of his gift. He doesn’t have to produce the grits or inject people with them.”

Once injected, even a single grit would eventually work its way to a person’s heart and cause death. This was what had nearly happened to Ashton, except that a Diamond Girl from the future had turned up to save him using her shield gift to remove the grit from his body just in time.

“Devin has to make skin contact to inject,” Alex warned. “So if he ever gets hold of you, just don’t let him hold on too long. If you’re wearing your sapphire, you’ll probably be okay with brief contact.”

Zin always did wear the ring her mother had given her that was set with a shield sapphire produced by Gavin McWhirter, who was Henning’s mentor. However, it suddenly occurred to her that the ring hadn’t at all protected her from Tanner’s Mind Maze. *That must have been a pretty powerful creation*, she thought, which was a little hard to believe of what had appeared to be simply a folded piece of paper. But our eyes and perceptions can definitely fool us, particularly with regard to things that are evil and wholly connected to Satan, who is the Great Deceiver.

Heather had also disclosed that anyone using her shroud sapphires could be exposed by rose-colored glasses.

“And probably by my Reveal Powder too,” Zin suddenly thought. This was something she frequently used to expose gremlins. Most recently, she had used it to reveal the mezzanine’s invisible door to the Mystery Realm.

“But you’d have to be close to use the powder,” Alex countered. “The glasses can work from farther away. I have an extra pair if you need them.”

“I have some,” Zin replied. “Thanks anyway.”

As Alex hurried off to the costume depot to get ready for his trip, he said goodbye using the triangular hand gesture that Ashton had brought with him from the future and that was starting to catch on in the here and now amongst various groups of friends, not only as a symbol of greeting and farewell, but also of general well wishes like “safe journey” and “many blessings.”

The TKTs this time were a group of four consisting of Muriel, Alex, Monte, and Cecelia. Having already been prepped by a research partner earlier in the day, they were now being outfitted in clothing similar to the garb worn by early Native Americans, though not decorative, but more of a plain variety that would simply be functional for fairly rugged outdoor conditions.

Alex was particularly excited about this trip because it involved a great historical mystery. To this day, no one knew exactly what had happened to the Anasazi peoples of what would eventually be known as

the Four Corners Region of the United States, referring to where the corners of Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, and Utah all meet. Specifically, the time travelers ended up in the area that would eventually become Mesa Verde, Colorado. No language specialist was along on the mission because the group wouldn't be having a lot of contact with the people of the area. In fact, they would be keeping to an isolated spot a ways outside of a settlement comprised mainly of cliff dwellings.

The TKTs themselves, having arrived in a late-afternoon setting, were staying in a widened rock crevice in a series of cliffs adjacent to the settlement to remain hidden until a certain time when they would be called upon to act per God's instructions. Their job on this trip was not to discover what had happened to these artistic and industrious peoples that had seemed to just vanish hundreds of years ago, leaving behind nearly all of their belongings, including the intricate and exquisitely-designed black-on-white pottery common to the area. Many baskets were also left behind, but most didn't survive the elements as well as the pottery did.

While waiting for their instructions, the TKTs speculated as to why the Anasazi might have left their homes, seemingly abruptly, since so many of their belongings were left behind.

"Maybe an illness like a plague," Muriel suggested.

"Or a drought or a period of long winters that wouldn't allow them to grow enough food or raise livestock," Cecelia input.

"More aggressive peoples might have moved into the area," Alex thought to say, "basically forcing the Anasazi to leave."

"Maybe they just felt it was time to move on, like they got restless," Monte offered, "and they couldn't take a lot of things with them because they knew it was going to be a long journey."

"Since there's no record of what happened to them as a whole" Alex said, "maybe they left in little groups and just joined other cultures in bits and pieces."

"Some might not have survived because of storms or maybe from dying of exposure in the desert," Monte added.

The TKTs had traveled to the late 1200s, nearly eight hundred years into the past. Sometime in the next few decades, the Anasazi people would abandon their homes and belongings, and basically disappear,

giving rise to the mystery still puzzling modern experts. The research partner that had prepped them had said there was evidence some of the people had traveled south. “Probably to avoid harsh winters,” the research partner had speculated.

Dell and Mr. Amir had thought of sending the Truth Key with the team, since the magical sphere with the ability to uncover truth probably could have revealed the answer as to what happened to the Anasazi. However, since the mission didn’t have to do with the mystery, they decided against this strategy, particularly since God had not sanctioned anything related to their curiosity. The TKTs were to save a person from harm, nothing more. However, because Dell and Mr. Amir both had gotten the message that Alex needed to be on the trip, perhaps God did intend the time travelers to learn at least something related to the mystery.

As far as who the team was to save was still something of a mystery, though Alex was getting the idea that the event would happen the next day, and not too far from their present location. While they were waiting, they ventured out onto cliff ledges, where Muriel amused herself by talking to a magpie, a mule deer, and a flock of turkey vultures. While she didn’t glean any useful information from her new friends, she did have fun relating to others what the creatures were telling her because some of it was highly amusing. “The rock that you’re sitting on was just peed on by a coyote,” Muriel told Monte.

At sundown, they had a meal together and unpacked their bedrolls. The evening air was somewhat crisp, and so they were glad for the thermal feature of their bedrolls that would keep them warm throughout the night.

Midmorning the next day, a young girl walking along the edge of a cliff very near where the TKTs had camped lost her footing and toppled from the clifftop. Stationed below the scene in preparation for this exact event, Alex was able to fly up and catch her, thus saving her from the fall.

As they landed on the ground, taken completely aback, the girl simply stared at him. Alex too didn’t know what to say, particularly in not knowing the girl’s language; so he instead simply smiled and made the triangular hand gesture, before swiftly trotting off to meet the rest of

the TKTs who were already heading toward the position of the destination window.

The girl smiled and waved as Alex headed off into the brush. Not only had he saved her, she also believed he was a friend because the triangle was a common shape for the area, used for such things as arrowheads and cultivating tools as well as in the designs for pottery, woven blankets, and the like.

On their way to the window, when Cecelia spotted a lone demon on a plateau about a mile in the distance, Monte used a rock roughly the size of a grapefruit to take the beast out with one hit. Surprised to see a demon out in the open in this time period, using spyglasses, the TKTs scanned the area for others. They found none and encountered no additional surprises as they reached the position of the window where they stepped through one by one.

Unknown to the TKTs, both the rescue of the girl and the demon hit had been witnessed by two elders of the girl's village. Many of the Anasazi already knew they were going to have to leave their homes, for several reasons including ongoing drought and long winters that equaled shorter growing seasons. However, many had been reluctant to leave. Still others were seeking spiritual guidance as to where to go and what to take, or not take, with them. The two elders that had observed the TKTs took what they saw as signs. Both the flying boy and the rock thrown a superhuman distance meant they should travel light, taking only the bare necessities with them. They could make pottery, tools, and such when they reached their new home. When the flock of buzzards Muriel had conversed with took off all at once and headed south, the elders thought this meant they should also head in that direction in search of their new home.

Several days after this, not too far from where Alex had saved the girl, the two elders witnessed another incredible sight.

Another group of TKTs had arrived, sent by the older Ethan. This team was comprised of three Demon Hunters (two men and one woman) who were sent to clean out an early version of a Demon Pocket. Though not as complex as later versions, the evil realm was still home to forty demons, and was designed with a luring factor that could cause certain human beings to be drawn into it. Armed with a Demon Magnet, the TKTs ended up being the ones doing the luring, out rather than in; and

they managed to reach all forty that came streaming out basically single file and close together. The Demon Hunters hadn't used a Trap Maze because they didn't want to transport the demons through time. However, the female hunter had the ability to call unicorns, one of which appeared instantly to her summons, lighting up for only about two seconds in order to dissipate the demon pack that appeared to simply melt away, with any small remnants of the nasty creatures carried off on the desert breezes.

The unicorn was swifter and quieter as a means of killing a group of demons than use of magical weapons would have been. The brilliant creature disappeared less than ten seconds after it arrived. Finished with their task, and unaware that they were being observed, the Demon Hunters stepped through the destination window, appearing to simply disappear one by one as though in swift blinks.

The elders took this incredible sight as another sign, one meaning that bright things were on the horizon for them and that they would be able to triumph over evil in their new lives, and in a swift fashion, much like the blink of an eye.

The Anasazi over the next several years ended up leaving in stages rather than all at once. While each group chose its own path, most ended up heading south.

Alex had always tended to use his gift in a rather eager fashion, to the point that if he wasn't solving mysteries hand over fist, he ended up worrying that he wasn't doing enough. However, he had recently had a revelation with regard to his gift: Not only were some mysteries meant to remain as such; but also, he was supposed to be a guardian of some of these, like the one involving the Anasazi. He was pretty sure he knew why they left their homes and belongings, the true answer involving much more than drought, long winters, and several sightings of supernatural occurrences. However, he also knew he wasn't supposed to disclose the truth; at least, not right now. And so he didn't say anything to Dell or Mr. Amir when they looked questioningly at him, other than telling them about the save of the young girl, and about Monte taking out the demon.

Just as the TKTs were returning, Quin's Grandma Vini was heading out on a time-travel trip of her own; but she was not using Laurelstone's arbor window. Being fully sanctified and fully connected to her

personal unicorn, she simply took herself on the trip, disappearing in a small flash of light from a spot on the grounds of the plantations very near Heritage Oak.

She arrived barely three months back in time, to a quarry roughly a hundred miles south of Supercity Six in Texas. With the Supes centralizing after the uprisings (a necessary event due to the roughly ninety percent drop in population), many outlying work camps had been abandoned, including this quarry in which many people who had escaped enslavement in the cities and camps were now establishing their own self-sustaining community, with many building their homes actually into the rocky cliffs formed by the massive pit.

The sorcerers were unlikely to try to retake this particular quarry because two firebirds and several wind horses were already guarding it, along with four bigfoot families in the area that were helping the people with some of the construction. In addition to being unable to stop a lot of new settlements from forming, the sorcerers had been unable to collect taxes because the self-sustaining communities were no longer recognizing many of the corrupt laws that had been forced upon them in the past. Plus, now operating more out in the open, the Underground Army would continue to address injustices. The Supercities could have all the rules they liked, but if they started imposing them on others, they would be countered. In truth, with the sorcerers' military depleted, along with creatures like megahobs and nyregs, the Council of Twos (the governing body made up of two sorcerers from each Supercity) had been unable to enforce much of anything of late. Nor did they want to because this would mean a lot of workers remaining in the cities would also want to leave. They could no longer treat people like slaves and expect to keep city operations up and running; and so, the powers that be had acquiesced, and were now treating people more fairly, even if some of the sorcerers and elites didn't like it much.

Auto-writing had led Vini on this quest to the quarry, and she knew exactly what she needed to do. Seeking out one of the religious leaders of the community, who was a false prophet, she led him away from the bustle of the various building sites and into a wilderness area where she confronted him with regard to many of his false teachings. The man was actively serving Satan, in mixing truth with lies, which was how

cults often formed. And this was exactly what was happening in this case—the man was gathering followers for a cult.

Many of the leaders of these dangerous sects were either mentally ill or power hungry, the latter being true in this instance. The man was also dangerous, to the point that he and a couple of his henchmen were more than willing to murder anyone who disagreed with them. One such murder was about to occur in Vini's present, which was why she had gone back three months, to remove him from power before he could plant a lot of his wicked ideology into people's brains. Without this person at the helm, several godly leaders in the community would be able to steer people right, leading them to the actual truth, in other words, "the Way, and the Truth, and the Life," as per John 14:6.

The man at first laughed at Vini. However, upon realizing that she was dead serious, he decided to kill her. Drawing a knife from his vest, he was very surprised to discover himself relieved of it almost the instant his hand touched it. (Unicorns can be very fast in their actions.) The dagger now lay on the ground with the stunned man simply staring at it, but only for a few moments before becoming enraged at the bravado of this woman, whom he then tried to throttle. However, upon reaching out his hands, he could only watch in horror as they melted away in front of them, the rest of his body quickly following suit from exposure to the bright flash of unicorn light that Vini's body had emitted, pretty much involuntarily as a defense mechanism against the attack. *Such a shame*, she thought, in knowing that God never wants anyone to die unsaved. She then swiftly returned to her own time.

In addition to saving many people of the quarry community from the dangers of the cult, Vini's visit had another impact because the presence of a unicorn often allows people to see the good in bad situation, acting as a natural counter to ugly thoughts and even depression. Simply by being in the area, Vini lightened the spirits of many, giving them not only a sense of peace and happiness, but also making them receptive to the correct biblical teachings of the true and honest leaders of the community.

Chapter Six

Dragons and Foo Dogs

October began with crisp air and a slight lull in the activities of the TKTs. Dell and Mr. Amir had both gotten the message that the trip into the Mystery Realm to investigate the maze and stone pyramid should be delayed, because something else important needed to happen before doing this. And so, the pair was simply praying, while waiting for more direction as to the specifics and exact timing.

Fairly caught up with magical projects and schoolwork for a while, Zin aboard Magsen was taking an afternoon trip to visit Linn at his lab on Lion Mountain. Quin was in the lab, sitting in Linn's lap, and the two were kissing as Zin walked in. This was a new development in the last week or so—Quin and Linn officially becoming boyfriend and girlfriend—though many of their acquaintance had long known this was inevitable. Seeing the pair, Zin thought of Luis for some reason.

As Zin cleared her throat to announce her arrival, Quin quickly popped up out of Linn's lap, after which, she left to check on a couple of dragons in Europe, as Linn busied himself at his work table that was strewn with several of the devices the TKTs had taken from the sorcerers' den in Tasmania. He had been studying the items in order to learn a few things to help the Underground Army and the W'eeppers (the navy of the godly) continue to stay one step ahead of their enemies.

Chevy and Trixie entered the lab a few moments later, having just arrived back from training at the plantations. Taking an interest in the various sorcerer devices, before either Chevy or Linn could stop them, Zin and Trixie ended up putting on a pair of matching wrist cuffs that were gray in color, rubbery, and somewhat heavy for their size of roughly three inches wide and about half an inch thick.

Chevy's slightly-too-late "Don't do that!" in combination with Linn's "Wait, stop!" overshadowed the clicks of the locking mechanisms as the bands tightly fastened themselves to the girls' wrists.

Zin's "What?" and Trixie's simultaneous "Why?" were drowned out by Chevy's loud "Oh no!" that was accompanied by Linn's exasperated "I can't unlock those!"

Since no pain was immediately felt, Trixie and Zin were very confused as to the seriousness of the problem, but soon became appropriately worried as Chevy said, "The cuffs create some kind of neural connection between the wearers."

"They were probably designed to keep prisoners from escaping," Linn suggested. "If one cuff is attached to the possible escapee and the other to a guard, the prisoner would have virtually no chance of escaping, aside from cutting off his or her arm."

"Or two prisoners might just be attached together for punishment," Chevy input.

"The cuffs have a ten-foot proximity feature," Linn said, "so you'll have to stay within ten feet of each other."

"Okay...but what do you mean 'neural connection'?" Trixie asked, since she still didn't understand what was going on. Zin was equally perplexed.

"You'll feel each other's pain, abrupt movements, bumps, and scrapes," Linn replied.

As one might flick at a fly with a finger, Chevy then proceeded to flick Zin hard on the back of her hand, to which both Zin and Trixie cried, "Ow!" as both girls felt the strike.

A moment later came another simultaneous "Ow!" as Trixie caught her hip on the sharp corner of the table.

Both cuff wearers were now starting to panic somewhat, Zin being very red in the face and having some difficulty breathing, and Trixie feeling like she might faint at any moment.

"Calm down," Chevy commanded, "and sit down."

As the bound pair complied, Linn tried to reassure them. "I'm close to working out the lock, but I think it will take a couple of days. So you'll just have to manage in the meantime."

"What about the ten-foot limit?" Trixie wanted to know. "What happens if we don't maintain it?"

"A lot of pain," Chevy warned.

At Linn's suggestion, Zin and Trixie performed a cautious test by rising and walking slowly away from each other. At a mere millimeter

past a ten-foot separation, both felt excruciatingly-sharp pains in their heads, along with waves of nausea sweeping over them. In their haste to get close to one another again and end the pain, the girls actually bumped into each other.

“Because the mind is so powerful,” Linn said, “you’ll not only feel each other’s pain, you’ll probably experience the same injuries like sprained ankles, cuts, and bruises. So you’ll have to be careful until I can get this sorted out.”

With regard to possible wounds, Zin’s sapphire ring and the shield dime that Trixie was carrying in her pocket could do nothing to help because this malice was working in their bodies from the inside out, not the other way around.

As Zin and Trixie were nodding their understanding, Linn added, “You might even be able to read each other’s thoughts with the cuffs on, the longer you wear them. This is all new technology, so I don’t know; but I wouldn’t rule it out.”

Wide-eyed, the trapped pair found this information just as unsettling as the idea of dual physical injury. Zin was especially upset over their predicament because escaping from cuffs was usually easy for magicians. Sadly, due to the power of this particular sorcerer creation, she would not be able to.

“You might want to hold hands until you get used to the ten-foot thing,” Chevy suggested.

Both Zin and Trixie thought this a sensible idea, and so they clasped hands to walk outside and head to Trixie’s home (not too far from the lab) to tell her parents what had happened. Magsen, tagging along, was practically horrified as the situation was explained to her. She would, of course, carry both girls around until they were unlinked because it would be too hard to stay within ten feet of each other if Trixie rode separately on a rookh or an airbike. (By this time, Jarna had gone back to the volcano in which she liked to sleep and was no longer carrying Trixie around.)

At the Greenspell house, it was decided that Trixie would go home with Zin, this being the more sensible choice due to the chaos Trixie’s twin toddler-age brothers tended to create at her house.

Magsen then took the pair to Doyle Mansion where Zin told her mother what had happened. “Linn is on the case,” Zin said, “but it will probably be a couple of days until he can figure out the lock.”

Em firmly decided the girls would have to stay confined to the estate, and not venture out anywhere else. Trixie was scheduled for a time-travel trip the next day. Informed of the cuff situation, Dell would be finding a substitute.

The girls got used to the ten-foot limit rather quickly, and so didn’t have to cling to one another all of the time, though they did feel incredibly cooped up, even when taking a walk before dinner in the sprawling gardens surrounding the mansion. When Zin tried to work on something in her lab after dinner, Trixie was instantly bored; and so the girls ended up working a jigsaw puzzle with Heike and Kisi. At night, Em wheeled a folding bed into her daughter’s bedroom, placing it right up against Zin’s four-poster bed.

Trixie and Zin didn’t end up being able to read one another’s thoughts, but they did get general feelings from each other—like when one was tired or frustrated, the other also became so. So too were things like hunger and distraction transferred. All in all, the situation was destined to be a little grating, but they would just have to endure until they could be unlocked.

Meanwhile, looking in on the older Ethan, we find him setting out with Michele, Ashton, and Quin’s older self on a rather urgent time-travel trip. They didn’t use the stained glass window in Laurelstone because the entire manor house had just been destroyed.

The TKTs were on their way to a stone-and-timber lodge in a remote area of Africa’s Great Rift Valley, this being the site of one of the other three time-travel portals known to exist in the world. Of the other two, one was located on Lion Mountain in the home of Astrid (no last name) who was the leader of the large mountain settlement, and the other portal was inside of the cave in the foothills of the Himalayas where the conjure woman lived.

With Ethan doubling up with Ashton on Bibor, and Michele riding behind Quin on Cuoré, they soon landed in Africa outside of the lodge, which they entered to access the portal that was in the form of a large free-standing mirror set into a stone frame elaborately carved with climbing roses.

The dragons were not going with them. From past escapades, the TKTs had learned that dragons suffered side effects (nausea and dizziness affecting them for days) when shapeshifting from dove form to dragon form after passing through time-travel portals. Not only was the lodge not capable of handling a full-sized dragon, the portal itself couldn't accommodate one. (Only the one in the cave in the Himalayas was of the right size to fit a dragon.) However, while Bibor and Cuoré would be staying behind, the TKTs were planning to locate them in the past to request assistance on this mission.

The mirror already displayed the correct destination and time—that of the twin plantations two days before Laurelstone's destruction—so Ethan didn't need to use the time-setter he had brought, just in case he might need it. To activate the portal, they used a new version of the Time Key, one cube shaped and roughly one-fourth the size of the original that was singular and specific to the arbor window, whereas, several Time Cubes were currently in existence and could be used on any of the four portals.

The Laurelstone of two days into the future had been destroyed by huge flocks of false dragons, sometimes known as falsies or flash dragons, which were similar to real dragons in appearance, except for being smaller and limited in color to a range of rather sad-looking greens, unlike the vibrant and much-varied colors and shades of true dragons. Also, the falsies lacked feathers, which real dragons always had in abundance. In a similar manner as to how megahobs and nyregs had come into being, the sorcerers (under the direction of Satan) had created these beasts, which had become quite a problem in the past couple of decades as far as their numbers and their malice. In addition to assaulting the manor house with streams of flame and pelting fireballs, the creatures had used suicide crashes, basically running at high speed over and over again into the house, which eventually caused the walls to crumble. But even before that, they had shattered all of the magical stained glass windows, both in the house and in Laurelstone's small separate chapel.

Upon arriving at their destination, the TKTs immediately called on the versions of Cuoré and Bibor in this time. In knowing the protectors not to have been involved in anything all that important two days previous, Quin and Ashton felt it was safe to engage the pair for this

mission. Quickly explaining that they needed as many dragons as possible to come to the plantations, and why this was necessary, the TKTs then simply waited—a somewhat hard thing to do in knowing what was set to happen in just two days' time.

From concentrations inside various volcanoes and caves in Africa, Bibor and Cuoré roused over two hundred dragons, all of which streaked at high speed to the plantations. To onlookers below, the path of their flight looked like an enormous rainbow-colored highway in the sky.

Once the splendid group arrived, Cuoré and Bibor by thought conveyed the impending danger to the two-day-previous versions of Quin and Ashton, which allowed the pair to take action, in this case, rallying the Underground Army, specifically, troops of mirror cannon specialists and sky-impact flute users, who staged themselves at various strategic locations around the twin plantations in order to help the dragons defend the properties once the flocks of falsies arrived.

The TKTs didn't wait for the battle to happen; they had done what God had told them to do. The rest would be up to the people and dragons of the past.

So Ethan, Quin, Michele, and Ashton simply took a deep breath before stepping back through the destination window to home, where they found Laurelstone Manor safe and sound, along with Netherwind, which had just been coming under attack when the TKTs left. Other structures on the properties had suffered some damages, though much of this was minor considering what the plantations had just been through. Two greenhouses and a barn were going to need to be rebuilt. Remarkably, no life was lost, other than roughly a thousand flash dragons, most of which had been dealt with by this time. Lydu and Naya were busy putting out any remaining fires around the properties. Michele helped smother several of these by moving earth from some of the farm fields. The two hundred dragons were still there. About thirty would be staying to keep watch for any lingering falsies or new arrivals. The rest would be returning to the volcanoes and caves in which they liked to sleep.

The evil sorcerers of this time were fairly confounded. Of all of the attacks on the plantations over the years that had failed, they had felt certain this one would succeed. And now, they had lost many of their

beautiful flash dragons that took nearly four times as long to produce as nyregs.

Since the TKTs of the future were often just as busy as those of the past, we might be wondering how the older Ethan was managing to stay out of his younger self's way. The answer was simple. Very early on in his travels, Ethan had kept detailed records of not only his time travels, but also his everyday movements. Now, the older Ethan was benefitting from having done this.

Speaking of the younger Ethan, he was just heading out on an early-morning trip with Alex to a temple in China. (This was the morning after Zin and Trixie had gotten hooked together the previous afternoon.) The two other members of their team were rather unexpected ones because puck trolls hardly ever time traveled. However, both Pizzo and Heike were game in this instance.

After a visit to the costume depot, Ethan and Alex stepped through the destination window with Heike and Pizzo, respectively, on their shoulders.

Arriving in the dead of night (though the moon was full and was providing a good amount of light to see by), they ended up nearly six hundred years into the past in a village very near the temple, where the pucks set about bringing to life all of the pairs of foo dogs they could find, most of which were stationed outside the entrances to people's homes and a few businesses such as an eatery and an herb shop, with one pair being from the temple. Though mostly made of stone, a few ceramic and iron varieties of these statues also existed. The pairs were always a girl and a boy in combination, and each pair had a cub, normally tucked under one paw of the female, while the male foo had a sphere representing the world under one of his paws. The cubs were awakened along with their parents and soon began wrestling and scampering about, some playing with the world spheres by batting them around to one another while leaping and doing somersaults. All in all, thirty-two adults had been awakened, which meant sixteen cubs were on the loose. A couple of gnomes who had been tending a garden nearby helped the pucks keep the youngsters corralled so that their parents could do their work, which tonight would involve protecting the temple from a group of ancient sorcerers intent on destroying the structure.

In addition to being animated, the magic of the newly-awakened foo dogs included all of the lore associated with these protective creatures; and so their power was going to be more than sufficient to accomplish the task. Since it was generally the job of female foo dogs to protect the insides of buildings, the girls entered the temple to begin patrolling while quietly humming a secret foo tune, which activated their magical powers, this being visually apparent in a misty blue glow that began seeping softly through rooms and hallways. With the interior thus protected, no sorcerers would be able to enter the large structure that was home to a number of monks, all of whom were asleep at this time. With the job of male foo dogs being to protect the exteriors of buildings, the boys took up stations in a number of outside places including porches, walkways, and even the roof, doing so using ledges above windows and doors as toeholds for their leaping climbs, since they couldn't fly. Four of the dogs used branches in a similar manner to climb into trees to keep watch for the approach of the unfriendlies. The boys then began magical murmuring, which manifested itself visually in patches of thick fog of pinkish hues floating about on currents of night air.

The foo dogs on the roof accidentally awakened a Chinese dragon, mainly pale gold in color, who often liked to sleep on top of the three-story structure that also had attic and basement spaces. Some dragons when disturbed from sleep ended up being cranky. This was not the case with Jinhai, who was delighted to find some action on this lovely full-moon night. Not only that, but he was thrilled to meet Alex, who had flown up to nearly roof level and was hovering to help the foo dogs keep watch for the approach of the sorcerers. Lifting off from his favorite spot on the building and gliding over to the boy's position, Jinhai scrolled around Alex's body in a kind of floaty wrapping fashion while nodding admiringly and issuing a thought message to his new friend. *Nice, very nice, young man. You've learned our secret, and you've made nice work of it for yourself.*

Alex, in turn, sent a thought message back. *Thank you for the compliment. We're here because the temple is in danger from sorcerers that are coming to destroy it. Will you help us when they arrive?*

Now this did make Jinhai cranky because he hated most sorcerers, particularly the way they were making the world a more evil place. He

most certainly would help the humans and foo dogs protect the temple. And he probably could have done this by himself against four powerful sorcerers; except, in this case, eight ended up showing up, which meant the foo dogs and people were definitely going to be a help and a blessing to the golden dragon.

Surrounding the temple, the sorcerers first linked the power of their staffs by issuing a beam of green light from each that sought out the other beams to join up and form a large circle of light around the temple. The energy emanating inward from this green circle was intended to cause the temple to shake violently and eventually crumble, as though struck by a powerful earthquake. When nothing happened after a minute or so, the sorcerers were very perplexed.

Not only had the blue-glow humming power of the girl foo dogs made the innards of the wood-and-stone structure extra strong, as though reinforced by bands of thick steel, the pink-fog murmuring strength from the boys had created a similar reinforcing effect on the exterior parts of the temple.

With such protection in place, the initial efforts of the sorcerers were completely ineffectual. Just as they were turning up the volume on their beams of light, the sorcerers found themselves swiftly knocked over, one after another, by Jinhai who was traveling so fast that he looked like a golden streak of lightning circling the temple. Indeed, all eight sorcerers were downed in less than three seconds. Jinhai had been reluctant to breathe fire at his opponents because this might wake the monks. Plus, dragons didn't like to kill people (not even evil sorcerers) unless they had to.

While the circle of green light had been broken, the sorcerers had managed to hold onto their staffs. Rising, they used an incantation to set the energy levels of their staffs to a blast intensity that would be able to pummel the sides of building like huge cannonballs might. Alex and Ethan were armed with flutes, but wouldn't end up needing to use them on this night because their new friends were fully capable of taking care of business. Before the sorcerers could get off even one blast, all eight were tackled simultaneously by the male foo dogs who also used their magical breath to put the men to sleep.

In deep slumber, from which they wouldn't awaken for twelve hours, the sorcerers (minus their staffs) were loaded onto the back of

Jinhai, who soon left to deposit his load in an uninhabited region of Eastern South America before swiftly returning to China to say goodbye to Alex and Ethan who had just returned to the village to pick up Heike and Pizzo. Because the foo dogs were planning to continue to help the dragon guard the temple, the pucks wouldn't be settling the statues back to an unanimated state. The parents were simply going to have to keep the youngsters in check, which was not going to be much of a problem given the powerful magic of foo dogs who could put their little ones to sleep as easily as they had the men. Using a series of synchronized magical toenail clicks, the girls were just shattering the sorcerers' staffs into fine dust as the TKTs were stepping through their destination window to home.

After enjoying a huge breakfast in one of the cafeterias at the plantations, Heike and Pizzo returned home by rookh to discover that Zin and Trixie hadn't fared particularly well during the night, mainly because Zin had been snoring, which wasn't normal for her, but her nose had been stuffed up lately because of a ragweed allergy. Trixie, with her super hearing, always wore special earmuffs to buffer sounds; however, since she could still hear anything in close proximity, the snoring had definitely disturbed her. Having not slept well, she now had a headache, which Zin also had. In addition to oatmeal and strawberries for breakfast, Em was giving each girl aspirin taken with a glass of milk.

Blaming her headache on Trixie, Zin soon became even more annoyed at her guest, mainly because Trixie was so superstitious. In an effort to avoid the thirteenth step on the staircase when climbing the stairs after breakfast, Trixie abruptly changed her step rhythm, which caused Zin to trip. Even though Trixie apologized, Zin was frustrated, and said, "Look, it's not even the thirteenth step from the top, only from the bottom, so the number is nonsense!" Zin being aggravated caused Trixie to be so too, which didn't help things; and both girls had some trouble calming down after this in order to be civil to one another. The ten-foot thing was also really starting to be troublesome, particularly with having to be in the bathroom with one another.

Zin was particularly scornful over the issue of the number thirteen because this was something that had arisen with Trixie before, on their trip together into the Mystery Realm because of the Thirteenth Door on the mezzanine, which really wasn't specifically a "Thirteenth Door"

because none of the doors were officially numbered. Plus, counting the two entrance doors, the number of doors actually equaled fifteen on the magical hallway.

Overhearing the girls hashing out part of their quarrel later, Em related the origin of the number thirteen with regard to being thought of as unlucky. “It’s very interesting,” she said. “The superstition relates back to the Last Supper. There were thirteen at the dinner. Judas was the first to leave, and he died.”

“You’re not helping, Mom,” Zin said, somewhat exasperatedly, in worry that Trixie would now fixate on how many people might be sitting down to a meal at a cafeteria, or at a reception dinner at a church, or meeting hall, or wherever.

For the rest of the day, it was a good thing Em was in the house to referee on occasion; though Zin ended up a little irked because her mother seemed to be siding with Trixie more often than with her own daughter. The pucks refrained from throwing things at the girls as they might have at other times because they didn’t want to in any way aggravate the situation.

As one of her interventions, Em challenged Trixie and Zin to look up proverbs in the bible about getting along, arguing, being cranky, friendship, controlling one’s anger, etc. “And we’ll read them aloud to each other,” she said.

Zin ended up finding the first one, Proverbs 17:14. “The beginning of strife is like letting out water; so quit before the quarrel breaks out.”

Trixie followed with Proverbs 16:32. “He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city.” And she found another one right away, Proverbs 10:12. “Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offenses.”

“A cheerful heart is a good medicine, but a downcast spirit dries up the bones,” Em said, upon finding Proverbs 17:22.

Proverbs 19:11 jumped out at Zin as she flipped pages. “Good sense makes a man slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense.”

“Oh, this one’s somewhat funny, given your situation,” Em said, as she read Proverbs 18:24. “There are friends who pretend to be friends, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.”

The girls didn't particularly think it was all that funny, to be tethered so closely together. However, after about twenty minutes of reading proverbs, the pair did indeed feel calmer and friendlier toward one another, so the exercise had definitely helped.

At night, Zin used an extra pillow as a prop to help control her snoring; and both girls ended up sleeping fairly well.

The next morning as Trixie was doing sit-ups beside the bed, Zin discovered that her friend had other superstitions about numbers in that she preferred numbers divisible by three, in this case, doing fifty-one sit-ups instead of just fifty, which Zin thought was ridiculous until she remembered that the Realm of Sextessence, in which magicians did some of their important work, was based on sixes. *Numbers actually can be very important in some cases*, she reminded herself, *in the sciences, music, and even magic. And in the bible, numbers are very important—like seven, twelve, four, three, and others.*

At breakfast, Zin ended up making sure to put nine grapes on her guest's plate, instead of eight or ten.

After lunch, in the garden, the girls discovered more common ground when Zin found a four-leaf clover.

"It's not divisible by three, but it's considered lucky," Trixie said, when Zin gifted her with the clover, which she would end up pressing into her journal later.

Later, when helping Zin on a few things in her lab, Trixie wasn't at all bored.

Being cuffed together might have been considered a blessing in disguise, as the girls were learning to get along better. In the past, they had found each other's company a little irksome; now, they were actually enjoying spending time together. Since both girls liked to read, that's what they ended up doing the most of during their predicament, particularly the bible; and they got caught up on reading the daily devotionals of a couple of evangelist writers they both liked.

While the girls were faring pretty well, Linn on the other hand was fairly exasperated. In three full days of working on the lock issue, he still hadn't made any progress. Calling to Zin by walnut, he said in a frustrated tone, "I must be missing something, so I need to see the cuffs again." And so, Magsen flew Zin and Trixie to Lion Mountain.

While the creations of sorcerers were generally not nearly as complicated as those of magicians, they did employ a technique of adding imprints to much of their work, which meant a lot of their malice couldn't be undone by anyone other than another sorcerer, and in some cases, only by the sorcerer that had made the poison, enacted the curse, uttered the incantation, designed the device, or whatever.

When working on counters to many of these things, magicians and gifted technologists like Linn often consulted Rhett Collier, a converted sorcerer making his home on Lion Mountain. However, Rhett had been spending a lot of time in recent weeks in Antica, one of the magical realms accessed by the doors of the mezzanine, and so had been unavailable for consult. (Antica also happened to be where Em's other brother, Kip, was spending a lot of his time of late.)

As the girls entered the lab, the storm-cloud look on Linn's face was enough to make them think they might be doomed to this tether for another few months, or possibly forever.

However, as they approached the work table where he was stationed, the cuffs suddenly opened—with the sound of little unlocking clicks—and fell from their wrists to the floor.

Stunned for a few moments, Trixie was the first to find her voice, and she said to Linn, "So you were just joshing us; you had the answer when you called us."

Zin was not surprised. Having known Linn for many years, she knew he was capable of perpetuating any number of jokes while keeping a perfectly straight face (or putting on a performance like the frustrated tone and storm-cloud look). Except, in this case, she was a little confused as to why he wasn't grinning now, not even a small smile, as he usually did when found out. Instead, his mouth had fallen open, and he was as speechless as she.

A minute or so later, when his brain had a chance to absorb what had just happened, he ended up saying, "I didn't do this. The locks must have a timer attached to them. That's the only thing I can think of."

Trixie had a hard time believing Linn hadn't been the one to make the fix. "Really, you didn't do this," she said skeptically.

"No," he answered, still in something of a wonder-filled state, though he did reason that his explanation of a timer on the locks was probably correct.

“If the cuffs were still in the testing stages for the sorcerers,” Zin speculated, “it would make sense for them to have a time limit attached. If the sorcerers themselves might have trouble unlocking them, the timer would be like a safety feature.”

Gazing out of the front window of the lab as he was pondering, Linn saw Westerwing outside, which wasn't unusual, except that the magical blackbird was very close to the window, instead of being more out in the clearing. For some reason, Linn's brain told him, *He's listening in, so he moved closer*. Except it didn't particularly make sense as to why the bird might want to listen in. *Whatever*, Linn decided. Since Westerwing had always been on the side of good, there was no reason to think he would use anything he might hear for ill.

Linn's little spreepSprite observer, Figlin, was in the lab today. However, while the magic of spreepSprites was powerful (and largely mysterious), Figlin hadn't had anything to do with what had happened. Instead, he was taking a nap on a small cotton-ball bed that Linn had recently fashioned for him. Linn had also just finished making a new amplifier so that he could hear the songs of Figlin, this being how boy spreepSprites tended to communicate with others, by singing, though they tended to do so unknowingly since the songs actually came from God. Without the amplifier, the lyrics sounded merely like faint chirps and murmurs. With the device, Linn could hear actual words, which often helped him with his work because this was one way in which God liked to give him direction.

Chapter Seven

The Second Pyramid

Mid-October found Alex and Jasper keeping to an extra rigorous training schedule, which the boys had started after having their butts royally kicked by Devin on the trip to heal the dragons. However, because the workouts, weapons classes, and such were a little on the ambitious side, the pair welcomed the chance to take a break and head out on a time-travel mission; though they would soon discover this not to be much of a relaxing trip, but one more filled with hard work than anything else.

The TKTs were going into the Mystery Realm, but not through the mezzanine's Thirteenth Door (which most people were calling it, even though the number wasn't entirely accurate); instead, they needed to time travel in order to actually build the stone pyramid that they would end up exploring on a subsequent trip through the magical doorway. With time being very mysterious, both in a general sense and particularly in the Mystery Realm, it made perfect sense for certain things to seem like they were happening out of order, such as Zin and her friends seeing the completed pyramid and maze before these things were actually constructed.

Along with Jasper and Alex, the pyramid builders would include Ethan, Muriel, Otto, Cecelia, Zin, and Quin. Otto had designed the pyramid with the help of Marlon, who wasn't going along because he was needed elsewhere. Knowing that Zin would be on the trip, Marlon had felt she could handle any magical issues that might arise. Plus, Otto was generally proficient in working with magical designs, having done so for most of his life.

Assembling at Laurelstone midmorning, having already been prepped by Mr. Amir, the group was getting ready to enter the study when Coco came down the hallway with fourteen-year-old Cary Kang who was a daisy chain, which meant she had a gift enabling her to stop certain suicides.

“Do you mind if we go just ahead of you?” Coco asked, for herself and her teammate. The pair had been scheduled for an afternoon trip on this day.

“No problem,” Ethan said, letting the two scoot in front of them and into the study.

“I have a Chemistry test later in the day,” Cary explained, “so this works out better for my schedule.”

The girls were back just about as soon as they had left, both looking extremely tired as they logged their return. They had spent two full days and nights on their mission back two years in time to counter some of Eizel’s malicious activities. Despite the tiredness, the results had been well worth the effort in that Coco had managed to block a number of Eizel’s attempts to plant ugly thoughts, and Cary had prevented four suicides stemming from nightmares that Eizel had already planted.

“You’d better catch a nap before that test,” Jasper advised as Cary wearily trudged past him on her way to do just that.

Smiling, Coco said, “Me too for a nap,” as she handed off the Time Key to Ethan.

Also helping to build the pyramid were several bigfoots, along with Yami and Korszak, two of the gargoyles from atop Netherwind, all of whom Ethan had already led through the window portal very early in the morning, along with loads of tools they were going to need for the construction. It was somewhat rare to have magical creatures along on the trips, but this was starting to become more common. Also coming with them was a puck troll sculptor named Mr. Veseko who taught a variety of art classes at the Netherwind-Laurelstone Schools. Mr. Veseko had chosen to wait to go with the humans because he had earlier been busy supervising the loading up of the pod packs with food, plenty of which was being taken to satisfy the appetite of the tiny art teacher who would be helping to sculpt many of the stone blocks for the pyramid.

The gargoyles and bigfoots already had the tools organized and the plans laid out by the time their friends arrived. Someone had placed boulders for the project in a large circle surrounding the building site. Having observed this on the earlier trip with the tools, Ethan had thought, *How handy, to have the boulders already in place.* This would save the gargoyles and bigfoots much time in moving rocks around.

Muriel didn't particularly notice that the stones were in a circle because, upon arriving, she right away began unpacking and setting up tents; and by the time she finished, many of the boulders had already been moved about by the gargoyles. This was why her older self, when accompanying Michele to place the stones in the circular configuration, hadn't recognized the site where her younger self had helped to build the stone pyramid. Korszak and Yami were moving the stones much in the same manner Michele had, simply by using their thoughts. Perched on a nearby cliff, they didn't even need to have their eyes open to do this because they could see the stones very clearly in the eye of their minds.

Beginning work right away, the bigfoots and humans helped Mr. Veseko carve the building stones, which ended up being in many more shapes than simply traditional squares and rectangles. Some had raised edges, others were made to interlock like zipper teeth, some were wavy and some were straight, a few were of a dove-tailed design, and still more were shaped like x's and v's. All in all, this was a fairly complex design for a square pyramid whose four slanted edges would end up measuring one hundred and forty-four feet each in length when complete.

As one of their tools, the team had brought a gauntlet, which was basically like a large glove extending nearly to the elbow. This was an item very like one that had been liberated from a sorcerers' den some six months previous. The original gauntlet, designed as a weapon, was meant to be used to crush the necks and limbs of enemies. While the sorcerers' version was steely gray in appearance, using their knowledge of color weapons, magicians and gifted technologists had made a red version of to be used as a tool, rather than a weapon.

Cecelia, Quin, and Alex had trained to use the gauntlet, which could cut or break rocks depending on how it was used. Simply tracing a finger along a surface was enough to etch a pattern into any stone. Doing this multiple times would deepen the pattern to eventually cut through. Using the edge of the hand, one could saw back and forth to cut through even thick slabs of rock in short order. Digging and gouging with the fingers could remove as much or as little crumbled stone as desired. And punching a boulder could shatter it into several large chunks.

The users of the gauntlet ended up switching off with each other fairly regularly, mainly because Mr. Veseko would often become exasperated when anyone deviated from his instructions even by a single centimeter.

The stones they were working with were all granite, overall mainly gray in color, but sporting streaks and flecks of oranges and yellows resembling lovely sunsets, pinks and reds like those adorning many flowers, and blues and greens reminiscent of the turquoise waters of many seas both deep and shallow.

Muriel once again saw the colorful little horse she had seen on the trip to build the glass pyramid. He appeared to have grown about five inches, to just above knee height. As before, he was very shy when Cecelia again snuck Muriel closer so that she might speak to him. While he never answered back in any way, he seemed to accept the presence of the girls this time, at least well enough not to bolt as he had before.

Just as it had for the TKTs that had made the trip to the museum to see the maze in the box, the name of the pyramid popped into everyone's brains: Chronos, meaning, Time. Again, Zin got the idea the structure probably had something to do with time travel, which her companions also reasoned, though they didn't know specifics at this point.

As they were getting on a ways in the construction, to about one-third complete, Yami saved Otto from a heavy stone falling on him. This was a rainy day, and the stone had slipped from the hands of a bigfoot. Blessedly, the gargoyles were constantly attentive. Once caught in midair by the thought-energy of Yami, the stone was returned to the bigfoot who then wriggled it into its proper spot.

Jasper's shapeshifting gift came in handy on several occasions when they needed to squeeze into tight spots in order to position stones correctly, particularly around the four doors they were fashioning, also out of stone, one for each side of the pyramid. The interior of the structure was basically one large open chamber that was empty except for twelve support columns. The floor, at this time, was merely bare dirt.

Otto knew what the floor of the pyramid was supposed to be made from, a type of golden glass; except, they didn't have the material ready

to hand because the TKTs hadn't been given these specifics prior to the trip. However, Jasper, on his previous trip into the Mystery Realm (with Zin, Quin, Alex, Ashton, and Trixie) had observed what appeared to be a sea of pale gold shining in the distance. Using a spyglass (as he had before) and climbing a cliff with Otto and Quin, he was able to spot the sea again. "Over there," he pointed out to Otto, who then took a turn with the spyglass.

"It might be just sand," Quin remarked as she in turn gazed through the spyglass at the golden expanse that appeared to go on for miles and miles.

"But it might be exactly what we're looking for," Otto said, smiling because he felt sure it was.

Accompanied by Quin, Jasper, and three bigfoots, Otto led the way, on a trek of nearly twelve miles, to reach the expanse that looked to be made of golden glass with a lovely soft sheen that wasn't at all slippery when stepped upon. Otto immediately got the idea that this was the exact material they were seeking (to basically use as floor tiles), and so they set to work harvesting some of the glass, which cut quite easily using the gauntlet.

As Quin cut an approximately three-inch thick by eighteen-inch wide square, which was removed by a bigfoot with a hefty heave-ho, the glass surrounding the cut slowly filled in the gap, as though new glass was being grown to replace what had been removed. This gave Otto and the others the idea that only one tile would be needed for their entire project, which turned out to be correct.

Taking only the one square back, they placed it in the middle of the pyramid's bare floor, where the glass began to expand, and fairly rapidly. In less than an hour, a twelve-inch thick layer of glass had formed over the entire surface.

That night, Quin had a dream in which she saw the faint shapes of unicorns moving about like shadows inside the golden glass.

The next morning, she could see neither movement nor shapes in the glass, despite the abundant light filtering in from openings high up in the structure (twelve on each side) that were designed to act as natural windows.

Before going to sleep that night, she again looked at the floor of the pyramid, also still well visible and giving off a lovely glow from the

flood of moonlight streaming in through the windows. Again, she saw no movement or unicorn shadows. However, in a dream that night, she once more saw the moving shapes; and her brain in sleep got the idea that what she was seeing pertained to the future. Trying auto-writing the next morning, she discovered this to be correct. At a certain time in the future, the magical glass would receive visits by unicorns, and would thus be connected to quintessence, the mysterious fifth element, which wasn't completely mysterious anymore because many people knew it was associated not only with unicorns, but also with the unused part of the brain, and with time travel. In addition to the actual physical doorway to the Realm of Quintessence on the mezzanine, people who were able to call unicorns had a doorway to this magical realm actually inside of their brains.

With the idea of quintessence on the brain, the mysterious aspects of the pyramid were starting to make a little more sense. Otto had said the pyramid was designed to connect each of the four sides to one of the four elements of Greek philosophy—fire, air, earth, and water. With the fifth element being quintessence, the time-travel connection was becoming clearer. In addition to the elements, the pyramid was also connected to the four winds, mentioned numerous times in the bible, which was why the siting of the pyramid had to be so precise. In fact, Otto had spent days positioning and repositioning the first layer of the stones so that the structure could link properly with the four winds.

Unknown to the TKTs, two creatures happened to be watching the building efforts. The only two beings of their kind, Etowa and Boko existed outside of time. With Etowa in the service of God and Boko working for Satan, the two were experts at making magical seeds, used in large part to influence the actions of various creatures, including human beings. Etowa was also tasked with occasionally setting up destination windows for time travelers. The pair often liked to hang out in the Mystery Realm, watching various activities. They had recently observed a group of gnomes plant a vineyard, very near a site where two humans had just finished digging a small pond. Being outside of time, they often observed events in an even odder order than the TKTs were experiencing them. Sitting in a tree very near the evening campfire of the time travelers, Boko and Etowa were listening to the conversation of the people.

“So it’s not just a square pyramid, but a quintessence pyramid with five sides counting the floor,” Ethan remarked, when Quin voiced her auto-writing revelations and thoughts. As it turns out, the others had been getting some of the same information as she, and more, through various means such as daydreams and seeing visions in shiny surfaces.

“It’s definitely connected to time travel,” Jasper added, “and it has to be constructed before the four time-travel portals can be built.”

Otto ended up saying, “Have you noticed that the pyramid is not just magically connected to the four elements; if you look closely at the shapes of the stones and the colors of the granite, you can see fire, water, earth, and air visually represented in each of the sides.”

Cecelia was nodding, because she too had noticed this. “It’s turning out to be a lovely structure,” she remarked.

“As far as what it’s ultimately meant to be, the project is being taken in stages,” Otto said, “and there’s more to come.”

“Exactly,” Zin concurred, “because it has to be activated.”

“What do you mean?” Quin asked.

“It’s dormant right now,” Zin replied. “Somehow it will need to be activated for it to actually work.” She had gotten this idea from consulting her foreshard, a magical crystal that often gave her information pertaining to the future.

“Without this pyramid,” Muriel remarked, “time travel wouldn’t be possible, except by unicorn.”

“And people who can call unicorns are still very rare,” Alex said, “so we wouldn’t be doing much time traveling at all.”

The structure was almost complete. All in all, the stone pyramid had taken the TKTs nearly as long to construct as the glass pyramid had, not quite five weeks to this point.

When they finished, they built the lookout platform roughly five miles from the stone pyramid, at a location about a mile from the glass pyramid. Using mostly fallen trees, and with the bigfoots so quick in their traditional construction techniques, the tower only took three days to build.

Breaking camp immediately after this, they returned to home. However, they had only one day of rest before heading once again into the Mystery Realm, this time through the door on the mezzanine.

Ethan, Jasper, Muriel, Cecelia, Zin, Quin, Alex, and Otto all went on this trip as well, along with Ron, who had long since finished his map of the maze. Yami, Korszak, Mr. Veseko, and the bigfoots didn't particularly want to come along, preferring instead to get back to their normal routines.

As they assembled in the magical hall, Zin used some of her Reveal Powder to expose the invisible doorway before retrieving from her belt pack her magic key, with which she intended to unlock the door. However, Muriel beat her to the task by using one of Cuoré's feathers, which had shapeshifting qualities and was capable of acting as a key to unlock the magical door. Sliding the feather back into her jacket pocket, she said, "It can also be used as a knife." Muriel had, in fact, killed quite a few demons with her feather-knife.

Quin hadn't known that Cuoré had gifted Muriel with one of his feathers (this happening a little over a year previous), and she was somewhat surprised. Pretending that her feelings were slightly hurt, she told Muriel, "He's never given me one of his feathers."

"He probably would if you asked him," Muriel said earnestly.

"I know, I'm just joking with you," Quin replied. In truth, because Cuoré was most often around to protect her, she was unlikely to need one of his feathers, whereas, Muriel was out on her own a lot in the wilderness.

It was morning when they arrived through the doorway, which on this side was built into a large boulder situated on top of a rocky plateau overlooking twelve canyons spread out in a circular fashion around the plateau. The travelers had packs full of gear in anticipation of the hike to the pyramid taking two days.

Those who hadn't been in the Mystery Realm before were truly flabbergasted by the vast gemstone canyons. By the reckoning of the earlier visitors, these were likely some of the materials that would be needed to build New Jerusalem. Otto and Cecelia were speechless for fully half a day, and Muriel might have been as well except for wanting to converse with a few critters along the way. Upon reaching the twelve gigantic oysters that were growing humongous pearls, again astounded, everyone agreed that these were likely for the gates of the future heavenly city.

They camped overnight in a mossy valley, with Ron reciting a couple of chapters of *Moby Dick* to everyone after dinner.

Heading on the next day, the group didn't stop to explore the glass pyramid when they came to it because they were anxious to get on to the stone one. They did, however, climb the lookout tower in order to view both splendid structures. The maze was very much present around the stone pyramid, so nothing funny timewise had happened since it had been viewed from this same location by the group that had come to the Mystery Realm in search of a leaf from the baby Tree of Life, which was evidently thriving inside the glass pyramid. Indeed, from the lookout tower, they could see that the tree fairly filled the whole greenhouse. Also from this high position, they had a good view of the entire maze that was easily the size of a square mile. As it had been in the museum model, the maze was perfectly square, with the sides lined up in parallel fashion with the straight edges of the base of the stone pyramid. Situated in an indent, the pyramid wouldn't have been visible by anyone approaching on foot because the walls of the multi-level maze were high enough to conceal the structure.

Four openings to the maze were present on its outer edges, one centered on each side, to allow entrance. By the time the group reached the nearest opening, it was late afternoon. Since they didn't want to have to traverse the massive maze at night, they decided to make camp outside and wait until morning. After a bible study and dinner, Ron recited a couple more chapters of *Moby Dick* to everyone.

The next morning, Ron distributed nine maps in total, one for each person. "In case someone gets lost," he said. Alex wouldn't have particularly needed a map, since he could have simply flown over the maze to reach its center; however, since his friends couldn't fly, he thought it polite to continue to walk with them.

The maps were printed on bamboo paper. In this instance, it was wise to use older map methods because devices from home often didn't work in other realms. This was definitely true of the Mystery Realm because the airbikes they had brought with them to test didn't function. The bikes wouldn't even unfold from their palm-cube states. Nor had walnuts worked on the trips to build the two pyramids.

In truth, the Mystery Realm was not meant to be a realm of gadgets. Possibly, no place was meant to be so. While some things human beings

had developed were helpful, a lot of devices had contributed to the laziness of mankind, along with a decrease in the ability to communicate well with one another.

According to Ron's maps, there were multiple paths to the center of the maze; so upon entering, they split into two groups. Otto, Ron, Jasper, Zin, and Cecelia were in one, while Ethan, Alex, Quin, and Muriel made up the other.

As Ethan's group moved along, Muriel posed the question as to what the maze might be for.

"Maybe to protect the pyramid," Alex answered, "so anyone not meant to find it would have more trouble reaching it."

"But someone could just launch a glider from the lookout tower and probably fly right in," Ethan countered. "Plus, there's no maze around the glass pyramid. Shouldn't it be protected too?"

Meanwhile, Otto's group was having a similar discussion.

"Some folks are really good at navigating mazes" Jasper said, "so if it's for security, why aren't there locked gates at the entrances?"

"People might not know there's a pyramid inside," Zin suggested, "and so they might give up before reaching the center."

"With no protection from above," Cecelia said, "someone could reach it by flying in. So it's not really protected in any way."

"I wonder if it has a magical camouflage like Lion Mountain does," Otto offered, "to keep anything ungodly that's airborne from seeing what's inside it."

"And maybe nature spirits protect it," Zin said, "like they do the Mountain."

The maze was an absolute delight to traverse, up and down various ramps and stairs, and around oddly-shaped corners, some of which immediately doubled back on the path. Amidst thriving shrubs sculpted into interesting shapes (with very few being squared off like a traditional maze), curved stone walls were covered with ivies, mosses, and masses of climbing roses. Ledges were overflowing with vegetation, reminding the travelers of many of the stacked gardens on Lion Mountain, or possibly what the Hanging Gardens of Babylon might have looked like. In several spots, the shapes of faces were carved into bushes and rocks. When the visitors gazed at them, the faces started to resemble loved ones. Jasper at one point thought he was looking at a rendition of his

mother's face in a silvery bush, while Quin saw the face of her grandfather in a stone.

As the two groups stopped for lunch around midday, they both ended up coming to the same conclusion as to the purpose of the maze—that it was just something they needed to take the time to figure out and navigate, like many obstacles in our lives. And time was certainly important, along with trust, mainly trust in God and His perfect timing as He guides us along life's journey. In the case of how events were unfolding in the Mystery Realm, patience was also a factor, as God was taking His time in revealing things to His children. But He often does this; instead of all at once, we're meant to learn things in stages.

Continuing on after lunch, Quin said, "I wonder if gnomes might care for the plants."

"That's a good guess," Muriel answered. "This looks like gnome gardening."

"In which case, they might be using gliders to access the area," Ethan input, in knowing this to be a favored way for gnomes to travel.

Taking nearly the full day to make their way to the center of the maze, the two groups reached the pyramid within minutes of each other.

Along with the addition of the maze, which seemed to embrace the pyramid much like a protective blanket, the structure was different than they remembered it because it was clearly "activated" by this time.

"What a difference!" Zin exclaimed, upon finding her voice.

"It's definitely different," Quin agreed, nodding.

On the side of the pyramid they had first approached, they could hear water gently flowing. They couldn't see any water, but the area did feel moist; and the sound was very distinctive, like that of a slow-running brook mixed with a distant waterfall.

Slowly circling the structure, on the next side, the visitors could feel a gentle wind blowing that hadn't seemed to be present on the side where they heard the water. On the third side of the pyramid, emanating from the structure was a warmth reminiscent of what they might feel sitting next to a cozy campfire. On the final side, they could smell robust and healthy earth, much like the scent of a freshly-plowed farm field in the spring (minus the manure).

Entering the door on the earthy side of the pyramid, inside, the golden floor was alive with the shapes of unicorns flitting about very swiftly.

Zin had suddenly gotten an idea into her brain, which she then voiced to the others. “I think the only reason we’re here right now is so that we can know what the pyramid feels like, looks like, sounds like, and smells like in its present state—that of being activated and fully functional.”

“I agree,” Otto said. “This trip was only meant to familiarize us with the completed structure in full function, healthy and working.”

Alex was of the same opinion. “There’s nothing we’re meant to do here. Not right now anyway. It’s functioning, and it somehow allows time travel through the four portals in our realm.”

Although this might have seemed like something of a long jaunt yielding nothing all that exciting or important, no one felt let down because they were thrilled to see the end result of something they had helped to create. Ron also was not disappointed, particularly in discovering his map of the maze to be completely accurate.

Since the Mystery Realm was filled with such wondrous sights, the group also didn’t mind the three-day journey back to the door in the boulder on the plateau. Stepping through to home, they discovered that the whole of their travels in the Mystery Realm had taken exactly three minutes, which was expected in keeping with what had happened on previous trips through the Thirteenth Door.

With regard to the four time-travel portals, Marlon in the next couple of months would take four separate trips into the past to make them, doing so by working with glass artists, weavers, painters, and sculptors. In addition to the stained-glass window at Laurelstone and the mirror with the carved frame in the lodge in Africa, he helped to make an enormous tapestry and a large painting. The tapestry, every bit the size of an auditorium curtain, was situated in the conjure woman’s cave in the Himalayas. The painting, roughly the size of a closet door, was placed in Astrid’s cabin on Lion Mountain. While all four of the portals had roses as a theme, this was not particularly related to function, but was more because roses are completely timeless.

God was allowing time travel mainly to fix problems and help His children in various ways. Because the TKTs were stringent about

following His instructions, they rarely worried that their actions in the past might adversely affect the future. And, in fact, if something about the future did change, they might not even know it; and this might be what God intended. In trusting that God would make everything work out according to His Overall Plan, the TKTs knew that He would orchestrate any fixes for our human mistakes because nothing anywhere, or any time, is beyond His control.

If we take a moment to look in on the older version of Ethan, we find him again sending the duo of Michele and Muriel on a time-travel trip, again to the Mystery Realm to the site of the stone pyramid, the construction of which had just been completed. The maze was not yet present, but soon would be. In fact, Michele's job this time was to move in dirt and stones for the massive maze project.

Smiling, Michele recognized the site as being where she had assembled the circle of boulders. It was gratifying to see what had been made from them. Muriel, again along for company for Michele, couldn't believe she hadn't noticed on their previous trip together that this was exactly where her younger self had helped to build the pyramid. Of course, it was obvious now, with the pyramid present. But she found it odd that she had been so unobservant before. Michele, in moving in the dirt and stones, got the idea that she was helping to piece together a large puzzle, one that still had a ways to go yet before it would be finished.

Just before they left for home, Muriel caught a glimpse of the colorful little horse, now all grown up at just a tad taller than waist high. He was still somewhat shy; but this time when she approached, he let her just touch his nose before running off a ways and looking back to see the visitors disappearing in a blink through their destination window.

Quin was right in her assumption that gnomes were the caretakers for the maze; and not only that, they had designed and constructed it. In fact, a mere three days after the group returned from building the stone pyramid, Dell was sending a troop of gnomes through the study window, laden with many tools and other materials such as seeds and plant starts. While gifted human garden designers and builders could have taken on this project, in this case, God had wanted gnomes to be His helpers; though one human being, Frees, was allowed to come too.

Gargoyles and bigfoots didn't need to be along to move stones because the gnomes had their own means of moving heavy things around (mainly using leverage, elaborate pulleys, and magic), and many were expert masons.

Once the basic structure was built, Frees got involved in helping to grow the masses of ivies, bushes, and mosses the gnomes were planting in such varieties that vines, flowers, shrubs, and ground covers in purples, reds, greens, golds, and bluish-grays were fairly exploding from every level and streaming around every corner of the twisting and turning walkways. Many of the plants were of the blooming variety and instantly began attracting bees, butterflies, and such. The air was filled with lovely scents as the gnomes continued along with their work in shaping the hedges, mainly in rounded forms instead of being squared off. A gnome sculptor carved the magical stone faces, and several topiary experts formed the faces in the bushes.

When the maze was nearing completion, Frees took a trip to the glass pyramid in order to once again spurt the tree inside, this time about ten feet. As he did so, the greenhouse magically enlarged itself to accommodate the growth.

Shortly thereafter, the group stepped back through the destination window. As efficient as the gnomes were, the whole project had taken barely a month; though of course they returned to Laurelstone's study merely seconds after leaving it. After helping the gnomes clean and stow their tools into gnome sheds, Frees headed home for a bath. While he felt very satisfied to have been able to help make the maze, he was also feeling very dirty.

Chapter Eight

Fairy Crosses and Murders

The last week in October found Ethan heading out on a time-travel trip with Lidia and Cecelia roughly fifty years into the past to Iraq. This was a time of great turmoil in the Middle East where the minority populations of Christians in the Muslim-dominated countries were being persecuted, to the extent that some were even kidnapped, tortured, and beheaded. Many of these were former Muslims who had converted to Christianity, with some even being turned over to terrorists by family members. Any Muslims condemning the violence were being forced to keep their mouths shut or risk slaughter because, in many cases, extremist military groups had taken over whole cities, aided by the sorcerers who were supplying some of their weapons.

A bombing of a Christian church had just happened in Egypt. This was an event the TKTs had not been directed to stop. However, in Iraq, they were going to save six former Muslims who were being targeted by extremists by getting them to a safe house. A beheading on a public street had happened just before the TKTs arrived, and the man's head and body were still on the street. This was, of course, deeply disturbing and prompted Ethan to closely watch Lidia, who seemed to be doing okay so far on this trip.

Using Cecelia's gift, shroud mirrors, and a particular enormouse who had just starting coming with TKTs on various time-travel trips, they were able to get the six across town and into the safe house.

Many of those being persecuted didn't want to leave the area. Not only was this their home, they wanted to stay to witness and bring as many people as possible to Christ.

Those who did choose to leave never truly escaped Christian persecution, which was rampant at this time, including in the U.S. In addition to using various forms of media and government to subdue opponents, activists were targeting children as part of their recruitment efforts. Under the guise of protecting Muslims from persecution, public

schools were adopting “sensitivity” policies that actually indoctrinated students into the Muslim faith, even forcing them to perform the required salat prayers. Although religion had long since been banned from public schools, those promoting this agenda had found a way around this, which meant a whole generation of school children were being trained to be part of a false religion, while rejecting a true one.

Before returning home, the TKTs attended a clandestine church service at the safe house, which was very uplifting and made them feel better about some of the horrors they were witnessing. The subject of the sermon was Micah 7:5-8, which directly spoke to the perilous situation at hand, while also containing a strong message of hope.

“Put no trust in a neighbor, have no confidence in a friend; guard the doors of your mouth from her who lies in your bosom; for the son treats the father with contempt, the daughter rises up against her mother, the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; a man’s enemies are the men of his own house. But as for me, I will look to the LORD, I will wait for the God of my salvation; my God will hear me. Rejoice not over me, O my enemy; when I fall, I shall rise; when I sit in darkness, the LORD will be a light to me.”

At the same time the service in Iraq was being held, the congregation of the recently-bombed church in Egypt was meeting, and taking heart in Philippians 1:27-28, which was a message from the apostle Paul encouraging those living in difficult circumstances not to give in to terror and intimidation.

“Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you stand firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear omen to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God.”

Upon returning home, the TKTs had to consider that the situation from five decades past had never really ended. Terrorist attacks by Muslim extremists had basically led to the creation of the Supercities and the enslavement of the populations inside that were forbidden to practice Christianity. Even after the uprisings, when many Muslims fled the cities to live in various outside communities, those that converted to Christianity were often ostracized by family and friends. While some of

the violence had calmed down, the situation was not truly changed; and since periods of Muslim extremism had always resurfaced throughout the centuries, there was no reason to think this would ever end. That history alone should have been enough to convince those of the Islamic faith that they were on the wrong path. Sadly, many were not convinced. And so, the error of their thinking would continue, until the return of Jesus. In the meantime, Christians simply needed to continue to witness, and pray, for as many Muslims as possible recognize the truth and make their way into the open arms of Christ to be saved.

Cary had been taking a lot of solo trips over the past couple of weeks, to around the same time period that Ethan's group just returned from, in order to counter an explosion in suicide numbers largely caused by addiction to pain killers and various illegal drugs, in many cases, heroine. Also at this time in history, suicides in transgender populations had drastically increased, mainly among those who had earlier in their lives had either surgeries or hormone treatments pushed on them by the media, teachers, peers, doctors, and even parents, some of which had as early as their child's kindergarten and grade school years decided that because a girl was a tomboy, she was really a boy, and because a boy wasn't suited to sports, he must be a girl. This, of course, was ridiculous, but was trendy at the time—for parents to have a transgender child. Aside from those simply looking for popularity, many people were promoting transgenderism as a means of training up the next generation of activists for their cause.

It had long been proven by psychologists that the surgeries and hormone treatments, that were largely irreversible, did not make those who underwent them any happier or more satisfied. In fact, the reverse was often true in that people often regretted having had such drastic things done to their bodies. Sadly, upon changing their minds later in life, not much could be done to counter the damage. One particular famous author recounted having threatened suicide as a teen if his parents didn't allow him to have the surgeries, which he now wholeheartedly regretted. He was not transgender at all, but had simply been a victim of normal teenage angst, hormones, and certain malicious influences.

For both the addiction and transgender situations, Christ was the answer, and the only true help, because He was the only entity powerful

enough to counter Satan, the one behind all suicidal thoughts and actions. However, with her gift, Cary was able to provide a temporary solution for many, to help them accept their situation at least enough to be able to work their way through the darkness and into the light in order to think more clearly and recognize that suicide wasn't any sort of solution to their problems. In fact, it was the opposite of a solution.

When the numbers of suicides were high in certain periods of history, a few people were always tempted to ask, "Why not just let people kill themselves?"

To this, Christians would emphatically answer, "No, because suicide is murder, the murder of oneself. People need help, not ignoring; and taking the time to help was often a factor. We need to put time into others in order to help them. Sadly, many people don't have time for each other, or God, because they spend endless hours focused on entertaining themselves, and seeking the approval of others such as through use of various forms of social media, which had long been proven to be extremely unhealthy venues for sharing.

Because Cary traveled to different countries, Lidia ended up going on a few trips with her. They were just returning from one of these when Ethan, Zin, Ford, and Chevy set off, four years back in time, to Supercity Seven where Telén Mayhew lived. Not yet the Governor Ruler of all the Supes (a title roughly the equivalent to a president or prime minister), on this day, he was simply going about his duties as a member of the Council of Twos in performing an inspection at a factory that made various toiletries.

Unknown to him, he was in great danger from a team of expert assassins who were also visiting the factory, specifically to kill him. While sorcerers generally were not protected by the godly, Telén needed to be because he was Christian. And not only that, he was responsible in his lifetime for the conversion of hundreds of other sorcerers. At the time of the TKTs' visit, nearly one in six sorcerers in the world had secretly converted to Christianity and were working undercover.

The Guild of Hunters had long had a secret faction of Convert Hunters, and one of their operatives had just found Telén out as being converted. Now, the hunter and two mimics were set to kill him. They would make it look like a factory accident because only a handful of

sorcerers worldwide even knew about this secret faction, and it was best kept as such.

Ford was along on the trip to spot the assassins and Chevy was along to deal with them, which she did in an amazingly-swift fashion, quietly, one by one. She had intended to simply subdue the hunter, afterwards using the Mind Key on him to make him forget what he knew about Telén. Sadly, the man attacked with such ferocity that she ended up having to kill him. The bodies of the mimics didn't need to be taken care of afterwards because they simply dissipated when she garroted them. However, the TKTs did need to dispose of the hunter whom she had killed with a dagger. Zin used a Conceal Spell to hide the man's body, which was then carried by Ethan and Ford to the factory's incinerators to be disposed of.

Since Convert Hunters tended to work in isolation, this one hadn't yet told any of his associates about Telén, so the future Governor Ruler was fairly well safe, for the time being. However, he would need to be more careful, so as not to expose himself in the future as being converted. And so, the TKTs needed to warn him as to how this had happened; but they needed to get him out of the factory and someplace secluded in order to do this. Zin orchestrated this by confronting Telén in a deserted hallway and challenging him to a duel, which would need to take place outside of the city.

Admiring the audacity of this young female magician, rather than either calling security or attacking her in an outright fashion, Telén accepted the challenge. Ford, Ethan, and Chevy had already exited the factory by this time and were making their way to a designated wilderness area to meet up with Zin and Telén who hopped on nyregs to make the jaunt to their dueling spot.

As the pair landed and slipped from the backs of the nyregs, Zin immediately told Telén, "We're not going to duel. We brought you here to warn you about Convert Hunters, one of which almost killed you in the factory."

Telén was definitely taken aback, but perhaps more by the group of gifted young people that were confronting him than about the existence of a secret guild faction.

He had been exposed because of a certain item that most converted sorcerers carried with them. Mr. Amir, when prepping the team, had

told them about the staurolite mineral that naturally forms the shape of a perfect cross. Also known as fairy crosses, staurolites were favored by mineral collectors. As lovely as any gemstones, both polished and unpolished ones were often set into jewelry. Converted sorcerers frequently wore rings, necklaces, and such set with fairy crosses so that they might recognize one another as being Christians. These staurolites had a spell placed on them so that non-converted sorcerers couldn't see the crosses in the designs. The hunter had evidently observed Telén putting the spells on several staurolites before sending them to a jewelry maker. Then, from both research and infiltration, the man had discovered the secret of the crosses.

The information about the secret faction had originally come to the TKTs from Heather, who had many connections among the gifted, including Henning, whom she had contacted on this occasion. Convert Hunters were supposed to be secret even from other hunters. However, Heather had many informants in the cities, one of which had provided information about those hunting for Christian sorcerers. Then, visions given to Dell and Mr. Amir had allowed the TKTs to recognize that Telén was in danger.

Speaking of Heather, in order for her to continue to do her undercover work, she needed to be at least a little successful as a Stone Hunter, which was why Henning had recently allowed her to capture him. Shortly following his capture, she had arranged for his escape, after which, she feigned extreme rage at the ineptness of the mimics and ESS who had been given charge of the Sapphire Boy. “You basically nullify my job and my hard work!” she shouted, throwing a coffee cup at one of the inept Snakes, who actually happened to be a Lizard—a member of the Undercover Army who was working clandestinely within the cities and work camps. The man, who had been the one to arrange Henning's escape, easily dodged the cup.

Telén was doing a bit of feigning of frustration himself, in the present time. In fact, he was pretending to fairly tear his hair out over having to abandon certain camps due to the issue of the nonworking rail systems, which were still being plagued by gremlins and EMPs, along with some human and bigfoot sabotage that Telén was actually helping to arrange. Despite certain challenges and even a few failures, most of the Council of Twos thought Telén was doing a good job as Governor

Ruler. However, many were also starting to recognize that it was unlikely that all fourteen of the U.S. Supercities would survive. Some would eventually have to be consolidated in the same manner many of the camps had been after the uprisings.

And speaking of the uprisings—which had been planned and carried out by General Dawson—when the TKTs that had just saved the past version of Telén were having lunch together at one of the plantation cafeterias, Ethan asked Zin, “So what do you think your Aunt Weatherly might be up to wherever she is?” (General Dawson was on an extended time-travel trip into the past.)

Shaking her head and smiling, Zin didn’t have a good guess; however, Chevy speculated, “Maybe she’ll assassinate Hitler, and then the whole Holocaust won’t have happened.”

“But what if it was meant to happen, as part of God’s Plan?” Ford said. “I mean, I know it was terrible, all the suffering and murders. But we can’t always understand God’s ways.”

“If it was meant to happen, maybe she’ll kill him afterwards,” Chevy suggested. “A lot of people think he faked his own death, so maybe she’ll track him down and kill him.”

“But only if God tells her to,” Ford said.

“Right,” Chevy agreed.

Zin didn’t quite know what to think, except she got this faint inkling in her bones that even though her Aunt Weatherly was gone, she might still be in the midst of them all somehow—if not in person then in spirit—and that she was making huge things happen, as she always had.

Ethan left while his friends were still lunching to join Alex, Quin, Trixie, and Monte for a time-travel mission. This was roughly the same time period that Cary was working in to counter the explosion in numbers of suicides, which was also the same as his recent trip to Iraq.

A man intent on destroying a public monument of the Ten Commandments in the U.S. was just about to plow his car into the enormous granite plaque. This type of destruction was happening quite a lot in this time, in various countries, and would shortly be followed by laws enabling torch squads to destroy massive amounts of art, both public and private, to include works that were not in any way religious, but that sorcerers and the activists under their influence deemed either uplifting or representative of the good in the world.

To the surprise of his teammates (which would shortly turn into horror), Ethan immediately stepped in front of the monument. The man in the car was also surprised, but this didn't stop him from gunning his engine before plowing headlong into both Ethan and the plaque, the latter of which basically turned into a pile of chunky rubble from the impact.

Immediately jumping from the car, the man fairly shrieked at the astounded onlookers. "Why didn't he move? I thought he'd move!"

Monte and Quin had just reached their battered friend, with Trixie and Alex hanging back a little to give them room to work. However, while Monte was intent on using dragon tears, and Quin thought she might need to use her gift of healing by touch, neither ended up doing anything because Ethan's body was already healing itself. As usual, his Fifty-One Medallion had been working perfectly.

As he stood up from the rubble pile, looking healthy and whole (albeit a little dirty), several onlookers gasped, including the man who had just destroyed the monument.

People stood back as Quin and Monte quickly ushered Ethan away, with Alex and Trixie in tow, to the spot in a city alley where they could catch their destination window to home.

A little while later by the monument, as the man was being arrested on charges of damage to property and reckless endangerment, he said in a bewildered manner, "He must have been...an angel." The man could think of no other explanation for what he and many others had just witnessed. *Or an angel protected him*, he later thought.

The man, who fully believed he had witnessed a miracle, was smart enough to realize he had also escaped a murder charge. *The ultimate second chance*, he pondered. Very shortly after this, he came to Christ; and once released from jail, he committed his life to doing works for God.

None of the TKTs particularly wanted to talk about what had just happened, instead choosing to simply pray, and give thanks for Ethan being saved. All were glad they were done for the day.

Ethan was quiet for a time after returning to his dorm room. He had heard God's voice very clearly in his head telling him to step in front of the monument, and it hadn't even been a difficult thing to do. Now, in the back of his mind, he was thinking he was very glad Lidia hadn't

been along to witness the impact of the car, which had been painful, but the pain had subsided fairly swiftly as he healed.

Meanwhile, Alex was on his way home to Lion Mountain aboard Westerwing. When they were nearly home, an early version of a flash dragon suddenly attacked, first by smashing into Westerwing's side, and then by a fiery assault, which Alex only escaped because he was flying, having been knocked from the back of the rookh during the smash. While Westerwing probably would have been capable of outrunning the false, in being taken by surprise, there simply wasn't time to flee, particularly in being worried for his rider. As a result, in a matter of seconds, the rookh was completely engulfed in fire; and Alex could only watch in horror as his flaming friend fell from the skies to land with a thud on the forest floor.

Setting down quickly, Alex discovered that help was already on the way, in the form of Astrid arriving by rookh. Leaping from the back of the bird before the creature even had a chance to touch down, she landed nimbly before running to Westerwing, faster than Alex had ever seen any person run, let alone an extremely old woman. A sylph had alerted the mountain leader, who had been in a nearby settlement, to the situation. By the time Astrid reached her friend's side, a water waif had already doused the flames; however, sadly, the blackbird was already dead.

As Alex neared, he noticed Astrid administering dragon tears to Westerwing. *That's not going to work*, his mind told him, *because dragon tears only work on human beings. They don't work on magical creatures, or even regular animals.*

However, in this case, Alex was evidently wrong because the rookh was almost immediately revived, completely whole and healthy, to the extent that not a single scorch mark was left on even one of his glossy black feathers.

Meanwhile, overhead, Lyydu and Beme were taking care of the false, who basically didn't stand a chance against either the thunderbird or the firebird, let alone both.

"How...how did you do that?" Alex asked Astrid, very perplexed over Westerwing's revival.

Astrid was on the ball with her answer. “Rookhs have the power to play dead, to trick an attacker; then they revive themselves later. The elixir I gave him just had the power to heal the burns.”

While the playing-dead part was true about rookhs, Alex knew that the elixir part of her explanation wasn't true because he had clearly seen the dragon tears in the flask, all silvery and swirling with rainbow colors. She had also used a special thimble to measure the tears. Westerwing had definitely somehow been healed by dragon tears, except that this wasn't supposed to be possible.

However, Alex also knew not to question his leader, particularly because he was one of only a few people that knew she was not only Astrid, but also Weatherly, from Weatherly having gone back in time to live as Astrid. She was Esther too, from Astrid having gone back in time to live as the conjure woman, this being an event set to happen in about two decades. In the same way he would keep these secrets, Alex would keep the one involving Westerwing as well, because he knew Astrid must have a good reason for not divulging the truth. However, nothing could keep him from pondering this interesting mystery for which he would soon have an explanation.

Meanwhile, back at Laurelstone, after a visit to the costume depot, Henning and Lidia were just stepping through the study window with Frees. They arrived in the black of night to the East End of London in the late 1800s, this being the time when Jack the Ripper was terrorizing the city with his gruesome murders. While the TKTs couldn't save all of his victims, they could save one, doing so by Frees commanding masses of English ivy and Virginia creeper vines to bind the Ripper while the girl he was after managed to flee. Oddly enough, the vines held the murderer for quite some time after the TKTs returned to home, before flinging him under the hooves and wheels of a night coach where he was fairly quickly killed, thus ending his brutal killing spree.

While Lidia had been doing better, she was still troubled enough to want to see Mrs. Bohanen on a regular basis, one of these appointments occurring just after her return from London. Her depressive symptoms were definitely better, but she had lately found herself in an escapism mentality, longing for the Second Coming of Jesus, which was sometimes known as the Day of the Lord.

“We’re not supposed to wish for that,” Mrs. Bohanen replied, afterwards encouraging Lidia to look up Amos 5:18-20 in her bible, which they read together.

“Woe to you who desire the day of the LORD! Why would you have the day of the LORD? It is darkness, and not light; as if a man fled from a lion, and a bear met him; or went into the house and leaned with his hand against the wall, and a serpent bit him. Is not the day of the LORD darkness, and not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?”

“So you see,” Mrs. Bohanen said, “we shouldn’t wish for the horrors to come. Instead, we should concentrate on saving more people in the time we have left until Jesus returns.”

They also discussed why God allows suffering, the answer of which was fairly complex; and so they could really only touch on a few ideas relating to this.

“We have to remember that Satan is the root cause of all disease, corruption, addiction, and other human ills,” Mrs. Bohanen offered. “None of that existed before sin entered the world. And because we have free will and sometimes give in to temptations, we have to take some of the consequences for our poor choices. Like, if we don’t live a healthy lifestyle, we can’t expect to be healthy in our bodies or minds, and we might experience a great deal of pain from this. Plus, God might allow adversity to test us, or to draw us closer to Him for comfort, or perhaps as a way to get us to come together to help each other. Or maybe suffering is a way to expose Satan in the world, so that we can know for sure that he’s real and not just some sort of metaphor. The persecution of Christians certainly exposes Satan and his influences.”

With regard to enduring suffering and how we’re supposed to respond, Mrs. Bohanen next looked up Romans 5:3-4, which she read to Lidia. “More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope....”

“It’s like we’re being trained up to be good godly warriors,” Lidia responded.

“Exactly,” Mrs. Bohanen answered, after which, she again recommended reading the bible, for both comfort and answers.

Lidia smiled because one of the reasons she had been able to handle the horrors better lately was because she had been reading specific bible

passages as a counter. Deuteronomy 7:9 was one of her favorites. “Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations....” Isaiah 26:3 also helped. “Thou dost keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee, because he trusts in thee.” Also, Psalms 12 and 14 were all about giving reassurance that the Lord will save us from the vileness of mankind.

At the end of their discussion, Mrs. Bohanen told Lidia something that both Dell and Ethan had recently told her—that it was perfectly okay to decide not to be a Time Key Traveler, because this might actually be best for her. This was something Lidia would continue to both pray and think about.

Whether or not she would be able to handle the stress long term was something only time would tell. Some people were simply more sensitive than others. Weatherly had long known this, as had her niece, Merri Tremaine, the current leader of all operations of the Underground Army worldwide. The TKTs were under her jurisdiction. While Dell was the leader, Merri was still his boss, and she often assigned specific people to time-travel task forces that she knew could handle the stress of difficult situations.

The next day, Ethan was taking a trip back to the same time period as the issue with the Ten Commandments Monument, this time with Jasper and Monte. Again, the team was going to protect a monument, but a much larger one. Mt. Rushmore was being targeted by a domestic terrorist group, several members of which were already planting explosives by the time the TKTs arrived. When prepping the team, the research partner had said that activists of that time were targeting the four presidential faces because two were slave owners, one was a bully, and the other was completely uneducated.

Monte during their prep meeting was trying hard not to laugh. As a history buff, he knew “bully pulpit” didn’t mean pushing people around. The word “bully” in this case meant wonderful and great as applied to the time in which Theodore Roosevelt was president. So it seems the activists and domestic terrorists bent on destroying this monument were the ones that were uneducated, not Abraham Lincoln, who was self-

taught to the extent of being incredibly well educated, more so in fact than most college professors.

“Why are they really doing this?” Jasper had to ask his companions as they were preparing to act.

“Domestic terrorism was all about stealing peace and rights from law-abiding citizens,” Monte said. “They’d ‘bully’ people to make them afraid and get them to cower in fear and submit.”

“That never works,” Ethan said. “People always revolt when oppressed.”

“Colleges at this time were filled with liberal activists; the professors were promoting things like this instead of acting as real teachers,” Monte added. “And school systems were actually rewriting history books to erase parts of history and promote their own agendas.”

“That’s how the Netherwind-Laurelstone Schools got started, I’m told,” Ethan related, “because schools were filled with evil instead of good, lawlessness instead of discipline, falseness instead of facts.”

Jasper also knew the history, and added, “Free speech was being suppressed, and anyone who spoke out about this was being treated horribly. So the plantation schools were established to allow knowledge and wisdom to prevail, from healthy disagreements, creative discussions, and facts presented with a certain amount of impartiality so that people could decide for themselves what to believe.” Oddly enough, Fiona Campbell, the founder of the Netherwind-Laurelstone Schools, had employed many liberal-minded teachers, on purpose, because she wanted to make sure free speech prevailed and that all opinions were heard. However, conservative viewpoints were also heard, which was a total departure from the normal policies of public schools at that time.

The TKTs were not at Mt. Rushmore to confront the evildoers or confiscate the explosives they were setting up; but rather, they were simply there to draw attention to the activities of the terrorist group. Ethan and Jasper did this by causing a rock slide using their mirror weapons, while Monte threw large stones in the direction of park officials, purposely missing them, of course, so as not to cause injury. From the far side of the position of the terrorists, The Pitcher managed to make it seem as though this was an attack by the miscreants. And so,

the authorities were able to apprehend the terrorists before any real damage was done either to the monument or any people.

Making their way back to the destination window, the TKTs happened on a stash of fairy crosses, tucked into a niche on a stone ledge. While it might have been tempting to each take one as a souvenir of their adventure, in deciding that the crosses must be there for a reason and that someone might be looking for them, they ended up leaving them all there. Plus, TKTs rarely took anything back to their present time, in fear that the removal of even something small might have a great impact on the future. A bigfoot of the time had been gathering the staurolites and leaving them for a converted sorcerer, who very much needed all of them to distribute amongst his secret kind so that they might recognize one another.

Just as the trio was returning from their Mt. Rushmore trip, Zin was on the back porch of Doyle Mansion, actually standing still in shock to see Luis walking towards her from the back garden gate where he had entered the estate. Finding her voice as he neared the porch, she asked in a surprised but very pleased tone, “How is this possible? What are you doing here?”

Apparently, he wasn’t able to tell her. However, he did say he was well and wanted to see her, and so was paying this visit. The pair then sat at the porch table to talk. This was shortly before lunchtime; and Em, coming out onto the back porch to meet Zin’s friend, invited Luis to lunch.

Sensing something mysterious, before making sandwiches and dishing up pasta salad, Em made a discreet walnut call to Alex, to ask him to join the group for lunch. She then sent Halli to Lion Mountain after him because Westerwing hadn’t been available as much lately; plus, the gryphon could bring Alex faster than if he called another rookh.

Alex and Halli arrived just as Em was bringing out glasses of lemonade and sandwiches on a tray. As far as Zin knew, he was at the mansion to use the libraries, to look up some information on the Loch Ness Monster, in the hopes of solving the centuries-old mystery. In truth, Alex was there to get a feel for Luis, as far as who he really was, where he might be from, and what he might be doing there.

While eating, instead of getting answers to any of these questions, Alex merely got the feeling that he knew Luis from somewhere, though he couldn't think of where. It was like something that was just out of reach for his brain. Since Alex hadn't been on the trip to build the glass pyramid, there was no reason he should have met this young man before.

Helping clean up in the kitchen after the meal, while Luis and Zin were still visiting on the porch, Alex quietly told Em that he didn't have anything figured out yet.

"Don't worry about it," Em said. "Mystery or no mystery, he seems like a nice guy. So I'm not too worried."

Alex had to agree. He hadn't gotten any bad vibes from Luis, so Zin was probably safe in his company. Plus, gryphons could generally sense if people were up to no good; and both Halli and Magsen, napping on the lawns, seemed entirely unconcerned.

"Don't forget to use the libraries before Halli takes you back," Em advised, in not wanting to be found out about her ulterior motive for arranging Alex's visit.

Luis left while Alex was in the upstairs library and while Em was in her sewing room. Zin walked with him to the back gate. Smiling, he fished in his vest pocket and handed her a folded paper crane, after which, he placed a kiss on her cheek before slipping through the gate and hurrying down the walk to turn the corner and disappear from Zin's astonished sight.

She was surprised because this crane was identical to the ones she had used in her duel with Tanner. How odd that Luis would have been able to duplicate one of them, down to the exact folds. Even more puzzled than Alex was over Luis, her mind couldn't quite put together what this might mean. In their conversations on the porch, they had mainly talked about benign things, like how Cecelia and Muriel were doing, and what Otto was up to as far as projects these days. As in their talks before, Luis had refrained from telling her specific personal things. However, she got the idea that he did seem to be trying to tell her something, especially with giving her the crane; though whatever he was trying to get across was definitely eluding her at this time. After heading inside and placing the crane in a book she was reading to use as a bookmark, Zin headed to her lab to work on a special project. On the

stairs, as she was just passing Alex, who was getting ready to leave for home, she said goodbye to him using the triangle hand symbol, which he returned.

Oddly enough, neither Zin nor Alex thought to ask either Halli or Magsen if they might know anything. If they had, the gryphons could have told them they definitely knew the answer to the mystery of Luis.

Chapter Nine

A Matter of Life and Death

If we take a peek at what's happening with the older version of Ethan, strangely enough, we find him going back to the same time his younger self had just returned from, though in this case, not to defend a monument from destruction. Instead, he was heading out with Quin and a team of doctors to do some healing.

They were going back to heal victims of a certain law that had passed in the U.S. forcing many people to buy health insurance. Sadly, the insurance equaled no actual health care for many of the individuals and families forced to purchase it because the monthly premiums were so high and the deductible amounts that had to be reached before insurance would pay anything were so large, people couldn't afford to see a doctor, or go to a clinic or hospital, when they were sick or injured.

Quin was rubbing her shoulder as they were prepping for the trip. Smiling, she told Ethan, "I can heal other people, but I can't heal my own arthritis." This was because her gift didn't work on things like arthritis and diabetes. However, she could heal cuts, sprains, broken bones, infections, and things like asthma and allergy attacks, though not the conditions of having asthma and allergies themselves. But this was where the TKT doctors came in. They could help with many things that Quin couldn't, particularly because treatment of illnesses like diabetes, cystic fibrosis, and multiple sclerosis had advanced so far by this time. While the doctors would be careful not to leave anything behind that might change the future, such as medical instruments, they could treat people. Part of this came from the fact that in the future, medicine wasn't at all based on profit, as it had been in the past, this being the root cause of most of the evils involved with medicine in that many doctors, pharmaceutical companies, hospitals, and such were invested in keeping people sick, rather than making them well, so that their profits would continue. In the self-sustaining communities like those at the plantations, there was absolutely no profit in anything having to do with

medicine. Plus, other than correcting disfigurements, cosmetic procedures were no longer being performed because people had finally recognized how dangerous these were, both physically and psychologically. Therefore, not much of anything elective was going on with regard to medical practices.

Sadly, this was not so in the time the TKTs were visiting; in fact, quite the reverse. And not only were people focused on getting unnecessary procedures, they had been brainwashed into thinking that they needed to see doctors regularly even when they weren't sick or injured. Also, people had somehow gotten it into their heads that every bump, scrape, and sneeze needed a doctor's attention.

But it had long been proven that going to doctors more and more was making people sicker and sicker, particularly because patients were being subjected to many unnecessary and sometimes even damaging procedures. So too were many pills and injections making people incredibly sick, with the side effects and other risks from these drugs often being worse than what the original complaints had been.

Sadly, people just wouldn't stop going to doctors, even when looking back at the lives of their parents and grandparents, many of whom had only seen medical professionals a handful of times in their whole lives and had lived just fine into their eighties and nineties. However, with lobbyists being extremely active for clinics, pharmaceutical companies, labs, etc., people for many decades had been brainwashed into believing that lots of trips to the doctor and lots of pills and other treatments would help them live better lives. Never questioning this trend of thinking, many seniors were much worse off than they would have been otherwise, to the extent that their relatively healthy bodies eventually couldn't handle the unnecessary drugs and procedures and became sick; and so, seniors in many cases ended up dying well before their intended natural times, sometimes even by decades.

Even more sadly, people figured out too late that preventive medicine was never all that preventive, in that it ended up often causing more problems than it prevented. Human bodies have a natural ability to heal many ills, if given the chance by not being interfered with by a lot of "practicing" medicine, which was exactly what doctors mainly did, just practice, since they often didn't know exactly what was best for

their patients, particularly since all individuals were unique. Oddly enough, people seeking second and third opinions often got totally different diagnoses, which proved that many doctors didn't have concrete answers to people's health issues. In fact, only God truly has control over our bodies and minds; and many people forget to consult Him with their problems. Those doing so sometimes are led by Him to see doctors; others are not.

The massive numbers of those addicted to pain killers was part of this whole evil age in medical history, with doctors not only excessively refilling prescriptions for pain medications after surgeries, but also pushing these drugs on people with sprained ankles, tooth aches, and other minor pains that could have easily been relieved by heating pads, cold compresses, aspirin, and such. Also at this time, doctors were prescribing many other unnecessary medications including ones that ended up crippling and killing people. We might wonder why medical professionals who had sworn to "do no harm" would do this. The answer was simple: Their rewards were great, to include things like expensive vacations, theater tickets, fancy dinners, gift baskets, stock shares, etc., all paid for by pharmaceutical companies, industry lobbyists, medical device representatives, etc.

With regard to the unfair health-insurance law, ironically, the government ended up providing free healthcare to some people, while denying it to many others. Politicians at the time, who were focused only on numbers and getting reelected, had many people brainwashed into thinking that having more people insured equaled more people being taken care of, when the reverse was actually true. This was again based on profits, and corrupt government practices. If healthcare was free for some, it should have been free for all. But this was at a time when the sorcerers, largely in control of the government, were trying to wipe out the middle class in the U.S.; and they were more than succeeding because the middle class was exactly who was bearing the brunt of paying for the free healthcare, which wasn't really "free" because those forced to buy the expensive insurance were paying for it, while being denied any ability to have medical care for themselves and their families when they needed it.

Middle class people were the ones the TKTs, under God's instructions, were mainly focused on during this trip, which would end

up lasting over two months. While the doctors of the team were busy with their various treatments, Quin was going about healing by touch, and Ethan was keeping busy with dragon tears from several huge flasks they had brought with them. He also used healing sapphires on occasion.

The whole time during their visit, the TKTs kept hearing some of the same comments from the people they were treating with regard to the health-insurance law. “It’s all about politics, and not about people,” and “Government is the problem, not the answer.” Sadly, the government employees of that time all had good healthcare, which made many of them immune to having any kind of empathy for those that didn’t. Plus, voter fraud perpetrated by the sorcerers and their followers was starting to become rampant, so people didn’t have much power to change anything with regard to their government. Also, mimics were starting to impersonate certain high-ranking officials.

Once the TKTs returned home, they gave thanks to God for their current situation, which was much better as far as medicine than the place they had just left. Of the two main political parties of that time, neither actually had the answer, which was why it was so bad to have government in charge of healthcare. However, it seemed the self-sustaining communities of the future did have the answer: Take both government and profit out of the equation, and allow God-centered people to do their work. People did still pay to see a doctor and get treatment, but this generally didn’t cost any more credits than having a sandwich and cup of soup at a café. With nothing being a matter of cost, and very few rules and regulations to stifle everything, everyone was well and wholly taken care of; though it helped that people were not suing doctors and hospitals left and right, which was what was evidently happening in the time the TKTs had just returned from, and what was helping to drive up medical costs.

After the medical group returned, Ethan immediately sent Ashton and Michele on a trip back in time to convert Heather, this being roughly two years previous to the time Ashton had traveled back to in order to help the younger version of Quin heal the dragons. As the pair entered Supercity Nine, Ashton merely acted as bait, which, sure enough, Heather took, in using her tracer (specifically set to track Sapphire Boys) to zero in on the location of the TKTs. After this,

Ashton used an advanced version of a shroud mirror to mask his magnetic imprint and hide nearby, while Michele confronted the thirteen-year-old Heather, posing as a peer, basically another elite teen from Supe-9.

“No, I haven’t seen any strangers around looking shiny or bluish,” Michele said, slightly laughingly at the seemingly-absurd question Heather had posed. “I’m just meeting some friends to hand out some tickets I got ahold of.”

“What are you doing in an alley?” Heather asked.

“Well, would your parents let you give your friends tickets to a banned play right in front of them?” Michele responded. “Or would you do it in front of sorcerers, or their stupid Snakes?”

“I guess not,” Heather said. Turning off and stowing her tracer on her belt, she then asked, “What play?”

This was precisely what the TKTs figured would happen—the curiosity of this teen getting ahold of her.

“Oh, it’s no big deal,” Michele answered back nonchalantly. After something of a tantalizingly-long pause, she added, “It’s called *Crimson Damsel*.”

Heather hadn’t heard of it, but was taking an interest, as many teens did in things that were forbidden.

“Well,” Michele said, “I guess I could give you one of the tickets; I have a couple extras.”

“Thanks,” Heather responded. “Stupid sorcerers; they think they know best what we should read and listen to and see.”

“Right, they are really stupid,” Michele agreed, though she was thinking more along the lines of the banning being the really stupid thing because people of all ages tended to seek after things denied to them. The sorcerers were actually countering their own actions by outlawing things, particularly amongst the elite teens of the cities, who definitely had a hunger for something more than what they were getting. While it might have seemed like they had everything they could ever want in being pampered and sheltered, these things were definitely hollow, leaving many to feel bored, empty, and wondering if this was all there was to the world. Of course young people have a longing for something more, much more. Kids don’t truly want everything they think they want. That’s why discipline and limits are necessary. Sadly,

many parents in recent generations had been trying to win popularity contests, to be their children's friends, instead of being parents. Thus, many never set limits, corrected wrong behaviors, or taught useful things to their children like budgeting and cooking skills.

The play was one actually written by E.R. Tremaine, and had the power to convert to Christianity all those coming up onto the stage for the audience-participation segment, which involved certain members of the audience boarding a train and each delivering a line. Heather's ticket was one specially earmarked for being selected to do this. For roughly a decade before the uprisings, an underground theatre troupe called Thespis Moles regularly traveled throughout the cities to perform many banned plays, including *Crimson Damsel*, which also had the power to convert other audience members, but generally more slowly than the ones coming up onto the stage to participate in the performance.

In less than two months, Heather's hunger to learn about Christianity and read the banned *Holy Bible* ended up leading her to the Truth, and she was fully and wholly converted, to be part of God's family forever in having accepted Christ as her Savior.

As far as making this type of effort to convert people, the TKTs rarely targeted hunters and sorcerers of the past because certain things that were destined to happen had to run their own course. However, God sometimes commanded this type of intervention, in accordance with His Overall Plan. With regard to Heather, her own free will had also played a part in her conversion because she certainly could have ignored the urges that were driving her to seek out a bible and Christians to learn from. However, the urges were very strong, having been planted by the skill of a wordsmith. While there were skilled writers in many generations, the way words were expressed by gifted wordsmiths tended to give their works great and often even supernatural power. Em never felt guilty about the effects of her work because who could feel guilty about helping people find Eternal Life while saving them from Eternal Death subject to torment in a burning pit. If given a chance to choose differently, those affected would never choose to undo things because that would be insanity. Instead, they were very grateful to have been saved.

As soon as she and Ashton returned home, Michele headed out on a series of solo trips to counter Kemp much in the same way Birch had

done in the past. However, she was targeting Kemp roughly two years later than most of Birch's activities. Though the fire-gifted boy had by this time found a way to hide from certain thunderbirds (using a device Tanner had designed for him), he couldn't seem to hide from the girl who could counter his flames simply by using loose earth from the ground. *How maddening!* And so, he was forced to give up most of his malicious activities, because she seemed to be tailing him. *Every place he went!* Not being able to find an escape, he was completely enraged; but there was nothing he could do. He couldn't even hide using his shroud sapphire because, by this time, Heather had managed to confiscate any she had previously given to Kemp, Tanner, Penelope, and Devin while pretending to be their friends, which, by this time, she wasn't anymore, having been exposed a short while previous as to her true allegiance. But this didn't matter because Heather could still do godly work, particularly when teaming up with the TKTs.

Once Michele finished her series of excursions, Ethan himself headed out on three solo trips, to self-sustaining communities of the past that were home to Birch, Trixie, and Monte as grade-school children. As a guest geology lecturer to their classrooms, he traveled with the Gift Key as part of a crystal and mineral collection. With many of the stones cut and polished up into the shapes of cubes, pyramids, and spheres, the Gift Key fit right in. Passing the collection around ensured that the three students in question touched the magical sphere, the effect being that their gifts were exposed slightly earlier in life than they would have been otherwise.

Upon returning from the three trips, Ethan sent the older version of Jasper on a dozen missions to deal with incidences of election fraud of the past at a time when fingerprints were being used as voter identification. With Jasper's skills being equal to those of any print double, he was invaluable in countering quite a few illegalities, which actually caused many sorcerers to suspect that the print doubles under their command were not performing successfully. And with Jasper being very careful, none of the evildoers even suspected they were being countered by a gifted person from the future.

Looking in on Jasper's younger self, we find him also on a series of important tasks, but ones that did not involve time travel. Instead, he was traveling with his father to various mothership communities

surrounding Lion Mountain in which Pastor Hughes had been working diligently in recent months to counter a lot of false teachings, including those of atheists.

Giving an outdoor sermon in one settlement, Pastor Hughes gestured to a butterfly floating by, and a nearby rose bush in full fall bloom, as he preached on Romans 1:20-23, which basically expounds that proof God exists is literally right in front of us, and that those not willing to recognize Him are basically out of their minds.

“Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse; for although they knew God they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles.”

Upon finishing the sermon, Pastor Hughes strongly encouraged the congregation to read as homework Romans 2, which contains a strong warning of what will happen to those who choose not to believe in God.

With regard to the Romans 1 reference of certain images that humans use to replace God, this was happening in a most blasphemous and idolatrous way in one of the communities Jasper and his father visited, where a woman who had once seen a unicorn had made a steel statue of one and was encouraging other people to worship it.

To this, Pastor Hughes responded with a command from God from Jeremiah 25:6. ““...do not go after other gods to serve and worship them, or provoke me to anger with the work of your hands. Then I will do you no harm.””

With the help of a bigfoot, the unicorn statue was removed from the community and delivered to a lady blacksmith named Bernadette Hayes on Lion Mountain who ended up using the steel to make horseshoes, a bench, and a stair railing for the home of an elderly couple.

While Jasper and his father were working in communities surrounding the Mountain, Vini was similarly busy visiting earthship settlements in order to counter false prophets, sometimes by delivering sermons. With her husband busy at the plantations and in many pocket communities, Vini often traveled on her own to do this.

When preaching, she was often aided by a special zippered bible that she had had since her youth. While all bibles contain magic, from having once been placed into a bagical, this one was able to perform certain magical tricks, such as the words flying from its pages and hanging visibly in the air to get a point across, as the ones from Jeremiah 23:11-12 did, as a strong warning to those of the church who are false.

“Both prophet and priest are ungodly; even in my house I have found their wickedness, says the LORD. Therefore their way shall be to them like slippery paths in the darkness, into which they shall be driven and fall; for I will bring evil upon them in the year of their punishment, says the LORD.”

And it wasn't just outright falsities that were being preached in many communities, but a watering down of God's Word, which was exactly what had happened in the past and what had allowed the Supercities to come into being. People were picking and choosing from the bible, in order to simply have their “ears tickled” so that they could pretend to be pious while living sinful lives. This is completely unacceptable to God because we can't have it both ways. We either follow His commands or we don't. There is no middle ground, no picking and choosing. While all of us are sinners, we must do our best to adhere to all of God's rules because dismissing some as unimportant means walking a path of evil, and one that had, in the past, led to heavy persecution of bible-based Christians. So too had many people of the past (including some church goers) denied the existence of Satan; and in doing so, were actively serving him.

Incredibly, some people still denied the existence of both God and Satan, even with gifted individuals surrounding them, and even after witnessing the highly-visible activities of various demonic forces. Tragically, the people doing this seemed hell bent on ending up in hell, instead of heaven.

In one community that Vini visited, church leaders were telling people they needed to record all of their good works in notebooks. Then the notebooks would be reviewed to determine who had done enough to receive God's approval and have the right to go to heaven. There was nothing at all biblical about this because good works have nothing to do with Salvation, which is entirely based on accepting a free gift from God—that of His Son, Who has already paid the ultimate price to save

us from sin so that we can become part of His family, if we choose to do so.

Vini had invited Lidia to come with her on one of her trips because she was going to another country and might need a translator. Lidia was excited because she was going to get to ride a wind horse who was none other than Dara, sister to Tulko, Vini's longtime protector. While Tulko didn't take his mistress places much anymore (because she often traveled like a unicorn), he still stayed very close to her. Vini could have taken Lidia in the manner of unicorn travel simply by linking hands with her; however, today she thought her young friend might like to ride a wind horse. Plus, Tulko was somewhat anxious for an outing.

The trip was to a pocket community in Spain, to stop the activities of a cult, this one led by a mentally-ill person; and it was a good thing Vini was intervening because a mass suicide was on the horizon for the followers of the cult leader.

Vini didn't actually need an interpreter because she spoke both Spanish and Catalan, the two most common languages of the area. However, she thought the outing would be good for Lidia.

To save time, Vini was using the Truth Key on this trip. While the godly didn't like to overuse any of the seven magical spheres, for fear of becoming dependent on them (like anyone might on various aid devices), in this case, she had felt a need to hasten, mainly because the mass suicide was imminent.

Just being in the midst of the congregation, within thirty or so feet of people, the Truth Key was able to unlock the truth, to allow all members of the cult to recognize the dangerous and incorrect path they were on. Once this revelation took hold, people in the community were able to get psychiatric help for the false preacher.

Anyone in close proximity to the Truth Key could be affected by it. This included Lidia, who was all of a sudden able to see clearly that being a TKT was not what she was meant to do because it definitely wasn't a good fit for her. What else she might do was unclear at this moment, but she definitely knew she had been on a wrong path and needed to correct this. Having observed some of Lidia's recent issues, Vini had taken her on this trip precisely to help her recognize the truth. However, from basically being in the presence of a unicorn, Lidia was also able to know that her work with the TKTs, no matter how

disturbing, had helped her learn something about herself and therefore had been a worthwhile experience.

After leaving the pocket community in Spain, the pair next traveled to a small mothership settlement in Alaska, where seasonal depression had taken hold of quite a few people, mainly in the form of distraction, loss of sleep, anger, low energy, and mood swings. In less than ten minutes of a visit, Vini helped ease many of these symptoms; and the effect would be long term because of the power of unicorns.

Vini herself was no stranger to bouts of depression, which had plagued her for much of her life; though once she became fully sanctified, she no longer had them. However, in knowing firsthand the struggles, she was always intent on helping others whenever she could. As in Lidia's case, sometimes depression was not due to a long-term chemical imbalance, but from situational stress; and so her symptoms would be resolved once she was no longer exposed to the stress. She could still find ways to put her gift to good use without subjecting herself to the horrors that were inevitable on many time-travel missions.

As Vini and Lidia were returning to the plantations, Jasper, who was taking a short break from helping his dad, was just finishing a ropes training session in the Weapons Room at Netherwind. Alex, likewise, had just finished an archery lesson on the lawns behind the manor house. And so the pair decided to have lunch together at one of the plantation cafeterias.

After lunch, on their way home atop rookhs, Alex and Jasper met up with Ethan and Zin who were also on their way to Lion Mountain, Ethan riding a rookh and Zin aboard Magsen. The group was not quite to their destination when they came under attack by Tanner, Kemp, and Penelope who were riding nyregs. In order to avoid the fireballs Kemp was throwing, blasts of wind from Penelope, and acid capsules Tanner was launching from a slingshot-like device, the godly group decided to land on the shore of a large lake.

Intent on countering the miscreants in the skies, Magsen and the rookhs immediately took off, not knowing that Heather and Devin were secreted in the tree fringe surrounding the lake waiting to ambush their charges.

Though Heather was cautioning against an outright physical attack, Devin basically couldn't resist, particularly in knowing how easily he

had bested Jasper and Alex as a duo before, and in noticing that the pair had dismounted their rookhs roughly fifty yards apart and thus couldn't easily help one another. Sadly, because it was going to take a lot more training than a mere few weeks could provide, Devin again got the upper hand over the pair fairly quickly. First tackling Alex, he swiftly attached a Twist to his ankle. Designed by Tanner, this was a type of a rope restraint that acted like a hundred-pound weight and had a locking mechanism that only a special key could unlock.

With Alex immobilized, racing to Jasper whom he right away fist pummeled, Devin next used a few lightning-fast wrestling moves to throw his opponent into the lake. Fully at home in the water, he dragged Jasper a ways out from shore, where he then tried to drown him. However, no sooner had Devin pushed his adversary's head under the water then he found himself somehow being lifted above the lake's surface, as though by an invisible hand or by an intense spell of some sort. Hovering and unable to break loose, he could only watch as his prey below swam away. Then, in a matter of seconds, Devin found himself whisked across the water where he was deposited on the far shore of the lake. Though a fast swimmer, it would take some time to swim across; and not knowing exactly what invisible forces might be at work, he was reluctant to again enter the water. So instead he called to his nyreg that had been hiding near the spot where he and Heather had been waiting in ambush.

While Jasper was not a great swimmer, he was fairly close to the shore, which he was able to reach in less than five minutes to find his rookh waiting to help shield him from Tanner who had landed and who was blasting just about everything in sight with his staff, including Ethan who had taken a direct strike, but was swiftly healing up thanks to the protection of his medallion. To conserve his chances, Ethan was now taking cover amongst the tree line.

Suddenly, Tanner's staff flew from his hands, as though yanked by some incredibly-powerful unseen force, where it landed in the trees some two hundred yards from the position of the young sorcerer who was now going to have to go and look for it. With only rookhs nearby, except for Alex who was fully engaged in trying to drag himself to hide behind some rocks along the shore, Tanner could only wonder who had done this, and how. Eventually locating his staff, he found it

deactivated, though how this had happened was as much a mystery as how it had been wrenched from his grasp because only a fairly complex touch sequence on the handle could have deactivated the instrument. Now, he couldn't use the staff without first taking it back to his den because a sonic bath was needed as part of the reactivation sequence. *A magician couldn't have done this*, Tanner's mind told him. Plus, his longtime adversary was quite a ways down the shore, hiding behind her gryphon.

Actually, Zin was trying to get out from behind Magsen who was shunting her toward the trees in order to protect her from attack by Kemp and Penelope who, like Tanner, had also landed. While Zin wanted to race to help her friends, at this moment, Magsen simply wouldn't let her. Blessedly, Kemp's flaming darts were not much of a problem for the gryphon, whose feathers and fur were fairly resistant to fire. Penelope's wind bursts also didn't pose much of a danger to the protector.

Penelope and Kemp soon found themselves under attack by an unseen flute user. This happened to be Cecelia whom Alex had managed to call by walnut and who had just arrived by airbike.

Heather had been putting on a pretty good show of attacking with the ink weapon she had loosed from her neck. If Tanner, Penelope, or Kemp had been watching closely, they would have noticed what a poor shot she was today, in missing all of her targets. (Devin was still across the lake, not near enough to observe this.)

While Heather was trying not to hit her secret friends, Cecelia was likewise purposely missing Heather, in having known for many months that the Stone Hunter was really on the side of good.

Ceasing her assault and pretending she was using a spyglass, Heather used a comm-cube to call Tanner, Penelope, Kemp, and Devin to advise them to flee because she could see six people with flutes (that weren't really there) approaching their position through the trees. "We'll soon be outnumbered, and outgunned!" she warned. "I'm leaving right now!"

Penelope, Tanner, and Kemp all heeded her counsel and hastened to mount their nyregs. Once airborne, they met up with Devin who was already heading home. Observing them leave, Heather left on her nyreg a short while later, just as Jasper was helping Alex to reach his rookh.

Blessedly, Devin hadn't injected a grit into Jasper when they were grappling. Having assumed he was going to be able to drown his opponent, he had refrained, though he was now regretting not having done so.

Jasper also had regrets. "I should have turned into a cougar or a wolf to fight him," he told Alex. "I always think of these things too late."

For Alex's part, he was fairly kicking himself, because this was the second time Devin had managed to put a Twist on him. Linn had a key that would unlock the device, so it was just a matter of getting to his lab on the Mountain; but still, it was completely maddening to have once again been bested by Devin.

Emerging from cover, Ethan helped Alex get seated on his rookh that soon rose into the air to join the ones Jasper and Ethan had mounted. Cecelia was just leaving on her airbike, after waving to her friends, with Zin being the only one to notice The Sparrow, and only seeing her because the motion of the airbike drew her attention. Aboard Magsen, Zin soon joined Jasper, Alex, and Ethan to finally continue their trek to Lion Mountain.

Tanner was royally annoyed with his friends, as he often was when their plans didn't succeed. *I always get stuck with losers*, his mind whined, since he was fairly unable to comprehend that anything he was doing might be contributing to the ineptness and dysfunction of this group.

Kemp, Devin, and Penelope were all heading to their homes in Supe-8. Heather was nowhere around, which was not surprising, as she often set off on her own. Not feeling much like riding with his friends, Tanner ended up taking a different route, one that would equate to a long ride home, but that would allow him to cool off somewhat.

As he flew, he pondered the incident with his staff. *Only a sorcerer could have deactivated it*, his mind ended up concluding. *But that doesn't make sense...unless a converted sorcerer was nearby, maybe using something like a shroud sapphire to stay concealed.* But this scenario seemed unlikely, the more he thought about it. *No, the staff must have just somehow been deactivated when it landed in the trees.* But this seemed even more unlikely than a concealed sorcerer. All in all, Tanner was completely baffled.

Tanner ended up glad he had taken the longer route; in fact, he was positively triumphant and gloating when he spied Trixie, who was riding home from the plantations on an airbike, having just spent a good part of the day helping Chevy work on simulations for the Training Maze. Tanner had a definite grudge against Trixie, stemming from her having used a color weapon, a knotted green scarf, against him in an earlier battle. Secondary color weapons corresponded to emotions, with green causing acute depressive symptoms. These had plagued Tanner for many hours after the scarf strike.

With his staff inoperable, and since his prey was slightly out of range of acid capsules, he decided to use a Blast Ball, a device like a mini-grenade. Because he had a rather poor throwing arm, he didn't manage a direct hit. However, the detonation did occur in close enough proximity to Trixie as to knock her from her bike, which immediately folded itself and began to fall from having lost its rider. Now Trixie might have been in real trouble, in a freefall from about four hundred feet in the air, except for the fact that she was almost instantly caught, by Jarna, who came streaking in like a turquoise flash, transforming in less than two seconds from dove form to dragon form as she dove underneath her friend, who landed astraddle on Jarna's back much as she might have the airbike if it had stayed in bike form and in a position for her to do so.

Jarna had been in the area precisely because she wanted to check up on Trixie, whom she found she missed hanging out with. As fast as the dragon was, she was also able to whisk under the falling cube of the airbike before it hit the ground so that Trixie could catch it, after which, Jarna turned slowly in the air to confront Tanner, whose eyes now held something of a terrified look, replacing the triumphant and gloating one.

As he fled, very swiftly, Jarna sent him a thought message. *That's right, you Nasty Boy; you'd better run, before I make you into barbecue.*

Hey, Sweet Girl! Trixie gushed by thought to her friend as she scratched her neck. *Thank you for saving me!*

Jarna had been only too happy to, and she now felt maybe she shouldn't be napping so much in volcanoes, like a lot of dragons tended to do, because it was obviously more prudent to be out and about helping Trixie get around to do her all-important work for God.

Flying to Lion Mountain aboard her devoted friend, Trixie happened to notice that the crest on Jarna's head had thirteen points. *That's not unlucky at all*, Trixie thought. *In fact, it's the very best of luck because Jarna is such a terrific blessing.*

Chapter Ten

Truth-Key Revelations

Of the seven magical spheres, the Time Key was used most often, followed by the Mind Key and Truth Key. The Gift Key, Mage Key, Realm Key, and Sage Key were used less often.

Zin's special project involved making mini Truth Keys for use both in the here and now, and on time-travel missions. The minis were orange and made of stone like the original, but were smaller. At roughly the size of peewee marbles, they were designed to be worn on chains or lanyards as necklaces. Zin had obtained materials for the project from the Realm of Sextessence, which only magicians had access to through one of the doorways on the mezzanine. With regard to function, the keys were designed to expose truth, often allowing people to see through deceptions, especially those stemming from Satan's influences.

While most folks didn't want to overuse any of the magical spheres, the argument could be made that helping as many people as possible to recognize the truth in various situations was prudent, such as in the cases of false prophets and their teachings. Having several keys would allow for more efficient use in both the past and present; and so, Zin made an even dozen.

As far as use by the TKTs, many teams were lined up to take trips back to a particular time in history. This happened to be the same time in which the destruction of the Ten Commandments Monument had occurred, and in which Cary was working to combat the explosion in numbers of suicides. The healthcare crisis in the U.S. was also going on, along with a worldwide rise in terrorist attacks, and largescale persecution of Christians. The TKTs were starting to call this the Twisted Time in history because human reasoning was certainly twisted. People were calling good evil and evil good, as Isaiah 5:20 warns us would happen. "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!"

And, indeed, this was rampant in the Twisted Time. Christians especially were bearing the brunt of the evil thinking and acting, in that fascist groups, lobbyists, many teachers, government officials, and even certain judges were ignoring basic human rights such as freedom of religion and speech. People were basically only allowed to say things that these radicals agreed with; otherwise, they would be bullied, in various ways, including having lawsuits brought against them. Many lives and businesses were being ruined (often by false accusations and propaganda); and in some cases, people were even brutally physically attacked.

However, the TKTs were about to help some of these victims, to even the odds somewhat, and slightly slow down the spread of evil.

The first week in November found Ethan, Coco, Birch, and Quin making a series of trips back to help many Muslims recognize the Truth of Christianity and convert. And not only that, but the converts helped to shield many other Christians from harm. Like the original Truth Key, the mini one that Ethan was carrying did its work on its own, as long as the subjects were in fairly close proximity to the key, within thirty or so feet.

Another team consisting of Zin, Trixie, Chevy, and Jasper took a trip to Uganda to help women and children being sacrificed by witch doctors who thought this would help end a terrible drought. For several months previous, victims had been subject to unspeakable things done to their bodies before being allowed to simply die from their wounds. The mini Truth Key Zin was carrying allowed the people of the region, including many witch doctors, to see how wrong these sacrifices were. Plus, quite a few ended up converting to Christianity as a result of witnessing done by the TKTs.

Upon returning from the Uganda trip, the same team immediately left for another mission, this time to a suburban area of Kansas where an evil man had just mutilated his dog and a girl he had kidnapped by cutting off their ears and transplanting them onto one another. The TKTs in this instance were not there to stop this particular horror, but rather, simply expose it. The Truth Key worked in different ways on different individuals, sometimes exposing a truth within someone's own life, and other times by imparting truth to a person about someone else.

At a time when the evil man was checking his mailbox and his neighbor (an elderly grandfather) was doing the same, Zin and her friends happened to walk by on the street. The mini Truth Key did its work by rapidly implanting images of the actions of the evil man into the mind of his elderly neighbor, who almost fainted from the shock of what he was seeing. Though this was almost crippling for him, the grandfather managed to make it back to his house, herding his young grandson (who had been playing in the front yard) inside as he did so, where he called the police. With the grandfather telling them that he had seen something (but not relating that the images were only in his mind), the authorities were able to get a warrant to search the evil man's home, where they found the dog and kidnapped girl in the basement. Both survived, but were damaged for life, both physically and mentally.

The TKTs might have wondered why they couldn't have arrived two days earlier to save both the dog and girl from this horror, except that the answer had already been imparted to them by the mini Truth Key. The evil man and his deeds needed to be fully exposed in order to be stopped for good. If the time travelers had prevented the one incident, the man would have simply moved to another town, where many more atrocities would have occurred, amounting to a basement full of mutilated animals and people including a woman kidnapped from a grocery store parking lot, two stolen babies, a nephew of a neighbor, a newly-married couple who had been on their honeymoon when the man abducted them, and so on. Plus, the evildoer would eventually recruit a protégé, one destined to continue his work for many decades to come.

Because the Uganda and Kansas trips had both been fairly disturbing, the team was glad to be done for the day, with Zin logging their return, as Chevy handed the Time Key off to Ethan, Frees, Muriel, Cecelia, Birch, Alex, Quin, and Sal.

Each armed with a mini Truth Key, the team of eight made a series of trips back to the Twisted Time to visit middle schools, high schools, and college campuses to help expose the truth behind the explosive trend of transgenderism, which truly was causing much damage in that many young people were having permanent changes made to their bodies, ones they would end up regretting later and that couldn't be reversed. While a whole host of psychological reasons were behind people being convinced they were transgender when they really weren't, instead of

imparting complexities, the Truth Keys simply helped young people realize that they shouldn't do something drastic to themselves until having more time to grow up and think things through, no matter what pressures they might be getting from peers, parents, teachers, doctors, and transgender activists who often pushed people into this in order to justify their own lives by having more people join them, no matter what damage might be occurring to those who really were not transgender. Use of the Truth Keys also allowed many young people to realize that the money spent on transgender surgeries and hormone treatments could be better used to help children stricken by birth defects like clubfoot and cleft palate.

The magical spheres enabled some students to discover a few of the reasons why so many people were following this trend. Some felt rejected by a parent who wasn't around much. Others were dissatisfied with their appearance because of certain unhealthy media influences. Some had been bullied and were seeking the safety of being part of a protected group. Still others had been abused in their early years. Many simply wanted to feel like they belonged somewhere in this crazy world. In truth, only God has the answer to belonging, and only a relationship with Him can provide any sort of peace for us while we are on earth.

At this time in history, public schools were actually teaching kindergartners that transgenderism needed to be explored, and any teachers refusing to go along with this curriculum were being fired. Teachers were also being fired for politically-incorrect use of gender pronouns that supposedly hurt the feelings of certain brainwashed students. In a certain school the TKTs visited, a teacher was being sued over this issue, for having used the word "she" to describe a student born female that had decided she might not be female. Also at this Twisted Time came a push for languages to be legally changed to favor gender neutrality, even to the point that many people were demanding books be rewritten, even great literary works of the past. This caused an enormous amount of chaos because the stories then didn't make any sense, in being changed to include completely incorrect grammar. In these new versions, many readers couldn't even understand what they were reading; and since older versions were starting to be banned, correct copies were becoming difficult to find. This was one reason many underground libraries were established, to preserve as many as

possible books written in the language their authors intended, not what was being imposed on society by a bunch of activists with only their own selfish and petty interests at heart. As far as correct grammar, singular is singular and plural is plural. Thus, the pronouns of he and she are correct when referring to individuals. The pronouns of they and them should not be used to describe individuals. When a gender is unknown (such as in describing a bird, animal, lizard, etc. that is difficult to identify as far as gender), the pronoun of he should be used for that individual creature.

While the TKTs were able to counter some of this nonsense using the mini Truth Keys, they couldn't cover the whole world. However, as mad as it may sound, some of this madness was meant to happen, as part of a progression of events leading up to the Endtimes, that many people felt were likely rapidly approaching, given the state of turmoil in the world and the fact that bible prophecy always comes true.

A push toward socialism in the U.S. was also happening at this Twisted Time; and the eight-member team ended up taking a few trips back to expose socialism for what it was—cruel, depraved, and corrupt in any society throughout history in which it had been implemented.

Sadly, liberal thinkers often try to push this ideology on others as a means toward a better world, where things are more equal and where everyone is satisfied and fulfilled. In truth, a socialist world that is fair can never be made out of our depraved societies where many people are greedy, corrupt, lazy, etc. Only Jesus can lead us to New Jerusalem, the only true Utopia, and not everyone is willing to accept Him. Even those that do often don't live truly godly lives by following all of God's commands, which would have to happen to make our world into a truly better one. Plus, because sin has been present in our world since the time of Adam and Eve, and always will be until Jesus comes again, we can never achieve perfection or paradise on earth, or even anything close to it, particularly in excluding God from our plans, as most of those promoting a socialist agenda often do. Socialism has been tried many times, and has failed every time precisely because people don't follow God's principles; and because governments are inherently corrupt, and power hungry, feeding and enriching and bloating themselves, and then only throwing the leavings to the rest of us.

While many human beings might have good intentions, those promoting socialism are always being led by the devil. Blessedly, the Truth Keys were able to reveal some of this. So too did they expose quite a lot of fake news being circulated at the time by journalists, most of whom were completely corrupt, spouting lies instead of truth, and hiding behind fake sources to promote wicked agendas that were full of hate, mainly toward conservative-minded people. Aided by lobbyists, liberal college professors, celebrities, and activists, many news people of this time were responsible for a rise in McCarthyism designed to destroy certain individuals.

While visiting a number of college campuses, the TKTs took the opportunity to share a few bible verses, which would take root in the hearts of those hearing them not only from the Truth of God's Word, but also from the magical power of the mini Truth Keys.

On one college campus, the TKTs met up with a group of masked agitators that liked to travel around to disrupt peaceful gatherings, by a variety of means, including destroying property and physically attacking conservatives. Ironically, they were calling themselves anti-fascist, while violently pounding down free speech and freedom of peaceful assembly.

Amazingly, rising to a speaking platform, Muriel was actually able to read Psalm 64 in its entirety to the crowd, while God silenced the voices of the agitators, also keeping their feet rooted to the ground so that they couldn't charge the platform and attack. With the mini Truth Keys in operation amongst the onlookers, God's Words (in this case about silencing wicked tongues) really had an impact, actually striking fear into many students and even a few professors who had lately been directing a lot of hate toward conservatives. Muriel followed up with Psalm 94 (about God protecting the righteous), after which, the crowd was forced to disperse because of a sudden thunderstorm that included a very close lightning strike, divinely designed to strike more fear (and possibly some good sense) into those in the crowd.

Back home from their travels, the team of eight handed the Time Key and three of the mini Truth Keys off to Chevy, Monte, and Zin who would also be traveling to the Twisted Time to visit a particular college campus.

Many students at this school who didn't like the outcome of a recent presidential election were crying while being ushered by their professors to "safe spaces" so that they could pet visiting ponies, color with crayons and markers, and see counselors in order to feel better about this "great injustice" that had been done to them.

While the TKTs had been prepped for the mission, this spectacle was still somewhat shocking; and at first they simply stood and stared, with mouths open.

"They're acting like kindergartners," Chevy said, when she finally found her voice. She refrained from saying anything further because a bawling twenty-year-old girl had actually heard her comment, and was now bawling even harder from having had her feelings hurt by this strange girl who was waving off a counselor's offer of cookies and juice, as well as an invitation to pet the ponies.

Away from the safe space, Monte remarked to his companions, "They can't handle any kind of stress or disappointment because of the way they've been brought up and how they've been taught in schools. They've only been pampered, never denied anything, and have had almost no responsibility. They haven't been challenged or tested, so they're basically just a mess."

Outside in the quad, several masked demonstrators had set fire to a tree, an action that was being applauded by a lot of liberal students and professors.

"This isn't just a protest," Monte warily observed. "It's a riot."

"Where are the green people of this time, the ones that like to protect trees?" Zin wondered.

"On to bigger and better things," Chevy said sarcastically, "protecting violent bullies instead because that was what was trendy. Trees were out; bullies were in."

There were counter protesters, people standing in peaceful support of the outcome of the election. However, their numbers were small in comparison to the liberal activists precisely because a lot of bullying had been going on, and many people feared for their safety. Nearby, a masked man was smashing a window with a wooden baton.

Riots like this one were going on at universities (and other places) all over the country at this time, and students were being goaded to join in by many of their professors, some of whom were giving conservative

students failing grades simply because they expressed a different viewpoint than that of the liberal ideology that was being forced down their throats.

Because Chevy happened to be standing very close to a group of peaceful protestors, one of the masked agitators made the mistake of shoving her, after which, he tried to hit her with a baton. Drawing no weapon herself, she had the man disarmed, on the ground, and pinned in less than four seconds, with his baton skittering some two hundred feet across the quad pavement. “Act like a human being, not a monster,” she told him, “shame on you!”

As she let him up, the man fled. While not shamed by his own behavior, he certainly was by the fact that a teenage girl had just bested him.

Chevy next relieved another masked man of a can of mace, which he was trying to spray people in the face with. After tossing the can into a trash bin, as the miscreant lunged at her, she easily threw him. When he landed (some eight feet away), after a short pause to get his bearings, he jumped up and ran off.

“You go girl!” a nearby peaceful protestor said to Chevy.

“That’s what we need here,” another said, “a bunch of ninjas like her to take care of these thugs.”

In truth, the TKTs were not there to take care of the thugs; but rather, to make sure that a particular professor, who had joined the ranks of the masked agitators, got filmed by someone’s phone camera as he attacked a student with a piece of iron railing. By this time, his makeshift bandana mask had slipped sideways, exposing over half of his face. Thanks to the photographic evidence, he would eventually be prosecuted for the severe injuries he caused to the student.

Before the professor could attack anyone else, Monte, throwing a water bottle, managed to knock the piece of railing from his hands, which caused the professor to flee the scene.

The TKTs, as they sought their destination window, were saddened by what they had witnessed, not necessarily the violence, because they were used to this in their own time, but more in knowing what the future held for a lot of these students, many of whom wouldn’t be able to handle the trials of life to come. Some would have great difficulty holding jobs. Others would be in horrible debt their whole lives. Many

would end up living with their parents well into their thirties and forties, in being unable to support themselves, largely because of their spending habits. With no one to baby and care for them after their parents passed away, some would actually commit suicide because they simply couldn't cope with having to take care of themselves.

However, the TKTs needn't have felt quite so sad because their visit ended up having more of an impact than they might have imagined. Because they had gone back primarily to make sure the college professor didn't get away with attacking a student, they had forgotten about the mini Truth Keys they were carrying, which helped many students recognize that the ideology being pushed on them was evil, such as the socialist agenda. Therefore, some would be able to steer clear of the path of doom they had previously been on.

At home, Zin ended up telling her mother about the trip.

"I lived through that era of liberal nonsense," Em responded. "It started when I was in high school, and it was still going on when I went to college. Professors were giving failing grades if students didn't march in protests. They were also singling out conservative students so that their liberal peers could bully them, often calling them bigots and homophobes, and even sometimes physically attacking them. Being conservative on a college campus was not an easy thing. They were banning bibles and other books, and a lot of suppression of free speech was going on. I got bad grades in several classes because teachers didn't like what I was writing, and I didn't get my articles in the school paper and various journals."

"So what did you do?" Zin asked, practically horrified to hear of what her mother had gone through.

"Some people did still believe in free speech," Em replied, "so I managed to find my way. Plus, I had a lot of support from my parents, friends, my Aunt Fiona, and from church members. But mainly, I just prayed and read the bible, and relied on Jesus for support; and I always remembered the quote from 1 John 4:4. '...he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.' With the help of the Holy Spirit, we can always overcome."

"I wonder what happened to a lot of those kids I just saw," Zin pondered.

Em was reluctant to tell her daughter that many of them, along with their children and grandchildren, ended up enslaved in the Supercities and work camps precisely because of what they had been taught (and not taught) by their parents and in college.

The next day, Ethan headed out on a time-travel mission with Ford, Coco, and Muriel to an enormous cathedral in Europe, again during the Twisted Time, to stop demons outside the cathedral from planting their ugly thoughts into the brains of people entering. The gargoyles that generally protected the building had been needed somewhere else, and therefore were not present. At an opportune moment, exactly when the cathedral bells were chiming, Ethan and Muriel killed the demons with flute strikes, the sounds of which blended in perfectly with the sounds of the chimes.

As they were heading for their destination window, Muriel posed a question relating to the fancy cathedral. “When does all of this stop becoming a tribute to God and a place to worship, and start becoming excess and waste and splendor and pride and too much wealth spent that could have been put to better use elsewhere, like to give people clean water or to help spread the Good News, to let people know that Jesus died for them, that He loves them, that He’s waiting for them with open arms, and that He’s not just in an elaborate building or its rich furnishings and decorations?”

While her companions didn’t have an answer, the question was pertinent, not only because many people had debated this issue for centuries, but also because the next trip this group of four ended up taking, immediately after returning from the cathedral mission, had to do with the direction certain churches were taking. Again, this was part of the Twisted Time, in which, sadly, many Christians had gone astray.

This was a trip exclusively in the U.S., and the goal was to have the mini Truth Keys expose the truth about some wayward churches and ministries of the time, many of which were primarily focused on constructing large buildings and having large congregations, rather than spreading the Truth of the Gospel.

In many of these churches, the pastor’s words became more important than those of God. People leaving a service could often quote buzz phrases from the pastor (or a litany specific to that individual church), but no bible verses. Many church leaders were also promoting

prosperity as being an indicator that people were doing the right thing in God's eyes, whereas, if someone wasn't prosperous, they must be doing something wrong. This was completely unbiblical as far as teaching, since not everyone is meant to be materially wealthy in their lifetimes. In fact, if wealth were placed into the hands of some people, they wouldn't be able to handle the responsibility, or temptations, and would only come to ruin.

Also in this Twisted Time, many churches were more about entertaining their flocks, rather than spiritually feeding them. Appealing to emotions and intent on soothing feelings, many offered only shallow teachings that did nothing to truly fill the soul or equip people for the spiritual warfare needed to survive in our fallen world. Left hollow and vulnerable, many people actually sought fulfilment in sinful behaviors.

Some churches had become more like businesses, focused not only on their large buildings, but also on selling books, videos, t-shirts, etc.

When prepping the TKTs, Mr. Amir had referenced Isaiah 30:1. "Woe to the rebellious children,' says the LORD, 'who carry out a plan, but not mine; and who make a league, but not of my spirit, that they may add sin to sin....'"

When visiting a particularly large church in Florida, that was more like a huge indoor stadium, and that cost literally hundreds of millions of dollars to construct, Ford remarked, "It's like they're worshipping their building, more than God."

"Exactly," Ethan agreed. "This is idol worship and a waste. They could have renovated an old school or a warehouse and done better work for God's Kingdom."

"Or just built a smaller church from scratch," Coco interjected. "They could fit the same amount of people comfortably in a building one-fifth this size."

The TKTs attended three services at this church, with the mini Truth Keys they were carrying doing their jobs the whole time, causing many to realize they were seriously on the wrong track, the result being that in less than a year, over half of the congregation left the church to seek other and more meaningful spiritual feeding, and in order to pursue truly doing God's work. With less than half of its monetary support remaining, the large church didn't survive and was forced a year later to permanently close its doors.

The TKTs next traveled across the country (by bus) to a sprawling ministry complex in Colorado. From what the visitors could gather, many in the ministry were convinced that selling masses of books and videos, and conducting endless paid classes and workshops, was the best way to go. “We’re teaching so many people here,” one of the workshop leaders gushed to the TKTs as she was giving them a tour of the campus, dorms, and large worship hall. However, the visitors well knew that people teach by example; and this was not an example set by Jesus or His disciples, who never focused on big buildings and making large profits.

Again, the mini Truth Keys did their work, and many people realized they were being misled. The loss of revenue caused the ministry to halt an expansion project. In an attempt to get things started again, the leader of this organization became even more focused on selling, selling, and more selling, which ended up alienating many more of his followers, who finally realized they had been participating in something very ungodly.

While the TKTs weren’t able to travel the whole of the U.S., they were able to make something of an impact, making stops in Nevada, Missouri, Ohio, and Texas as well.

Zin and Sal took a trip right after the team of four returned from their church-and-ministry mission. A trend of ziplines being installed in wilderness areas was sweeping practically the whole earth during the Twisted Time, and having the effect of spoiling many natural places, both in a physical sense, and as far as the beauty of these areas.

Before leaving on the mission, Sal had written an essay entitled “Zipline, a Word Synonymous with Eyesore.” Translated into various languages, Zin and Sal posted the essay on social media websites, as well as delivering it both electronically and on paper to schools, libraries, and news organizations in various parts of the world. With the mini Truth Keys lending weight to Sal’s wordsmith gift, the trend of ziplines rapidly ended.

When the pair got back, they were done time traveling for the day. As Sal took himself off to the Labyrinth Library, Zin met up with Cecelia for a quick lunch, after which, Magsen took the girls on an errand to visit Patrick in Supercity Nine, where something terrible was about to happen.

Tanner, angry over the recent failures of many of his schemes, had just found out from Eizel that his brother had been working against him. Thanks to an elixir that Tanner had made for her, Eizel's abilities were enhanced, to the point that she could now read the thoughts and dreams of others, as well as plant them; and she had just read some of Patrick's thoughts, after which, she reported to Tanner that his little brother was basically a little spy, having several friends among the godly with whom he was sharing information about Tanner and his plans.

So he's the reason I'm being thwarted at every turn, Tanner thought, as Eizel left.

Next, seeking out his brother and finding him reading on the rooftop deck of their apartment building, Tanner swiftly turned Patrick into a squirrel, after which, he kicked him pretty much halfway across the roof.

However, in mid-flight from the kick, Patrick was somehow suddenly transformed back to his normal self. Somehow managing to land on his feet, though a little out of breath, he wasn't even damaged from the hard kick his brother had just delivered.

Meanwhile, Tanner had gone white as a sheet. Standing stock still, he felt a cold chill run down his spine. Only another sorcerer could have undone his incantation; and a powerful sorcerer at that because Tanner was gifted when it came to transfiguration spells. In addition to being fearful, he was completely baffled as to who could be doing this; a sorcerer who had mastered invisibility, no doubt.

Tanner left hurriedly, disappearing down the rooftop stairwell just as Magsen was landing on the roof.

"Thanks for changing me back," Patrick said to Zin. "I wouldn't have wanted to be a squirrel for the rest of my life."

Zin had no idea what he was talking about because she and Cecelia hadn't even witnessed what had happened. When Patrick explained, she said, "I didn't do anything."

"Then who did?" Patrick wanted to know.

"Maybe Tanner changed you back himself," Cecelia suggested, "like out of regret. You are his brother."

"He couldn't care less if I'm dead or alive," Patrick countered. "No, this is definitely a mystery."

Whoever had helped him, he was truly grateful, as he was for some good news he had just received from his mother. The family, minus

Tanner, would soon be moving to a self-sustaining ranch, far away from Supe-9. Patrick was smiling as he related this to his friends. “In Colorado,” he said.

The errand Zin and Cecelia were on was to deliver a shield sapphire to Patrick. “It might not protect you from all of your brother’s spells,” Cecelia explained as she handed it to him, “but it might help save your life someday.”

“Thank you,” he said, giving a hug to both girls who left shortly thereafter.

From Supercity Nine, Magsen dropped Cecelia off at Lion Mountain before heading home with Zin to Doyle Mansion.

Zin was still wearing the mini Truth Key around her neck from her trip with Sal. Three of the dozen she had made were being stored in the safe in Doyle Mansion’s subbasement library when not in use because Dell had felt it wise to keep some in a place separate from Laurelstone.

Magsen deposited her charge very near the rear garden gate, outside of which Westerwing happened to be sitting, in the shade of a pecan tree that had shed many of its nuts that were currently being enjoyed by the rookh as a snack.

While the Truth Key rarely knocked someone over from imparting too much knowledge at one time, Zin actually did lose her balance and have to lean against the garden wall from the shock of what was flooding into her brain, practically all at once, in a rapid series of images and thoughts, as though she was being told an elaborate story, and one that might fill a fair-sized novel, with her brain absorbing it in only a couple of minutes, as opposed to over the course of several hours. Some of the information she was receiving was out of order as far as a timeline, but she was still getting a fairly clear picture of the story in her head. What her brain was piecing together went roughly as follows:

Westerwing was the one who changed Patrick from a squirrel back to a human. Westerwing was the one who unlocked the cuffs binding me and Trixie. Westerwing broke the hold of the Mind Maze, saving me from Tanner. He also cast a spell on Devin at the lake, and deactivated Tanner’s staff. Westerwing is really a sorcerer who is converted and very powerful. But he was cursed to live as a rookh long ago by another sorcerer who found out that he was converted. The flying-westward-faster thing evolved from the curse because, at first, he could only fly

west, before figuring out how to tap into his sorcerer powers that he retained even under the curse. Also, Westerwing was the one who started the tradition of converted sorcerers wearing fairy crosses.

At right around two minutes, the Truth Key finished its work by imparting perhaps the most astounding revelation of all into Zin's brain: *Westerwing is really Luis! They are one and the same!*

This was completely true, and as Zin sought out her friend on the other side of the gate, the thoughts in her brain basically wrapped up the story by telling her, *He didn't have a year left to live before death when I first met him; he had a year left to live as Luis before the curse took effect.* This too was true, as was the fact that he was not allowed to tell anyone he was under a curse. Also, he could revert back to human form, but only one time per century and only for a period of six hours. Luis had used his most recent Century Revert on the day he visited Zin in the garden. While he wasn't allowed to tell her about the curse, he had hoped the paper crane would give her a clue as to his identity.

Oddly enough, Alex, at his home on Lion Mountain, was just realizing something about Westerwing too, mainly from pondering the situation with Astrid and the dragon tears. Though he didn't know all of the details Zin had just learned, Alex definitely knew the rookh was really a human being under a powerful curse.

Westerwing, crunching a pecan, was rather startled when Zin confronted him.

Somehow knowing that even though she knew his secret, he still couldn't tell her anything, such as that the curse had happened three hundred years ago, she simply said, "Thank you, Luis, for saving me."

After hugging his neck tightly, she turned and slowly walked to the house, her brain working the whole time. Luis had indeed saved her. Now, she needed to find a way to save him.

Chapter Eleven

Beyond Magic

The first thing Zin thought of was something she had already been pondering with regard to saving her friend. She had a leaf from the baby Tree of Life. The conjure woman had used a leaf from the tree to heal the dragons, so maybe she could make a cure for Luis too.

In knowing that sorcerers' curses generally couldn't be undone by others because of their imprints, Zin briefly had a sinking feeling; except, Esther was very powerful, so maybe she could help. A little voice in the back of Zin's head was telling her this was correct. Plus, she always had trust in God. He had brought her this far, and she was sure He would carry her the rest of the way.

While it was rather late in the day, it was even later (by about ten hours) in the Himalayas where Esther lived. So rather than heading out right away, Zin took a long nap. Then after dinner, she set off on Magsen to visit the conjure woman, making sure to take with her the blue Chinese puzzle box in which the precious leaf was stored.

They arrived near the entrance to Esther's cave just as dawn was breaking. Magsen, waiting outside as Zin entered, caught sight of a snow gryphon named Telános that lived in the area, perched on a distant hill. Other than a brief nod to one another, the gryphons didn't communicate in any way.

Esther was already up when Zin knocked tentatively at the entrance.

"Coffee and muffins are ready, come on in," came the answer from within.

Having pulled up a chair to the table, as Esther was setting out blueberry muffins and big mugs of angel-spiced coffee, Zin was just pulling the Chinese puzzle box out of her pack and was on the verge of explaining the reason for her visit, when Esther said, "Oh we can't work on that just yet. We have a busy day ahead of us, so I'm afraid the Luis issue will have to wait."

"So...you know why I'm here?" Zin said.

Nodding, the conjure woman replied, “Of course. “But as I said, breaking the curse on Westerwing is going to have to wait. And we’ll wait to talk about it because we have other things we need to focus on.”

Zin didn’t bother asking how Esther knew. Since God provided information to His children in various ways, the specifics in this instance didn’t matter much.

“Rookhs often live thousands of years,” Esther went on, “so we have plenty of time. But it won’t take that long to fix the problem, so don’t worry.”

Zin wasn’t worried; however, she was now fully curious as to how this was going to come about. But, as Esther had indicated, she was going to have to wait to learn the details.

As they were enjoying the muffins and coffee, Zin discovered that the conjure woman knew something else that Zin had thought was a secret. “He’s a nice boy,” Esther told her young guest. “You could do a lot worse.”

Zin hadn’t told anyone about her feelings for Luis, not even her mother. In fact, in at first thinking she would likely never see him again, she hadn’t even wanted to admit them to herself. However, lately, in seeing Quin and Linn together, she had started to wonder if maybe her future could possibly hold such a partnership.

The puzzle box was sitting on the table next to the coffee carafe, and Zin was completely amazed when Esther picked it up and opened the compartment with the leaf in it in about two seconds. While it had only taken Zin about fifteen seconds to get into both sides of the box, this had to be some kind of a record.

Next, Esther stored the leaf, which looked as crisp and fresh as when Zin had collected it over two months before, into a small wall nook covered by a door that was camouflaged to blend in perfectly with the stone of the wall.

“Do you know what’s in the other side?” Zin suddenly thought to ask, referring to the second compartment of the puzzle box.

Smiling as she nodded, Esther answered, “Yes, but you won’t need that item until sometime next year. But keep it safe,” she advised, “because it’s important.”

After they had cleared away the breakfast saucers and cups, Esther announced, “We’re going to take a trip. Well, actually several; you’ll

see.” Leading Zin outside, the conjure woman told Magsen, “Come along with us, dear.”

As Magsen followed, Esther led them on a winding path, picking her way around boulders and through brushy areas, for nearly a mile to the camouflaged entrance of a tunnel that happened to connect with an enormous chamber in the rear of her cave. “We came this way,” Esther explained, “so that Magsen can come inside too.” Indeed, the entrance to the tunnel was not only large enough for a gryphon, but would have easily fit a full-grown dragon. “It’s about to storm,” the conjure woman further offered, “and she shouldn’t have to wait outside in the rain, wind, and lightning.”

Sure enough, in less than a minute, thunder began clapping as the wind started to blow sideways the huge raindrops that were dotting the landscape. Soon, the dots turned into a splashy windswept downpour.

“So you’re a meteorologist too, as well as a prophetess,” Zin remarked.

Smiling, Esther answered, “If my arthritis acting up from pressure changes makes me one.”

“I guess I thought weather forecasting might be one of your gifts,” Zin said.

As they made their way through the tunnel, Esther said, “Actually, I’m not one of the gifted, never have been. I mean, all people are gifted in different ways. But I’ve never had one of those ready-made powerful skills like healing by touch or super eyesight. I’m just an ordinary person. Anything big I’ve ever managed to accomplish was only done from God helping me.”

The trio traveled the tunnel for nearly a quarter of a mile before reaching the chamber, the sight of which left Zin nearly speechless. In addition to its size, which could have fit probably four dragons comfortably, and the lovely minerals and crystals streaking and splotching the walls, floors, and ceiling, the room was home to a huge tapestry that was probably two stories tall and twice as wide. The scene of the tapestry was simply that of masses of roses climbing a stone garden wall.

“It took twenty-two people six years to make,” Esther answered Zin’s unasked question relating to the weaving. “And Marlon stayed nearly a year working on his part of it.”

“So it’s magical,” Zin breathed, not yet knowing that this was one of the four time-travel portals.

“Marlon takes an elixir on longer trips, so that he won’t age,” Esther said, “which you might want to think about doing too.”

Zin had been thinking of this of late. Since time travelers aged in the past just as they would if they were in the present, many seasoned TKTs took a youth elixir developed by magicians so that they could still maintain their normal lifespans in their own time. However, use of the elixir was regulated, so that people wouldn’t abuse it, as many sorcerers did with their own version of the potion, in that many of them actually went mad from having lived much longer than God would have intended them to.

Next, using a Time Cube, Esther took Zin’s hand to lead her through the portal, which worked much in the same way that the stained glass window at Laurelstone did, in that the scene on the tapestry had changed to that of their destination, which was none other than the site of the stone pyramid that Zin had helped to build.

Magsen would end up waiting in the chamber as the pair took their series of trips. Of course, in keeping with how time travel worked, this wouldn’t amount to much overall time, as the back-and-forth travels would happen fairly quickly.

“We’re here to activate it,” Zin cleverly deduced, staring at the pyramid, while also looking around at the maze, which had just been constructed. (In fact, Frees and the gnomes had just left.)

“Correct,” Esther confirmed.

As suspected by Zin and the others of her team, the trip they took into the Mystery Realm after building the pyramid was just so they could know what the pyramid was supposed to be like when activated, which was going to help Zin and Esther with being able to tell if they were getting the steps right.

The process, which required the skills of both a magician and a sorcerer (in this case, a sorceress), would end up taking the pair nearly a month, during which, they had to perform some of the more complex steps several times each in order to get them right.

Since Esther and Zin had both tackled difficult projects before, they ended up encouraging each other. Some things were simply meant to take some time, so there was no point in getting overly frustrated. One

of their larger feats involved finding a means to corral the four winds, which was done by the construction of a magical weathervane and a zephyr balloon, both designed to float on a cloud-buoy platform connected to a chinook net acting as a funnel to direct the winds to the pyramid. Channeling water from a nearby brook over the maze also took some major work, as did drawing fire from a twenty-mile deep chasm located nearly ten miles from the pyramid site.

Along with supplies like food and two tents, the pod pack Esther had brought with her contained several sophisticated work instruments. This was typical of sorcerers, as they liked to use gadgets, whereas, magicians used more mind power than anything else. But in this case, both instruments and mind power were needed to accomplish the task.

Esther could communicate with nature spirits, a feat very few human beings would ever master in their lifetimes. In doing so, she engaged a sylph to help corral the north wind, the most powerful and unpredictable of the four, it seemed. And a tree spirit helped keep several piles of dirt afloat so that Esther and Zin could more easily complete the activation of the earth side of the pyramid.

When they were finally done, and the pyramid was fully activated, both magician and sorceress felt good about their joint project, particularly, the teamwork involved.

Esther twice on their trip took an elixir, but one that was unlike what most sorcerers took, and that was not much like the magicians' version either. "This is directly from God," she explained, giving Zin a sip of the silvery-tinged clear liquid that tasted just like water and that made them both feel incredibly alive and full of energy.

While they were in the Mystery Realm, they took a trip to visit the Zoe Pyramid; but they didn't travel through the maze to get there. Instead, using Float Seeds that Zin had developed, they flew; except the flying was more like swimming through the air because they had to propel themselves along somehow, since the seeds were designed more for levitation purposes than for distance travel.

Standing in front of the glass pyramid, Zin was astounded because the greenhouse was much larger than she remembered. "It's definitely growing with the tree," she said, this being something she had already reasoned out.

They walked back to the Chronos Pyramid, instead of flying, in order to enjoy the countryside, and because they wanted to go through the maze.

“A third pyramid will shortly be built here,” Esther said as they walked, before catching herself. “Oops, I wasn’t supposed to say that,” she added, as she made the gesture of turning the little lock at the corner of the mouth and throwing away the key, as though to keep herself from giving away a secret; except that she already had, though Zin didn’t know details.

Nor did Zin ask, in somehow knowing that she wasn’t supposed to know, and that she was simply going to have to wait, specifically, on God’s perfect timing. Since He often reveals things to His children in stages, we simply have to wait, and learn patience, which is a wonderful virtue.

The maze took them two full days to traverse because Zin’s memory of her previous trip through wasn’t perfect. But, again, some things were meant to take time.

At the same time Esther and Zin were time traveling, Dell was going back in time with Marlon to make the time-setter. In addition to being a fabulous leader, Dell was a gifted mathematician, which made him well qualified to help a magician with this task. Both Marlon and Dell found it very funny that when the device was found in their younger years, neither of them at first knew at all what it was for. Now, here they were making the time-setter, which was then hidden away at Laurelstone on a shelf in a secret room that Pizzo and Heike would eventually discover.

After returning to the cave chamber through the tapestry portal, Esther and Zin immediately set off on their next mission, to the site of the temple in China that was actually in the process of being built, this being roughly a thousand years into the past. The main structure and exterior details were complete. Now, only certain interior finishes needed to be added, such as the making of twelve special doorways. In a long hallway, which reminded Zin very much of Netherwind’s mezzanine (probably because it was every bit as magical), several carpenters had just finished installing twelve wooden doors.

“Can you guess?” Esther said excitedly, fairly bouncing up and down on her heels in anticipation of Zin finding out that this was the equivalent to the mezzanine at Netherwind.

“These doorways lead to the same realms as those on the mezzanine,” Zin correctly guessed.

“Exactly,” Esther replied. “The realms already exist; God made them. But we get to help make passageways to them from our realm.”

Again, this was going to take the work of a sorcerer (in this case, a lady one) and a magician in combination. The carpenters had already worked with a magical mathematician to come up with the exact dimensions of each doorframe and door, this being incredibly important. And each of the twelve had slightly different dimensions, not only height and width, but also thickness. While this was true at Netherwind as well, Zin had never noticed. Nor had Esther, in all of the time she had spent on the mezzanine over the years (as Weatherly).

This particular project ended up taking nine months, and Zin ended up taking several sips of Esther’s elixir during this time.

Zin thoroughly enjoyed working in the temple, which was Christian, as were the monks residing there. As viewed from the air, the temple was even shaped like a cross.

“I thought Christians in China were heavily persecuted, even outlawed, especially in the past,” Zin said to Esther as they were having dinner one evening.

“Jesus always finds a way, into all corners of the world,” Esther replied. “Plus, the temple over the years will be guarded, by various protectors—yetis, tamed orcs, genies, even dragons.”

Luis was on Zin’s mind a lot as she worked, but she didn’t talk to anyone about him. And she didn’t ask Esther about breaking the curse. Although she wanted to several times, she was trying to exercise patience, which she was getting very good at, at least from her perspective.

At the end of their project, as they were just about to leave for home, Zin thought to ask, “Does the temple hallway have a Thirteenth Door like the mezzanine, leading to the Mystery Realm?”

Smiling and leading Zin to the center of the magical hall, Esther pointed to the floor, to what appeared to be a large trap door.

“God Himself will make this passageway function and make it invisible; that’s not for human beings to do,” Esther said. “It comes out very near the maze, as an overhead trap door in a cliff overhang that’s only about five or six feet from the ground,” she added.

“Near the maze; that’s a bonus,” Zin said, in well remembering the three long treks she had taken through the Mystery Realm.

“Well, it’s a bonus if you need to go to the area of the pyramids,” Esther replied. “But if you need to get to the canyons, that’s another story.”

After returning briefly to the cave chamber, once Esther had switched out a few items in her pack, the pair again left through the tapestry, again to visit the temple in China, this time roughly two hundred years later than their previous visit.

Taking a short hike to a nearby village, Esther and Zin picked up six stone spheres from a stone carver’s shop.

“We’re going to make the seven spheres,” Zin correctly deduced. “Where’s the seventh, the Time Key?”

“Yet to be carved,” Esther said, producing a fist-sized chunk of greenish stone from her pack. “This is the same stone that was used to make Laurelstone, quarried at the exact same time. And this is why the Time Key is specific to the arbor window portal.” (It was quite natural for Esther to have a chunk of this stone, since she had lived at Laurelstone Manor for many decades.)

The stone carver would be delivering the seventh sphere to them the next day.

Returning to the temple, Zin and Esther set to work right away.

Each of the spheres was unique, and each required a unique set of steps to make. Again, this task needed the skills of both a magician and a sorcerer (or a sorceress). Zin on a couple of occasions remarked how odd it was that these magical objects, relied upon over the years by the godly to thwart sorcerers, actually came about from the help of one. Barring anything extremely unexpected, the seven spheres were designed to work even on time-travel trips and in other realms, their magic somehow being protected from most anomalies; thus, they were very useful as well as powerful tools.

“Remember,” Esther said as they were beginning the project, “the Realm Key, Time Key, Gift Key, Sage Key, Truth Key, Mage Key, and Mind Key are each meant to unlock something, hence the name, keys. Their magic will unlock truth, unlock a portal through time, unlock gifts, unlock visions of the future, etc.” As Zin was nodding, Esther added,

“And they have to be relatively easy to use, because many people will need to use them, not just those who are overly clever or skilled.”

Zin understood this as well. Because so many people needed to use the magical spheres, this was why five of keys did their work pretty much entirely on their own (other than perhaps needing to be in contact with a person’s skin like the Gift Key and Time Key, or having proximity factors). The Mind Key and the Mage Key were the exceptions to the ease of use because both took some training to use. Additionally, the Mage Key could only be used by magicians, to unlock various magical secrets that were not supposed to be available to non-magicians.

In order to make the spheres, Zin needed access to the Realm of Sextessence, from which magicians received some of their knowledge and materials. She used the magical doorway in the temple hall to access this realm because Netherwind’s mezzanine didn’t yet exist, this being over six hundred years prior to when the manor would be built.

A magical talking peacock arrived at the temple a week into the project. This was the same one that had helped to make the original seven dragons based on the seven colors of the rainbow; now, he was going to help with several steps of making the spheres, specifically, those involving color, the magical energy of which was needed to make the keys function. This peacock was easily twice the size of any Zin had ever seen; plus, his coloring was slightly different, more vibrant, with more purples, reds, and golds than most peacocks seemed to sport.

While Zin was used to gryphons talking aloud, the peafowl among the flocks at Laurelstone never spoke; and so it was somewhat funny to hear this one actually utter words and phrases. At first cracking up a few times, which didn’t particularly please either the peacock or Esther, she did finally manage to get herself under control, while apologizing for her behavior.

When out of earshot of the peacock, Esther said, “God has many helpers, including magical peacocks, which are very powerful. This one was said to have been present when Jesus was born. Also, according to legend, the eyes of his feathers can see into the future.”

“My Aunt Vini has a peacock feather than can do just that,” Zin said, in amazement.

“Hmm, does she?” Esther replied. “Well, it might be from this very bird.”

“Wow,” Zin answered.

Over the course of the eight weeks that it took to make the spheres, Zin, at one point, became very frustrated, specifically when making the Time Key. It all just seemed overwhelming. She had been able to make the mini Truth Keys, and a mini Mind Key awhile back for Quin, because she had the originals available for reference, as something of a template to follow. But starting completely from scratch was quite a different story—a much more complex and difficult task.

Although she noticed Zin struggling, Esther hung back a bit, in deciding to let her young teammate find an answer herself, which Zin eventually did. She had forgotten to ask God for His help, which she usually did, instead of relying on her own self-sufficiency, which was nothing compared to what God could accomplish working through a person who had fully submitted to His will. We were never meant to go it alone, especially not as related to difficulties. And running through Zin’s mind when she realized her error was exactly what Esther had said before they started their series of trips together. “I’m just an ordinary person. Anything big I’ve ever managed to accomplish was only done from God helping me.”

When Zin prayed about it, God directed her to consult the peacock, who told her, “You’re thinking in terms of the color weapons. They’re not the same as the spheres. While green is related to the emotions, and a green textile weapon can cause depression, in another philosophy, the color green relates to renewal, growth, and knowledge.”

Zin was starting to see how her brain had strayed off course, particularly because the spheres were more tools than weapons; though there was something of a connection because green could mean a renewal of sorts with regard to coming out of depression—a renewal of energy, of spirit. And we can learn from our dark times, so we grow in spirit and increase in knowledge.

With help from the peacock, the many facets of magical color energy definitely started to make more sense to Zin.

Again praying, and asking God to show her the way, He ended up telling her to use her foreshard to see certain steps before she was required to perform them.

“I almost feel like I’m cheating,” Zin told Esther.

“If God tells you to do something, it’s not cheating,” she said.

“But it’s so easy,” Zin countered.

“Why wouldn’t He move heaven and earth to help us, if we’re doing His work, in accordance with His will?” Esther answered.

Marlon, after returning from the trip with Dell to make the time-setter, ended up taking a solo trip back to help carpenters and genies make the magical doorways in the mezzanine hall, shortly after Netherwind Manor was built. This project took nearly two years, during which, he accessed the Realm of Sextessence using the temple in China, which, at the time he visited, was guarded by foo dogs and two Chinese dragons. The protectors didn’t take much notice of the magician, as they could tell he was a friendly sort. Since Marlon had the help of the genies, in Netherwind’s case, he didn’t need a sorcerer to help make the twelve doorways. Though not identical as to how the temple doorways had come about, similar results were achieved. While we can’t fully understand God and His actions, we can be sure He works in many and sometimes unexpected ways.

The spheres, for the time being, would be staying at the temple. Through various means, they would eventually make their way to the twin plantations as their final home destination.

After completing the project, Zin took one more trip with Esther back to the temple, this time ending up there roughly four hundred years in the past, where she met up with two other magicians to help make the six bagicals. It always took three magicians to make a bagical, because each person had a piece of the puzzle needed to complete the project.

Esther’s skills in this case were not needed because only magicians could make bagicals. And so, while Zin was working, the conjure woman, aboard Jinhai, left to explore a nearby mountain where Jinhai ended up meeting Jinjie, a lilac-colored female Chinese dragon who would eventually come to live at the temple, to help protect it.

In addition to drawing on Sextessence, the magicians making the bagicals tapped the Dimension of Mystery (through a doorway in their minds), which was necessary, since no one can know how bagicals will react to items put into them, the results always being a mystery until revealed, mainly due to the free-will component of the bags.

Like the seven spheres, the bagicals stayed at the temple for now. Certain events over the years would ensure that five of the six would make their way to the plantations. The sixth, being a little more of a free spirit than the other five, would always choose a different path.

God was allowing all of these wonderful things to be made because it was not yet time for all of the evils set to befall mankind, and He wanted His children to have a little help in enduring, until the time when Jesus would come again.

The trips Esther and Zin had taken so far through the tapestry had taken less than an hour of their time at home, even with switching out gear a couple of times. Magsen, reading a mystery novel borrowed from a bookshelf in the large chamber, hadn't even gotten through a whole chapter. The rest of the chapter was going to have to wait because Esther needed the protector to run an errand, to the plantations to retrieve the Mind Key, which, blessedly, no one was using at this time.

"Now to work on the issue involving Luis," Esther announced, just after Magsen left. "We can't break the curse, I'm afraid."

"We can't?" Zin asked, in a rather crestfallen tone, because she had felt sure the conjure woman could somehow, especially since she had cured the dragons, and because they had the precious leaf.

"No, but we won't need to," Esther answered.

"So will the leaf work just by itself?" Zin questioned.

"We won't be using the leaf," Esther replied. "It will be used for something at a later time. But we will be able to fix the problem."

With this, she paused, in a rather lengthy and dramatic fashion, while looking expectantly at Zin, who got the idea that the woman was waiting for her to come up with the answer as to how the fix was going to happen.

And so, Zin's brain rather speedily started to work. However, even after about three minutes of intense thinking, she couldn't seem to come up with anything, even after a quick prayer to God to ask for His guidance.

As a way of offering a clue, Esther asked, "If we can't break the curse on Luis, because of the sorcerer's imprint, who can?"

"Only the sorcerer who cursed him," Zin right away answered.

With Esther again looking at her expectantly, and with her brain starting to work better, Zin soon had the answer, in the form of a plan,

which she then shared with Esther. “We’ll take a trip back in time to when the sorcerer enacted the curse in the first place. Then we’ll use the Mind Key on him to convince him to develop a counter-curse at the same time; we’ll convince him he might need it, maybe in case his curse backfires onto himself. Then we’ll have a way to cure Luis.”

“Well, then let’s get to it,” Esther said, since Magsen had just returned with the Mind Key.

Because the pair was gone and back again so quickly, Magsen never got to finish the chapter she had been reading. However, Esther ended up lending her the book to take home to finish.

On the trip, Zin had posed as a protégé of the elderly prophetess, whom the evil sorcerer, though he was only meeting her for the first time, evidently much respected, in not at all knowing that she had a device on her that she was skilled in using and that could manipulate his mind. This ended up being the easiest project of all. In fact, they only spent a couple of hours in the sorcerer’s den. Once the counter-curse was finished, Esther, with lightning speed, nicked it from her male counterpart, while also wiping from his mind the fact that he had ever created it.

As they were leaving the den, Zin told Esther, “I see now why we had to do our other work first. If we hadn’t already made the seven spheres, we wouldn’t have had the Mind Key to use on this mission.”

Esther was smiling, because this was perfectly correct.

Upon returning home, Magsen took both Zin and Esther to find Westerwing, who was at home on Lion Mountain, sitting under his favorite black walnut tree.

While the curse had been in the form of an incantation, the counter-curse was a potion, which took immediate effect when Westerwing swallowed it, turning him from blackbird to Luis in less than four seconds.

Zin was rather surprised when Esther suddenly hopped onto Magsen, bidding Zin to do so as well so that they could quickly leave. As it turns out, a fire spirit had just alerted Astrid to the fact that the curse on her longtime friend had just been lifted, and the mountain leader was now on her way to the scene.

While Esther had never been directly told by God to avoid her younger self, she thought it good common sense to do so. Plus, in the

past, when she had arrived in the walnut grove to find her friend decursed, no one else had been in the vicinity.

Although Zin didn't exactly know why Esther had suddenly decided that they needed to leave, she didn't question, in figuring that Luis, back to his old self, might like some time alone. There would be plenty of time later for the two to spend time together.

Looking in on the older version of Ethan, we find him taking a trip back to give a Time Cube to Astrid, this being shortly after Marlon created the painting portal. Ethan followed this by taking a trip back to give Esther a Time Cube so that she would be able to use the tapestry that had just been completed. Both Astrid and Esther used the portals sparingly over the years, basically, only when God commanded it.

Chapter Twelve

December Blessings

With Luis deciding to make his home on Lion Mountain (instead of going back to Denmark where he was originally from), Zin being able to spend time with him happened fairly quickly. In pondering why she and Esther hadn't simply gone back in time to prevent the curse in the first place, Zin realized that not only would she probably never have met Luis, but also, his experiences over the past three hundred years were an important part of God's Plan. Westerwing had helped so many people over the years, including countless rescues from demons, sorcerers, and whatnot. Plus, he and Astrid were meant to be good friends, which had only happened because he was Westerwing.

Luis, too, was able to see the situation as a blessing in disguise, as he felt supremely blessed to have met Zin, and now, to be a part of her life. Indeed, the pair would gradually form a special partnership, starting with his giving her tips to counter Tanner and other sorcerers during duels. Luis had already been powerful at age twenty. Adding three hundred years of observation and experience to that, he was easily one of the most formidable sorcerers in existence. This was why he had so easily been able to counter Tanner.

As a bonus, because he had been Westerwing for so long, and because he had excellent transfiguration skills, Luis would be able to take the form of the giant blackbird anytime he wished; and thus, could fly anywhere without help. And, he retained his forty-times-faster-westward skill. So it was a very good thing he was a converted sorcerer; otherwise, he might have been an unstoppable evil force.

Zin also ended up spending some time with Esther, now her good friend; though it remained an oddity that Zin never recognized the woman as being her Aunt Weatherly, whom she sometimes missed terribly.

With Esther also giving her tips about dueling, Zin was more than ready for her next encounter with Tanner, which occurred the second

week of December about fifteen miles from Doyle Mansion, on the outskirts of the rubble city that had once been Montgomery. Zin had been riding an airbike and thus didn't have Magsen along on this day for protection, which was why Tanner, also riding an airbike, had decided to confront her.

"Just wear him out," Esther had advised. "Sorcerers are notoriously lazy, never working out and never training, so most of them don't have any real stamina. Just go for a stalemate, instead of a win, and he'll eventually give up."

Since there were a few magician moves that could basically indefinitely counter any sorcerer tricks, after nearly two hours of dueling, Tanner did give up. However, instead of fleeing, he simply stayed put after bowing his concession.

Although wary because her opponent wasn't retreating, Zin did let her guard down somewhat, never expecting that Tanner would break the rules of dueling and again attack, which he did, with lightning speed, using something super deadly that he had been holding in reserve.

Tanner had recently consulted a Magician Hunter, from which he had learned how to fashion his own version of an ink weapon. However, instead of being applied to his skin like a tattoo, he had the weapon—a razor-sharp S-shaped blade resembling a snake—printed onto his robes.

As Tanner sent the snake-blade whizzing towards his opponent, unable to move quickly enough, Zin might have suffered a sliced neck, except that the blade was suddenly knocked off course by another object sailing in with even more speed. This happened to be a sorcerer's staff, thrown by none other than Luis who had just arrived on the scene.

At this point, Tanner did flee because he was basically no match for Luis; and he knew it. As the snake-blade returned to its spot on his robe, Tanner hopped on his airbike and took off. While Luis could have easily chased him down (as Westerwing), he instead let him leave.

"Never trust that a sorcerer will follow the rules," Luis said, by way of giving Zin another tip related to dueling.

"I still have a lot to learn, don't I," she agreed, actually slightly embarrassed that Luis had, once again, had to save her.

The staff Luis had thrown was actually one that had once belonged to Tanner and that Linn had been keeping in his possession. However,

figuring that Luis could make better use of it, Linn had recently given it to him.

Tanner was once again angry as he returned home. He never could seem to get ahead, and he was starting to wonder if this was going to be the story of his life. With his parents and brother gone (having moved the previous week), he was on his own now. He didn't have to worry about food and such, or keeping up the apartment, because sorcerers were provided a credit allowance from the government. If Tanner ever ran short, he could always steal more credits. However, living in an empty apartment was taking some getting used to.

With no one to vent to or take his anger out on, Tanner on this day took to kicking a few things around in his den. However, as he started to do this, he got the oddest feeling that he was being watched. As the feeling grew, he started to think it wasn't just his conscience telling him he was being a brat, which sometimes happened when he was engaged in immature behavior. No, this felt more like real eyes; and he started to wonder if maybe an angel was watching him. Not that Tanner had ever been one to believe in God and angels and such (except that the godly had to get their powers from somewhere), but it was more that he felt something that could only be described as an overwhelmingly good and warm presence in the den, like what he felt sometimes when remembering how his mother had held him when he was a little boy. In her arms, he was always safe, warm, comfortable, and even happy.

While Tanner wasn't exactly sure when happiness had fled his life, if he stopped to think about it, he probably could have traced it back to when he began his training as a sorcerer some eight years previous, under direction of his mentor, Vidas Farr, a harsh and critical man who wasn't anything like what a true mentor should be. Nor was he a substitute for either of Tanner's parents, who basically saw their son very little after his sorcerer training began.

Sitting in the lab and surrounded by the good feeling served to soothe Tanner's anger, and he even had regrets about certain ways he had treated his family in recent years. He definitely missed his parents, and he was starting to think maybe it hadn't been so bad to have Patrick around either. After about twenty minutes, Tanner left the den to head to the rooftop deck to get some air.

The good feeling in Tanner's den wasn't due to the presence of an angel, but rather, from Linn, whose gift of exuding goodness was working perfectly and who was shielded from detection by both the stealth feature of his airchair and a shroud mirror. Thanks to Patrick, Linn had had the security code to Tanner's den for some time, and had taken several spy trips. On this particular one, he hadn't expected the sorcerer home so soon. But it little mattered because Linn was patient. Sitting in an out-of-the-way corner, he simply needed to be careful not to breathe too loudly, or sneeze. Shortly after Tanner left, Linn did likewise, taking a comm-cube and a couple of other small devices with him to study.

Having been saturated by Linn's goodness, which would last for several weeks, the remainder of the year would prove a smoother time for Tanner, mainly because he would end up feeling less inclined toward some of his nastier behaviors. Sadly, the feeling wouldn't last forever, and he would soon be up to many of his old tricks.

However, if we flashforward about twenty-two years, to another scene in Tanner's life, shortly after he destroyed over half of his den trying to blow up a time-traveling Diamond Girl, we find something happening to him for good that *would* end up sticking. When Aube visited him in order to destroy a device called an aftershard, which the older Tanner had used to send a message to his younger self, she left a blessed diamond in the den. Unharmed by the explosion, the diamond would end up working its magic on Tanner, to the effect that several unexpected and blessed things would eventually happen, and become permanent, in his life.

Aube didn't leave blessed diamonds everywhere she went. In this case, she was following God's command in Romans 12:14. "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them."

Luis would eventually have a den on Lion Mountain. In the meantime, using Linn's lab, he and Linn were working together on a few things. One of their first collaborative projects involved making a pair of Sync Cuffs, which was what they were calling their version of the cuffs that had bound Trixie and Zin. These would eventually be used in the Underground Army. With the prototype complete the week before Christmas, Jasper and Trixie managed to attach the cuffs to the wrists of Penelope and Kemp, who had been out stirring up trouble in an

earthship community. For safety, the locks of the Sync Cuffs were set to unlock automatically after a certain period of time, in this case, three weeks, which meant the miscreants were going to have to spend every minute of the rest of the December and the first part of January with one another.

Linn, in addition to his more serious work on things like weapons and prosthetics, liked to make somewhat frivolous things too, such as a pair of fairy wings for a little girl at church. In the same way he had convinced Quin that the elf ears he made earlier in the year for a girl named Ruth were super-powered and could be used to listen in on conversations halfway across Lion Mountain, he convinced her that the fairy wings would allow Nadine to fly faster than an airbike. “You’ll see,” Linn said, keeping a perfectly straight face. “She’ll be zipping all over the place like a sylph.” In truth, the wings couldn’t fly at all; unless you count how high the heart and spirit can be lifted from being given such a special gift.

It was a busy time for many on Lion Mountain. Bernadette was making useful things out of another idol statue (this time a figure of a winged woman) including a garden gate, a decorative cross, and twenty sets of door hinges. When taking a break for lunch, she read several chapters in the Book of Hosea, which had a lot to say about idols, and included strong warnings from God that those worshipping them won’t get away with it. She was especially drawn to Hosea 8:7, which she decided to memorize. “For they sow the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind. The standing grain has no heads, it shall yield no meal; if it were to yield, aliens would devour it.” So too did Hosea 10:2 catch her eye. “Their heart is false; now they must bear their guilt. The LORD will break down their altars, and destroy their pillars.”

At the same time Bernadette was working, Pastor Hughes was preaching a sermon from Ephesians 4:11-16, which had to do with growing up spiritually, using our God-given gifts to resist false doctrines and those who mislead, and coming together in unity to strengthen the church and build one another up in love.

Back at the plantations, Lidia was helping to decorate the family’s Christmas tree, while counting her blessings and thinking about the coming year. While she wouldn’t be time traveling, she would be keeping extremely busy working as an interpreter in schools. Having

students from all over the world, many teachers at the plantations and in various pockets were anxious for her help. Also, a librarian had expressed an interest in working with her, specifically, to tweak a series of conversational-language reference books. Although a universal translator was available (developed by a gifted technologist), many people were leery of relying too much on gadgets; and so, people would always need books to help them learn foreign languages. Sal, too, wanted Lidia's help, to translate some of his books into various languages.

While happy to be on a new path, Lidia was able to recognize that her time spent as a TKT had been beneficial to her. For one thing, feeling helpless when witnessing the horrors had driven her to pray more, and she was now building a better relationship with God. He had helped her to understand that human beings are all helpless against the sometimes overwhelmingly-evil forces of the world, from which our only true help is God.

On the ranch in Colorado, Patrick and his parents were settling in well, and looking forward to celebrating Christmas with their new neighbors.

Christmas activities were going on in the Supercities as well, and the sorcerers were looking the other way, even as some people were openly displaying crosses. The authorities were going to have to allow this, or more people would leave. If that happened, there wouldn't be enough workers left to run the cities.

At Doyle Mansion, Em and Zin were getting ready for a Christmas celebration by setting out masses of food in the parlor while visiting with the portraits of Mrs. Doyle, Violet, Dave, and Zapor. Though Mrs. Doyle's portrait reflected her as being approximately in her seventies, and Zapor never changed much throughout his lifetime, Pizzo had chosen to paint Dave and Violet, the adoptive parents of Em and her brothers, roughly in their fifties.

With about an hour before any guests would arrive, Zin retreated to her room for a while. Looking into her foreshard, she was somewhat surprised to see a scene of herself in the parlor of Doyle Mansion in the future. This was also Christmastime, given the decorations. Heike, Pizzo, Kisi, and Pipac were helping her to set things out for a party. She and Luis were expecting a few friends. Noticing that a portrait of Em

had been added to the parlor, Zin was not sad to discover that her mother was with the Father in heaven. After all, this was obviously a good way into the future. Pizzo's hair was a little gray. Even she and Luis were looking a bit gray.

As Zin continued to gaze at the happy scene, she saw the pucks in the crystal beckoning the older Zin and Luis to the window, to see something incredible outside, where, although the sun had already gone down, an intense brightness was lighting up the sky and everything beneath it, in all the colors of the rainbow, and to much more of an extent than anything like Christmas lights, laser shows, or fireworks could have done.

Viewed in the foreshard, the scene outside the window wasn't super clear, though it was clear that something pretty spectacular was happening; and she got the idea that the spectacle was not only in the area of the mansion, but all over the world.

As the foreshard suddenly ceased its display, Zin could only imagine what was probably in the mind of her future self at that time, mimicking her own present-day thoughts. *Could this be Jesus' return? Was He in the sky, along with His angels?*

While no one could ever know for sure the time of the Lord's return, He was sure to come sometime; and it might be within in her lifetime. Like many others of her brothers and sisters in Christ, Zin would simply have to remain always on the lookout, and always prepared.

“For still the vision awaits its time; it hastens to the end—it will not lie. If it seem slow, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay. Behold, he whose soul is not upright in him shall fail, but the righteous shall live by his faith.”

“Therefore you also must be ready; for the Son of man is coming at an hour you do not expect.”

—Habakkuk 2:3-4, Matthew 24:44



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