

The Once and Forever Mountain



J.H. Sweet

Clock Winders Book Five

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book are from the Revised Standard Version.

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of the *Clock Winders Series*

Clock Winders Series

Wind Horses and Horned Lions

Burnished Doves and Sky Serpents

Netherwind and Laurelstone

The Clock of the Universe

The Once and Forever Mountain

“It shall come to pass in the latter days
that the mountain of the house of the LORD
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised up above the hills;
and peoples shall flow to it,
and many nations shall come, and say:
‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD...’”

—Micah 4:1-2



Locations of the Fourteen U.S. Supercities

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Prologue

Twenty-three years had passed since the discovery of the suspension bridge in Kentucky and the stained glass window in the Upstairs Library at Laurelstone Manor, both of which were shortcuts to the mountain of refuge in Tennessee. These magical doorways were connected to one another not only in that the same magician had helped a carpenter and a glass artist respectively make them, but also because the bridge was partly constructed from wood salvaged when one wing of Laurelstone burned.

At this point in time, fourteen Supercities (often called Supes in conversation) were in full operation, with no other cities existing anymore in the United States; at least, none existing as far as how cities used to be defined, with basic infrastructure, governmental bodies, and resources available like grocery stores, schools, health care facilities, and such. The Supercities were tied by rail systems to each other and to large work camps needed to provide resources to the cities. These included operations such as wind farms, quarries, bamboo plantations, dairies, water treatment plants, vineyards, fish farms, and military facilities.

Only five years past, the practice of Christianity had been completely outlawed in the United States. This wasn't actually unexpected, given certain trends over the past several decades, as well as the fact that history was often doomed to repeat itself with regard to dark times, particularly those relating to the persecution of Christians. Evil events like this had definitely cycled throughout the ages, which shouldn't be surprising as Ecclesiastes 1:9 reminds us. "What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; and there is nothing new under the sun."

In the past forty years, terrorist acts, mainly from extremist Islamic groups, had continued to worsen all over the world. And many of these extremists were working from within governments and large corporations under the control of the sorcerers and their many

subordinates, which included some humans but were more often specialized demons, specifically, mimics and print doubles using their shapeshifting abilities to impersonate human beings.

In the U.S., the development of the Supercities had actually been hastened along by carefully-planned terrorist acts, the destructive incidents precipitating the need for construction, which was done in a consolidated manner because this was the most efficient use of resources. People were then herded into the Supercities and work camps, with most of the population complying because there was little other choice in order to have shelter, food, clean water, jobs, and other necessities. Since this had been the plan of the sorcerers all along (in order to better control the masses), the current terrorist attacks in the United States were not as often directed at those living in the Supercities and work camps, but more at certain large private properties such as self-sustaining ranches and plantations, and at earthship and mothership communities operating independently in various places in the deserts, plains, and mountains.

Supercities were coming into being in other parts of the world as well, but were not yet as well established as those in the U.S. In order to hurry things along with other countries, the sorcerers would have liked to have stepped up attacks in other parts of the world that had not yet fully complied with their consolidation plans. However, those on the side of evil were currently being forced to take things a little more slowly than they might have wished, due to a setback suffered the previous year when they carelessly went too far with some of their efforts.

In a similar manner as to what had happened in the U.S. when Torch Squads were destroying huge quantities of art, people rebelled when terrorists under the sorcerers' direction started destroying national treasures such as many of the abbeys, cathedrals, and castles of Europe. (The sorcerers should have known to heed the warning in Proverbs 22:28. "Remove not the ancient landmark which your fathers have set.")

Even Switzerland decided to get involved, basically shocking everyone by taking care of business like nobody's business. Who would have thought they would have such a vast network of operatives, kept secret; though this probably shouldn't have been surprising given

the Swiss history of papal protection. Responding to public outcry, Switzerland carried out an assassination-assault in twenty-two countries that killed nearly four thousand mimics and close to three hundred sorcerers all within four days. This equated to a huge shake-up within the ranks of the sorcerers. Also, a European revival of Christianity followed this event, which left Satan none too pleased, especially because revivals such as this had happened many times over the years. Since this meant huge decreases in the numbers of souls he was gathering for hell, Satan would make sure those responsible would pay dearly.

At around the same time as the events taking place in Europe, something similar happened in China in response to terrorists destroying ancient palaces and temples. In this case, the Chinese military killed thirty-two sorcerers and over six hundred mimics. Though Christianity in China had long been repressed, this series of events precipitated droves of new believers coming to Christ. With this also being very displeasing to Satan, the sorcerers were forced to take a step back, in order to be at least a little more careful.

But in truth, with the sorcerers' plans progressing so well in the United States, they could actually afford to cool their efforts a little with regard to the rest of the world. In the U.S., things were pretty messed up for most of the general population, though some of this was a mixed-up version of messed up, such as in the case of the Population Control Laws. While at first many women were forced to abort children, the laws were now forcing them to produce. In fact, the Law of Three had recently become the Law of Four, this being instated to ensure enough slaves would be available to work in both cities and camps. The upgrade to the law had come about quite easily because print doubles were still manipulating elections. By this time, the U.S. Constitution had been scrapped and individuals basically had no rights.

If people thirty or forty years past had been told about this, they wouldn't have believed it. However, if the founders of our country had been told that abortion would be legal at all, they wouldn't have believed it. Nor would they have believed that children would be forbidden to pray in schools, or that any mention of God could be kept out of schools, or that schools would teach, as fact, seriously-flawed scientific information such as the theory of evolution. The founders

also wouldn't have been able to imagine that in response to terrorist attacks, a U.S. president would tout the resiliency of the people he was appointed to lead, rather than doing anything to protect them. "The American people are resilient; they'll be okay." Sadly, in refusing to take action, that same president ended up being the root cause of the rapid growth of terrorism, not only in the U.S., but in other parts of the world as well.

Of course, past presidents weren't responsible for all of our woes because churches had certainly played their part. Bending to social pressure over the past seventy years or so, many churches had been caving in and compromising, to the point that they were not at all following the timeless and inerrant Word of God. In order to win popularity contests, many so-called godly people were denying things like hellfire, demons, and even the cross—the precious shed blood of Jesus Christ, which is the only thing that has the power to save us. Changes to schools and school curriculum had also been a factor, such as dumbing things down and fostering an overly-competitive atmosphere. Using social media to garner support and destroy the lives of opponents, many activists and atheists had also greatly contributed to our downfall. In truth, few atheists existed anymore. With sorcerers, demons, megahobs, and such operating completely out in the open, few people could deny that satanic forces were at work in the world, and therefore couldn't deny the existence of God either, particularly because creatures such as firebirds and gryphons were also openly at work and were clearly operating in service of God. Sadly, quite a few people were still denying certain biblical truths in order to live worldly lives, or simply escape persecution by the sorcerers and their followers.

At this time, there were no longer any state governments because individual states didn't exist anymore; instead, the country was divided into fourteen regions corresponding to the locations of the Supercities acting as epicenters for each region. However, the designations of Region One, Region Two, etc. weren't often used because the state borders were still recognized as such and the names of the fifty states were still informally being used by most people, including the sorcerers and their followers.

In the same way that many absurd, oppressive, and horrific laws had passed, like the Law of Four, additional laws were being passed, such as

one that forced people to fight to the death to settle disputes—Dispute Battles as they became known—rather than engage in litigations. Also, when prisons were overcrowded, prisoners were picked to fight one another to the death in what were called Contests to decrease the incarcerated numbers. Many of these Contests were televised for both entertainment and as a warning to others. In a manner similar to how suspected witches were once thrown bound into water to test whether or not they were witches (because witches would supposedly float, while innocent people would sink), other insane methods to determine guilt or innocence were implemented. Evidently, pens of hungry tigers could tell whether or not someone was a thief, and would not kill and eat anyone innocent. These were simply called Trials by Tiger. But in the same way many innocents were drowned during witch trials, so too were many honest people eaten by tigers.

Of course, the insanity hadn't started out being this large in scale. It had come into being over a certain period of time, roughly half a century, like the growth of a cancer, one with fairly steady growth, but that most people wouldn't have been able to recognize in time to be saved. Sadly, many human beings have difficulty with the concept of smaller things preceding larger ones. We are also completely prone to ignoring warning signs, many of which were present in pre-Supercity times.

With crosses and bibles banned, and art being forbidden and destroyed, came other laws such as those changing the names of many U.S. cities like Los Angeles, San Antonio, St. Paul, Corpus Christi, Sacramento, and any others related to the bible. The list of changes was incredibly long, and the taxpayer cost relating to replacing signs, monuments, and the like was incredibly high. As they moved on to changing the names of rivers, parks, etc., more insane cost was incurred. Shortly after they removed the inscription from Leviticus from the Liberty Bell, they melted the bell down and used the metal to create a statue of Satan, which actually violated the Art Laws relating to display of religious art, since this was actually a beautiful statue of an angel. But, then, the sorcerers didn't have to follow the same laws as the majority of the people. The destruction of the Liberty Bell hardly mattered anymore because there was no longer any liberty in the United States, unless we count certain wealthy people who had stayed in league

with the sorcerers in order to continue to live in licentiousness and have their every desire continued to be catered to. While the smaller changes should have been indicators of larger things to come, those who might have prevented some of this either didn't notice or simply didn't care, or were too afraid to speak out.

All of the laws were currently being enforced by the new U.S. Military comprised mainly of members of the Enforcement Services Squad, the ESS, more commonly known (even amongst their own ranks) as Snakes. Many of these Snakes were simply power-hungry and greedy bullies, turned into narcissists and sadists over the years, with their hearts hardened to the point that they were now fully in the service of Satan.

There was little resistance to government rule and enforcement because laws had long since been passed taking guns away from citizens so that people would be unable to defend themselves. But this would very shortly be a nonissue because guns weren't going to work much longer, mainly due to the issue of gremlins. While these creatures had once been loners, with thousands upon thousands of them bred and unleashed on the world by the sorcerers, the gremlins had very quickly developed pack tendencies. This was one of those things that the sorcerers hadn't completely thought through, insofar as how it might affect their own efforts. With the entire existence of gremlins wrapped up in breaking mechanical things, this being their supreme delight, why would they limit their activities to just certain devices or machines? The answer—they wouldn't. So, even the sorcerers were very shortly going to be without the use of guns.

Gremlin activities were already affecting airports, which were rapidly becoming obsolete. With one in five flights crashing, the risk to travel this way had become too great. But this had actually been the design of the sorcerers, to limit travel to just what they could control. With the Supercities connected by rail systems, the fact that airports were going away didn't much concern the sorcerers who were able to travel anywhere they wanted to by nyreg. With over a hundred thousand of these foul beasts in existence, there was no lack of transportation for the sorcerers and their operatives, mainly various hunters, and certain Snakes needing to travel outside of the rail systems. Since demons of all sorts could fly, they didn't often use the nyregs

unless needing to travel long distances. Because gremlins didn't much like water, travel by skimmers and dippers, which were what various surface and underwater crafts were respectively called, was still fairly safe. However, the sorcerers were starting to disrupt water travel as well, in the form of using demons to raise storms to sink skimmers, and employing krakens to destroy dipper vessels. Communications were also limited, again due to gremlins, who as much delighted in breaking sophisticated electronics as they did in destroying machinery of a more clunky nature. This also suited the sorcerers, not only the limit of domestic communications, but foreign as well. In fact, the present lack of international travel and communication was of great benefit to their plans. With the setbacks they had recently suffered, they feared too much international contact would interfere with their operations. The sorcerers particularly wanted to lessen the chance of any other countries trying to help the United States. As far as the U.S. helping other parts of the world, such as in impoverished areas and after natural disasters, only nonreligious mission work was allowed, and had to be government approved, so very little of this was taking place.

The sorcerers had progressed to not just trying to break Christians, but trying to break all human beings. They were accomplishing this by making people desperate enough to steal, kill, and turn to malevolent sources for help. Then who would be left to resist the evil of the Endtimes? Satan already knew he was defeated; it was just a matter of time. His goal now was simply to collect as many souls for hell as possible. Their eternal torment would then be something of a consolation prize for him.

Sadly, despite certain setbacks such as those in Europe and China, most countries of the world were on the same path as the United States. Of course, the Light of Jesus Christ, the Victor, is a powerful magnet. And this Light was shining brightly inside believers, with more and more people being drawn to it.

Many Christians had learned to roar. Underground churches were prevalent, as were underground schools, which were necessary because all schools were under strict curriculum guidelines that didn't allow for much real learning of truth and fact, or any true freedom of speech or expression. Whole hidden communities were also flourishing because

the sorcerers hadn't yet gotten into the magical pockets providing refuge and resources to many hundreds of thousands of believers.

As far as travel, many of God's children were shuttled various places they needed to go (even far-reaching places) by magical creatures such as rookhs, gryphons, and wind horses, all of which were growing in numbers because there was currently much more for them to eat than in previous times, this being due to Chase Linn, the fifteen-year-old boy gifted with the capacity of overproducing human goodness in vast quantities.

Regarding sea travel, halcyon could easily calm demon-produced storms; and leviathans under the direction of certain mermaids and mermen were able to counter the activities of krakens. An enormous navy, operating in various seas, was flourishing under the command of Admiral Albert Nolan, his efforts being coordinated with land operations under direction of General Weatherly Dawson, who was in charge not only of the vast Underground Army in the U.S., but also of installations in many countries all over the world that were largely currently secret, due to the need to wait on God's timing in order to make use of them. However, some of the information gathered by operatives at these facilities had been useful to both Swiss and Chinese Intelligence in planning their offenses against the sorcerers and mimics.

Weatherly's headquarters was still at the twin plantations, which were still pretty much fully operating, both out in the open and inside many pockets and underground caverns. Netherwind and Laurelstone—along with other plantations, and various farms and ranches—had been able to continue to operate because they were still privately owned. The various earthship and mothership communities were also situated on private lands. The sorcerers had been unable to change the rules relating to private property because this would affect the wealthy as well, many of whom still liked to visit their sprawling country estates when not participating in various forms of debauchery in the Supercities. As long as people were paying their taxes, they could still own property and do with it what they liked.

With the sorcerers still hoping to find evidence of "terrorist training camps" (Weatherly's military facilities) and proof of women violating the Law of Four, Netherwind and Laurelstone were still being raided on occasion, but were still managing to thwart those investigating. Also,

the plantations still had enough money to pay their taxes, thanks to wise investments, and having products that even the rich wanted and needed such as certain foods and other items. Plus, if Weatherly ever needed money, she could always go back in time to obtain some. She hadn't yet had to steal to sustain operations; but if God told her to, she would. As far as safety, not much could actually counter the likes of bigfoots, puck trolls, gargoyles, firebirds, gryphons, and magicians, all in staunch service to God. Genies were also involved, more than they had been in the past, though in much less of a capacity than what they were capable of, for various reasons, but mainly relating to safety because use of their full powers would be physically dangerous to people.

Overall, a good number of God's children were still making a good job of not only surviving, but thriving, all the while trying to help those in poorer circumstances, while continuing to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ to as many as possible.

Chapter One

Kentucky and Arizona

“In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.” Proverbs 3:6

Five-year-old Ruth Evans, having been grabbed up by her father as he ran, wasn't looking back at the pack of demons that was rapidly gaining ground on them; rather, she was looking up into the sky, and pointing. Slowing their run ever so slightly, her mother and father also looked up before halting in surprise. What might have appeared at a glance to be simply a cloud overhead, was actually a white dragon. Mr. and Mrs. Evans' surprise was actually less from the sight of the magnificent creature, and more from realizing that the white dragon they had heard about was not merely a legend made up to give people hope. Of course, they never should have doubted, not anything, because with God, nothing is outside of the realm of possibility. And there is nothing He won't do to help His children. This was indeed true for the Evans family. Already on their journey, a watchman had redirected a stealth hob and a pack of gremlins. Plus, a game move by Etowa had kept the escapees from the work camp on a certain path, one that helped them avoid an encounter with two conjurer sorcerers from Supercity Seven who were on an outing to gather herbs for use in their foul concoctions. As the dragon let loose a mighty blast of fire from his throat at the demons, Mr. and Mrs. Evans began running again.

Roughly twenty minutes later, when certain they were no longer being pursued, Ruth's parents slowed their trek to a steady walk and her father set her down so that she too could walk. During the run from the demons, the Evans family had gotten separated from their traveling companions; but that didn't particularly matter because the other two families had maps and compasses like the ones Ruth's dad was carrying. Plus, the group was nearing their destination.

A couple of hours later, the three families had just met back up with one another when they came under attack by two megahobs that had

looked just like boulders sitting in an open field very near the small river the escapees were following. As the boulders came to life and began streaking towards them, those under attack barely had two seconds to worry over the matter because a large grouping of topiaries suddenly sprang into action, from seemingly out of nowhere. As the leafy tail of an enormous crocodile quickly swept the megahobs off of their feet, a gigantic bear pounced upon one the nasty beasts, while a host of smaller topiary animals managed to slow the other one getting up by pelting it with rocks and tree branches.

As the families began to run, in glancing back, they saw a cheetah, a large owl, the crocodile, a huge bee, and a horse all ripping one of the megahobs to pieces, while the bear was simply calmly yawning as he sat on the other, presumably waiting until he felt like slashing the creature to shreds with the long thorny claws on his gigantic paws.

According to the maps, they were almost to the bridge; and the families might have felt home free except for the group of six ESS members that they basically ran right into after wading a stream and rushing through a small copse of trees. But as it turns out, the Snakes weren't going to slow them down either because a man secreted in the copse had a flute weapon, which he had already begun to adeptly use, in a graceful leaping-and-spinning fashion.

As a series of melodious and somewhat melancholy notes issued from the instrument, streams of energy directed at the Snakes, who had drawn handguns, swiftly knocked five of them off of their feet. Though the sixth one fired at the flutist, he missed. So did two other Snakes scrambling to their feet and firing shots. Evidently, these particular men, on patrol from an ESS encampment some eighteen miles away, were not very skilled with their weapons.

The escapees had continued to run. The suspension bridge was in sight.

Then they were on it, feeling the gentle sway of it in the wind as they tore across single file.

As they reached the exact center of the bridge, they simply disappeared, one by one, which didn't at all surprise the four Snakes who observed this because they had seen the phenomenon many times before. Nor were they inclined to follow because they knew exactly what would happen if they did. They would end up crossing the bridge

to the other side of the river and never finding the families they were pursuing because they weren't there.

Not only had those on the run disappeared, but the man with the flute had as well. Grumbling, the Snakes headed back to their patrol vehicle, basically a largish roving terrain vehicle called an RTV, one big enough to hold six men comfortably.

However, they soon discovered that the vehicle wouldn't work. Investigating, they found that nearly half of the engine parts had been ripped out, with several components damaged beyond repair.

"Blasted gremlins!" the driver fumed.

So they were going to have to walk nearly eighteen miles to get back to their base.

The six pretty much griped at each other the whole way, and the ones who hadn't hit their marks when firing received the most insults from the others. Another was heavily criticized for not firing at all.

"Hey, it wasn't my fault!" he proclaimed. "My gun wouldn't work." (This was presumably due to gremlins as well.)

They also griped about not being able to make their base camp as close to the bridge as they might have liked. This had been tried, many times. However, each time an ESS encampment was established near the bridge, it was swiftly destroyed by storms. And the sorcerers and Snakes both fully knew that these storms were caused by firebirds, wind horses, and thunderbirds. The same creatures provided protection for several mothership settlements in the area, which gryphons, bigfoots, and quite a few of those pesky little puck trolls were also helping to protect. How maddening, to be thwarted by these godly creatures, especially the small ones; and how much the sorcerers and their followers would have liked to have gotten their hands on a few of them, except that they rarely did.

Arriving on a footbridge crossing a ravine in a wooded area at the base of one of the Smoky Mountains in Tennessee, the escapees were met by several mountain residents, one of whom would be escorting them to a settlement that was about a three-hour and mostly-uphill hike from the footbridge.

Ruth was going to get to ride a horse. She had never seen a real horse before, only pictures of them in books. Sitting directly in front of her mother, she was told she could pet the horse's neck if she wanted to

as they rode. The escort, who introduced himself simply as Marcus, was going to walk in front of the three horses that were making the uphill journey mainly to carry the three women of the families, all of whom were pregnant and one of which had a three-year-old boy currently seated in front of her on the horse. The three fathers of the families all walked with the escort, with whom they were able to relax and chat because the horses didn't need much leading.

The group had a meal-on-the-move as they made their way up the trail, the food being produced from a pack Marcus was carrying. Ruth was amazed to be given a bag full of bread, nuts, cheese, some kind of chewy fruit thingy, and a whole apple. Since the amount was more than what she was used to eating in two days, she thought she would need to save most of it, until her mother told her it was okay to eat it all, but slowly, so as not to get a stomachache. The apple was a special delight because they were somewhat rare in the Supercities, with people always having to share the ones they managed to get their hands on. Ruth ended up eating pretty much the whole apple core too, only discarding the stem and a couple of the seeds.

After finishing the meal, she checked on Bunny, the small stuffed animal not much bigger than one of her hands, who was sewn into the bottom of the inside of her shirt. He was fine, still smiling. Ruth was smiling too. They had made it; they were free.

But she frowned a little in remembering how the day began, cramped and uncomfortable because she was hidden inside of the duffel bag her father was carrying on the train ride to the bamboo farm. The bag hadn't looked out of place to any Snakes on the train or at the work camp because this was the first day of her father's assigned six-month stay at the farm. Her mother was already working at the camp, as a dishwasher in the kitchens, but wasn't supposed to be there because the people in charge always made sure to separate family members. When a wife was working at a camp, her husband worked in the city, or vice versa. For an unmarried person working at one of the camps, that person's closest relative—brother, sister, father, whatever—was always kept in the city, basically held hostage, this being a means of deterring those in the camps from fleeing because it was generally easier to escape from the work camps than from the cities. Mrs. Evans had

switched IDs with another woman in order to be there, so they could all escape as a family.

Ruth was one of the few children allowed to live with her family because her parents could support her, since they both worked, and because her elderly Aunt Patty was living in the home and could look after her during the day. Ruth had just started at the required preschool, and her aunt had been walking her to and from the school each day. However, with her mother currently four months pregnant with her second child, given the state of the family's income and her aunt being elderly, Ruth's parents felt it likely the ESS Family Investigators would probably determine Aunt Patty couldn't look after more than one child during the day, and would likely take away not only the new baby, but also the next two children Mrs. Evans would be producing in accordance with the Law of Four. They would be taken away, never to be seen by the family again, raised to work in the camps, or maybe to work as servants for the wealthy, or possibly subjected to something worse than being slaves in general because it was rumored that some children were simply used as organ donors and then killed when they weren't useful anymore. Whatever the case, the family was determined to run. Aunt Patty couldn't come, but was going to be hidden by a friend before going to one of those safe places in the cities. The woman Ruth's mother had switched IDs with was also being hidden. While the safe places in the Supercities were wonderful, there wasn't room for everyone in them. Plus, hiding wasn't true freedom. Therefore, many people needed and wanted to run.

As far as being in the duffel bag, this had been talked about for two months, and the family had rehearsed it. Ruth was carried around in the bag at home as practice, and a couple of times around the neighborhood at night. She knew to be quiet and still. She also knew she was going to be able to take Bunny, one of two toys she possessed, but she couldn't take her puzzle. And the secret books all had to stay because they were needed by the people in the cities. These were secret in a camouflaged sort of way, often looking just like small sea shells, and sometimes like the magnetic letters stuck on the tiny food refrigeration unit in the small kitchen of the family's apartment.

The trip on the train in the bag had been no problem; Ruth had stayed very still. Before going to his bunkhouse to drop off his duffel

bag, Mr. Evans had slipped into one of the bamboo fields, one not slated for either fertilizing or harvesting, where he deposited Ruth in a specific spot where she would stay the whole day, tucked into the thick green stalks and fronds of the bamboo. In addition to Bunny, she had only an oat cake and a water bag, basically a flexible plastic canteen. The time in the bamboo field had been practiced too, though in a closet at home. She was to stay put, make the oatcake last all day, stay quiet, and wait for Mom and Dad, who would come to get her at the shift change late in the day, which was when the sun would have moved all the way across the field. During the day, while the sun was slowly moving, she was to pray and remember that she was not alone, because Jesus was there too, with her the whole time.

She did pray, and did remember; but she also cried a little as she petted Bunny's ears because she knew in her heart that she would probably never see her Aunt Patty again.

When Ruth's father picked her up—literally, because she was very stiff from sitting still all day and could barely move—and after her mother briefly kissed her, Mr. and Mrs. Evans took to running, also literally, on somewhat of a zigzagging path through rows and rows of tall bamboo.

Making their way to one of the fences surrounding the camp, her father used cutters to get through the fence, hurriedly, because they were already being pursued. In her mother's arms, Ruth saw one of the Snakes trip and fall down, and accidentally shoot a megahob that had been unleashed to come after them. She also saw another ESS member shoving and scolding his bumbling companion. In truth, this was fairly common, Snakes messing up that is, because many were lazy, fat, and not very good at their jobs. While the one that had shot the megahob wasn't fat, he was evidently very klutzy, and would soon be on probation because of the three families that would make their escape on this day. Following the escape, a camp lockdown would occur, while the ESS and the mimic in charge of the Snakes conducted an investigation that would soon reveal who was missing, and who in the cities was connected to them. This would lead to them finding out that whole families had escaped. Aunt Patty would already be gone by the time they searched the Evans' residence; she had left just after Ruth and her father left for the train station in the morning.

Once through the fence, they were out in the open, but only briefly before making it to an outcropping of rocks where they met up with the other two families. The fact that it was starting to get dark was a help and a blessing as they snuck through clumps of dense shrubs and tall weeds, along rocky cliffs, and into a forested area which provided good cover for the start of their journey south.

They traveled mainly at night, but a little during the day too. With it being only early summer, the days weren't too uncomfortably hot yet. In addition to sharing stale bread and some dried fish that one of the families had managed to bring with them, they ate mainly berries and nuts found along the way.

As far as the children of the three couples, only Ruth and the three-year-old boy were along on the journey. The mother of the three-year-old had only given birth to the one child so far, and the other woman's pregnancy was her first. While the little boy was mostly carried, Ruth mainly walked, though her father sometimes carried her when they needed to go through water or up steep hills. Neither she nor the little boy ever fussed, in realizing how serious and important it was to stay quiet.

Blessedly, this group was from one of the Supercities close to Kentucky, their destination. A large area of farmland between what had once been Columbus and Cincinnati was now Supercity Ten, which was often referred to as Supe-10. The bamboo farm being south of the city was also a blessing. This was a much shorter distance than most people had to travel when fleeing other cities and camps, though the trip was a little longer than if they were traveling in a straight line because they had to skirt a fish hatchery and a military camp. Plus, the fleeing groups always took varied routes, some longer than others, so as not to be predictable.

Maps and compasses had been provided by what was termed the New Underground Railway (NUR for short). The escapees were also given the location of weapons secreted in a small grotto, which they picked up on their second day of travel. Six daggers were currently in the depository, of which they took three.

In their haste to escape the ESS, they had forgotten to leave the daggers in a spot by the suspension bridge. But this didn't matter because more would be replenished for the next groups coming through.

With helpers such as gargoyles, gryphons, and Tope Armies (as the larger groups of topiaries were often called) watching the routes, it was no problem to have additional weapons deposited in various secret spots.

It had taken the escapees four days to reach Kentucky, and another two to make it to the bridge.

Back in the vicinity of the bridge just after the families crossed into safety, the flute user had escaped by entering a pocket located on the grounds of a nearby church. Though the church building had been blasted some fifteen years back, and lay in crumbling ruins, the pocket had never been affected and contained several flourishing communities. Strolling through his hometown, a settlement of over twenty-five hundred people, the man whistled as he walked in thinking that soon one more would be added to the population of their community because his wife was about to give birth to their second child.

About two miles from the church grounds, the topiaries that had helped the escapees were in the process of hiding themselves. Though there were many estates in remote areas where topiaries could remain safe being out in the open, the ones living closer to the bridge generally had to hide, which they did by fluffing out, twisting, bending into various shapes, tucking in, or sometimes rolling into balls, all to make them look like regular bushes, unshaped and untended, rather than sculpted ones that might have been brought to life by puck trolls for the express purpose of helping human beings.

Meanwhile, back on the mountain trail, the group had almost reached the village where they would be staying. Petting the horse's neck, Ruth was still thinking back to the start of their adventure, in specific, something strange that had happened in the bamboo field. But this was something she was pretty sure she was supposed to keep secret, even from her parents, at least for the time being.

When they arrived, the Evans' family was given a two-bedroom cabin stocked with food, clothing, and other necessities. They would be taking a few days to rest and get settled in, during which, they would visit a doctor to make sure they were all okay.

Ruth's dad wouldn't be starting work for at least a couple of weeks; and when he did, he was going to be given choices. Before even starting work, he would be talking to people who were evidently experts

in finding out what people were good at and what they might like to do. This was so foreign to Ruth, being so unlike the cities, where people were told what to do and threatened if they didn't comply.

Except for a little gardening, her mother wouldn't be working at all for a while. Her job it seemed was going to be looking after Ruth, and getting her settled in at school. Before they even left the city, Ruth had been told about the school she would soon be going to, which was a safe place in which she could learn and even play with other children.

Ruth had her own bed in the second bedroom of the cabin. Except for when she was a baby and slept between her parents in their bed, which she couldn't even remember, she had never slept in a real bed. Her bed in the apartment had been the family's small couch because her parents' bed was very small, really only big enough for two and even then was pretty tight. And her aunt's bed had been only a small cot. In the cabin, a shelf and a trunk near Ruth's bed held books, games, puzzles, and a small stuffed bear, evidently named Teddy, who was going to keep Bunny company while Ruth was in school.

For a little while after they arrived, Ruth thought she might be in heaven, except that she pretty much knew she wouldn't be seeing heaven for some time, probably a very long time. Plus, her mother assured her that heaven was way more wonderful than this. But this just seemed hard to imagine at the moment, with life at the cabin being so wonderful. A small dog belonging to one of their neighbors liked to visit with Ruth when she would come out onto the porch or into the yard. This was something she was allowed to do even without her parents coming out with her, which at first had seemed very strange to her, being so different than in the cities where young children always had to have a grown-up with them for safety. A couple of other neighbors had cats, which were also friendly.

Not even a week after arriving, Bunny was given a bed too, made out of an old wooden candy box by one of the carpenters living in the village. And a neighbor had sewn little sheets, a blanket, and a pillow stuffed with downy fill for Bunny. This was Ruth's first day at school. It was a fabulous day. She learned things, and had her own pencil and notebook. They all had a good lunch—a sandwich, grapes, and a cookie. Ruth had never had grapes before, and she decided that they were just about as wonderful as apples. She met many friends at

school; and when she came home, Bunny's bed was a big surprise. The next few days at school, her teacher helped her write thank-you notes to the carpenter and the neighbor who had sewn the bedding.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the United States, in Arizona to be exact, a group of people were in the process of making an escape of their own, not from a work camp, but from Supercity Two in California, which spanned the area between, and also encompassed, what had once been Sacramento and San Francisco, whose names had previously respectively been changed to Capital City and Bridge City. (Obviously, those doing the renaming hadn't been very creative in their efforts.) The sorcerers hadn't wanted to build in the area of Los Angeles (whose name had been changed to Quaketown) because they didn't want to deal with what they termed the "Hollywood Mentality" of the region. Quaketown, like most other cities in the U.S., didn't exist anymore, lying in ruins from having been devastated by a series of terrorist attacks before being deserted when most of its remaining residents were shuttled to the Supercities.

The escapees from Supe-2 had been on the run for six days and were almost to their destination. This was a larger group than the one from Supe-10 that had made it to the bridge in Kentucky, nineteen in total at the start. They had gotten separated several times during their run, and had lost two members—one to a pack of gremlins, and another to a fall into a gorge. But the rest were making good progress, currently in two groups, one containing twelve and the other five.

While it might have been nice for creatures like rookhs and gryphons to simply swoop in and grab people up out of the Supercities to rescue them, this was rarely possible because swarms of demons and nyregs patrolled the skies above the cities. While messages and useful items were sometimes delivered to those living in the cities, the deliveries were most often made by kites and dawn pigeons that could generally slip in and out unnoticed. Of course, having excellent camouflage abilities, rookhs did once in a while manage to rescue people; but they did so sparingly because when family members went missing inside the cities, their loved ones generally paid the price, often being tortured for information, even when they didn't have and couldn't provide any.

The escapees from Supe-2 were heading for a magical doorway that was much like the bridge in Kentucky, but one situated in a cliff wall instead of being strung over a river. The Arizona doorway had been found not long after the one in Kentucky began being used by people fleeing the growing horrors of the world.

Basically pointing to the doorway, the marker was a short stretch of asphalt road that began in the middle of nowhere, not near any cities or settlements. A small spring-fed stream and pool were situated very near the start of the road which, when followed, simply dead-ended into a cliff in a lonely patch of desert. Passing through the invisible doorway in the cliff face, travelers ended up on a similar asphalt road at the base of the mountain in Tennessee where, like at the ravine footbridge, people were waiting to escort them to their new homes.

Who had made the two doorways was a mystery, but many felt the passages of safety corresponded to Isaiah 35:6-8. "...then shall the lame man leap like a hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. And a highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not pass over it, and fools shall not err therein."

And, indeed, no sorcerers or any of their evil followers had ever been able to enter either of the doorways.

Though the marker was a road, no cars could pass through the Arizona doorway. In fact, no large machinery of any kind could go through. People seeking passage pretty much had to walk through on their own. However, being wide and tall, the doorway was large enough to accommodate creatures like horses, which had on occasion brought people through. There was simply some sort of limit on metals and even electronics, which people often had to abandon in order to enter.

The group numbering twelve had just made it through the doorway, having abandoned the six air bikes they were riding very near the spring-fed pool before stepping through. The bikes were self-folding and were therefore already small cubes, each no larger than an average teacup, by the time the dawn pigeons hovering in the skies above the

cliff zoomed down to pick up the bikes, which were then swiftly returned to the hidden depository in Nevada where they had been acquired, to be available for another group to use.

Since there had been only six air bikes, each only able to carry two riders, the last five people hadn't yet made it to the doorway. However, shortly after crossing the Nevada/Arizona border, in finding four domestic (but free-roaming) horses willing to carry them, the five were only a half day later in their arrival. The horses knew where to take the people because they had carried others to this area before. In truth, they were from a community situated in a pocket about forty miles from the doorway; but they often liked to get out and stretch their legs even more than they could in the thousand or so acres that they called home.

The group of "Leftovers" (as the remaining five escapees had begun calling themselves) was comprised of two women in their late twenties who were sisters, a seven-year-old daughter of one of the women, a man in his sixties, and a thirteen-year-old boy. Clara and Marie Washburn were the sisters. Meg Washburn was Clara's daughter. The man in his sixties was Ronald Weiss. And Alex Rodriguez was the teen. Clara and Marie had the same last name because neither had ever married, but had been forced to produce children, four each as per the law. However, only Clara had been allowed to keep a child. The rest were taken away and made into slaves.

Alex's parents had both died two years previous, his father in a camp machinery accident and his mother a month later giving birth to her fourth child. Alex was the first child of the family and didn't know any of his siblings because they had all been taken away. When his mother died, a neighbor had helped to hide him, first in a painting, and then in a safe building, one that looked like a small storage shed from the outside, but that was actually the size of a large warehouse inside. The people in charge of the safe building had helped to organize many escapes; and when this one was being planned, Alex had asked to go.

Arriving late afternoon and spotting the asphalt road and spring-fed pool from a plateau, the five dismounted a good distance (about three miles) from the cliff doorway. In order to approach inconspicuously, they didn't want to arrive on horseback. Despite being fast, regular horses couldn't outrun creatures like demons or megahobs, and so were generally only used in remote wilderness areas less likely to be

trafficked by evil creatures. As they galloped off together, the horses whinnied to their new friends who had just given them pats of thanks.

Having decided to wait until nightfall, the Leftovers shared cactus fruit they had harvested earlier in the day, and the last pack of nuts they had brought with them from the city. They also drank the last of their water, not rationing it because they planned to refill the bags at the stream before entering the doorway.

Marie was trying to comfort Mr. Weiss who was crying because his wife was the one who had died in the fall into the gorge. They hadn't been able to do anything about the body because they had to keep moving, for the safety of those still alive. This was the same with the man that had been attacked by the gremlins, which were themselves killed because one of the escapees (one already through the doorway) was proficient with a rope, which had come to them via a hidden cache of weapons. Alex himself had a dagger and a fighting stick, and Clara was carrying a flute, which she sort of knew how to use, but in somewhat of a dangerous manner because she hadn't had much practice with one.

As he sat listening to Mr. Weiss softly weep, Alex was privately chiding himself. He should have been able to save Mrs. Weiss, but he hadn't been paying attention, and she was slightly too far away. Plus, he was still working on his speed. But he was definitely mad at himself for not staying closer to the elderly couple. That was actually one of the reasons he had wanted to come along, to help protect people. He had always dreamed of saving others; and he actually couldn't think of a better job in the world than hero or superhero, though he also knew real heroes weren't all flashy and in people's faces. In fact, they were supposed to be extremely low-key, mostly doing their good deeds in super-secret fashion. *That would be my name if I were a superhero, S-S Low-Key*, he decided in thought.

"But she's with God now," Alex said, more to himself than to anyone else. "She's already home."

Suddenly realizing that what he had said might be upsetting to someone who had just lost his wife, Alex was on the verge of apologizing when Mr. Weiss replied, "You're right. She's home, with God. So I should be happy." And from that moment on, the widower's

mood lightened considerably. He also had a good deal more energy with which to move forward on their journey.

Unknown to the Leftovers, a rookh had found both Mrs. Weiss and the man killed by the gremlin pack, whose name was James Aiken, before any coyotes or vultures or other such creatures had gotten to them. The rookh had taken their bodies to an earthship community where a memorial service was held, after which, they were buried.

The Leftovers spent the rest of the day hiding under rock overhangs in a cropping of large boulders on the plateau, not just to escape the sun, but so as not to be seen from above, which was a good thing because, at exactly one hour before dark, a sorcerer arrived on a nyreg. Landing very near the spring-fed pool, the man dismounted, making his way to the doorway. He of course couldn't enter, but he was messing with the doorway. From the vantage point of those watching from the plateau, he appeared to be piling stones, roughly the size of cantaloupes, against the side of the cliff.

In about twenty minutes, his piling efforts equated to two piles about three feet high each spaced approximately four feet apart, upon which he placed two round objects about the size of baseballs, which the onlookers couldn't particularly see from their distant hiding spot. The sorcerer then remounted the nyreg and was off, very swiftly.

A mere twenty seconds after the flying pair disappeared from view, the cliff was destroyed in a huge explosion that sent a thundering shockwave all the way to the plateau, causing several small rock avalanches, as well as knocking both Marie and Mr. Weiss off of their feet. Alex's feet weren't actually touching the ground because he had, on instinct, lifted off and was hovering.

Alex had been able to fly since he was eight. And while he was definitely a gifted person, flying actually wasn't his gift. Rather, his gift was the ability to figure things out and learn things by thinking outside the box, even to the point of being able to solve great mysteries, some of them centuries old. At age seven, he had learned how the Chinese dragon was able to fly without wings. Knowing this secret, it was only a short step for him to apply it to his own body.

But it was rather odd, as far as how it worked, both in the brain and in the body; and he didn't think he would be able to teach it to others, mainly because flying wasn't scientific in the same way other gifted

people used the sciences. Instead of being based on triangles, it had to do with circles, three of them. It also had to do with the blood in the body. Of course, it was a little more complicated than that; but still, he didn't think he would really be able to explain it to other people. They might even think he was playing a joke on them if he tried to explain it. And if they didn't believe, they wouldn't be able to learn to fly because believing was definitely the key.

As he set back down from his position of roughly four feet above the ground, Alex helped Mr. Weiss to his feet. Marie was already upright again, her sister having pulled her up.

Etowa happened to be looking on as the explosion occurred, the destruction of the doorway being a move by Boko that Etowa had chosen not to counter, for various reasons related to their ongoing game, which had progressed to quite a delicate point in time (as far as how humans measure time anyway) because it was nearly time for Etowa's biggest disappointment, as far as game moves relating to one of God's children who would soon make a poor choice that no amount of human finagling would be able to reverse, or fix. No, only God Himself would be able to fix things. Etowa, well knowing what was about to occur, was currently steeling himself.

The group on the plateau waited until it was fully dark to investigate, though the moon was so bright that they still had to be careful. Keeping a good lookout, they sneaked their way to what had once been the cliff doorway.

The safe passage was definitely destroyed. In its place was simply a sandy crater surrounded by a pile of stone rubble.

Poking around, they could find no way to enter the rubble or the crater as they might have an invisible doorway.

The spring-fed stream and pool nearby looked unaffected, but a good chunk of the asphalt road had been torn to bits from the shockwave.

The sorcerer knew he could never enter the doorway, but he had recently figured out that he could make an explosive strong enough to destroy it. Later, in trying to do away with the Kentucky doorway in a similar manner, he would be confounded because the bridge couldn't be destroyed. Many would ponder why the Arizona doorway could be blasted to pieces, while the suspension bridge could not, but few would

come up with the answer. Alex would have been able to figure it out, if the puzzle had been put to him, and the answer was pretty simple. The cliff doorway was fully connected to the earth, which was Satan's domain, and this had allowed the Arizona passage to be destroyed. Most of the bridge was not connected to the earth; it was set above. Colossians 3:2 tells us to set our sights on the things above and not on the things of the earth. When magicians and other gifted people set their creative sights on the things above, their accomplishments are often impenetrable with regard to the evil forces of this world. While the ends of the bridge were connected to the earth, they were protected by the bridge through something like a heavenly force field. Also, the magic that had been used to construct the bridge involved something slightly more than the triangular sciences often used by magicians and certain gifted individuals; it was actually more along the lines of the secret that enabled Alex to fly.

Though he had the ability to fly, this never would have been a safe way for him to have escaped Supe-2, due to the speed of the nyregs and demons. He had gained in speed over the years, but currently couldn't manage much more than around fifty miles an hour, while demons could fly at two hundred easily, and most nyregs even faster than that.

Those missing their chance to use the Arizona doorway couldn't be too sad about its destruction because, in the past twenty years, roughly forty-three thousand people had been able to make their escape by this means.

In the present, the Leftovers were simply going to need to figure something else out. Filling their water bags, they discussed what to do. The map they had only led to the doorway. But they had a compass, and weapons, and could find food.

So they decided to continue to trek east. They would eventually make it to Tennessee; they were sure of it. The trip was just going to take a little longer than expected. And they actually didn't have to make it all the way there. If they could reach either an earthship or a mothership settlement, those living there might be able to help them figure out how to get to those plantations in Alabama that people often secretly spoke about. According to the stories, which everyone believed were true, the twin plantations were completely safe; and getting from the plantations to the place of refuge in Tennessee was a sure thing, no

running necessary, no danger, just a straight shot somehow, probably by vritsee or wind horse or some other magical means, they all reasoned. The journey was going to be tough though because they weren't going to be able to count on any kind of magical help. Hiding from megahobs, demons, and such meant hiding from the likes of wind horses and firebirds too. But who knows; the Leftovers might come across some while traveling. They at least had hope.

"This is probably a test," Alex told his companions. "Something meant to strengthen us, and teach us something."

The others agreed.

"Maybe too many people were relying on that doorway," he suggested as they set out on their trek. "We're supposed to use our wits. Plus, nothing worthwhile is ever easy."

"I agree we're supposed to learn something from this," Marie said, "and not just knowledge-wise. From what I've been told, the people who discovered the cliff doorway found it by accident. They weren't actually looking for it. Maybe we're supposed to find something too. And we need to travel to do so."

On the first night of the Leftovers' new journey, having handed over the fighting stick to Mr. Weiss for use as a walking stick, Alex decided to fly for a bit. Flying was actually easier than walking, at least less tiring. However, on this occasion, he wasn't flying because he was tired, but because Meg was. Alex was giving her a piggyback ride, and he wanted to make the ride as smooth as possible for her so she could sleep if she wanted to; and flying was definitely smoother than walking.

Like her Aunt Marie, Meg had also decided that what happened to the doorway was meant to be, and that she was destined to learn something. She had already learned one thing on the trip so far—her new friend, Alex, was a real hero.

Chapter Two

Diamonds are Not Forever

“Do not grumble, brethren, against one another, that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the doors.” James 5: 9

Gavin was in a complaining mood as he walked with one of his coworkers, a man named Jesse, to Double P, which was still the largest horse-rearing operation, and still expanding because many people had already begun using horses for travel and farm work, and were sure to need more in the future. While he had once worked with several groups of Time Key Travelers, as well as being involved in various covert military operations, Gavin was spending much of his time lately in Double P, mainly because keeping company with the horses helped to soothe his anger. Plus, Chelsea had loved spending time with the horses, so the memories the double pocket held were fond ones.

Chelsea had died five years previous at age thirty-two, but the memories were still very fresh to Gavin. Stone Hunters and sorcerers had finally managed to get their hands on the Diamond Girl, and she had died in their care. Gavin himself had once been captured by sorcerers, nearly fifteen years back, but had escaped. At the time Chelsea was captured, she was too well-guarded for anyone to even mount a rescue. While Gavin had spent much of his life protecting her, he had been able to do nothing at the time. Weatherly had sent her on a mission by herself to one of the Supercities, which was where she was taken and subsequently died in an underground holding cell. Chelsea had been on many missions before, so she wasn't a novice, but Gavin had generally gone with her.

Entering the doorway to Double P, Gavin was still venting, which was fine because free speech was never stifled on the plantations. “She doesn't care how much danger she puts other people in,” he said, referring to Weatherly.

He had basically been complaining the whole way from the barracks where they were bunking, and Jesse was pretty well tired of listening by this point. However, this didn't stop Gavin. Referring to a recent attack on a mothership settlement by mimics and stealth hobs, he said, "I wonder how many of these horrors we've actually brought on ourselves. I mean, I don't think the sorcerers would be lashing out so much if we weren't launching so many offensives."

Jesse didn't have a chance to reply as Gavin continued. "I've been to the Supes undercover a few times, and there's not much wrong with them as far as I can tell. True, they don't allow a lot of art, and people can't gather in groups. But the conditions are not so bad. They are very efficiently set up so that most people are fairly well cared for as far as their needs; if they work, that is. So they're actually living by some basic biblical principles, even if they're not allowed to call them that. And there are reasons to keep some people quiet," he added, "so as not to incite terrorist acts. So I think the rules are understandable. People can say what they like in their own homes, just not out in public. I think the people in the Supes are living in much better conditions than when so many were on welfare. Crime at least is being kept in check. And we can't say that for a lot of places outside the cities. A lot of gangs roam the Rubble Cities, looting and whatnot."

"See you later," Jesse said, heading off to the South Corrals in the opposite direction of Gavin's trek to one of the barns. Since these were the first words he had gotten in edgewise since they left the barracks, Jesse was happy not to be working with Gavin on this day.

Gavin didn't get the chance to continue venting, other than to a few horses, because the girl assigned to work the barn with him for the day had just been called to the plantations in order to greet a couple of New Arrivals.

Whenever strangers seeking refuge arrived at Netherwind and Laurelstone, they were always screened before anything else, such as taking up residence in one of the pockets, joining the military, or being sent on to the mountain; and the screening was generally done in a discreet manner. As the New Arrivals were getting settled in temporary housing, a couple of people gifted with heightened discernment were generally on hand to have a chat with them to determine through casual conversation if someone might be up to no good, perhaps even working

undercover for the sorcerers. When this type of treachery was discovered, it was easy to use the Mind Key to erase certain memories, and plant certain thoughts, such as the need to take a journey to some far-reaching destination to obtain perhaps a benign object or maybe a bit of useless information, which often resulted in the miscreants spending months and sometimes even years on a pointless errand. Thus engaged, they would be unlikely to much trouble anyone for a pretty good chunk of time.

In contrast, most people arriving at the plantations were not of the foul sort, and genuinely needed help. In addition to those fleeing work camps and Supercities, many were refugees from assorted self-sustaining communities that had been destroyed by various attacks masterminded by the sorcerers. Although doing their best to help, magical protectors couldn't manage to thwart every assault because there were simply too many demons, terrorists, megahobs, etc. In such cases, the communities rarely rebuilt, instead choosing to flee to places of safety, mainly the mountain of refuge in Tennessee, which didn't have an official name but was often referred to as Lion Mountain because a mysterious white lion had on occasion been sighted on it. The term "flee" was fairly accurate because ESS personnel were generally on hand after an attack in order to "escort" (meaning "take into custody") to the Supercities any survivors they could find in the areas of the communities that had been destroyed.

People heading for Lion Mountain that ended up on the plantations were generally allowed to use the window passage in Laurelstone's Upstairs Library, designated as such to distinguish it from the Labyrinth Library. Unlike Netherwind, which had three libraries inside its basic structure, Laurelstone had but one, which was all that was truly needed since the Labyrinth Library was so incredibly huge. Plus, with the manor over the years being regularly raided by various branches of the government, the Upstairs Library couldn't house banned books, or very many rare books which, when found, were frequently destroyed, in addition to being added to the ever-growing Outlawed Literature List.

Aside from survivors of attacks and people fleeing the horrors of the Supercities and work camps, others from pocket communities were migrating to Tennessee in order to become part of the growing settlement on the mountain whose population had just topped five

hundred and ninety thousand. What had once been simply one of the many peaks of the Smoky Mountains, and one capable of supporting probably not more than thirty or forty thousand people in small self-sustaining villages, was more than providing for the current residents who were spread out in a comfortable fashion, with some even being fairly isolated. This was not due to the existence of pockets on the mountain; indeed, none had ever been opened up. Instead, something quite different was going on. Lion Mountain was definitely expanding, but not in any way related to the triangular sciences used by magicians and certain gifted architects. What was happening was definitely magical, but was a phenomenon of a different sort, and one that was currently inexplicable. From outward appearances (such as a satellite view), the mountain was not taking up any more room geographically than it ever had. But it was somehow, inwardly from its borders, expanding to accommodate the growing population of its residents who were continually updating maps for accuracy, and to keep track of the ever-changing acreage of the communities and spaces between them.

The magical enlargement was happening slowly enough so that people were not getting lost on their way to work each day, or when heading out to attend church services. However, when embarking on longer journeys, such as between communities or to visit distant friends or family members, travelers did need to learn to expect the unexpected with regard to changes in terrain, as well as several miles of extra distance added to even familiar paths that had been traversed as recently as two or three months previous.

The ability to grow on its own without the involvement of pockets was not the only thing different about the mountain in comparison to other places of refuge. The protection was also much different. While some rookhs, puck trolls, gnomes, and such did live there, Lion Mountain was mainly protected by magical spirits, nature spirits to be exact. It had taken Astrid, the leader of the mountain settlement, nearly forty years in total to learn to communicate effectively with the spirits. Thanks to their protection, no sorcerers or demons of any sort had ever set foot on the mountain.

Weatherly was in her study on the same morning that Gavin was venting to Jesse, and she was actually thinking about Gavin. He had recently returned (a week past) from taking a small herd of horses from

Double P to one of the farms on Lion Mountain. She had thought the outing might be good for him; but since returning, his grumbling about her had seemed to get worse, at least judging by what was reaching her ears from various sources. He was of course free to say whatever he wanted, which hadn't at all been interfering with Weatherly's operations, so she hadn't worried too much about it. Nor had she been paying much attention to it, though she had been praying for Gavin, that he might find some peace with regard to Chelsea's death.

Maybe the griping will help him heal, Weatherly thought. *"Blowing off steam," they used to call it.*

As far as the validity of his complaints, she truly felt she had done the best she could. She had listened to God's instructions when sending Chelsea on the mission. Gavin would have drawn too much attention if he had accompanied her. Despite her shining personality, Chelsea had always been better at being inconspicuous and blending in, perhaps related to the colorless nature of the majority of diamonds. When found simply sitting on the ground, they were often utterly unremarkable, so much so that people tended to disregard them, even in the days of old when diamonds were actually worth something, before cursed stones became common and their effects scary enough to make people discard and avoid most diamonds, even ones that had once held great value. Sapphires were definitely flashier, which was probably why Gavin often drew the attention of others, standing out rather than blending in. Also, since diamonds were harder than sapphires, Chelsea's body over the years had actually developed better defensive qualities than Gavin's. This should have meant she would be less likely to be killed. Indeed, the sorcerers hadn't been able to kill her in what might be considered a normal, outward manner (like by stabbing or shooting) as they might someone not possessing her gift. Nor would she ever have willingly ingested any poison that could kill her. She was well trained enough to know not to eat or drink anything given to her by an enemy. Sadly, the sorcerers had figured out how to kill her. At the time of her capture, Weatherly could not have rescued her without risking hundreds of other lives.

Taking another group of horses to the mountain might be good for Gavin, Weatherly's mind mused. Her thoughts on horses, she smiled in recalling how much Chelsea had loved them. Gavin too; and like Vini,

he had a way with them, which was why Weatherly hadn't objected when he chose to abandon all other projects in lieu of working in Double P full time. *Yes, another trip for him to the mountain would probably be in order*, she decided, *and sooner rather than later*.

Weatherly herself hadn't been to the mountain in the past two years; she had been too busy, and there really was no need to go. They were sharing some resources, like the horses, and even some of the gifted were going back and forth between the plantations and the mountain. But as far as Weatherly getting further involved, she would never have dreamed of interfering with what Astrid was doing.

And what an amazing operation it was. In fact, due to the rapid growth, the logistics involved were almost mind boggling—the housing, food growing, schools, medical facilities, tree farming, and other such necessities. Evidently, when the flood of people started coming, Astrid had never worried because God had told her that the mountain could accommodate any number of people, even millions.

Her brow crinkling in thinking of Astrid, Weatherly pondered how odd it was that she had yet to meet the woman, even after all of these years. They had communicated on occasion, sending messages by kite and dawn pigeon; but each time Weatherly had made a visit to the mountain, Astrid had been busy and away, generally in some remote location, which was understandable given the scale of what was going on under her direction.

Weatherly had also never seen the white lion, few people had; but she didn't doubt the existence of the creature, thought to be completely magical. Indeed, from some sightings came descriptions of a beast as large as an African elephant. The fact that no attacks had ever been reported, on either livestock or people, led many to wonder if the lion was in some way helping the mountain spirits provide protection.

Although not prone to pondering long over mysteries, or miracles, Weatherly was rarely surprised by them; nor was she very often a skeptic. The expansion of the mountain, currently completely mysterious as to the processes, never even surprised her. Lion Mountain was volcanic, and was not entirely dormant; but the growth was not at all like what an active volcano might produce in the form of cooled lava beds being used as new land or territory. So while some people reasoned the fire of the mountain might have something to do

with its ability to grow, it certainly wasn't anything that might be considered traditional. Even the thermal features were fairly benign, with the small geysers and steam rising from chasms within caves on the mountain being barely noticeable in comparison to a region such as Yellowstone.

Light had also been pondered as a factor with regard to the mountain's growth, particularly because the synchronous flashing of fireflies had long drawn visitors to the Great Smoky Mountains. So too had the bioluminescent mushrooms, which were still a great mystery as to why they glowed, whereas, scientists had long since discovered why fireflies sync their flashes. In the future, Alex would be the one to figure out the mushroom conundrum. While not as complex as the secret of his ability to fly, it was still hard for him to explain it to others, mainly because of the way most human brains tended to work. With the phenomenon related to the rapid growth of the mushrooms, he ended up telling people to simply imagine the mushroom as being like a glowworm taking a well-deserved nap after crawling back and forth very quickly across the toes of a spreesprite for three hours (the equivalent to a super-speedy glowworm marathon); and the creature was glowing while napping in order to be noticed so as not to be stepped on by others in the forest. That was the best way he knew to describe it, though he knew that mushrooms were definitely different than glowworms.

Instead of anything to do with fire or light, to Weatherly's mind, the enlargement of the mountain was more like stretching, multiplying, and defying known spatial rules, which might have been related to what the genies were capable of, except, according to them, their magic wasn't at all involved.

Lion Mountain likely wasn't a separate realm, and didn't seem to be situated in a triangle of any sort, as other realms often were. If it was, it was not an obvious triangle, perhaps only three points formed by rock formations, rather than the traditional lines of the three sides. However, most people felt a triangle probably wasn't involved because magicians had long stated they doubted the expansion had anything to do with their practices, other than in use of Light Energy, which all godly things on earth were connected to.

Any sorcerers looking for the mountain were never able to find it, not from atop nyregs, not from the ground, and not from any other means of searching such as divination. Ground searches in the area thought to hold Lion Mountain had yielded no more than a couple of mothership communities that were much too small to be the place of refuge the sorcerers had heard rumors of for the past fifteen years or so. When searching from the skies, the sorcerers could only see a few sparse villages tucked here and there in the peaks of the Smoky Mountains, and never anything large enough to sustain the numbers of people that seemed to be migrating there. It also seemed doubtful that the caves in the area could hold very many refugees. However, the sorcerers were persistent. Since they couldn't just bomb all of Tennessee to try to wipe out the hidden place, they would keep looking, and seeking new ways of discovering what was presently hidden to them.

In contrast to what a sorcerer riding a nyreg might see, a magician arriving by rookh or wind horse would view a sprawling settlement, comprised of both large and small communities, plus various farms. Most structures were modest with regard to size, though some were fairly large, like the churches and schools. However, none were super tall because those responsible for the designs, in general, viewed overly-tall buildings to be an affront to God.

After work and while having dinner in one of the cafeterias at the plantations, Gavin was again complaining, and pretty much wearing out the ears of the five people sitting at his table. As he was again expounding that the people in the Supercities weren't being treated all that badly, and that they could say or do whatever they liked in their own homes, even a group of grade-school kids sitting at the next table knew better.

"If they find bibles or crosses in people's homes," one of the boys shot over to him, "the people are arrested and sometimes even executed."

"People can't ever witness to others," one of the girls added, "not even in their homes because whoever's there might be a mimic or one of the Snakes undercover. So they don't have any true freedom, even if they get a small food and housing allowance."

“Plus, they take people’s kids away from them in the Supes,” another boy interjected.

“But only if the families can’t care for the children,” Gavin countered.

“How can anyone support children if they can’t earn even a thousand credits a month working sixty-five hours a week?” a man at Gavin’s table chimed in.

“And they never get any breaks from work,” another said. “And they can never leave the cities; they’re all held hostage.”

As all of the five people at his table abruptly left, Gavin was joined by Kip for dessert.

“I was actually thinking about going to live in one of the Supes,” Gavin said, through a mouthful of peach cobbler.

“You can go live in one of the cities if you want,” Kip replied, “but just be smart enough to know you won’t be able to just live in peace, not with your gift.”

“How would anyone even know about my gift?” Gavin answered. “It’s not like I’m blue and shiny all over.”

“Oh they’ll know,” Kip said. “People who spend ten minutes with you know, even if they can’t tell specifics. And if you get within half a mile of a sorcerer, they’ll find you for sure.”

As Gavin sat thinking, Kip added, “You’d have to be connected with those in charge in order to stay safe, and you’d end up having to do their bidding.”

After finishing his cobbler and saying goodbye to Kip, Gavin decided to visit the sorcerer that Weatherly had in custody before going home for the evening. Having worked with various military operations for years, he still had the clearance needed to see the man, who was being kept in an underground holding cell.

Rhett Collier, a conjurer by specialty, had been kept prisoner for two years. Determined to be at low-risk to commit suicide, Rhett was not sedated as many of his predecessors had been. He also regularly conversed with visitors, which was also unlike the other sorcerers that Weatherly had captured and held over the years. Being a clever sort, Rhett didn’t see any need to remain silent, especially when opportunities presented themselves to “educate” his captors as to the reasoning behind many of the sorcerers’ activities, which to the view of

most sorcerers and their followers were completely justifiable and of extreme good to the world in general. Over the centuries, in addition to eliminating certain conflicts, the sorcerers had provided safety, education, jobs, food, shelter, and medical care for many millions of people worldwide.

In having had several conversations with Rhett, Gavin was starting to think Weatherly keeping him prisoner was pretty unfair, her goal being to gain information from the man, particularly relating to the issue of poisons used by the sorcerers. She had only one other time had a conjurer in her keep, but had learned nothing from the man before he managed to kill himself.

Why not either just kill him or let him go? Gavin thought, riding the tube down to the level of the cluster of cells specially designed by magicians and gifted technologists to hold even the craftiest of supernatural prisoners. Even the designers of the cells, during tests, had never been able to break free from them.

She keeps saying that we are at war, his mind continued to grumble as he made his way down a long corridor. *But this is not like wars of the past, so maybe certain rules of engagement shouldn't apply.*

Except that war traditionally hadn't ever had any exact rules, with those being more creative often emerging as the victors. Whether fair or not, Weatherly was definitely creative; Gavin at least had to give her that.

Rhett was napping when he arrived. Staring at the conjurer through the bubble of light surrounding him (the cell), Gavin remarked on the man's benign appearance. Aside from the garb, which clearly identified him as a sorcerer—specifically, the pale turquoise, sage, plum, and mustard colors—he looked completely harmless. But, then, this had been true even of serial killers throughout the centuries—many looked completely innocent, especially while in a state of sleep.

As far as clothing, while sorcerers had once tried to blend in by wearing garments much like those in whatever culture they were in, they were all now pretty much wearing their traditional robes, and carrying staffs which they used for various spells and defense. Rhett's staff was being kept in a locker in the security office adjacent to the cell cluster.

While robes might have been considered cumbersome, they did have their purposes, the many pockets being ideal to store the much-needed gear the sorcerers often toted. Conjurers generally carried herbs, tree bark, berries, and such, along with various vials, bottles, and other containers. Rhett often carried a small burner device called a palm stove, which he found useful for regulating temperature when potion making, this being something his staff could not do very well when producing fire. In the case of necromancers, they needed specialized devices to commune with the dead (most often sorcerers of the past), and thus needed pockets in which to store the equipment. Sorcerers of all kinds used various stones and crystals for their incantations. Some robes were infused with shield-like qualities to protect during battles. In colder climates, they could provide warmth. When needing more freedom of movement, or for those spending time in hotter climates, robes were generally designed shorter and made of lighter materials.

Rhett woke as Gavin tapped lightly on the surface of the bubble and took a seat in the visitor's chair. With the two guards in the office playing a game of chess, and no other cells currently occupied, the pair had plenty of privacy to talk.

After visiting with Rhett for nearly an hour, Gavin made his way home. In his mind, he was making definite plans to leave the plantations. He had his own room in the bunkhouse; therefore, stuffing clothes and a few other necessities into a travel pack drew no attention. He made sure to pack a large pouch of sapphires and a small sack of Chelsea's diamonds, mostly blessed ones, but a few cursed stones as well. Having long since been able to tell the difference, he had also over the years developed an immunity to the cursed ones, which were kept in special genie-made containers so as to limit the danger of anyone else coming into contact with them. He had a large stock because Weatherly wasn't using diamonds anymore in her operations. Having lost their value, and with so many people being wary of cursed ones, they were hardly ever traded anymore. Even the blessed ones were not in demand because people were suspicious, and rightly so, since few human beings could tell the difference between blessed and cursed stones.

Sorting through items from a box on his dresser, Gavin recalled parts of his conversation with Rhett, which echoed other talks they had had over the past couple of months.

“The sorcerers are not all working for Satan, as many might believe,” Rhett had stressed. “And we truly do have the best interests of mankind in mind. For centuries, we observed that human beings are bent on self-destruction. Taking over and initiating the centralizations seemed the best way to save everyone. We can feed people more efficiently, enforce laws better, and better serve people in other ways too like education and medical care. And everyone is occupied and productive, which has cut the crime to nearly zilch. We put all of the people once on welfare to work, everyone capable of working that is. As far as the issue of caring for the elderly, most people agree it should be left to families, as it had been in years long past.”

When the issue of the terrorism came up, the sorcerer responded, “But we’ve brought a lot of the ones committing the acts under our control in the last decade and a half, so the incidents are way fewer than they used to be.”

Gavin had to admit this was true because there had been less large-scale attacks in recent years. All in all, Rhett presented a pretty compelling argument, which was the main reason why Gavin felt the need to get away from the plantations, at least for a while, because he wasn’t at all sure at this point if Weatherly and her operations were as righteous as he had always thought they were, or been led to believe. Gavin had actually told Kip’s son, Brent, this recently. “I’m not sure she’s on the right track anymore; I don’t think she’s totally upright and moral in her thinking and decisions.” Brent, currently active in a time-travel task force, didn’t agree; but this didn’t stop Gavin from continuing to argue his case.

Not only were there less terrorist attacks, in roughly the past five years, the sorcerers had pretty much stopped expending resources on attacking the plantations because they figured out that they couldn’t win. While Netherwind and Laurelstone were possibly not quite as protected as Lion Mountain, because the mountain spirits were in general more powerful than other types of magical protectors, the twin plantations were at present pretty well impenetrable. Over sixty gargoyles currently resided on the property, as did eleven gryphons.

Four firebirds, several rookhs, and a small herd of wind horses also regularly patrolled the area. Plus, the bigfoots were as large of a factor as ever. Still running everything relating to crops and livestock, they wouldn't stand for even one gremlin or hobgoblin stepping a single toe onto the property; in fact, a toe of a gremlin or hobgoblin on the property equaled a squashed gremlin or hobgoblin, no exceptions. Gnomes and puck trolls (their toes being allowed to roam the grounds) were more plentiful than ever, as were creatures such as enormice and wooly crotons. Genies too helped to curb mischief from outsiders, though their powerful brand of magic was still being kept largely in check, by both divine instruction and in general fear for the safety of others. With the plantations being so safe, Gavin didn't quite understand why the Underground Army (called such because it had never been given a more specific name) was so active. Rather than simply maintaining it for defense, Weatherly seemed intent on continuing to expand, and continuing her strikes, regularly sending out teams to hunt megahobs, gremlins, nyregs, etc. Additionally, she was targeting certain sorcerer strongholds, sometimes containing weapons, but other times her targets were the sorcerers themselves, as well as various hunters and mimics. She was also more aggressive than ever in her overseas efforts.

Rhett had confided to Gavin that, in addition to Netherwind and Laurelstone being a thorn in the side of the sorcerers, quite a few other places had been hard for them to penetrate, such as certain earthship communities, not only protected by magical creatures, but by human ingenuity, specifically in the form of magicians. "Yes, it's been very irritating," the conjurer had disclosed. "That's why we stepped up efforts to train Magician Hunters. But even with the extras, we've only managed to kill thirty-four in the past twenty years. Crafty, they are."

Gavin had cringed when he heard this. Compared to the many thousands of sorcerers worldwide, magicians were rather scarce, numbering right around nine hundred by Weatherly's current estimate, which was correct.

When fishing for information from Gavin, Rhett had stated, "I'm guessing the magician population to be roughly at five hundred in the world at this time."

Though Gavin knew the number to be incorrect, he didn't offer any information. In addition to magicians, many of whom had come out of hiding in the past couple of decades, approximately four hundred protégés were known to exist, most of them ranging from about five years old to the mid-twenties.

When in the mood to share, Rhett had expressed that the sorcerers were not too worried about a few houses and properties here and there in the deserted cities that were being protected. Specifically mentioning Doyle Mansion and the Galloway Estate across the street from the mansion, he said, "We also know about a couple of log homes in Colorado and a Tudor-style house on about two acres in Indiana. Plus, we've kept an eye on that stupid little inn in Mississippi that those new-age hippies like to hang out at. And there are a few little farms and ranches here and there. But we're not planning any offensives. After all, how many of our enemies can actually hide in those places, or operate out of them in any significant way."

Gavin smiled from having confirmation that the sorcerers still didn't know about either pockets or the triangular architecture of pods. (Though pods were based on triangles, the structures were rarely triangular in shape; so if the sorcerers ever did discover the secret, the small buildings wouldn't stand out as being magical in any way.)

Rhett did confess that they couldn't figure out how certain settlements in Alaska and Greenland were operating so well in such extreme cold. The sorcerers didn't know about the grimmpts that liked to live in those places, providing excellent heat for the communities. Certain magical devices were also helping people survive and even thrive, such as a set of spoons produced by a bagical that was keeping whole families in Siberia warm in winter. Again, the sorcerers didn't plan to strike these communities. Overall, Rhett gave the impression that those in charge of the cities mainly now just wanted peace.

Having a lot to think about lately, Gavin was still praying and reading the bible; however, as he had admitted to Rhett during one of their conversations, he had never heard God's voice like a lot of his friends did, especially not like Weatherly, whom God spoke to through a voice in the back of her head. (What he told Rhett was completely true because God had mainly always spoken to him through his dreams.) With grief over Chelsea's death still clouding his thoughts, he

had been questioning a lot lately. Kip had actually agreed with him that when people were confused about certain issues, they should seek answers themselves, instead of relying on the ideas and influences of others. So his leaving probably wouldn't take too many people by surprise.

At the same time Gavin was packing, Em was arriving at Netherwind atop Zapor. After a short visit with Kip, Jane, Merri, and Brent, she headed to the Magicians' Lab at Laurelstone to pick up her fourteen-year-old daughter, Zinnia, who was most often called Zin.

Em might not have ever imagined herself as a mother, except that Zin had just kind of fallen into her lap at age six, her parents having died in a mothership community destroyed by sorcerers. Zin was at first taken to a nearby work camp, but had escaped on a rookh that brought her to the Inn at Magnolia Hills.

A sort of underground adoption agency and foster care program currently existed, specially designed to help children and the elderly. The organization was named Bookends, standing for people at the beginning of their earthly lives and at the end. People had always been interested in adopting children. Now, good-hearted people everywhere wanted to adopt the elderly who didn't have anyone left alive to help them. This had unofficially begun when the nursing home and hospital laws were passed forbidding bibles, and when eidetic people started visiting these facilities. When it was discovered that Christian visitors were often kept out, the Inn at Magnolia Hills started planning, to have as many elderly people removed from nursing homes and hospitals as possible. This became increasingly easier to do as the Supercities came into being, with the elderly completely neglected by the government. Some Christian seniors were simply estranged from their non-Christian family members and had no one to care for them. With regard to children, as the death-rate in the U.S. rose and as a lot of people simply became ill-suited to raising kids, many were left without parents or were abandoned.

Bookends had very quickly become something official. While still fairly secret, it was official in its screening and paperwork processes (though actual paper wasn't used anymore). Since it was easy to track and check up on placements, the program was very safe, with few instances of problems thus far.

Flying Em and Zin home to Doyle Mansion just after nightfall, Zapor recalled his visit with Folto's twin girls, Magsen and Halli, not currently assigned to anyone as protectors because they were too young. While the twins were a bit youngish in their thinking too, Zapor enjoyed spending time with his cousin's offspring. The girls were very keen on reading, as he was, and on this evening they had all engaged in a lively discussion about Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Rappaccini's Daughter." Folto's mate, Candar, wasn't around much, mainly because mother gryphons took on most of the childrearing duties, but also because he traveled a good deal in order to do research in various libraries around the world.

While all of the other houses on Paloma Drive were currently in shambles (including the one Vini and Preston had grown up in), both Doyle Mansion and the Galloway home had survived, and remained much as they ever were, having been protected not only from terrorist attacks, demons, looters, and such, but also by diligent care taken to preserve them from disrepair and disintegration. Although the neighborhood didn't officially exist anymore—its streets crumbling along with the remnants of houses—gardens were still regularly tended to by gnomes who lived mostly in little treehouses in the area. Though public water and sewer services were no longer available, both estates had wells, water catchment systems, and septic systems that were kept in perfect operation. Greenhouses were also easy to maintain. Wind and solar power were readily available. No phone systems were needed thanks to dawn pigeons and kites. Em was still able to write, on computers connected to those at the plantations, and had as large of an audience as ever in various communities worldwide both inside and outside of pockets. Thanks to genie innovations, a good deal of her work was also making its way into the Supercities, which was how some of those fleeing were able to find the best escape routes and various resources along those routes. Since her work was often subtle, she was of great assistance to those operating the NUR.

Otto was living at the mansion about half of the year, while traveling the other half. He had never married, being in love with his work, Em always reckoned, kind of like how Louetta had always been married to her art.

Lyydu often helped Zapor provide protection. As speedy as the thunderbird was, it was no problem for him to keep an eye on several places in addition to Wharton Farm, which was still in full operation. Four young and playful wind horses also patrolled the area. In the same way that gryphons and thunderbirds enjoyed knocking missiles out of the air during attacks (their speed enabling them to safely outdistance any explosions), wind horses absolutely delighted in knocking nyregs out of the skies and into gorges and rivers, the latter of which was particularly troublesome to the nasty creatures because, while demons mainly only hated holy water, nyregs absolutely hated all water.

The two remaining houses on Paloma Drive were also home to eight gargoyles. In the same manner as to how the sorcerers had created a problem for themselves with gremlins, they never thought as to what the outcome might be when destroying many churches and cathedrals. With the buildings they had once protected destroyed, many gargoyles took it upon themselves to move to places like self-sustaining ranches, earthship communities, and private homes that were still occupied, thus, increasing the protection of those habitations. And their magic was so powerful, they often didn't even need to rise into the air (which only winged gargoyles could do anyway) in order to knock demons, nyregs, and even missiles out of the sky. Instead, they simply commanded a boulder or two to zip up high to do their bidding, often knocking out dozens before coming to rest upon the earth again. And since gargoyles could see for hundreds and sometimes even thousands of miles in the eye of their mind, they were often able to act as a warning system. Some even lived in the Supercities, though generally in hidden spots or in company with hairy vetches, which were able to extend their invisibility powers to other creatures when they chose to. And since hairy vetches and gargoyles had always gotten along well, the tiny furballs basically loved hanging out with their stony friends.

Camouflage was also available to the gargoyles (and many others in the cities), in the form of certain triangular mirrors provided by the magicians, the devices basically allowing users to live hidden while in plain sight. The shroud mirrors, as they were called, didn't work as well to hide any creatures that might be on the move because the movement was easily noticed by way of flashes of light reflected in the

mirrors; but the devices were perfect for mainly stationary beings like gargoyles.

Blessedly, with so many magical creatures on the scene for the past fifteen years or so, the majority of the remaining church and cathedral buildings of the world were relatively safe, though most weren't used anymore due to current laws prohibiting the practice of Christianity.

Magical creatures like firebirds and gryphons had over the years managed to preserve the Christ the Redeemer statue in Rio de Janeiro that the sorcerers were constantly trying to blitz. Even Folto and Zapor had taken turns on this watch, basically having the most fun of their lives tackling missiles, deflecting energy blasts from sorcerers' staffs and demons, and preventing various explosive devices from being planted around the beautiful landmark.

Gavin was still on Weatherly's mind as she was getting ready for bed. Sitting in a little bowl on her bedside table was one of Chelsea's blessed diamonds, set by a genie jewelry maker into a polished carbuncle designed to be worn as a small brooch. Since Weatherly didn't often wear jewelry, the pin was often kept there, though sometimes she carried it in a pocket. The diamond twinkled gently in the soft lamplight as Weatherly recalled that it had been a Christmas gift from Chelsea the year before her death. If diamonds had held their value, though less than a carat in size, this one based on its quality (not even taking into account the blessed factor) would have been worth probably twenty thousand credits, which would have put it at roughly equal to twenty thousand dollars of the past

In truth, Weatherly was troubled, mainly because Gavin was not the only one voicing frustration lately. Many people were frustrated by the worsening state of the world—in which evil seemed to have gained such a stronghold in recent years—not to mention having to live through an age of increasingly-violent natural disasters.

Believers had to remind themselves constantly that God is still in control, and is not slow about keeping promises, particularly that of the Second Coming. But even with being reminded as to what the bible says in Second Peter, that one day is as a thousand years with God and vice versa, many people were still frustrated that the Endtimes had not yet come; and this led to a lot of questioning. *When will they happen? Why haven't they happened yet?* Each generation throughout the

centuries seemed to think the Second Coming would happen in their lifetimes, but this could still be thousands of years away. Related to the waiting, Weatherly personally felt that present-day Christians were meant to live through a time of great testing and building of their faith. The Endtimes might be close at hand, but we can't rush God.

In addition to recent attacks on two earthship communities, horrible flooding was going on in several states (including inside numerous pockets), leaving people feeling very depressed, even hopeless, in wondering why God was allowing this. A massive tornado had also recently hit two states.

Related to Gavin's idea that we've brought certain things upon ourselves, Weatherly actually agreed; but her thoughts stemmed from a much different perspective. It was her opinion that God had in the past four or five decades lowered his hedge of protection; and she often told people, "We've brought this mess—storms, politics, everything—upon ourselves by rejecting God." Whole sermons were being preached on this, often using the parable of the vineyard in Isaiah Chapter Five.

God had given human beings, particularly in the United States, everything good—fertile land, shelter, food in abundance, and many other resources. But instead of giving thanks and living by His rules, many people rebelled. Instead of thriving and bearing good fruit, human beings were living lawless and fleshly lives full of pride, greed, cruelty, laziness, and other such abominations. In choosing to bear only wild grapes, with many also denying Christ, they were rebelling against God—the King, the Provider, the Protector. Many were also calling good bad and bad good, as the bible warns us would happen. So, He was withdrawing His protection; and why shouldn't He if we are choosing to live like heathens.

Wind horses and thunderbirds were often somewhat sad that they were not allowed to break up and calm storms to help humans; but they had to obey God, as we all should. There was actually a gifted person living in West Virginia who could calm storms, but he too was frequently instructed by God not to do so.

Just before falling asleep, Weatherly wept softly in recalling exactly how Chelsea had died. She hadn't starved, though she might have if they hadn't killed her first. From an undercover operative, Weatherly had learned that the sorcerers had contemplated taking Chelsea by nyreg

to an active volcano to drop her in, since this might be a method of choice in destroying diamonds. Her captors also speculated if taking her to the place they were holding captured dragons and torching her with dragon fire would also likely kill her. However, as the sorcerers had been struggling with getting dragons to convert to evil, they doubted they could get one of the beasts to do their bidding. They eventually decided on poison. She wouldn't eat or drink, but they would still be able to poison her. Though shielded, her body was still a human body in many respects, and was not completely impenetrable to outside forces like a regular diamond would be. In the end, they had administered poison through ear drops and nasal spray, which they felt was better than forcing a tube down her throat. She was very weak by that point from lack of food and water, and wasn't able to mount much resistance, so the process was pretty quick.

Truthfully, they would have rather gotten their hands on Gavin again because his sapphires were much more valuable to them than Chelsea's diamonds. (No sorcerer had ever been able to tell blessed diamonds from cursed ones, and thus greatly feared all stones produced by Diamond Girls.) They had hoped Gavin might try to rescue her, so they could capture him too.

The sorcerers would very soon manage to get their hands on Gavin, but not in a way they might have expected.

Chapter Three Supercity Seven

“Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.” Matthew 10:16

At this point in our story, we might note the locations of the fourteen Supercities: One spanned what had once been Seattle and Olympia. Two encompassed Sacramento and San Francisco. Three covered Salt Lake City and surrounding areas. Four had overtaken Phoenix. Five was basically the whole Denver area. Six covered Fort Worth and Dallas. Seven was comprised of Topeka and Kansas City. Eight was what had once been Chicago. Nine was Indianapolis. Ten was situated halfway between the ruins of Cincinnati and Columbus. Eleven stretched from Boston to Hartford and down to New York City. Twelve covered Nashville and its suburbs. Thirteen was the Atlanta area. And Fourteen was Miami.

Most people were not surprised that Gavin left, but they were shocked that he took the sorcerer with him, basically breaking him out of his cell, and rather easily it seemed. Paying another visit to the cell cluster in the early hours of the morning, Gavin had simply given the two guards each a cursed diamond. Believing the stones to be blessed and trusting Gavin, they gladly accepted.

Able to tell the intensity of the cursed diamonds, Gavin knew they wouldn't kill, but would likely cause sickening in the form of vomiting, nausea, dizziness, and diarrhea. While the guards were visiting the bathroom, and believing themselves to be the victims of food poisoning, Gavin retrieved Rhett's staff and freed the man.

According to two gargoyles and a puck troll who had picked up snatches of conversation as the pair fled through an apple orchard, past

a corral, around a corn field, and over a stone wall on the western border of Netherwind's property, they were on the run to Supe-7.

As far as why Gavin did it, he realized that Kip was right. To survive in any of the Supercities, he was going to need to get close to those in charge, to be among their ranks; and what better way to facilitate this than through the rescue of a sorcerer. He didn't particularly consider his actions to be switching sides because he truly felt it was wrong of Weatherly to hold the man prisoner for so long. Plus, Gavin planned to live much as he ever had—a fairly godly life in actions and through prayer. Being in the cities would give him a chance to witness to others, though he knew he wouldn't be able to do much in public. But according to rumors, there were a lot of safe places in the cities where people could worship, and draw others in, though carefully so as not to accidentally draw in an undercover mimic or a Snake. Always being an adventurous sort, this was a chance for Gavin to learn more about the sorcerers, and the cities, which at this point didn't seem all that bad to him.

Though Supe-12 and Supe-13 were much nearer, they were heading for Supe-7 because this was where Rhett was from. The longer journey was fine with Gavin, though he was a little surprised that Rhett didn't call a couple nyregs to carry them, something he could have easily done using his staff, which contained a sort of built-in whistle feature for that exact purpose.

When questioned about this, Rhett confessed he was a little shy of riding nyregs (or anything airborne) at present because this was the way he had been captured. A rookh had knocked the nyreg he was riding over the plantations right out of the sky, whereupon, he had basically just fallen into Weatherly's lap (but really more at her feet).

"Oh this is too easy," she had remarked with laughter as she simply bound the stunned conjurer with the red rope she had been carrying before escorting him to a cell.

"Plus, I've been cooped up for so long," Rhett declared, "I'd really like to stretch my legs."

Gavin didn't mind walking, and this would give him a chance to get to know the conjurer better, as well as learn more about Supe-7 before actually arriving at his new home. While he wouldn't have confided

this to his companion, Gavin was pretty much as frightened at the prospect of living in one of the Supercities as he was thrilled.

Much in the same way the rail system of Kansas City—being situated in the center of the country—had always been a major hub, Supe-7 was currently acting as a major hub for trade, government, communications, travel, and other significant factors involving the Supercities, which didn't have a designated capital; but if they had, Supe-7 would have been it because the Council of Twos often met there. The cities were governed by this council comprised of twenty-eight sorcerers, two from each city, holding joint rule and often called Governors, with one of the twenty-eight being elected by the council as Governor Ruler (a position kind of like a president or prime minister) for a term of ten years. Rhett wasn't on the council, but was an advisor to the two sorcerers in charge of Supe-7, Telén Mayhew and Jerome Malcom, with Jerome being the current Governor Ruler.

Gavin and Rhett wouldn't actually be walking for the whole of their journey (because this would have taken a couple of weeks) but would be for three or four days in order to catch a train at a work camp producing fruits, nuts, and berries outlying Supe-12.

They chatted some as they walked, but more in the evening at their makeshift campsite in a grove of oaks as they cooked a rabbit they had caught for dinner and enjoyed a dessert of plums gleaned from an abandoned farm they passed a few miles back.

“Sorcerers don't use a lot of spells or potions like many people think,” Rhett told Gavin. “We follow a creed of being careful in the use of sorcery, and we don't truly want to control people. We're not in it for the power. Our goal is the survival of people.”

From Rhett's demeanor, Gavin got the idea that the conjurer was sincere in his statements, and that most of the sorcerers truly believed they were doing the right thing.

To Gavin's query as to whether or not female sorcerers existed, Rhett explained, “They are called sages or prophetesses because their specialty is most often foresight. But they are very rare, so you'll probably never meet one. I've only come across four in my lifetime, and I'm ninety-three.”

Since Rhett looked barely older than fifty, Gavin assumed he had been taking the elixir that many sorcerers liked to take to extend their

lives, sometimes for centuries. This was true, and a fact Rhett confirmed when stating that he was one of the conjurers adept at producing this stay-young potion.

“And while some sages dabble in potions,” Rhett added, “I’ve only ever heard of one true conjure woman, someone as expert as I am, in all of sorcerer history. She’s still alive, but keeps to herself, somewhere in the Himalayas, I’m told.”

“From what I understand,” Gavin related, “very few female magicians have ever existed, though I think there have been more in recent decades than in centuries past.”

Though Rhett waited to see if his new friend would disclose any specific numbers, Gavin did not.

Unknown to both Gavin and Rhett, very nearby, a gifted sixteen-year-old girl named Cecelia Landris was looking on and listening to their conversation with interest. Cecelia, who had the nickname of The Sparrow, was actually from Lion Mountain; but she often liked to travel the countryside, mostly on foot, but sometimes also by taking hops on wind horses, rookhs, and such in order to reach long distances more quickly. She was perfectly safe while out and about, even from gangs and the likes of demons and megahobs because her gift was that of extreme inconspicuousness, like the many sparrows that are often out and about, but that people and other creatures rarely notice.

Sitting against the trunk of a bur oak only about fifty feet from the campsite where Gavin and Rhett sat facing her, she didn’t need to worry about being seen, not even when she got up and slipped quietly away about an hour before dark. Her gift was working perfectly, as it had from her toddler years when her parents would frequently panic in thinking she had wandered off, when she was, in fact, right in front of them, generally no more than twenty feet away and sometimes directly under their noses (like they could have actually tripped over her in taking a single step). The gift had never failed her on her many visits to the Supercities. In the same way Weatherly’s operatives were often able to successfully infiltrate enemy territories, Astrid often relied on The Sparrow to do just that, mainly to gain information, but sometimes to deliver messages to certain individuals, particularly since the ability to communicate with those in the cities was somewhat limited.

Related to the issue of communication, as they stopped for lunch the next day, Rhett elaborated on the sorcerers' own problems in that regard. They had been using magnetism mixers for years to disrupt the equipment of others; now, the gremlins were wreaking havoc with the sorcerers' own communication devices, as well as the mixers on occasion. Since the sorcerers hadn't as yet been able to figure out what to do about the gremlin problem, they had recently been using nyregs as couriers; but they were working on creating a smaller creature called an efel that sounded by description like a streamlined blackbird (albeit a decrepit one feeding mainly on festering waste). *A midnight version of a dawn pigeon*, Gavin thought.

On their second night of sleeping under the stars, while listening to Rhett's snores, Gavin couldn't get Chelsea off of his mind. They had never married (as some people thought they eventually might), being simply best friends throughout their lives, and more like brother and sister than anything else. She had died in Supe-7, but Gavin knew that Rhett hadn't had anything directly to do with her death. If he had, this might have been quite a different scenario, with the man as an adversary rather than an ally. Before her death, she had amassed thousands of cursed diamonds which were not destroyed. While Weatherly currently possessed a small number of them, only Gavin knew where the rest were safely hidden away, in various places, some with the help of puck trolls who were experts at hiding things, as well as finding them. She had left a beautiful legacy completely unrelated to her diamonds. Being kind, helpful, loving, gentle, and giving, and always putting others first, she managed to touch in a special way the hearts of almost everyone she had contact with over the years.

Her death had changed Gavin. Indeed, in the past five years, he had cried more sapphires than the rest of his life in total. The stones were mainly being used by Weatherly's military personnel, though a good number of civilians were carrying them too.

Of the two types of sapphires his body produced, ones with shield-like qualities and the others for healing, the shield-like ones were far more common, outnumbering the healing stones at roughly eighty to one. The shield sapphires were actually the most useful in not only protecting bearers from physical harm, but also in acting as talismans against thoughts planted by Satan and certain of his followers, mainly

fellow fallen angels and demons. The protective stones could also counter various spells the sorcerers liked to use against their foes such as ones designed to spread discord or induce sleep. Death spells were also sometimes used, though more common were incantations that simply sickened, much in the same manner that cursed diamonds could—causing headaches, fevers, stomach aches, and such. Whatever Rhett might claim, Gavin knew that use of both spells and potions among sorcerers was commonplace.

Adjusting the position of his pack (which he was using as a pillow) before drifting off to sleep, Gavin said a prayer to God, to ask for His help during this time of transition in his life. Although he had never heard God's voice in the same way certain others did, there was no reason to think the Lord wasn't hearing his prayers.

At the end of the third day of their cross-country trek, Rhett and Gavin reached the fruit, nut, and berry work camp outlying Supe-12. Starting the next morning, they would now be able to hop a train to reach Supe-7 in less than a day.

Taking a short tour of the camp, Gavin and Rhett happened to witness a sorcerer, angry at one of the ESS guards, use his staff and a short incantation to turn the man into a pig that was then shot by one of his fellow Snakes on orders from the sorcerer.

Looking sideways at Rhett, Gavin's expression said what he was thinking. *So, sorcerers don't use very many spells. Right. And the moon is made of green cheese.*

In response, Rhett simply looked sheepish, basically like a kid with his hand caught in the cookie jar.

On the tour, Gavin noticed that there seemed to be nearly as many Snakes as workers. *Do they really need that many enforcement personnel to keep people in line?* he wondered.

Probably, his brain answered, if guns only work sporadically because of gremlins.

After a quick dinner in a mess tent, Gavin and Rhett were escorted to guest quarters for the night.

Boarding the train the next morning, Gavin was surprised that no one searched either his person or his pack. *I guess they don't see anyone traveling with a sorcerer as a threat,* he surmised. *Weatherly would never have made a safety mistake like that.* As much as he

disagreed with her sometimes, Gavin had to admit he admired her. She would never assume a stranger to be safe, no matter with whom the stranger might be traveling. He also found it slightly odd that Rhett had never asked him if he was armed. In addition to the sapphires and diamonds he had packed, he had a small mirror and a flute.

The morning was so foggy that Gavin could see little of Supe-12 as they skirted it, just a few of the taller buildings, looking mainly like oppressive shadows watching over weaker ones.

Leaving the city behind, as the fog cleared, they were able to see the workings of a livestock ranch that Rhett explained raised goats, rabbits, and cattle. As they passed in view of numerous barns, corrals, tents, and bunkhouses, Gavin observed that in this camp too, the Snakes were just about as numerous as the workers.

On the approach to Supe-7 nearing midday, they passed several outlying work camps including a huge hay-growing operation, a fish farm, a limestone quarry, and a hydro plant.

Seven was not draped in fog as Twelve had been, and Gavin was fairly astounded at the numbers of skyscrapers, glittering in the sun like metallic crystals reaching for the heavens.

Upon alighting from the train at the city's edge, as the pair made their way through a factory district to another train station, Gavin saw only slum-like tenements surrounding the factories. He knew from reports that most residents of the cities were living in cramped and run-down conditions, mainly in small two-room apartments, with several families often sharing a single bathroom. In the Western Supercities, these areas were generally called shantytowns. Residents of the Eastern Supercities preferred to call them ghettos. With Supe-7 being in the middle of the country, both terms were used equally. The people making their way here and there looked downcast—not making eye contact, not socializing, and not smiling. If their lives held any joy at all, they were hiding it. But their subdued demeanor might have been due to the numbers of Snakes on group patrol just about everywhere—on every street, around every corner.

In addition to the swarms of Snakes, at any given time at least a dozen nyregs could be seen swooping about overhead; and scores of demons were perched on various buildings and walls, in order to plant their ugly thoughts into people's heads. Though he wasn't currently

carrying a protective sapphire, Gavin was well shielded from this by his natural gift; but he could only imagine what might be saturating the minds of those not protected in some way.

At one point, Gavin was thoroughly startled when a mimic amongst a throng of factory workers walking in front of them on the sidewalk suddenly shapeshifted, changing from a stout-looking blond man to a tall red-haired woman in a matter of seconds.

“That’s how we keep an eye on things,” Rhett explained, “by blending in.”

The people surrounding the mimic hardly seemed to notice; and Gavin didn’t know why he should have been startled since Rhett had previously told him that in addition to basic garden-variety demons, both mimics and print doubles were fairly common in the cities.

Passing a vegetable-canning plant and a shoe manufactory, Gavin noted that the factories were in better condition than the apartments, but were drab and simple in their architecture. *The types of buildings Otto could have designed when he was about eight years old*, Gavin privately reckoned.

Noting the rather sad conditions, Gavin was somewhat surprised not to find things quite as rosy as he might have hoped for, or remembered from his brief visits to the cities previously. *The thrill of the adventure on the previous trips must have cast a better light on things*, he reasoned. Despite the poor conditions, he was here now, and he intended to make the best of it, especially because he knew that this was just the sort of place Chelsea would have loved to have lived, in order to help people. Without many resources, she probably only would have been able to do so in small ways, like by sharing her food with the hungry or handing out blessed diamonds. But no matter how small the acts, she would have made a difference; she always did, no matter where she was.

Catching a train into the downtown area that held clusters of mainly art-deco-style pristine skyscrapers, as well as the large dwellings of the sorcerers and certain wealthy individuals, Gavin thought, *Only slums and palaces in the city, and nothing in the middle; so not much has changed in the world in recent years, except that the disparity between the rich and the poor has continued to grow*. The sorcerers had long wanted to wipe out the middle class in the U.S., and they had more than

succeeded. Middle America, as it had once been called, was completely extinct, this being true not only inside the cities, but also in the various self-sustaining communities because the people tended to share everything equally in those settlements, without regard to class of any sort.

The skyscrapers of the cities served a variety of functions such as housing tax-collecting operations and education bureaus. Utility and transportation directors, prison overseers, work camp supervisors, government officials, hospital administrators, and factory managers also had offices in the high rises that also held hotels, restaurants, shops, and gambling parlors for the wealthy, many of which lived in lavish apartments in the high rises. Sorcerers' labs and holding cells for select prisoners were frequently located in the underground levels of these downtown buildings. This was exactly where they were heading, to a conjurers' lab (called a den) where Rhett did most of his work.

The den was less pristine than the building housing it. The several conjurers hard at work on various concoctions were surrounded by cluttered tables and shelves. Numerous simmering vats and pots were giving off spurts and splatters that were evidently seldom cleaned up given the condition of the many stoves and the sticky floors surrounding them. Trash bins in one corner of the den were fairly overflowing with an assortment of rotting herbs, berries, and such, leftovers from the ingredients in many of the potions under construction.

With his sinuses under assault by a mix of medicinal, flowery, and festering smells, Gavin was glad that Rhett was just checking in with a couple of colleagues, and not planning to stay to do any work.

After only ten minutes or so, they left in order to get Gavin settled in a hotel room temporarily. "We'll get you set up in a house before too long," Rhett assured him.

On the eighty-second floor of a high rise, Gavin had a fabulous view of a good portion of Supe-7, which was entirely enclosed by a twenty-five foot stone wall, mainly to prevent its residents from leaving and not necessarily to safeguard the city, which was well protected from outsiders by demons, nyregs, Snakes, and even megahobs that occasionally roamed free, though the megahobs were infrequent inside any of the cities due to their unpredictable and destructive nature.

Indeed, many Snakes and even mimics over the years had been killed by both megahobs and stealth hobs turning on them.

Rhett stayed to have dinner that was delivered by room service. With no current family alive, the conjurer was not in any hurry to return to his home, which he knew would likely be in a fairly poor state from being unoccupied for the two years he had been gone. The condition of his home hardly mattered though because Rhett often slept on a cot in the rear of the den.

As they ate, Gavin and Rhett conversed about the cities in general.

“Why not establish more coastal cities,” Gavin questioned, “to take advantage of the abundance of the sea—kelp, fish, shellfish, water, even power?”

“We harvest enough from our operations outside of One, Eleven, and Fourteen,” Rhett responded.

“But there’s nothing in the Gulf or on the Southern part of the Pacific Coast,” Gavin countered.

“Having more cities on coasts would mean dealing with more storms,” Rhett replied. “We’d also be more vulnerable to possible sea attacks by other nations; and people in the cities might find more ways to escape by sea, which already happens on occasion.”

“So it’s true,” Gavin said. “The people are being kept prisoner in the cities.”

“It’s really for their own good,” Rhett answered. “Most wouldn’t survive outside the cities. It’s not just the harshness of living without any resources; the gangs would make hash of most people. We can control criminals inside the cities, but not outside. I’ve seen what gangs have done to smaller earthship settlements, and farms without much protection. They steal what they want, raze everything, and either murder the residents or make slaves of them.”

In the morning, Rhett arrived early to take Gavin to an arranged meeting with a handful of sorcerers, including Jerome Malcom who was serving his final year as Governor Ruler. Also present were various others holding positions of importance in the cities.

All were pleased to welcome him, though Jerome and a Governor visiting from Supe-5 were clearly suspicious of Gavin, who couldn’t blame them. If the situation were reversed, if someone had

unexpectedly come into his trusted circle of friends, he would have been suspicious too.

Despite the suspicion, Jerome made sure to tell Gavin, “I am very indebted to you for freeing my friend. You are welcome to stay as long as you like in the city; and if you need anything, please let me know.”

While having a sumptuous breakfast, Gavin visited with a necromancer and a Dragon Hunter. Upon finding out where Gavin was from, the men were more than happy to talk to him, mainly because they were curious about certain operations of the twin plantations, in particular, production of things like Bigfoot Honey and Bigfoot Grenadine. In truth, another reason the sorcerers had suspended efforts to try to destroy Netherwind and Laurelstone was because products like these were favored by many in the cities, particularly the wealthy. And the sorcerers were always interested in keeping wealthy people happy; at present, mainly due to the international connections these folks tended to have, ones that were going to come in very handy in the future when bringing more and more countries under full control of the sorcerers.

Of course, many people aside from the wealthy liked specialty foods of high quality produced by various sources outside of the work camps. Therefore, quite a bit of bartering was going on with regard to things like honey, grenadine, and even eggs because the poultry facilities outlying several of the Supercities didn’t produce eggs that tasted even half as good as those from various farms and plantations. A particular mothership settlement in Wisconsin made cheese unrivaled by all other dairies, and a small cattle ranch in Oklahoma was producing the best beef in the U.S. While demons didn’t generally eat traditional foods (except for show when impersonating people), the sorcerers, hunters, and ESS personnel all did; and many of them had the normal cravings that most human beings tend to have.

After the breakfast, with Rhett busy elsewhere, Gavin was taken on a tour of a metal works factory by a Magician Hunter and two print doubles, currently looking unremarkable as simply a pair of middle-aged men dressed in the amber and olive garments the Snakes generally wore.

The factory was as plain inside as it was outside, with the workers blending in with the drabness.

On their way to a train station after the tour, they passed an elementary school. A group of about twenty children were in the schoolyard having what was known as a fresh-air break, which was nothing like the recesses at the plantation schools because this school had no playground equipment; and the city air, as Gavin noticed, wasn't all that fresh, but rather stale and stifling. So too was the atmosphere in which the children seemed extremely subdued and strangely quiet as they simply milled about since they had nothing like balls or jumpropes to play with. The only liveliness came from a yellow cat passing through one corner of the schoolyard in pursuit of and batting at a fluttering moth. As two of the children ran to greet the cat, a nyreg overhead swooped low to spit a stream of acid at the playful creature, who was able to dodge and take cover in a drainage culvert.

Having missed its target, the nyreg decided it might as well spit at the two kids, who also dodged as they tried to run back to their classmates. However, deciding to land, the nyreg ended up blocking their path, while rearing and hissing in gearing up to attacking with long talons and sharp fangs.

Sprinting into the schoolyard, Gavin yelled, "Hey!" to draw the beast's attention, thus allowing him time to place himself between the children and the nyreg, who wasn't at all happy at this interference and who let Gavin know this with a shot of acid from his throat, which saturated and burned away a good chunk of the front of Gavin's shirt, but didn't harm his person in any way because of his gift. If he had been carrying one of the shield sapphires he had brought with him that were still in his pack, his shirt would have been saved as well. As it was, the quality of his skin couldn't extend protection to his clothes as a sapphire worn externally could; and the lone sapphire he was wearing set into a necklace was not of the protective sort.

The Magician Hunter, with the print doubles in tow, shortly arrived on the scene, where they managed to ward off the nyreg, who once again took to the skies, though not in a very good mood at having been deprived of a little fun.

"I'm not going to change who I am just because I've changed my place of residence!" Gavin fumed to his companions. "This is wrong! Those beasts should be kept in check!"

“I agree,” the Magician Hunter stated, giving the print doubles a scathing glare because it was considered part of the job of all demons to keep the nyregs from posing too much of a risk to the general population of the cities, and in particular, the children.

Returning to his hotel room to change his shirt gave Gavin a chance to calm down before meeting Rhett for lunch at the hotel restaurant. However, upon learning from the conjurer that megahobs and nyregs in Supe-7 generally killed around six hundred people each year, Gavin very quickly got worked up again.

“The ones killed are mostly people trying to escape,” Rhett said in his best effort at a soothing tone.

“That shouldn’t matter!” Gavin heatedly replied.

“Most of the sorcerers are not too happy about the numbers either,” Rhett answered, in a further effort to try to calm his new friend.

“With all of the Snakes trotting around,” Gavin said, “you’d think they could keep those beasts under control.”

“The ESS would need more training in order to control them,” Rhett answered. “It’s not a natural skill for human beings to learn, like it is for demons.”

“But even they don’t seem to care,” Gavin remarked, in recalling the slow reactions of the print doubles in the schoolyard.

“Or they think themselves above performing such tasks,” Rhett offered, believing this to be true of many print doubles, since they were basically the most advanced and elite of the various types of demons.

“Actually, the ESS need more training all around,” Rhett said thoughtfully as they were having dessert, “because many of them are completely inept at performing even their basic job functions.”

After lunch, having previously gotten Jerome’s approval, Rhett accompanied Gavin to see the underground holding cell where Chelsea had died.

Rhett knew about Chelsea, and the full circumstances surrounding her death. “I am so sorry,” he said softly.

“Well, we can’t change the past,” Gavin immediately replied, “only move on toward the future.”

Gavin didn’t need to do any research to find out exactly who was involved in bringing about Chelsea’s death; he already knew specifics. He also knew Jerome had allowed this visit to the cell as something of a

test, to see how he'd react. With help from his shield gift, he was able to keep his emotions in check. Whether or not he would have wanted to take revenge, Gavin knew that God didn't want him to act, at least not right now. Plus, human beings were supposed to practice forgiveness, not take revenge.

Rhett had already told him that Chelsea had, literally, cried a pile of diamonds in the days preceding her death. Thinking they were all cursed, the sorcerers had initially saved them and were planning to modify the diamonds in such a way as to make them look like emeralds and rubies and such to use against enemies. But, surprisingly, the stones all turned out to be blessed ones. Though a mystery to the sorcerers as to why this was so, Gavin knew the answer. In knowing she would soon be with God, Chelsea had only been able to cry happy tears. Rhett had also confided that they had been forced to get rid of all of the blessed stones because they ended up converting to good and saving (bringing to Christ) any person who came into contact with them. This included two Dragon Hunters, several of the wealthy elite, and a sorcerer, all of whom were able to see things clearly, as though through a diamond eyepiece, for the first time in their lives. They were able to see the offer of Salvation, and discern as truth the fact that they would be incredibly stupid not to accept it. They also all wondered how they had managed to stay on the wrong path for so long. Though Rhett seemed surprised by the power of Chelsea's tears, Gavin wasn't.

"Of course, the diamonds couldn't convert the likes of mimics or print doubles because they're not human," Rhett had told him, "but they definitely worked on human beings. I believe the stones were taken to a volcano to be destroyed."

Regarding the information of cursed diamonds being camouflaged to look like emeralds and such, Gavin thought this was just the sort of information Weatherly would be very interested in; but he likely wouldn't be having contact with her or anyone else from the plantations anytime soon. While he didn't want anyone to get hurt by these camouflaged stones, he wasn't planning to do anything to jeopardize his new situation by trying to send messages. So at this time, he would just have to remind himself that Weatherly generally had ways of finding things like this out without his help.

Over the next couple of days, Gavin was introduced to more of the elite and powerful of the city, including a wealthy man named Peter Johns who owned a sizeable chunk of property north of Supe-12 in what had once been Kentucky (but not very near the location of the suspension bridge). Upon learning of Gavin's experience with horses, Mr. Johns said, "I've been considering raising horses. Maybe we could discuss you heading up a venture like that for me."

As Gavin expressed polite interest, the man went on. "We haven't had any decent horse racing in the U.S. for nearly twenty years. We have other sporting events, but no horses are available because the ones the sorcerers have managed to get their hands on in recent years don't seem to want to work for them. So they've ended up destroying the creatures, instead of continuing to feed them. Well, you know how much horses eat. They'd just be a nuisance to keep if they're not useful in any way."

This was news to Gavin—that the sorcerers had been killing horses. Rhett (if he knew) had been wise not to tell him about this, as it might well have influenced Gavin to not want to help him escape from imprisonment. Covering his anger over this information with a smile and an even tone, Gavin feigned being flattered to have been asked, but told Mr. Johns, "I'm taking a break from horses at present. But if I change my mind, I'll let you know."

Though he had no intention of ever helping anyone raise horses for sport, Gavin *was* interested in developing contacts; so for the present, he kept his opinions on the matter to himself. He wasn't at all surprised that horses wouldn't work for the sorcerers. Though they were social creatures that generally liked people, and even liked work such as providing transportation and performing farm tasks, horses were incredibly smart, as well as extremely sensitive to anyone aligned with evil.

In the interest of meeting more people, Gavin did accept Mr. Johns' invitation to accompany his family and several friends to a soccer match the next day.

The wealthy, of course, still had various means of entertaining themselves including watching a variety of sports, which many people enjoyed simply for the gambling, this being as popular as ever in its many forms. As far as televised entertainment, sports currently

dominated because the elite (pretty much the only ones who could afford the viewing devices and subscription services) were currently shunning other programming, this having come about from years of censorship of anything meaningful, and boredom with the extremism of violence and other disgusting acts that could no longer shock audiences because they were just “more of the same.” Other entertainment included concerts and plays, though of limited fare due to censorship. Shopping and fine dining were as popular as ever among the elite. For their children, in addition to frequenting exclusive amusement parks, many favored a version of virtual video games known as CG, short for Cinematic Gaming; though with gremlins learning to break many of the gaming devices, leading to frustration and frequent tantrums, this was starting to fall out of favor.

As far as sports, though hockey and baseball were no longer played, the fourteen Supercities each had soccer, basketball, and football teams, with most of the athletes gleaned from kids taken from their parents as infants and tested (usually as toddlers) to determine which were best suited to enter the National Sports Program run by the government. Trained in this program through age twelve, the athletes were then handed off to the individual Supercities by what was supposed to be a random Fair Draw, though the yearly draw was often manipulated by the wealthy who basically bought particular athletes for certain programs, and who also often donated funds to their own Supercity’s teams to enhance training and living facilities in the hopes of gaining an edge over the competition. In addition to soccer, basketball, and football, smaller programs were also run for a few individual sports like tennis and wrestling. With the exception of a couple of races, most track and field events no longer existed; and no swimming sports were currently being practiced in the U.S. Supercities. As far as sports in other countries, each had its own preferences. Sadly, the Olympics, and other large sporting events such as world cups, were no longer held in any countries due to concerns of terrorist attacks.

The athletes in the U.S. programs, though treated fairly well, were basically slaves. When teams and individuals did poorly, certain players tended to disappear, a fact that was widely known, both inside the Supercities and outside. Like the philosophy Mr. Johns had expressed regarding non-useful horses, the organizers and those

providing funding felt there was no reason to keep very many non-winning people around. For older players that could no longer perform, the ones not made into coaches or commentators generally ended up working in factories and camps.

During the soccer match, Gavin noticed many of the athletes playing extremely hard, as though their lives depended on it, which was correct in many cases.

At a large dinner gathering after the game, while hobnobbing with sorcerers, hunters, and such, Gavin overheard snippets of conversation relating to recent escapes from the cities and camps, in particular, the issue of IDs being switched so that families could all be together at the camps and escape together. The solution, it seemed, was going to be tattoo barcoding of people, rather than using the ID system that had been in place for over a decade. Before that, chip implants were used, but had evidently never worked well for tracking because people could simply have the chips removed. Gavin smiled because he didn't think tattooing would be much better, since people were clever and could visit ink artists to have barcodes modified, or removed.

Other information Gavin picked up involved getting more training for the Snakes because a lot of escapees seemed to be slipping through their fingers. "Like water," a conjurer visiting from Supe-3 to see the soccer game said.

"It is a huge problem," a quarry manager chimed in. "The numbers have increased ten-fold in the last five years or so. I'm losing workers right and left, and a few of them have somehow managed to take even their grandmothers with them."

"With so many Snakes on duty, there really should be no problem at all," Mr. Johns said.

"Well, their guns don't work as often anymore," Gavin input, "thanks to the gremlins."

"I don't think it has much to do with guns," a Dragon Hunter offered. "I think it's more that they're just a bunch of bumbling idiots."

"What is being done about the gremlin problem?" Mr. Johns interjected. "I have family in Morocco, and it's infuriating to have to take a boat to see them. We should be able to fly."

What followed was a huge discussion about how much easier it was for gremlins to break air transports as opposed to watercrafts, and this

topic was mixed with a great deal of speculation as to what the sorcerers were doing to try to neutralize the invisible pests. Since the sorcerers at the gathering didn't seem to know anything definite, the conclusion from the conversation was that next to nothing was being done; and this was confirmed later when Rhett told Gavin privately that most sorcerers were just ignoring the problem, in the hopes that it would go away by itself.

Having tangled with gremlins numerous times, Gavin knew this would never happen. *Wishful thinking*, he thought.

Gremlins were evidently a huge problem in many parts of the world, particularly in areas that had established Supercities. There were currently six Supercities in Canada, nine in China, seven in Russia, and two each in Great Britain and Australia. Many countries had but one, such as what had once been Istanbul in Turkey, Berlin in Germany, Salzburg in Austria, Madrid in Spain, Monterrey in Mexico, Lagos in Nigeria, Bogotá in Columbia, and Rio in Brazil.

Over the next few days, Gavin focused on giving out some of his sapphires in order to make more connections. Several of the healing ones he gave to various hospitals and clinics, making sure as he did that the facilities did treat the common people and not just the elite.

He also tried to spend some time on the streets with the masses, most of whom had only the most meagre of basics for sustaining their lives, and nothing at all related to convenience or luxury. They didn't have phones or computers. Televisions, mainly in the form of no-screen projectors, were available only in select public places and displayed only government announcements, prison executions and Contests, Dispute Battles, and Trials by Tiger.

Though Muslims were allowed to worship openly, mostly in designated places and at specific times, no Christians were allowed to do so. This had started off under the guise of safety because, over the years, there had been fewer terrorist attacks when Christians were kept subdued. The banning of Christianity altogether had naturally followed. However, as bad as the lack of religious freedom was, many theologians felt it was meant to be. For decades, bending to social pressure, church doctrines had been watered down. Now, the underground churches (meeting in secret pods) were mainly strong ones, filled with people more interested in pleasing God than in pleasing other people, the result

being that even in the harsh conditions of the Supercities, many more were living by His laws.

In addition to the underground churches, there was hope in the form of other resources such as the pod vegetable gardens and secret libraries filled with genie-made books that were hard to recognize as books and were therefore left alone by the Torch Squads. Eidetic people also regularly roamed the Supercities, reciting passages, chapters, and sometimes even whole books to people. Genie-made bibles abounded, including ones that could duplicate themselves if destroyed.

In seeing everything in Supe-7 firsthand, Gavin was praying more, while reminding himself that God was still in control, of everything, including everything happening in the Supercities. *God causes all things to work together for good*, he often thought. *And maybe I can make a difference by being here.*

Gavin might have been considered naïve by some to think a single person could make an impact in a place such as this, but that is exactly what had happened on numerous occasions throughout bible history, as well as in more recent times.

Exactly one week after attending the soccer game, Gavin was alone with Jerome in his office in the late afternoon when the Governor Ruler, who was standing by the window, suddenly fell over, seemingly dead.

Rushing into the hall, Gavin frantically called to the two sorcerers who had just left the office only seconds before.

“He just grabbed his chest and keeled over!” Gavin sputtered, looking thoroughly unsettled, as well as dumbfounded.

Jerome was indeed dead; and since his body showed no obvious signs of violence, the two sorcerers examining him were inclined to think that Gavin hadn’t done anything to their colleague to cause his death.

A couple of ESS personnel with some medical training were only one floor below in the building and were called. However, they were unable to revive Jerome. The three Emergency Medical Staff that arrived about two minutes later were also unsuccessful. “It was probably a heart attack,” one stated, as they were wheeling off the body.

And that indeed was the determination of the coroner—heart attack as cause of death.

Chapter Four

A Day in the Life of a Spreesprite

“For whoever has despised the day of small things shall rejoice....” Zechariah 4:10

The following notes relating to spreesprites were found in one of Vini’s journals:

“Spreesprites are tiny, fairy-like beings that are generally a half inch to one inch in height. They occasionally ride on creatures such as beetles, butterflies, and hummingbirds; but they actually have no need to because they can fly very swiftly, anywhere they need to go. Boy spreesprites have the power to become invisible; and during this state, they often like to play pranks on others, particularly girl spreesprites, who cannot become invisible, and seldom play pranks. The girls do, however, have the ability to stop time for one minute, but only when in company with a magical white hummingbird. Created by a magical peacock, many of these white hummingbirds exist, their main function being to help spreesprites do their job of stopping time on occasion, under God’s command.”

Vini’s notes were pretty much spot on. However, while the tiny sprites did indeed occasionally perform God-directed tasks, in the minds of most spreesprites, their lives mainly boiled down to two things, observation and playing pranks. On this day, since we’ll be following a girl spreesprite named Martella around, we likely won’t witness any pranks, unless we happen to come across a boy spreesprite, which is unlikely because most of them are homebodies, preferring to keep house, cook, garden, and such.

Martella’s husband, Weyland, was too busy on this day to play any pranks on his wife. Up and hard at work before dawn, he was in the process of canning peach butter and baking honey wheat crisps as Martella readied for her journey, which might take two or three days

because this was common with girl spreesprites on their observation trips—when deciding to roam, they didn't pay much attention to time.

After enjoying a breakfast of a pomegranate seed and two drops of dewy honeysuckle nectar, Martella kissed Weyland goodbye and set off flying. This happened to be the same day that Jerome Malcom keeled over and died; but that won't happen until the afternoon, so for now we'll need to focus on other things.

On this somewhat cloudy but otherwise stellar Tuesday morning, Martella had decided to first pay a visit to Supercity Five. Alighting on the razor wire atop a wall surrounding a prison, she enjoyed the gentle sway of the wire, not from her weight (because she basically didn't weigh anything) but from the stiff breezes that were fairly warm since the season was summer.

An ESS prison guard was apparently in a lot of trouble. Being escorted across the yard and off the job by the warden and two mimics, he was fumbling with his words. "I'm sorry, v-very sorry. It won't, it won't happen again...I, I promise. I promise!"

The man was evidently a drinker and had fallen asleep on the job, allowing four inmates to escape during the night. The same guard, it seemed, had messed up the previous month too during the execution of two prisoners by electrocution. Just before the switch was thrown, he ended up shorting out the system, which caused a delay of a day. And the prisoners set for execution ended up escaping that very night, with help from a gargoyle.

Because the guard was an alcoholic, he was going to be given a chance to rehabilitate in a government facility, but would not likely be able to return to his job at the prison.

Martella left her spot above the wall when she lost sight of the guard and his escorts as they entered a building.

Spreesprites were so fast that no human being had ever been able to see one flying at full speed, which was not quite equal to that of a wind horse, but was definitely faster than most demons and nyregs. If a person happened to glimpse a spreesprite at full speed, they might only think they were seeing a tiny streak of a smoke wisp. When flying more slowly, spreesprites were camouflaged to look just like butterflies, moths, bumblebees, and such. Martella actually preferred to fly at full speed most of the time, which allowed her to zip about over the earth to

visit many wide-reaching places in one day, without particular regard as to whether or not any of them were in a straight line, or on the way to each other.

For her second stop of the day, Martella decided to visit Alex, Clara, Marie, Meg, and Mr. Weiss, all of whom were still together and unharmed, though they had had a few scares such as when Clara, wielding the flute she was carrying against two demons, had almost blasted Mr. Weiss' feet off. (Though getting some practice, it was taking her some time to get the hang of the weapon.)

The Leftovers currently had plenty of food in the form of canned and freeze-dried items obtained from a stash they had found several days before when passing through the Rubble City that had once been Albuquerque. They also had a water purifier found in a cache on the outskirts of the city. When two hobgoblins posing as chairs near the cache set upon them, Mr. Weiss' gave one a stern beating with his walking/fighting stick, while Marie managed to stab the other creature using a short spear they had found with the water purifier.

It had been exactly three weeks since the doorway in Arizona had been destroyed, and the group had crossed all of New Mexico, a small section of Texas, and were just heading into the Oklahoma panhandle. The Leftovers had made good time so far, partly due to help from a group of five New Mexico horses that had carried them over a hundred miles before needing to turn around and head back to their home in a pocket.

Additional help had come in the ruins of a small town when a courtyard statue (previously brought to life by a puck troll) had saved them from a nyreg swooping down upon them. The statue had pounced on, held down, and pummeled the beast, allowing the Leftovers to escape without a single scratch or acid burn.

On her way to her next stop, Martella observed a set of travelers in Arkansas that were about to have an encounter with two stealth hobs. In order to help the group, she ended up calling a white hummingbird using a small musical triangle that she most often wore as a necklace. The wind carried the magical chimes to the nearest white hummingbird (in Mississippi) in less than two seconds; and since white hummingbirds were just as fast as spreesprites, the bird arrived almost instantly. Though she didn't need to ride the hummingbird in order to stop time,

Martella knew that the tiny bird liked to give rides to spreesprites, so she decided to hop on. Using her wand, she then stopped time in a small area surrounding the two hobs that were rooting in an old garden plot on a deserted farm for possible food. Stopping time four times in a row (for a total of four minutes) allowed the travelers, just passing on the far side of the farm, time to get out of the area safely without drawing the attention of the stealth hobs, which the people couldn't see because they were invisible. Martella, on the other hand, could see invisible creatures. While not all spreesprites could boast of this, Martella, in her youth, had learned this skill from her father.

Opting to stay with his companion for a bit, the white hummingbird flew Martella to a camp on the outskirts of Supercity Fourteen. On the way, the pair observed a small group of gnomes and puck trolls traveling together across the countryside, and getting along with each other, which was a huge difference from a time not so very long past. But having worked together for the past couple of decades, gnomes sculpting armies of topiaries and puck trolls bringing them to life, gnomes and pucks had pretty much had to learn to get along.

Nearing the camp, the flying pair observed a sorcerer taking to the skies on a nyreg.

What had once been the Everglades was now a camp that raised alligators, boas, and pythons for meat and other products. Sadly, it was a common practice for mimics and ESS personnel to feed workers they didn't like to the gators and snakes, most often throwing them alive into various pens and paddocks.

Martella often made visits to this camp, but wasn't always able to help keep people from being eaten because stopping time in situations like this was only prudent if other creatures (like thunderbirds or wind horses) were nearby enough to swoop in and carry away the intended victims.

Blessedly, today, all seemed fairly quiet. But this turned out to be true only as far as atrocities because, as Martella and the hummingbird watched, one of the ESS slipped and fell into a paddock containing pythons, where he ended up thrashing about and screaming, presumably in fear of either drowning or being eaten, though the pythons were some distance away and at present appeared completely disinterested, or at

least not interested enough to move toward the man, who was in the process of being rescued by a couple of colleagues.

The antics of the clumsy Snake actually made Martella laugh because they seemed so melodramatic, almost as though staged. The crisis ended up distracting others of the man's squad from seeing a couple of workers taking bags of food from a hoard that was being denied them, though they had earned the provisions and were supposed to receive them.

Martella and her companion next headed to the Supercity in Brazil, where the white hummingbird departed (as his tiny friend blew a kiss to him) because he wanted to visit other hummingbirds in the area. (There were always many beautiful and friendly hummingbirds buzzing about Brazil.)

Christ the Redeemer was as lovely as ever; and as Martella had observed for many years, magical creatures all over the world were still lining up to protect the statue. She had also observed that the sorcerers had recently just about stopped their efforts to blast the landmark because the missiles being deflected by gryphons and such were causing too much damage to their Supercity. (No one likes a ricochet.) Plus, whenever attempts were made to destroy the statue, an incensed thunderbird in the area tended to assault the sorcerers' dwellings with lightning, wind storms, and drenching downpours.

Though Martella made her home in the U.S., in South Carolina to be exact, she liked international travel. She had actually witnessed part of what had gone on when the Swiss took action against the sorcerers and mimics. The sorcerers had been incredibly surprised by the resistance they met in Europe and China. At around the same time, they were also thwarted in a pretty big way in Australia when a bunch of oodus working with the aborigines on some tunneling projects broke nearly two hundred Christians out of a prison. Following this liberation, unknown assassins had killed thirty-two sorcerers and nearly two hundred mimics in Australia and New Zealand. And a sorcerers' den in Tasmania was burned at around the same time.

Next heading back to the U.S. to visit a woodsy area just south of Supercity Eight, Martella saw two bigfoots adding little pouches to a hidden cache intended to help travelers. *Probably dimes and*

sapphires that can act as shields, she thought, having peeked into similar pouches out of curiosity a few times before. Her assumption was correct; the bigfoots were indeed distributing dimes and sapphires.

Zooming away fairly swiftly, Martella happened to notice Etowa in the woods as well. Busy placing an okra seed in a specific spot on a trail, he didn't see her. After tucking the seed under a pinecone, he was off to set up a destination window for a party of Time Key Travelers who would be leaving on their journey from Laurelstone in a few hours. As he sauntered along, not in any particular hurry (because he never needed to be), Etowa's posture was rather forlorn, matching his thoughts relating to the particular one of God's children that was about to make a pretty big mistake. While he didn't usually let the actions of human beings bother him, this did for some reason. Etowa knew he could only do so much to help people along their path; they still had to make their own choices. But this was a case that both surprised and disappointed him.

Her mind on bigfoots, Martella next made her way to Netherwind and Laurelstone, two of her favorite plantations to visit because there was always so much to see, like herds of goats skipping about, wooly crotons meandering here and there, and certain activities of the Underground Army. This happened to be a deployment day. Perched on a leaf of a rowan tree, Martella watched members of all four divisions of the army heading out. From bits of conversation, she could tell that the nine Badgers (experts at survival) were heading to West Virginia, Ohio, and Pennsylvania to replenish weapons in several caches in escape routes used by the NUR. The twelve Ants (provisions providers) were taking loads of genie-made candles that could burn for hundreds of hours each to several farms, mothership communities, and a couple of underground libraries. From those locations, some of the candles would be smuggled into various work camps and Supercities. The groups of Locusts (basic infantry) leaving the plantations were heading for pockets in Kansas, Idaho, and Arkansas. The four Lizards (infiltrations specialists) were evidently on some sort of errand to Supe-5. The Ants and Locusts were on horseback, while the Badgers and Lizards had simply set off on foot.

With regard to the candles, Martella thought it was nice that the various communities had learned to share so well. Of course, there was currently no shortage of items provided by the genies, long known as the Great Multipliers. In truth, the magic of genies was much greater than that of spreesprites, and even more mysterious, though spreesprites also tended to keep a lot of secrets, especially with regard to their various powers.

Making her way to a playground behind Netherwind, Martella observed a couple of puck troll children starting to build a sand sculpture in one of the sandboxes; but she didn't stay to watch the sculpture take form, instead deciding to follow a wind horse just taking off from the nearby croquet lawns.

Em was aboard Dara, which might have seemed odd because Zapor generally took her everywhere she needed to go. But Dara and Em had recently decided to team up for a special project—that of delivering cloud messages to residents of the Supercities.

Dara had long been an expert at manipulating clouds into various shapes, and now letters, with Em using her wordsmith gift to guide the forming of the words. Cloud Writing, as Em had started calling it, was helping to bring hope to those in the cities in the form of bible verses and quotes from various Christian writers and evangelists written in the skies. The slant, spacing, and height of certain letters tended to inspire, calm, and fortify those reading the messages. Generally, Dara was so quick that they never had any problems such as interference from demons or nyregs. On the few occasions when any had managed to get close, Dara simply departed and outdistanced the nasty creatures. Though Dara and Em were visiting six Supercities on this day, Martella only followed them to Supe-3, where she enjoyed watching the formation of Psalm 91:9-11. “Because you have made the LORD your refuge, the Most High your habitation, no evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your tent. For he will give his angels charge of you to guard you in all your ways.”

From Supercity Three, Martella swung over to a farming work camp just outside Supercity Six where she witnessed twelve Locusts (four men and eight women) destroying all of the buildings, the train station, and most of the tent lodgings of the camp using large mirror weapons set up like cannons. Oodus had carried the mirrors through

an underground tunnel system and were standing by to carry them back again when the soldiers were finished with them. Using kites and dawn pigeons, Weatherly had managed to get word to the workers of the camp to evacuate the sections being destroyed. Several mimics and a sorcerer trying to stop the assault were killed by a firebird and two rookhs watching over the operation.

Many horrendous and corrupt things had been going on in this camp such as tortures, mutilations, and murders; and Weatherly had just about had enough of it. When reestablished in roughly four months' time, she would manage to get some of her operatives inside, in order to help even things out somewhat.

Martella had seen this same group of mirror experts two months previous destroy the entrances to a dozen or so Demon Pockets. Though each Demon Pocket generally had several doorways, getting rid of as many of them as possible meant less people would get drawn into them. Fewer doorways also lessened the goings in and out of those evil realms by the gremlins, stealth hobs, demons, and such that lived in them.

Making a little trip over Alabama, Martella saw something that rather surprised her on Wharton Farm. Frank and Charlie were making preparations to move to Lion Mountain. They would be leaving the farm in the care of Mira and Tobin and their families, along with various farm workers, gnomes, and bigfoots. Charlie's café, restaurant, and soup kitchen had long since ceased operations, mainly because the towns in which they had operated no longer existed. While many of the larger self-sustaining communities had various eateries and food banks, the farm wasn't really large enough to make those types of endeavors worthwhile. Charlie and Frank still shared resources like food, equipment, seeds, and hay with other communities, a practice which their children and grandchildren planned to continue.

Feeling very connected to the mountain, because her father and uncle had both lived there for over fifteen years before passing away within just a few months of each other, Charlie was very excited about the move, especially because both she and Frank were going to be able to continue to put their skills to good use. She already had connections with various school cafeterias and workers' mess halls, having done volunteer work in them for many years. For Frank's part, there was no

end to farming on the mountain, particularly with the growth, so he was sure to keep busy too. Lyydu was also pleased to be making the move, as he enjoyed a mountain setting.

As Martella was heading on to her next destination, Lyydu was just setting off with a load of bags that he was taking to Lion Mountain for Charlie and Frank. Over the next three or so weeks, he would carry boxes and select pieces of furniture for the couple as well, to help get them moved and settled into their new home.

Seeing so many things in her travels, one might think Martella would need to keep a journal to remember everything. Not so. In fact, with her brain being much like that of an eidetic person, she was able to remember everything, even down to the smallest details. However, she did occasionally write in a journal, just for fun.

Zippping to Supe-10, through a window in a ghetto apartment, Martella saw a mother hiding her six-year-old son in a quilt that had once been brought to life by a puck troll. ESS Family Services were at the house with an official Government Custody Order because it had been determined the family could not afford to keep the boy, who was their second child. In truth, the government wanted him for his organs because he was blood type O, the universal donor type. The child's mother swore her son had run away, and that she hadn't seen him for days. Though Martella could see the child in the quilt, the Family Services workers could not and left empty handed. When they were clear of the house and a ways down the street, the mother retrieved her son, telling him, "Don't worry. We'll be leaving for the mountain in a few days." Checking on the family the next month, Martella discovered they were indeed gone; and a rookh ended up telling her that they had made it safely to Lion Mountain.

Heading out of the city, Martella next took a peek at pottery drying in the sun in an earthship community in Utah before heading back to Netherwind to see the progress of the sand sculpture the tiny pucks were working on. It was starting to look like a sleeping dragon.

Nibbling on a pink rose petal while pondering trying a yellow one, Martella happened to see Preston crossing the lawn. *Oh, he's the man currently in charge of all weapons training*, she thought, in recognizing him from having watched quite a few training sessions over the past few

years. *And that's his son*, her mind added a few moments later as she watched Ignacio running to catch up to his father.

What followed between father and son was a conversation about Ignacio sleeping late nearly every day and not pulling his weight around the dorm lately. Preston had been a dorm parent for decades, and Ignacio was still living in the same dorm facility (though in a different apartment than his father) that he had lived in since his youth. Instead of full-time and steady employment, Ignacio mainly sporadically did odd jobs here and there around the plantations. On this day, he was planning to help the bigfoots make huge batches of their famous Bigfoot Wildfire hot sauces. However, he had been anxious to ask his father for cafeteria credits before heading to work. Pushing a few buttons on his armband processor, Preston obliged by transferring credits from his account to his son's while giving a great sigh and saying, "If you'd get up before noon each day, you could work a few full days here and there and earn your own keep."

This was an ongoing discussion because both father and son knew it was wrong for someone in their mid-thirties to still rely on a parent for support. People were supposed to work, and not just live off of others. This was actually God's law. However, prone to bouts of depression since his teen years, Ignacio had never had much drive. He also tended to shirk responsibility. Chronic insomnia, low energy, excessive worry (over just about everything), and general laziness didn't help, along with the fact that he hadn't ever found much of anything workwise that interested him. He did enjoy reading, but that didn't help with putting credits in the bank because he didn't particularly feel like working in a library, doing research, or perhaps becoming an editor or teacher. He was simply one of those people that never felt like doing much, other than lazing around; and this was in large part Preston's fault (and he knew it) because he had coddled Ignacio in his toddler through teen years, not ever making him do much or push himself. Since Ignacio's mother had died in childbirth, Preston had felt justified in being overprotective. Now, he recognized his mistake. However, he couldn't do much to help, other than model good work ethics and schedule-keeping to his son. He would always make sure Ignacio was fed and had a roof over his head, but anything more than that was extremely limited because Ignacio was eventually going to have to learn to look

after himself. After this brief exchange, Preston headed to a training facility in one of the caverns to meet Merri, head of ropes training for the Underground Army.

Ignacio had had some treatment for depression over the years; but, like a lot of people, his symptoms were difficult to manage, particularly in the current state of the world. Most recently, a good friend of his from high school that he had kept in touch with over the years had committed suicide. (The current suicide numbers were as bad as ever.) Also, a friend from college was killed in a megahob and sorcerer attack on a mothership community. Plus, having recently tried working in a weapons lab, one that focused on making improvements to flutes, he found he wasn't very good at it. He wasn't good at weapons training either, a fact he had discovered very early in life when his father had tried to train him. For the most part, Ignacio felt life was a drag; and he also felt sorry for himself, as though he could count on one hand the times in his life he had been truly happy, which was an exaggeration, of course. Sadly, his habits and state of mind were mostly keeping him holed up in his room lately, reading, sleeping on an odd schedule, and hanging out with a couple of friends who also weren't regularly employed, one of which he was planning to meet in the evening. But for right now, because he wasn't particularly hungry for the peppers and onions he knew were waiting for him in the bigfoot kitchens, he was in a hurry to grab a bite at the cafeteria before heading to work.

As Ignacio was trotting to the cafeteria, Martella (in a bit of a rush herself), was heading for something exciting happening in Supercity Eleven that she had gotten wind of two days previous from a dawn pigeon. (Birds of various types often liked to share news with spreesprites.)

The public no-screen projectors of Supe-11 had been quiet as of late, with few public announcements and, blessedly, even fewer televised Dispute Battles and Trials by Tiger. Someone using the Mind Key (which could work on any creature, not just humans) had tricked a group of gremlins into breaking into a broadcasting station, which was easy to do because the stations were all automated and not very well guarded. However, instead of breaking the equipment inside, the gremlins took it over and began round-the-clock broadcasting of vintage banned films such as *The Glass Bottom Boat*, *Cinderella*, *Mothra vs.*

Godzilla, *A Christmas Carol*, *Two Mules for Sister Sara*, and *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea*. Sandwiched between the films were cartoons and episodes of shows like *Bonanza* and *Lost in Space*. Kids especially enjoyed the programming, as many had never seen either a movie or a television show in their whole lives.

With the gremlins holed up in the station, having jimmied the locks to the point that even the sorcerers couldn't get the reinforced doors to open, the programming would end up running a full two weeks before the building was simply destroyed because the sorcerers couldn't figure out what else to do. By then, the gremlins had left the station, though no one had seen them leave, since they were invisible. The person who had used the Mind Key had only been able see the gremlins to target them because he was wearing a pair of rose-colored glasses, produced by a bagical to allow the wearer of the glasses to see both camouflaged and invisible creatures.

Many people in various settlements had copies of old movies and television shows that had been outlawed. The ones for this event had been provided by a mothership community in Wisconsin, which was where the man who had used the Mind Key (on loan from Weatherly) was from.

Martella might have liked to have stayed to watch a few of the cartoons, or the episode of *The Twilight Zone* that was coming up, but she needed to get going. As she was soaring away, a talking cartoon rabbit called Bugs was chewing on a carrot while plotting to make the life of a talking pig pretty miserable. Or maybe it was the other way around; maybe the pig was going to make the rabbit's life miserable. Since Martella had never seen cartoons before, it was a little hard for her to tell.

Speaking of rabbits, Martella ended up flying over a whole slew of what looked like cottontails in a field in Indiana. These were not actually rabbits. However, Martella was not going to give their secret away because she knew better not to.

Making a stop in Supercity Eight, our favorite spreesprite slipped into a locked hospital ward and unlocked all of the doors so that twenty-nine women being held hostage in the human breeding program could escape. And six of them managed to take newborn babies with them, these being babies that hadn't yet been taken from the facility for

“redistribution.” From the hospital, the group made their way to a pod safe house a couple of blocks away; and they all made it inside before their escape was noticed.

Martella hadn't needed a key to unlock the doors because she used her wand, simply taking it out of her belt where she most often stored it. Made of a splinter of red oak with the handle wrapped in a small twist of corn husk, it was a rather simple thing compared to most spreesprites' wands, commonly made of either crystal or white gold. But Martella loved her simple wand; it had been a gift from her grandmother.

Very near the hospital, Martella observed The Sparrow also unlocking a door (using a magic key that could unlock nearly any door) and entering the side door of a school building.

Deciding not to stay to discover what the girl might be up to, Martella next made her way to Supe-7 where she observed through a high-rise window Gavin popping a sapphire out of his necklace and handing it to Jerome who then fell over dead within seconds. Unaware that he was being observed, Gavin quickly retrieved the stone from the dead sorcerer's hand before rushing into the hall to call for help. And what a good act he put on of being surprised and concerned over the man he had just murdered; for that was indeed what had just happened—Gavin had intentionally killed Jerome.

How interesting, Martella thought. *That's going to shake things up a bit amongst the ranks of the sorcerers.* However, she wasn't quite correct in that regard because Telén Mayhew, Jerome's counterpart in Seven, was pretty much the Council of Twos' clear choice to succeed Jerome for the remainder of the term. Having worked with his predecessor for so long, he was simply stepping into familiar shoes on a path he had at least already partially trodden. Telén would also have no trouble getting elected as the next Governor Ruler when the next election rolled around in just under a year's time.

Martella didn't stay to try to learn exactly how or why the murder was committed (which we'll get to a little later on in our story) because she wanted to be on to her next destination—that of Lion Mountain.

One of the entrances to the mountain, in the form of a camouflaged and narrow passage through cliff overhangs, was situated very near what had once been Gatlinburg. This was often referred to as the

Gatlinburg Pass. In a serene valley not too far from this entrance (half a mile to be exact) sat a boulder shaped exactly like a lion in slumber that Martella often took a peek at.

After having the peek, instead of using the Gatlinburg entrance, Martella backtracked in order to make use of the suspension bridge in Kentucky. She just liked bridges more than mountain passes. Plus, it was typical of spreesprites not to travel in a straight line.

Taking the suspension bridge and ending up on the footbridge, she observed four rookhs overhead bringing seven people to the mountain who had escaped the Supercity in Spain. On her previous trip to Lion Mountain, Martella had seen two wind horses drop off three survivors from a village settlement in Africa that had been destroyed by demons and megahobs. *So despite the limits on international travel*, she thought, *there's still some going on*.

Zippering through several small communities, Martella saw Ruth walking home from a park by herself, after having an after-school playdate in the park with two of her classmates. Ruth's mother was in the process of walking a short ways down the lane from the family's cabin in order to meet her daughter coming home.

On the other side of the mountain, Martella witnessed Astrid in communication with a fire spirit, the look of strained concentration on the woman's face clearly indicating the intensity of the experience. As far as any spreesprite knew, Astrid was the only human in the world capable of communicating with nature spirits; and it had taken her nearly twenty years to initially learn this skill, plus another twenty to fully hone the craft, making forty years in total. *That's fortitude*, Martella thought, as she had on numerous occasions in witnessing the ongoing process over the years. *She might not have learned it at all, except for the coaching*, her mind added on this day.

This was indeed true, as a tree spirit had been nearby during much of the training, giving silent tips. Though Astrid had been unaware of the spirit's presence, the help had frequently given her brain nudges in the right direction. Now, the elderly woman had the ability to speak telepathically to all of the nature spirits on the mountain. Though under orders from God to protect the mountain and its residents, the spirits didn't mind taking some of their direction from Astrid, who, in addition to guiding many of their security functions, also gleaned a good deal of

useful information from them about a variety of subjects, such as the best places to site buildings in steep locations and how deep wells needed to be dug. The spirits also made Astrid aware of their favored habitation spots so that humans could avoid particular streams and caves, and refrain from using certain stones in their construction projects. The use of wood for building structures and furniture, and for keeping warm in the winter, was not an issue because God had provided the mountain residents with the fast-growing and hard-as-oak Liget Trees, which the spirits didn't care to inhabit.

Although Astrid always spoke telepathically to the spirits, they generally talked to her in a much different manner—through rustling leaves, swirling waters, whooshing breezes, and the like. And while she could always get the general idea of what they were telling her, she had to pay close attention in order to pick up on important small details sometimes indicated by yellow leaves instead of red or brown being rustled by a dryad, or the number of cool droplets from a brook being splashed by a water nymph onto stones warmed by the sun. Tiny puffs of steam rising from the rocks were also of significance, in particular, what direction they were wafting. Other subtleties of importance included the depth of the bend of meadow grasses caused by the wind of a sylph, the pitch of the crackle of a campfire lit by a fire spirit, the loudness of the squeak of tree limbs rubbing together under the direction of a tree spirit, and how high glistening pollen from a field of buttercups was being spewed into the air by a wind waif.

With regard to Astrid's original learning process of twenty years, almost nothing happened during that time, except for being knocked off of her feet on several occasions by air sylphs frustrated with her for not understanding them. She was also pelted with small rocks numerous times by stone spirits who couldn't figure out why she wasn't hearing their voices.

Although protecting the mountain and its inhabitants, we should note here that nature spirits differ greatly from magical creatures like gryphons and thunderbirds who also often act as protectors because the spirits were never meant to be anything like companions or friends. In fact, with both their powers and personalities as unpredictable as nature, they are best left completely alone most of the time. Just as we wouldn't befriend a tornado, we shouldn't try to make friends with a

sylph. Likewise, in the same way we wouldn't try to cuddle with a family of wolverines, or put into our pockets handfuls of hornets, we also shouldn't try to befriend spirits with control over animals, birds, insects, and such, though we can recognize these absurdities to be completely unlikely because most human beings will never learn to communicate with nature spirits. (People, in general, simply don't have the patience to learn such things.) Nature spirits also differ from magical creatures in that they do not feed on human goodness, instead being sustained by the energy in nature.

As she watched Astrid talking to the fire spirit, Martella pondered why it had taken the woman so long to learn to communicate with the mountain spirits. *A newborn spreepsprite could have learned in probably less than a month, she thought. Most humans have first-rate brains. So the process should have happened more quickly, like in five or at the most ten years. But most people don't use as much of their brains as they should, and still more don't use their brains as often as they should.*

As she mused, a small reminder popped into the back of Martella's brain that God's timing is always perfect, and some things are meant to take time. *He is in control of everything, and His schedule is always perfectly timed.*

In noticing how busy Astrid always was, Martella thought, *Some people are so busy, they really need to find a way to be in two places at once.*

After giggling for a few moments (as though she had just told herself a private joke), Martella headed to another part of the mountain to see some of the changes from the growth. Doing this on each visit was like observing a painting in progress, with the ever-changing shapes, textures, and colors of the landscape. It was truly fascinating, even to a spreepsprite in her seventies, who had pretty much seen all of the natural wonders the world had to offer in her lifetime so far.

In one of the newly-formed valleys, Martella glimpsed the white lion. The creature was not entirely white as some people liked to describe because his coat also sported mousy shades of browns and grays with a few streaks of red and gold mixed in. While this was his normal appearances as far as coloring, Martella had once seen the lion high on a mountain peak, with the sun shining fully upon him. At that

time, he had held the appearance of being bathed in all the colors of a rainbow.

A short while later, Martella parked herself on a tree limb to watch the sun set for the day while having for dinner half a sunflower kernel that she had been saving in her pocket.

After enjoying her meal and the sunset show, she flitted through a dense area of forest in search of bioluminescent mushrooms, a patch of which she found quite easily using her keen spreep sprite eyesight.

Greeting the mushrooms with a little chirp of hello, Martella did a spritely dance in circles around them (as was spreep sprite custom when in company with mushrooms).

A little while later, having danced aplenty, she left the mushroom patch in search of a flower to curl up in to sleep for the night.

A little more roaming tomorrow, she thought, as she was drifting off inside a dwarf iris, then home to sit in the leaf swing for a bit with Weyland, and have yummy honey wheat crisps spread with tangy peach butter.

Chapter Five

Linn, Zin, and Quin

“Let not loyalty and faithfulness forsake you; bind them about your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart.” Proverbs 3:3

At the exact time Gavin was murdering Jerome, Chase, whom most people called by his last name of Linn, was with Jitterbug in the Technology Lab. The pair had lately been working closely with Marlon on a project to add a stealth component to the airbikes, which was not going to be difficult because the shroud mirror technology was easily applied, along with a few maneuverability enhancements that Marlon and Linn had come up with based on hours upon hours of observing the movements of gremlins through pairs of rose-colored glasses. They had watched Lydu (when he was invisible) on numerous occasions as well in order to glean information. Instead of being difficult, the airbike project was just mainly time-consuming, which wasn't a problem for Linn because schoolwork had always been easy for him, so he had plenty of free time.

Despite being at a tricky stage in the project, when Marlon arrived in the lab and suggested that the pair take their dinner break a little early, Linn and Jitterbug decided to head to their favorite cafeteria. In truth, Marlon wanted to work on something in private, and needed a piece of equipment in the Technology Lab that wasn't available in either of the Magicians' Labs at the plantations.

Jitterbug left before Linn in order to secure a dinner table for them. After quickly cleaning up his workstation, Linn buzzed off too, his airchair humming softly when in motion because Jitterbug had made a recent adjustment to it. Tired of being snuck up on by Linn in his soundless chair, Jitterbug had decided to take matters in hand. Since he had designed the chair, various versions of which Linn had been using for mobility since his toddler years, it was easy for Jitterbug to add a

sound feature to the air wheels. “I’m tired of you scaring me out of my skin every time you come into a room,” he told Linn. And while Linn had been clever enough to fairly quickly figure out how to disable the function, he had decided to keep it active, at least for now, out of respect for Jitterbug, his longtime friend and mentor.

Scarving down his food, because he was anxious to meet a friend in the Labyrinth Library, Jitterbug didn’t stay long at the table; but this was fine with Linn who was expecting a couple of friends, Zin and Quin, to join him.

As far as nicknames, Chase had become Linn because the people in Antica where he had spent his baby and toddler years liked to call him that. Zinnia had become Zin because she wanted a short and efficient name (like her mother’s) and because nothing much better could be made out of her last name of Summerhaven. Quinlyn had become Quin because this was what both her mother and grandmother tended to call her; and her last name of Brinker wasn’t much to work with as far as forming a nickname out of it.

When Linn, Zin, and Quin were together, people often referred to them as the Three Musketeers, not only because they were fast friends, but because they were so close in age. Quin, like Linn, was fifteen; and Zin being a year younger was not so much different when it came to forming friendships.

Zin often stayed after school for dinner before going home for the evening, and she was very interested in hearing about the progress of the stealth-airbike project. However, when Linn told her that Marlon was in the Technology Lab, she suddenly became more interested in wolfing down her dinner and passing on dessert so that she could be off to the lab. Marlon had been her mentor for the past six years (which was exactly how long it had been since Zin discovered that she was meant to be a magician); and while she learned a lot from him during their scheduled sessions, she actually managed to pick up a good deal from snooping too, some of this coming about through her friendship with Cecelia, who, in her persona as The Sparrow, had helped Zin in this regard on numerous occasions over the years.

Quin was mainly quiet this evening; but, then, she was prone to pensiveness. Linn knew she had been on several time-travel missions lately, which would probably put anyone into a thinking mood, as well

as tire a person out. Quin's father had headed the Time Key Travelers for nearly two decades, and she had been going on missions with him for several years. However, lately, she had been going by herself, in her capacity as Protector of Dragons. Though Dragon Hunters had been more successful in recent years, which was keeping her busy in the present, it was still important to thwart their efforts in the past as often as possible.

To Linn's surprise, Quin took off in the middle of dessert, which left him to finish off her piece of key lime pie. *Being deserted isn't all bad*, he thought, scooping up big mouthfuls of leftover whipped cream and graham cracker crust with gusto.

Quin's departure was not so much from pensiveness or tiredness as Linn suspected, but for quite a different reason. Though good friends with Linn, she often found it helpful to have Zin around as a sort of buffer, mainly because it was sometimes hard to tell what Linn was thinking, no matter what he was saying. She particularly found it hard to tell when he was joking, mainly because he had a very dry sense of humor and she was a gullible sort whose brain often took a while to work things out. Plus, he was often so scientific, kind of an opposite to Quin, who tended to be a fanciful type, a non-scientific thinker, and much more of a dreamer and daydreamer, very like her mother and her Grandma Vini. Also, Linn's gift was somewhat unnerving to be around for long periods of time, and slightly addictive, almost to the point that a person might have difficulty leaving his presence. People in company with him often described the feeling as being like an immense breath of spring air that might be capable of whooshing through the very fires of hell in search of flaming souls in order to cool and comfort them. He frequently drew large groups of toddlers to him, as well as flocks of wrens and sparrows, and occasionally small rodents like voles and mice for some reason. As far as the toddlers, who were unaware of the constant goodness flooding from his body, most didn't know why they were drawn to Linn. *An intense sort of person*—this was how Quin's mind often labeled Linn.

So Zin was definitely good for buffering, particularly because she had a quality of lightness about her, which Quin often attributed to her friend being good natured, helpful, and a person not prone to complaining. *Levity might be a good second nickname for her*, Quin

often thought, *though Mystery might be an even better one*. In truth, most magic users had an air of mystery about them, since much of what they did was so mysterious. Many were also lighthearted and jovial.

Linn was soon off to home, taking a piece of pie with him for his mother, whom he knew was at home but was working. As a teacher, she often worked evenings in her home office grading homework assignments and making lesson plans.

Two days after the death of Jerome, Gavin was locked up. Telén was not stupid. While some might have accepted the explanation of a heart attack, he never for one second considered that the death of his predecessor might be from something so mundane. However, Telén was cautious, and so had proceeded carefully while investigating and pinpointing Gavin as the likely culprit.

Sitting in his cell, Gavin reflected, mainly on Chelsea's death. He had long known that Jerome was the one primarily responsible; the former Governor Ruler had been the one giving the orders. Gavin had no qualms about killing the sorcerer because God had told him to. And while no human being should enjoy killing others, it had felt good to get the man out of the way. Since Chelsea hadn't posed much of a threat while imprisoned, Gavin felt her death was truly unwarranted. The sorcerers could have held her without killing her, while giving her nutritional supplements when she wouldn't eat. Weatherly had held numerous sorcerers and mimics long term without killing them. She didn't kill captives unless God told her to, generally in cases where they posed some great threat.

From a prophetic dream in his youth, Gavin had known how and approximately when Chelsea was going to die, so the day he learned of her death was not a great shock. What was shocking was that the first tear he cried after receiving the news was a killing sapphire, the only one he would ever produce in his lifetime. In a dream that very night, God had told him exactly what to do with the stone. As powerful as the most powerful cursed diamond Chelsea had ever produced, Gavin was to use the sapphire to kill the sorcerer responsible for her death. Jerome's death wasn't because of what he had done to Chelsea; at least, it wasn't for that reason alone, but because the man was responsible for so much more, and would end up committing many more horrendous acts if left alive.

Gavin was not surprised that God was telling him to kill. After all, the Lord had commanded people in the bible many times to fight and kill. Immune to his own killing sapphire, he just needed to keep it away from others until the appropriate time. Having it set into a necklace by a genie (also immune to its effects), he then simply had to wait. Waiting had been the difficult part, but Gavin knew God's timing was always perfect.

Also from a dream, Gavin knew that skin contact of the sapphire with Jerome for a mere two seconds would kill him, and that it would look like the man had a heart attack. But, of course, he couldn't take into account every eventuality, like Telén being suspicious and anxious to find out the truth. But if this was Gavin's time to be called home to the Father, he was ready. In addition to looking forward to meeting the Lord, he was more than ready to see Chelsea again.

In order to interrogate Gavin, Telén used a Ring of Truth, a device commonly used by sorcerers to force others to tell the truth. Unlike the hand-held Truth Key that Weatherly sometimes used for the same purpose, the ring was a spidery-looking device placed on the head of the person being questioned. In truth, the device was not particularly needed in this case because Gavin would have freely admitted that he killed Jerome. Now that it was done, now that his task was complete, he didn't particularly care who knew.

In reflecting on what Gavin was admitting to him, and in noticing the sapphire around his neck (which hadn't been confiscated when Gavin was imprisoned), Telén reasoned that the stone was not of the protective sort; otherwise, it would have kept the Ring of Truth from working on him. With a suspicion sensor kicking on in his brain, Telén decided that the sapphire probably wasn't a healing one either. As he reached out to touch the necklace, Gavin jerked back while giving a sharp warning. "It will kill you if you touch it!"

Gavin then confessed that this was how he had killed Jerome.

Since the Ring of Truth was still on his head, Telén knew Gavin was speaking truth. After a few moments of silence, the sorcerer asked, "Why didn't you let it kill me too?"

"You weren't meant to die," Gavin replied, in a matter-of-fact tone, "at least, not yet. According to my orders from God, just Jerome was meant to die."

Only contemplating the answer for a couple of seconds, Telén removed the Ring of Truth from Gavin’s head and swiftly left the cell.

Not only did Gavin not care that the sorcerers knew he had killed one of their own, he also didn’t care what they might be planning to do to him. They could probably find a way to kill him, as they had Chelsea, but it was going to take some time. It’s not like they could shoot him with bullets because no bullet could penetrate his skin. And unless his skin was in direct contact with hot lava or dragon fire, no heat source on earth could kill him. Nor would ropes, mirrors, or flutes have worked on him. But these weren’t going to be options because the sorcerers and their followers never used them. How odd that after all of these years, those serving Satan hadn’t figured out how to make use of the newer weapons. Any time they managed to get their hands on any, they were never able to use them with any success. The nearest that experts like Preston and Weatherly could figure, this was due to the fact that the weapons were designed by magicians with help from God, using Light Energy. Being fully in the realm of good, they were not likely to work very well for the forces of evil, just as many magical creatures on the side of good would never work for evil.

Contemplating the weapons, Gavin saw them as a possible means of escape. His jailers hadn’t even noticed that the flipside of his turquoise belt buckle was a mirror. He also had a small flute worked into the top of his left boot, unnoticeable by most people because it looked like part of the cinch lacing system of the boots. Though the weapons themselves were magician made, they had been worked into these designs by genies. Gavin knew he couldn’t get through the lock of the cell with either weapon; but he really only needed one of the guards to open the door for about three seconds, perhaps when delivering food to him.

However, God was telling him to wait; it was not quite time yet. This time Gavin was actually hearing God’s voice clearly in the back of his head, and while awake, rather than in his dreams.

A small window in the cell door allowed communication back and forth between Gavin and his jailers. Currently on duty with the two ESS guards was a mimic, who looked just like a guard. But Gavin knew better; he could feel the evil vibes the demon was giving off. He

could also feel small pings in his brain as his gift deflected the evil thoughts the mimic was trying to plant.

Shortly becoming aware that the thoughts weren't getting through, the mimic tried a different strategy, that of taunting. "They're planning something special for you as far as an execution," the demon said, "like vats of burning lava poured over your head. And they'll televise it, of course."

Smiling slightly as he replied, Gavin simply quoted from 2 Timothy 4:7-8. "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me...."

To this, the demon didn't have an answer; and he suddenly found his ears beginning to burn tortuously from hearing God's Word. In pain, and in fear that Gavin might start spouting more bible verses, the mimic swiftly fled the cell hall, which actually caused both ESS guards to laugh because, despite being in service to the sorcerers, most people had no love for demons, of any kind.

Rhett himself paid a visit to Gavin at dinnertime; and the conjurer placed a Ring of Truth onto his own head in order to tell Gavin that the food and drink being delivered to him were not poisoned or tampered with in any other way. Even though Gavin had committed murder, Rhett still considered him to be a friend, and still felt indebted to him; and he didn't want to see him starve himself to death.

Meanwhile, back at the plantations on the same evening, Linn was doing his best to tutor Quin in algebra.

"Come on," he encouraged. "Let's ace that test next Monday."

Her face was saying the same thing her brain was. *Ugh, I hate this stuff.* She hadn't done any better in geometry the year before.

"Everybody needs to learn this; it's useful; you might need it someday," Linn stated.

"Like when?" Quin countered. "I'm not planning to be a carpenter, or an engineer."

"You might need it sometime in relation to healing someone," Linn replied.

Quin had to stop to consider this. Using dragon tears to heal was pretty automatic: Simply measure the draught in the special thimble and

pour it down a person's throat. As far as her gift of healing by touch, which had begun to work as early as her toddler years, it was also automatic. It wasn't something she ever had to think about, but simply do. She wasn't planning to apply it to a health career of any sort. For as much as she struggled with subjects like biology and chemistry, she never would have made it through any type of medical program. So she didn't really get Linn's meaning. However, because she was anxious to wrap up the tutoring session, Quin decided not to ask.

When they finished, feeling a need for fresh air, Quin suggested that they ask Cuoré to take them both for a ride, which Linn agreed to, not just because it was fun to ride the white dragon, but because he enjoyed spending time out in nature with his friends.

Once outside in the gardens, they found Dara, who ended up carrying Linn because it was much easier for him to ride a wind horse, whose aura helped him to both mount and stay astride by holding him in place.

"No straps necessary," Linn said, referring to how he would have needed to ride atop Cuoré.

The pair was only seconds into the air, when Zin joined them atop Zapor who had just been picking her up to take her home for the evening.

They headed to Hawaii first, enjoying the view of the sea waters winking at them in sparkles from the afternoon sun on their pass over the islands. Other than the stark places simply covered in cooled lava, the landscape was lush with vegetation, and looked rather shadowy and mysterious in its current largely-uninhabited state. Only a few people had stayed when the majority of residents had been shuttled to Supercities One and Two, so the population of Hawaii was much depleted.

From Hawaii, they next made a trip to Mongolia, where it was morning. Setting down, they sat in a meadow for a bit to watch butterflies and a few wild horses, which were much smaller than most horses of the U.S., but were also much tougher. Mongolian horses had always been tougher than most of their counterparts worldwide (the exception being Siberian horses), so that they could withstand the harshness of their home environment. Even in summer, much of the country was windy and cool, so the visitors didn't stay long. They

needed to be getting home anyway, having all had a busy day and needing a good night's rest.

All three tended to keep to a strict sleep schedule. In this day and age, many parents were forcing this issue to help their children combat depression.

The Three Musketeers often helped each other with this problem, as far as dealing with anything that might be troubling them. We all need good friends to confide in, and we all need to help one another. And when experiencing symptoms of depression—such as low energy, distraction, and poor sleep—we all need people to encourage us and help us get back on track, such as reminding us to eat right, exercise regularly, discuss problems, and keep to a sleep schedule.

Visiting a friend in one of the boys' dorms upon his return to the plantations, Linn happened to see Ignacio going into his apartment at the end of the hall; and he felt rather sorry for him, to have to live in a dorm at his age. But without a regular job, most people couldn't afford a regular apartment or a house.

Linn wasn't likely to be unemployed much in his life. Even now, his lab efforts equaled a part-time job; and Jitterbug had already told him that he'd start earning credits in his junior year if he kept on with the lab work. And, of course, he would keep on because this was what Linn felt he was meant to do, which meant his college years were likely going to be even busier than the high school ones with regard to spending time in the lab. In truth, overproducing human goodness was not his only gift because his scientific abilities were pretty much equal to many of the gifted technologists living at the plantations.

When he thought about it more, Linn actually felt sorry for Ignacio aside from having to live in a dorm and not having a job because he also didn't seem to have any close friends. Linn had seen him in company on occasion with a couple of what might be termed rather smarmy guys around his own age, of the sort most people would be incredibly wary of. While probably not evil along the same lines as sorcerers, they were definitely up to no good; one could just tell this sort of thing, like through a gut instinct.

On Saturday morning, Quin visited one of the horse-raising projects with her mom. This happened to be in the same pocket in which the behemoth, Lóhere, resided. Stopping to pet the gentle giant, Samantha

and Quin were smiling from the fond memories they both had from having played on the creature when each was growing up. Even now, several children were climbing up his fur to roll around on his back and pet his ears, and two more were swinging on his tail.

In the afternoon, Quin and Cuoré went on a quick outing in order to fly over a couple of Supercities before taking a swing by the suspension bridge in Kentucky. They often did this in order to see if any travelers needed help in reaching the bridge.

Though most of her work was related to being the current Protector of Dragons, she often did miscellaneous tasks as well, a habit she had picked up from Professor Fulhausen when he was training her. He had only needed to train her for four years, mainly because Cuoré was so proficient and knowledgeable. The professor had stopped taking the elixir that had kept him alive for so long shortly after Quin was born because he was anxious to be home, our true home that is, in heaven. He had simply passed away in his sleep, about two years past now; and his expression when found was much like the contentedness on the countenances of sleeping dragons. (With sleeping as their favorite activity, dragons were always content when in this state.)

Back home before dinner, Quin worked a few algebra factoring problems in preparation for her test on Monday.

While Linn had been working on the airbike project of late, things like bikes were not his preferred area of focus. So he had spent all of Saturday in the Technology Lab with two scientists and a doctor working on prosthetics, which had advanced incredibly over the years in both function and design. This was what Linn really wanted to do with his future—something in the medical field. He had been designing useful things for the disabled for several years, this coming about from having made many gadgets to help with his own bathing, dressing, cooking, and such. Now, he was progressing to more complex things. As far as prosthetics like limbs and digits looking real or mechanical, the trends tended to come and go over the years. Currently, people were favoring the mechanical look. Right now, Linn was helping to build a leg for a four-year-old who had lost one in a megahob attack. He smiled in thinking the girl would soon be able to run, jump, and play just like any of her friends and classmates.

The algebra test on Monday went well for Quin, who was able to sleep well that night, a good thing because she was leaving early Tuesday morning on an important trip that was unrelated to her job as Protector of Dragons, and not particularly related to her gift of healing either. She was going on a covert mission on orders directly from General Dawson; and while she couldn't quite figure out why she was chosen for this operation, others could pretty well guess it was because of Cuoré's natural camouflage abilities. While most dragons were brightly colored, and flashy from being shiny and metallic, as the only white dragon in existence, Cuoré was able to blend in with just about anything that held white, gray, cream, yellow, or even beige tones. Stones, clouds, sand pits, pale shrubs, ice, smoke—the possibilities abounded just about anywhere. He could even meld with blues and pinks on occasion if they were light enough (like giant bundles of cotton candy). Another determining factor for the choice of mission participants might have been the fact that Quin always wore her grandmother's pin-on watch, which could stop time for five seconds at a time, but only with help from a white hummingbird summoned by using a musical triangle similar to the one Martella carried, but one that was larger, at more like three inches in length for each of the three sides.

Since the mission might end up taking a few days, Quin made sure to hug her parents goodbye.

Zin was going too, and Quin easily determined the reason for this—Zin was quite a phenom in the realm of younger magicians, with skills surpassing even some in their thirties and forties.

Riding Zapor, Zin arrived to meet Quin right at dawn. Zapor didn't mind the trip away from Doyle Mansion. In addition to Pizzo, Heike, Pipac, and Kisi, the gargoyles and topiaries in the area kept things pretty safe. Plus, Folto and her girls would occasionally be checking on all of Paloma Drive. Though only the two houses still existed in whole, the magical creatures in the area tended to be diligent in preserving and protecting the gardens, trees, and such, particularly since the gnomes made their homes in the trees, and creatures like enormice, wooly crotons, and snoils frequented the gardens. Em was also far from helpless, as Zapor well knew, as an amazing stick fighter, even in her sixties. She could also wield a rope, if she needed to, and often wore one as a belt. Jenny still lived across the street, with two seniors she

had adopted from the Bookends program; and she and Em frequently took walks around the block, often with a couple of topiaries in tow to protect them. They enjoyed touring the gnome gardens, some of which had been made using rubble from the crumbling houses and other area structures for retaining walls, planters, walkways, benches, and such.

While Linn didn't often go on this type of mission, he was still very much interested, and even involved. In the past couple of years, he had started designing gadgets for his friends to use on their various trips. One such item was a communication device the girls each carried that connected to one another, and back to one Linn always kept with him. This was sort of like a three-way set of walkie-talkies so that they could all keep in touch. For this particular project, Linn had modified three hand-held radio devices originally from Kivetel. Shaped like little walnuts, but in various colors aside from walnut tan, the radios hadn't initially worked in our world due to the issue of crossing realms. They did now, thanks to genie ingenuity and modification, and were actually plentiful, especially in the Supercities. Though they were forbidden in the cities and camps, this was how many people got news from the outside, as well as listened to bible lessons and readings from many books. Since the radios were small, they were easily concealed in clothing and amongst various belongings. In addition to making the walnuts function like walkie-talkies, Linn had added a feature to shield them from the sorcerers' magnetism mixers that often interfered with the radios' operations.

Though early models (because he planned to make improvements), the walkie-talkie walnuts were working fairly consistently, with the communications being clear and understandable. Plus, there was no distance limit; at least not one Linn had been able to discern thus far. Even when Quin and Zin took trips to far-reaching places, like Africa and Australia, he had been able to communicate with them. But this was not surprising because, even unmodified, the little radios could pick up news and other programming (mainly from hidden broadcasting facilities located under ground in various countries) from just about anywhere in the world.

While just the three walkie-talkies were in use at present, Weatherly had talked to Linn about making more of them for the military to use, since dawn pigeons and kites were a slightly slower form of

communication. The main problem in designing something like this before now had been the magnetism mixers. But Linn had evidently found a way around that.

Linn was pleased to have made something useful, as this was always his goal, though most important in his mind when first starting the project had been the safety of his friends. He just felt better knowing what they were up to; and if they ever got into trouble on one of their trips, he figured he might be able to send help.

Another reason Weatherly was sending Quin and Zin (and basically Linn too, since he would be keeping in contact with the girls) was because she knew they made a good team. Team chemistry was always an important factor to pay attention to. With regard to the trio, Weatherly often thought of Ecclesiastes 4:12. "A threefold cord is not quickly broken."

Zin, Quin, Zapor, and Cuoré had actually set out a day ahead of time as far as the part they were going to play in the mission. In case they were needed early, they wanted to be ready and available. Setting up a makeshift camp near the fish farm outlying Supe-7, the group waited for directions from Weatherly, who was in close dawn-pigeon contact with several of her operatives inside the city. With dawn pigeons being five times faster than any kestrel, their speed was really not all that slow in comparison to the walnut walkie-talkies, particularly because Supe-7 was not any great distance from the plantations.

After simply setting out their bedrolls and having a small breakfast, the girls waited, as patiently as possible. Upon getting walkie-talkie confirmation midday from Linn that their part of the mission for sure wouldn't happen until the next day, the girls decided to head out to try to do some good while waiting. They didn't want to be idle.

In addition to the protection of Zapor and Cuoré, Zin wore a ring her mother had given her set with one of Gavin's protective sapphires; Quin carried a shield dime.

Making scanning trips over a few Rubble Cities, they ended up landing in what had once been Philadelphia in order to thwart the efforts of a gang harassing six travelers. In addition to the ferocity of Cuoré and Zapor, with Zin using a mirror and Quin a yellow rope, they were able to route the ruffians, twenty-two in all, from the city, in the opposite direction the travelers were heading. This ended up taking

nearly three hours because they were being careful not to actually kill any of the gang members, who were rather bold in their resistance to the routing. But it ended up being a good workout for the girls, as well as an exercise in restraint for both Zapor and Cuoré, who could have easily fatally dealt with all twenty-two in less than a minute flat.

Taking to the skies again, they swiftly came across a group of megahobs and two nyregs attacking a family heading for the suspension bridge, on the run from what remained of their earthship community that had recently been destroyed in a terrorist attack.

Mirrors and ropes were the respective weapons of choice for Zin and Quin. Lately being busy with school, which they attended even in summer, neither had had much training in recent months, so the day's outing was turning out to be much-needed practice for them. (If Linn had been out and about with his friends, since he favored and was proficient with flutes, he would have made the perfect complement to the strong "threefold cord.")

After wiping out the evil creatures, Quin used her gift to heal a boy burned on the thigh by nyreg acid. Simply touching him on the knee, the contact lasting a mere five seconds, was enough to fully heal the burn.

Deciding they had done enough for one day, they headed toward their makeshift camp, with Zapor and Cuoré dropping the girls off some three miles from the camp so that Zin and Quin could harvest raspberries and peaches from an abandoned farm for their dinner.

No sooner had their protectors dashed away in search of their own dinners than the girls encountered a sorcerer, also harvesting food from the farm, in the form of zucchinis and pomegranates. The man was evidently on his own while out in the wilds.

Quin and Zin would have preferred to have avoided a confrontation. However, they weren't going to be given the opportunity to simply walk (or run) away because the sorcerer immediately attacked.

Speedily removing a vial of liquid from a pocket of his robe, he deposited one drop in the ground, which swiftly turned into an enormous poisonous centipede the size of an oversized canoe that advanced rapidly on its double prey.

Not to worry, because Zin and Quin had their weapons handy.

However, no sooner had they dealt with the gigantic insect than the girls' weapons were blasted from their grasps by bursts of energy (that looked like glittering and sizzling dark-colored snakes) from the sorcerer's staff.

Instructing Quin to hide behind a boulder (which she was smart enough to do), Zin was shaking her head. Generally, when a magician and sorcerer were facing off, dueling etiquette designated one move at a time each, and taking turns. So the man wasn't playing fair in not giving her a chance to make a move. But Zin quickly surmised that he hadn't realized he was dealing with a magician, which was correct. So she let him know by using a classic magicians' dueling move—that of throwing a playing card like a knife. Quickly producing a three of spades from one of her pockets and throwing it, Zin split the top of the sorcerer's staff in two, as though splitting a fire log with a hatchet, rendering it useless.

Smiling, because he hadn't encountered very many female magicians in his lifetime, and never one this young, the man gave a short bow of respect before making his next move, that of flicking a pebble from the ground at his opponent nearly as fast as a bullet would travel.

Blessedly, Zin had anticipated the move (from noticing a slight robe adjustment near the man's elbow prior to the flick) and was able to step to one side while employing a simple disappearing act. Since magical mirrors were involved, which Zin had sewn into the hem of her jacket and under one collar, she didn't instantly vanish like a genie (disappearing at will like a quick snap), or a spreesprite (making a dash, gone in a flash). Instead, her form shrunk very rapidly sideways, to just a thin vertical line, before disappearing entirely from view in what appeared to be a swift blink when the line rapidly collapsed.

She reappeared again in just a few seconds directly behind the sorcerer who was a couple hundred feet away, which was how far she had been able to sprint in that short amount of time. She couldn't simply flee while "disappeared" because she needed to stay to protect Quin. Plus, she wouldn't have been able to get far enough away before the mirror effect ended because the most she could have extended it with the small size of the mirrors was twelve seconds. She would have needed a dose of Quicksilver Elixir, which she didn't have with her, to

have made it a mile or so away in that amount of time. But even without Quicksilver Elixir, magicians were generally fast, which allowed Zin to knock the sorcerer off of his feet using a sweeping kick.

Since the kick was not a magical move, being in the category of hand-to-hand combat that didn't require the etiquette of taking turns, Zin was free to make another move, which she did by again disappearing, in order to put some distance between herself and her opponent.

Making his next move from the ground as soon as Zin reappeared, the sorcerer shot flaming darts at her from his fingertips.

Even though her sapphire would have protected her, she chose to dodge the darts. Having always loved dodgeball, she was good at it. And mirror weapons training always included lots of defensive speed drills, particularly because there was always ricochet danger when using mirrors.

As the sorcerer scrambled to his feet, the duel suddenly ended when Cuoré arrived on the scene, with Zapor only two seconds behind, both having heard Quin's thoughts as she sent out silent calls for help.

Since magical creatures didn't recognize any sort of etiquette when it came to protecting their charges, and the sorcerer knew this, he decided to flee. However, since he had made the first and last moves of their duel, he waited to see if Zin wanted to take a final turn. As she shook her head, he gave her a short bow, which she returned. He then departed, at a fairly fast trot in fearing the unpredictable nature of gryphons and dragons—unpredictable around sorcerers that is, not so much human beings in general.

Cuoré was giggling in his thoughts to see the sorcerer hightailing it away, and the giggling tickled Quin's brain, as it often did.

The protectors next flew the girls back to camp, where they enjoyed their dinner, afterwards watching the sunset. They didn't make a fire. Not only was their no need for one in summer, they didn't want to draw the attention of any unfriendlies.

The night was clear and the stars were plentiful, commanding the rapt gaze of Zin and Quin stretched out on their bedrolls. Zapor and Cuoré were nearby, and were drawing straws to determine who would keep watch first while the other slept, since they were planning to take turns in two-hour increments.

Looking at the stars brought horoscopes to mind, and Zin mentioned that hers in the morning had said she would have an exciting encounter during the day.

“So which exciting encounter was it referring to?” Quin asked.

“The sorcerer, I’m guessing,” Zin replied.

While Quin had once enjoyed reading her daily horoscope, she had recently gone off them based on a conversation with her Grandma Vini. On a particular morning when Quin was spouting something about how crossing paths with a stranger was going to help her complete an important task, her grandmother had strongly counseled her not to put too much emphasis on anything relating to astrology, and not to read too much into the stars in other ways either, such as wishing on shooting stars. “Our fate is in God’s hands, not in the stars,” Grandma Vini had said. “And it’s not fate at all because the paths of our lives are carefully planned by our Loving Father.”

“But it says in Genesis that He put the lights in the sky as signs to us,” Quin had countered.

“Yes, but we shouldn’t put too much emphasis on any human philosophies because they can distract us from what’s truly important,” her grandmother responded. “Also, our ways of thinking are so far below God’s ways. When I was younger, I focused a lot on things like feng shui and birth elements. And I paid attention to numbers, like lucky numbers. I even went to a palm reader once. While those kinds of things are fine for a bit of fun, we have to be careful not to think ourselves too clever. Anything that draws our focus from God isn’t good. We can admire and wonder over the stars because God created them, but we shouldn’t read too much into them. And we shouldn’t let them draw too much of our time away from doing God’s work.”

Vini had many times over the years contemplated various opinions on the issue of astrology and other human philosophies. The following entry was found in one of her journals:

“My powers of discernment generally tell me what is true, particularly with regard to what I produce during auto-writing; however, the issue of astrology and other philosophies is confusing, particularly because certain things like tarot cards and crystal balls can so often be connected to Satan. He is more than capable of manipulating our

thoughts, superstitions, fears, hopes, dreams, and such. After a visit to the Garden of Stars, I read Genesis 1:14. ‘And God said, “Let there be lights in the firmament of the heavens to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years...”’

“With regard to the passage, I think we can add stars to the sun and the moon, since stars too provide light and change as time passes. So there seems to be some support in the bible for considering things like astrology to be valid. And if the lights were placed in the heavens for signs, I think we can add that they are there for the contemplation of mysteries too, since some of us would have to ponder long to understand the signs. This to me implies a great deal of meaning in the stars, not just as heavenly bodies to indicate the passing of time, or to help with sea navigation. Focusing on the elements actually led me unicorns. Numbers are obviously significant with regard to the mezzanine, the Twelve Realms, and the Sixteen Dimensions. So all of this is rather confusing, as far as how much emphasis we should put on these things. Obviously, we are meant to use our brains to contemplate, to solve mysteries, and to understand things. But how much time we spend on all of this is of key importance. I keep thinking of Ephesians 5:15-17. ‘Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.’ [Dear Lord, please help me be wise, not foolish. And please help me make the most of my time. In Your name I pray, Amen.]

“To sum up the issue, I believe that as long as our thinking is not made into something like idolatry or Satan worship, it’s not wrong to ponder or enjoy these mysteries, and the explanations philosophers have attributed to them. As long as things like horoscopes are taken as puzzles and fun, and don’t take away from God’s teachings, I don’t think they are bad. (Just like the issue of guns; it’s only what some people do with a gun that is bad, not the gun itself.) But we must also take Colossians 2:8 seriously. ‘See to it that no one makes a prey of you by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ.’ We must be careful, diligent, not taken in. Nothing should ever become more important than Christ. Recalling a time when I rather

flippantly said I didn't think there was much wrong with astrology, I now realize I shouldn't have said this; and I probably did put too much emphasis on things like numbers and horoscopes in my youth. If anything is a distraction from God, it is not from God, and there is something wrong with it. Likely, it is connected to Satan.”

Zin and Quin both fell asleep thinking of stars, if not astrology, while listening to the soft snores of Cuoré as Zapor took the first watch.

Chapter Six

Rise of the Gifted

“As each has received a gift, employ it for one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace.”

1 Peter 4:10

A week before setting out on the mission with Zin, Quin had a dream about what was going to happen on the trip, which was part of the reason she wasn’t at all nervous or afraid.

While her mother had prophetic daydreams, and her Grandma Vini was gifted with prophetic dreams and auto-writing, Quin had all three of these gifts, along with the gift of healing by touch. These types of God-given gifts, which sometimes ran in families, seemed to be growing with each new generation, as evidenced by Quin’s dreams and daydreams being clearer and occurring much more frequently than they had for either her grandmother or mother, and by the fact that she had discovered her gifts much earlier than her predecessors, actually in her toddler years. Also, more and more young people were recognizing their gifts without ever touching the Gift Key. Quin had never touched it, and neither had Zin.

In the same way that gifts were becoming stronger and more numerous with each generation, more and more female magicians were being born. Plus, younger magicians in general were more powerful at earlier ages than many of their predecessors had been. For example, Mr. P hadn’t mastered card tricks or disappearing acts until his mid-thirties; and even now, he wasn’t as fast when enacting magic as many of his protégés. Mr. P, who had been Marlon’s mentor, still lived at the plantations and was still active as a magician. He was also in favor of reading and sleeping a lot, since this was what a lot of elderly people seemed to like to do.

Quin’s dreams, daydreams, and auto-writing led her to the people she needed to heal, and to the dragons that needed protecting. With

regard to her job as Protector of Dragons, it was not yet time for dragons to roam the earth; therefore, most were still sleeping, while waiting for God to call upon their services, which was destined to happen in the Endtimes. The only reason Cuoré wasn't secluded somewhere and sleeping was because he needed to help Quin carry out her job, while protecting her; and this was something that he and his mistress often had a chuckle over—that God would assign him to protect his own protector. But the nature of teamwork often involved a little give and take, and occasionally a reversal of roles.

For the most part, Quin and Cuoré focused on moving burnished doves around, mostly ones sleeping in caves and caverns, so that Dragon Hunters would have more difficulty finding them. Occasionally going back in time to save dragons of the past from hunters was also vitally important, such as when Quin traveled back nearly a hundred years to rescue the green dragon whose tears would end up saving the life of her Grandpa Ben in his youth. If she hadn't done this, neither her mother nor she would have ever been born. Because the time-travel portal at Laurelstone wasn't large enough for Cuoré to use—and because Quin didn't have access to the other three in the world, only one of which was large enough to accommodate something the size of a dragon—Cuoré didn't travel back in time with her. However, on a couple of occasions when she needed help on a trip, she had found him in the past, and he had assisted her. In the here and now, Cuoré was careful not to tell his mistress anything about activities of the past that she hadn't yet experienced. He never even told her how many times he had assisted in the past because he didn't want to in any way influence her activities while time traveling.

Quin was currently the only person who knew where the majority of dragons in the world were sleeping, though a variety of other creatures certainly knew such as spreesprites and genies. However, she felt it was dangerous knowledge to have. What if she was captured and a Ring of Truth was used on her? Anticipating this possibility and wanting to be proactive, Quin secretly had a shield sapphire implanted into her ankle. Though small, the stone would protect her mind from penetration by various devices, as well as from demons trying to plant their ugly thoughts. Linn had actually designed the capsule into which the

sapphire was placed before being implanted; and he was the only one who knew the secret.

As the girls rose at dawn, Zapor alerted them to a group of travelers not too far from their location. As Zin stayed with Zapor to pack up their camp, Quin and Cuoré set out to investigate.

Several people were accompanying five horse-drawn wagons filled to the brim with cheeses, dried fruits and meats, pickles, jams, and quilts from a farm in Missouri that were being taken to a train depot at the nearby fish farm. While vehicles such as trucks and cars still existed and were still occasionally used, due to the decaying state of most roads and bridges, wagons were the most practical means for the conveyance of goods. Among the group was an eighteen-year-old girl named Muriel Lofto that Quin had come across before in her travels. Muriel on this day was accompanying her mother, one of the police officers escorting the wagons.

While members of the Underground Army always protected their home base of the twin plantations, some fifteen years back, the earthship and mothership communities had established a Police Corp comprised of general peace officers, their main job being to protect various self-sustaining communities and to accompany traders on trips to sell and barter with those from the cities, which was what was going on today. Though the people on these types of excursions both sold and bartered, they were always called traders since anything sold was basically exchanged for credits, the current form of currency in the U.S.

This was a cautious kind of selling and trading between the self-sustaining communities and those in cities. They mostly met at camps to exchange goods. Some of the bartering involved products from the cities (such as medicine and shoes) that were useful to those in self-sustaining communities. This time, the traders from the farm were mainly just selling, getting credits for the goods, the only exchange item being a couple of crates of apples all the way from a camp outlying Supe-1. Rookhs, gryphons, and such were always on hand to help the police with protection. On this day, a wind horse and a pair of rookhs were watching over the travelers. As far as the other side, ESS personnel often accompanied designated city traders; and four would be present on this occasion.

Muriel and her parents had once lived in an earthship community that was destroyed by a terrorist bombing, which killed her father along with about half of the community's other residents. Now, she and her mother lived on Lion Mountain. But her mother still worked for several mothership communities and farms.

Muriel often went with her mother on excursions for the opportunity to hone her gift, which involved communication with animals, mainly telepathic communication, though she was sometimes able to copy the chirps, twitters, and whistles of certain birds well enough to communicate with them. She also on occasion managed to chatter with squirrels in a meaningful sort of way.

The presence of Cuoré was of particular excitement to the trading party, especially Muriel, who looked on this as a good chance to try out her skills on a dragon. However, the communication of dragons with humans was more like that of wind horses; when they wanted to tell people something, they simply laid thoughts onto a person's brain. As far as anyone knew, no dragons or wind horses spoke aloud (in contrast to gryphons and gargoyles who often did), or had much back and forth communication (like lengthy conversations) with human beings.

Cuoré was tickling Quin's brain again with giggles, this time over Muriel trying to use her gift on him, which was making his own brain tickle. Muriel was actually making faces, rather like ones made by someone straining to go to the bathroom; and, indeed, she was straining in her attempts to talk to Cuoré telepathically. He was definitely hearing her thoughts, but it was also definitely not what he was used to with regard to communicating with human beings.

When Cuoré conveyed to Quin that Muriel was trying to talk to him like she might a buffalo, Quin told Muriel, "He's not an animal. If a magical creature wants to communicate with you by thought, he or she will do so, gift or no gift."

As her thoughts fell silent, the strained look on Muriel's face faded; and she instead looked hurt, which made Cuoré feel sorry. She had been trying to talk to him and he had basically laughed at her, which wasn't very nice.

Muriel also looked embarrassed, which was the case. She was embarrassed because she just hadn't considered. Now, it seemed pretty

obvious. Of course magical creatures would be different than animals like dogs, sheep, rabbits, and such.

Laying a thought just onto Muriel's brain, and keeping Quin from hearing it, Cuoré said, *Don't feel badly; Quin's made plenty of mistakes too when learning. And so have I, for that matter. I used to make all kinds of mistakes when I was a young dragon.*

After this, when Quin was talking to one of the traders who was giving her a package of turkey jerky, Cuoré winked at the astounded Muriel while passing one of his feathers to her as a gift. Though the pure-white feather was very light, it was extremely hard, like metal. It was also somewhat sharp, and Muriel would come to discover that she could use it like a knife. She would also eventually find out that the feather had a shapeshifting quality and could be used like a magic key to unlock just about any door.

As Quin and Cuoré dashed back to camp, Muriel said a short prayer of thanks to God. *Thank you, Heavenly Father, for the white dragon talking to me, and for the lovely feather, and for helping me to learn. And thank You for the amazing gift of being able to communicate with animals. Please help me use it well, in service to others and for the Glory of Your Kingdom. I pray this in the name of your Glorious Son, Amen.*

Muriel often prayed like this, and often in conjunction with thinking of 1 Corinthians 12:4. "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit." Like many of the gifted, Muriel understood and even stressed that she should be using her talents for God, for His Kingdom alone, and not for anything self-serving.

Back at camp, as they got ready to head out, both Zin and Quin checked their small packs, made by Linn in the lab, one customized for each of his friends. He had whipped them up in an afternoon specifically because he knew both girls tended to carry around a great deal of gear. Though Quin wore her pin-on watch on her chest and carried the triangle to call white hummingbirds on her belt, she needed a good place to stow other important things such as thimbles, vials of dragon tears, and rose-colored glasses. Likewise, Zin's pockets were always fairly bursting with things like cards, doses of Quicksilver Elixir, and a monocle version of rose-colored glasses that she liked to

use. Zin wore her pack on her belt while Quin's was a shoulder version because Linn had known exactly what each of his friends would prefer.

Zin was contemplating an extra slim pocket in her pack, just waiting for something small and slender to be added. This was like a little mystery. Quin's pack had an exact number of pockets for all that she needed to carry. *So why one more for me?* Zin wondered. *Is he going to give me a tube of lipstick for Christmas?* She thought this rather jokingly because she never wore make-up and she knew that Linn knew this. *But maybe a tube of lip balm wouldn't be a bad idea*, she decided. *In cold and windy places, I tend to get chapped lips.*

As she was hopping aboard Zapor, Zin suddenly got to thinking about what Marlon might have been working on in the lab. She hadn't been able to tell on the day she snooped because he was just leaving the lab when she arrived.

With regard to Marlon's mentoring, they were not spending as much time together as they once had because she was advancing so well on her own. And just as she had never touched the Gift Key, Zin also had never used the Mage Key, though many magicians did, in order to help them work out tougher problems because the key gave answers to certain mysteries. But Zin had always liked the challenge of working things out for herself, and Marlon had encouraged this because he knew that relying too much on magical objects wasn't a good practice. Overuse of the Mage Key in the past had actually led certain magicians to complacency, as well as laziness in the areas of wit, creativity, and just plain hard work—a factor needed to accomplish anything truly worthwhile.

On the subject of mentoring, Zin's mother was currently working with a twelve-year-old boy in New Hampshire that she felt might end up surpassing her in skill as a wordsmith.

Em was still writing and had accomplished a lot in the past two decades. One of the best things she had done, ten years previous, was rewrite Jessica Brown's untitled manifesto, which attributed all human ills to Christianity and which had been responsible for the outlawing of Christianity in the U.S. and several other countries. The document had also condemned many souls to hell from people having followed its doctrines. Em had worked on it in stages, in order to be less affected by the malice in it, and had read the bible intermittently while reworking

the manifesto into something not only benign, but also farcical, to be taken as a joke.

Once Em finished, a troop of Weatherly's Lizards set out to destroy copies of the originals in libraries and on college campuses (where the work was most popular), replacing the originals with Em's versions. Paper copies were either shredded or burned, and electronic copies were deleted. Oddly enough, those doing the destroying had to agree that this was one instance in which the consolidation of a good chunk of the world into Supercities had been a good thing, because it made it easy to dispose of many copies at once. In less than three years, originals became incredibly hard to find worldwide; and since the replacements still bore Jessica's penname of H. Elle Follows, many people doubted the rumors that another version once existed, one that wasn't absurdly comic. Though some might have cried "Unfair!" this was a way of protecting future generations from further damage, mainly the lost souls and the persecution against Christians caused by the work. Many people who had read the original version had committed murders, mainly of Christians, but also of others. Civil wars had occurred in two countries, as well as other conflicts. Blessedly, many skirmishes that broke out were settled by the effects of various peace-inducing paintings by Morgan Scull that had been distributed over much of the earth by that time.

As far as distribution of Em's other work, and the works of other writers, quite a lot was available to quite a few people, even those inside the cities. An underground newspaper simply called *Free Press* had long been popular, and people were reading it by various methods because the self-sustaining communities had access to gadgets. However, inside the cities, where most people didn't have reading devices, most popular was a newspaper made of bamboo paper that was genie enhanced to perform certain functions. One model of the newspaper was able to receive fresh newsprint each week. Another was a print-retaining version delivered to city residents through various channels. Both types had a self-destruct feature (of the vanishing sort, not one that blew up) for use if people were caught with the forbidden papers. "Free" in the case of *Free Press* meant not only free speech, but also free of charge, as those running the paper and contributing the articles, poems, etc. worked strictly on a volunteer basis.

Among those helping to make the deliveries were librarians, members of the NUR, military personnel, genies, peace officers, rookhs, and dawn pigeons. Some kites carrying papers were making their way into the cities. Also, the mothership and earthship communities had what were called Post Riders, volunteers delivering mail, news, and small parcels with help from horses (both wind and regular ones), rookhs, gryphons, and such. The Post Riders also sometimes covertly hopped rails to make their deliveries. Gnomes occasionally helped with deliveries, both on foot and using little air gliders launched most often by birds such as eagles and hawks, but occasionally by other friends as well like wind horses.

And while there weren't many reading devices in the cities at present, the genies were working on headbands that people could flip down to eye level to read. These looked like ordinary headbands to pull back hair, and so weren't going to particularly draw attention. Wrist cuff versions that looked just like sweatbands were also in production. Some would be preloaded with books, news articles, etc. Others would be designed to receive transmissions and downloads. Some of these devices were already in operation in Antica and Kivetel, mainly for testing purposes because there was no lack of free speech in those realms.

Eidetic people inside the cities were still reciting written works that had been outlawed, including Em's. In fact, a particular eidetic woman named Sarah Mary James had made it her life's work to memorize everything Em had ever written—plays, letters, articles, novels, short stories, poetry—all of it.

For all of the changing of names of cities and rivers and such, the sorcerers had decided not to tackle the issue of names of people. While they definitely frowned on ones obviously related to God, like Christopher and Christine, there were just too many names associated with the bible such as Timothy, Mary, John, Samuel, etc. Plus, the sorcerers had decided that they actually liked some biblical names such as Ruth, which could be made into the word, ruthless.

Because of Cuoré's camouflage abilities, getting into Supe-7 for the mission wasn't difficult. Quin was never visible riding on top because his concealment extended to her. While first looking like steam from a factory, and then part of a pale stone wall, Cuoré basically snuck Zin

and Zapor in, where they stealthily made their way to the city center to take up positions in a courtyard of a skyscraper, which happened to be the building where Gavin was imprisoned in an underground holding cell.

On the way to the city center, thanks to help from a gargoyle, Zapor had picked up a couple of hairy vetches, which were now sitting on his neck. In motion, the gryphon was still slightly visible. However, when he sat still in the quietest corner of the courtyard (to lessen the chance of anyone running into him while he was concealed), he looked completely invisible. Looking like a cloud, Cuoré with Quin astride stayed in the air above, hovering at about eye level with the ninety-second floor of the high rise. The courtyard was nearly deserted, except for a factory manager taking a break to have a cup of yogurt and some grapes.

In order to be mobile, Zin had dismounted, but was staying near Zapor. She had already quieted her walkie-talkie in order to remain as inconspicuous as possible. Using a mirror trick to hide, she took a Time-Extending Pill in order to stay hidden for a full ten minutes because the normal time for a motionless mirror trick was two. Nearing the end of the ten minutes, when she was just about to renew the trick and pop another Time-Extending Pill, a pebble dropping from above made her pause. This was the signal that things were definitely in motion, Quin having gotten the information from Linn via walkie-talkie.

Sure enough, a mere forty seconds later, Rhett and Gavin burst onto the scene from a door on the south side of the courtyard.

While the factory manager was a little surprised by the pair's arrival, and slightly more so from Zin appearing out of thin air, he was actually shocked to see Zapor emerging from the corner, having shed the hairy vetches and given them each a pat on the head before sending them on their way. When the white dragon swooped down into the courtyard carrying the girl, having finished his yogurt and grapes, the man actually ate his napkin, after which, he simply sat, dumbfounded, watching the scene.

Rhett quickly hopped aboard Cuoré behind Quin while Gavin jumped onto Zapor's back behind Zin who had already mounted.

When Zapor and Cuoré took off, almost like rockets because they were anxious to get out of and away from the city quickly, the factory manager finally unfroze in order to spit out the part of the napkin he

hadn't yet swallowed and gather his yogurt cup and the little bag his grapes had been in, after which, he quietly went inside to spend the rest of the morning at his desk.

Cuoré and Zapor landed in an isolated forested area a good distance from the city in order to deposit Rhett and Gavin on the ground, after which, Quin and Cuoré swiftly set off on another task, related to protecting a dragon in Oregon.

Zin also needed to be on her way, back to home to study for a test scheduled the next morning. The departures were fine with Gavin and Rhett who had only needed help getting out of the city, and didn't particularly want transportation to their next destination, that of Lion Mountain, because they didn't mind taking their time in getting there and actually hoped to do a good bit of sightseeing on the way.

Before Zapor and Zin had a chance to leave, a teenage boy on horseback arrived through the trees. Ethan Stanley, a sixteen-year-old from Lion Mountain, was someone Zin had crossed paths with before.

"Fancy meeting you here," he exclaimed. Ethan had also just left Supe-7 after performing a task.

Each city had an underground leader, most often called an Aid Governor (AG for short), in charge of hiding people in the various pods and pockets. This was the person who most often distributed resources and coordinated escapes, and Ethan had just delivered a large pack of shroud mirrors to the AG of Supe-7.

Ethan's time in the city had not been uneventful. "I got shot twice," he told Zin. "That makes twenty-six for the year so far."

"Sounds like you need to go home and stay safe for a while," Zin suggested.

"Yeah, I hear ya," Ethan replied. "But I have lots to do right now, so home and safe will have to wait."

"I have an extra dime," Zin stated, offering him one from her pack.

Shaking his head and refusing, Ethan said, "They don't work with me." This was correct, for a very special reason, which we'll get to a little later on in our story.

Like Quin and Zin, Ethan was in something of a hurry, to get on to another delivery he needed to make to a mothership community in Michigan. So after only a very brief introduction to Gavin and Rhett, he was on his way.

Zin and Zapor were off only seconds after that.

Before setting off themselves, Rhett and Gavin took a pause to catch a much-needed breath after their whirlwind of a morning so far.

Just after delivering breakfast to Gavin, Rhett had released a freezing spell from his staff, in the form of bolts of ice leaping out to immobilize a group of mimics in the cell hall, which gave Rhett and Gavin exactly seven minutes to make their escape.

This ended up being plenty of time because an ESS guard outside the cell had already sent away his two companions on an errand. The man had been willing to help because of Chelsea—he was one whose life she had touched. During her imprisonment, she had shown concern for the guard, and for his wife who was battling cancer. In general, things like healing sapphires and dragon tears didn't work to cure cancer. However, a blessed diamond Chelsea gave to the man helped to ease his wife's suffering until her death.

After unlocking the cell, the pair had then made their way through various less-traveled passageways, stairwells, and corridors to reach the courtyard—the designated spot that Rhett had coordinated with a NUR member to meet certain operatives (Zin and Quin) who would aid in their escape. The only resistance the fleeing pair had met in the building was in the form of one sorcerer, whom Gavin knocked flat with one punch.

Rhett being willing to help Gavin was not in the form of payback for helping him escape from the plantations, but for quite a different reason. Rhett was converted. He had accepted the offer of Salvation. And he was not only a Christian, but a true believer, and a devout follower of Christ. This had not happened from one of the blessed diamonds Chelsea had produced that ended up converting others in Supe-7, but from something quite different, specifically involving eidetic people and Em's book, *Graham Rumpole*. But we'll talk in more detail about that a little later.

This happened more than a year before Gavin let him out of the bubble cell, but Rhett had had to play the part of a prisoner while making certain plans because, if it became obvious that he was working with Weatherly, other sorcerers might have gotten wind of it. He hadn't minded the imprisonment; it had given him the chance to read the bible

from cover to cover, twice, on a genie-made wristband device that he was able to keep hidden under the sleeve of his robe.

Gavin, too, for quite a long while, had put on an act at the plantations—that of being disgruntled and angry—so that breaking the sorcerer out of his cell would seem plausible.

Before having a meal of protein bars and apples from backpacks they had managed to bring with them, Rhett and Gavin knelt to pray, to thank God for their escape and for those who had helped them. They also said grace before eating.

While Cuoré's camouflage and the speed of the protectors had certainly helped, the getaway of Gavin and Rhett had been relatively easy mainly due to a carefully-timed escape going on in another part of the city that acted as a sort of distraction to what was happening in the cell hall and courtyard. While three Snakes and an athletic director were drinking, playing cards, and falling asleep on the job, twenty-seven athletes had escaped their training center. This happened an hour before Rhett froze the mimics, but was discovered at around the same time, the delay in part being because the athletes had split up into eight groups in order to be less obvious when making their way to safe houses and other designated spots to be helped by gargoyles, puck trolls, rookhs, etc. In pursuit of the escapees from the training center, Telén had sent ESS troops and megahobs to all the wrong places, it seemed, which added a fair amount of chaos to the city. The whole thing ended up being a complete mess, with none of the athletes being recovered, which was going to play havoc with this year's football season because nine were football players.

The Sparrow happened to be in Supe-7 and was able to help two of the athletes. Cecelia had just snuck two people into the city, and was delighted to help two more (weightlifters) reach a safe house in which they were going to be hidden until leaving the city in a week's time. The two people she snuck in were also there to help, but in a different sort of way. Eighteen-year-old twins, Yvonne and Robert Holland, were daisy chains, two of Trista Feldman's protégés, and were in the city to help prevent suicides. With so many more gifted individuals, including many young daisy chains, Trista had been able to do more mentoring than traveling in recent years, though she still did make trips to stop suicides whenever God directed her to. But for the most part,

she mentored, while helping her aging Aunt Leona continue to run the Inn at Magnolia Hills, which was still something of a hotspot for the operations of eidetic people in the Southern part of the U.S.

As we might expect, largely due to human nature, not all of the gifted used their gifts for good, instead turning to evil and the way of the flesh. Many of these people had rejected Christ and simply didn't see the need to use their skills for good. Others couldn't handle the responsibility of having such powers. For some, misuse of gifts was due to upbringing, as they were basically taught to do wrong. Quite a few people ended up giving in to the temptation to use the gifts either for personal gain or to lash out at others.

One such individual was Eizel Gibson from Supercity Ten, who had just turned seventeen. She had the power to plant thoughts and dreams much in the same manner that demons could. But her gift was actually stronger than the abilities of most demons because her powers could extend over long distances. From a very young age, she needed only to have seen a person one time—and not even all that close up, just basically within sight—in order to plant thoughts or dreams into that person's brain from that point on, and often from as far as halfway around the world.

Eizel happened to be in Supe-7 visiting a friend, whom she was planning to attend a tennis match with that afternoon. Due to the training-center debacle, all sporting events for the day had been cancelled. Angry that her plans were disrupted, and wanting to dole out some punishment, Eizel set about planting ugly thoughts into as many minds as possible of people she didn't like (along with quite a few she didn't even know), which resulted in several hundred people not only having ugly thoughts, but also migraines as well, this being a common result of misuse of gifts involving brain waves. The thoughts planted were of a great variety and caused a wide range of problems including suspicion between friends, guilty feelings, angry outbursts, symptoms of depression, selfish tendencies, arguments stemming from jealousy, and anxiety attacks, to name only a few. Many of her victims had great difficulty pulling themselves out of these unhealthy emotional states, or suppressing certain undesirable personality traits.

Passing very close to Eizel and her friend on a city street, The Sparrow might have been one of the people affected by the malice,

except that Eizel didn't notice her. (The dime Cecelia was carrying would only have protected her from physical injury, not from the planting of ugly thoughts.)

Still in a bad mood when nighttime rolled around, Eizel ended up sending nightmares about things like tortures and murders to several tennis players and their coaches, the thoughts of which would affect those people for many weeks and months to come.

In truth, when Eizel was in third grade, her parents had had to withdraw her from the private school she attended because she kept using her gift against teachers and classmates she became angry with. From that point on, she had been given private home schooling, from a string of teachers and tutors, since most tended not to last long under her domination of their thoughts and dreams whenever she was either frustrated or bored with them. And, of course, some she just plain didn't like.

After passing a peaceful night in the forest, Gavin and Rhett awoke to something of a surprise in the form of meeting up with The Sparrow very near their campsite. Cecelia had decided to reveal herself to the men who otherwise never would have noticed her passing by. With Yvonne and Robert both planning to stay in the city for a while, The Sparrow hadn't needed to stay to escort them out. Instead, she would be returning home to Lion Mountain for a bit, for a rest. Gavin immediately invited Cecelia to travel with them, since they were all heading for the same place, and she immediately accepted.

Though she hadn't been targeted by Eizel, Cecelia had passed an uneasy night's sleep, mainly because her dreams often troubled her. Her parents had sent her out of Supercity Nine when she was seven years old, just told her to leave, on her own. At that age, she already understood why. They did this to save her. A younger brother and sister had already been taken from the family. No one noticed her departure, which was what her parents knew would happen.

Leaving Supe-9 behind, little Cecelia knew where she needed to go—to the bridge in Kentucky. She had a small pack of food, a bag of water, and a map, which she had learned from her father how to read. It had taken her a full month to make it to the bridge.

After crossing and making it to Lion Mountain, she was adopted rather quickly, by a middle-aged couple named Jared and Maxine

Binder whose only child had died in Supercity Thirteen. Having new parents was wonderful. Aside from having many good qualities such as intelligence and creativity, they were kind, loving, protective, concerned, and all of the other things parents were supposed to be.

However, Cecelia still well remembered her first family, which caused her to dream about them, in a longing sort of way, mainly in wishing they had made it out of the city too. She could still see the faces of her parents, brother, and sister very clearly, particularly in her dreams.

On trips to Supe-9, Cecelia often looked for her parents, but had so far been unable to find them. They had left their apartment shortly after sending her away, and had basically disappeared. So she didn't know if they were still living in the city under different names, or if they had somehow escaped and were living elsewhere, or if one or both of them had died. Even doing some investigating when she had time, Cecelia hadn't been able to find anything out. But she wasn't planning to give up hope because she knew that with God, nothing was impossible. She also hoped to someday track down her brother and sister, though she knew this would be an even more difficult task given the manner in which most children were "redistributed" in the cities and camps. Plus, the two would have changed as they grew, so she likely wouldn't recognize them by appearance. Her mother wouldn't have had a fourth child per the law because, due to a very difficult third pregnancy, she was unable to have any more children. So Cecelia wouldn't need to look for another brother or sister, which was a good thing, given the fact that it was likely going to be extremely hard just to find the two.

Often praying about the issue, she hadn't gotten any definite answers or direction yet from God. But she didn't feel He was ignoring her. She more felt like the timing wasn't quite right. *We can't rush God's perfect timing*, she often reminded herself. And in the deepest corners of her heart, she had a sort of inkling that was telling her she was going to see her original parents and her siblings again during her time on earth. She just needed to be patient.

In addition to gifts getting stronger and more numerous, many were being recognized at very early ages, often as early as three years old, which was when Cecelia first discovered her talent for not being noticed. And in keeping with gifts running in families, her rather shy

grandmother that most people tended not to notice had had a version of this gift, which was most often called being a wallflower in her day.

Also at an early age, Cecelia knew to be careful with her gift. She could have been an incredibly successful thief, but she knew better. In truth, a few successful jewel thieves of the past did have this type of gift, and knew how to abuse it. The Sparrow was wise enough and fearful enough of God (a healthy fear) to know not to misuse her talents. What He had given her, He could easily take away. Plus, though her Salvation wasn't tied to her works, she knew her reward in heaven was. *We will be judged on our works*, Cecelia often reminded herself. One of her favorite bible passages, 1 Corinthians 3:12-15, was related to this. "Now if any one builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—each man's work will become manifest; for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work which any man has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire."

The three forest travelers had a quiet day, tromping through the woods, and hunting down berries and nuts to complement their lunch of oat cakes and dried meat.

Making camp just before dark, they met up with Muriel who had set off on her own in order to spend a little quality time with the creatures of the wild while her mother was escorting the traders, horses, and empty wagons back to the farm. Being alone in the forest wasn't a danger to Muriel because animals, birds, and the like often acted as her protectors, such as during the previous month when six members of a gang from a Rubble City came after her. At that time, she barely had time to worry before a black bear, a panther, two eagles, and a family of possums arrived on the scene, from seemingly out of nowhere, and basically tore the miscreants to pieces.

While she preferred to spend her time in the woods with the wildlife, Muriel didn't mind occasionally hanging out with people too, particularly someone about her age like Cecelia, whom she had met before, though the girls didn't go to the same school because the communities in which they lived were some distance apart, currently eighty-seven miles, but about to be ninety-eight in two months' time

due to the expansion of the mountain. However, Muriel and her mother were getting ready to move to the community where Cecelia and her adoptive parents lived, because it was nearer the Gatlinburg Pass, which was a handy means of coming and going as related to Mrs. Lofto's work with the Police Corps.

Since she was heading in the direction of home, Muriel gladly accepted the invitation to travel with Rhett, Gavin, and Cecelia.

As Gavin and Rhett soon discovered, the girls were well outfitted, with packs much like those Zin and Quin carried, though slightly larger. Both girls' packs contained small water purifiers, nutrition supplement cubes, shield dimes, foldable utility knives, genie-made bibles that looked like large buttons, rose-colored glasses, and thimbles to measure dragon tears. Additionally, Muriel had a protective sapphire and Cecelia had her magic key (the one she had used to access the school building in Supe-8), which she kept secret from her companions for the time being. Muriel was keeping her dragon feather secret as well; for now, it was kept in an inside pocket of the light jacket she was wearing.

When Muriel showed Gavin her sapphire and handed it to him to hold, he immediately noticed that it was not one he had produced. While it flitted through his mind that it was probably from a Sapphire Boy long ago, this didn't ring true because the stone in his hand didn't feel that old. Knowing how incredibly rare Sapphire Boys were, Gavin could hardly dare to hope that someone alive might have his same gift. Muriel could only tell him her mother had been given the stone two years previous as payment for escorting a trader from an earthship community to a camp outside Supercity Four. While he didn't say anything to his companions, Gavin did puzzle over the mysterious sapphire for quite some time.

Cecelia had just acquired a walnut radio, and they all listened to a bible lesson while having dinner of sautéed fish cooked over Rhett's palm burner in a collapsible pan Gavin had stowed in his backpack. The Sparrow had caught the fish, and quite easily, simply from a stream with her hands. In the same way humans didn't notice her, wildlife often didn't either.

As they were enjoying peaches gleaned from an abandoned orchard for dessert, and listening to a reading from *The Pilgrim's Progress*,

Gavin gave Cecelia and Rhett each a protective sapphire, and both girls a blessed diamond.

Talking later over a small campfire, Muriel and Cecelia both stated they had never touched the Gift Key.

“Some speculate that the key will eventually become obsolete,” Gavin said, “since it never bestows gifts, only unlocks ones that haven’t yet surfaced. With people these days recognizing their gifts at such early ages, I doubt there will be a need for any kind of key in the future.”

Early the next morning as they were packing up camp, Muriel did a little interpreting for the group with regard to the scolding chatters of a squirrel clinging at about shoulder level to a nearby narrow tree trunk.

“We’re evidently parked exactly in a spot where he buried some nuts last fall, and he wants us to move so he can get the nuts,” she said.

When Gavin moved slightly closer to the tree to retrieve his bedroll, the squirrel scooted around to the opposite side of the tree trunk. From there, he shifted position side to side to try to stay hidden from Gavin, who was himself moving side to side a bit while kicking dirt over the smoldering remnants of their campfire.

Suddenly, with a loud squeak, the squirrel leapt from the tree and tore off through the woods as though a bobcat might be after him.

Laughing, Muriel related, “I just told him we could see his tail.”

“Well, shall we call for Cecelia so we can get going?” Rhett asked.

As The Sparrow, not five feet from his left shoulder, said, “I’m right here, Mr. Collier,” Rhett fairly jumped out of his skin. He had thought she was off taking a lengthy bathroom break.

Muriel and Gavin both had seen Cecelia and were smiling.

Sweaty and a little shaky from the start, Rhett replied, “I guess it might take me a while to shed some of my sorcerer tendencies, like being less observant than I should be. And you can call me either Rhett or Mr. C, by the way.”

Used to addressing adults by their last names, both Muriel and Cecelia decided to call him Mr. C.

“I probably wouldn’t have seen her either,” Gavin confessed as they set off, “except that I was looking for her.”

After this, Rhett did take to looking for The Sparrow at times when he couldn't see her. And he was often able to make her out by looking for her.

On the same morning as the bolting squirrel, back in the Technology Lab at the plantations, Linn had a first version of the stealth airbike ready to test. Zin was in the lab too and was applauding. She was planning to go with him for the test, on a second bike, in case anything happened to go wrong with the experimental one.

However, feeling rather tired and oddly sore, Linn suddenly didn't feel like going. "Let's go tomorrow," he said. "Right now, I feel like I just need to be home."

"You've been working too hard lately," Zin said. "Get some rest, and I'll see you tomorrow."

The next morning, having slept badly, Linn still wasn't feeling great; but they decided to do the test anyway because, being excited about the bike, neither wanted to wait. It was no trouble for Linn to ride an airbike because Jitterbug had, long ago, fashioned a set of straps (like an elaborate seatbelt) to hold him safely on. Plus, the straps were universal and could be moved easily from bike to bike.

They set off just after breakfast and were delighted to discover that the stealth feature worked perfectly. The bike was silent, and neither it nor its rider could be seen. In order for Zin to stay with him, Linn had to talk occasionally to keep her apprised of his position.

So excited were the friends over the success of the test that they spent more time out and ended up much farther from home than intended, at nearly five hundred miles from the plantations, which put them somewhere in the middle of Kentucky where they crossed paths with a sixteen-year-old sorcerer named Tanner Ellison from Supercity Nine who was the protégé of one of the Governors of that city, a necromancer named Vidas Farr.

Linn was about to discover that the stealth feature he had designed slowed the airbike, to the point that it couldn't outdistance the nyreg Tanner was riding. And while the sorcerer couldn't see or hear the stealth airbike, he definitely heard Linn shouting to Zin to leave him.

Unwilling to do so because she felt Linn would be too vulnerable, even while camouflaged, she instead landed, which prompted Tanner to land as well, since she was the one he could see.

Hopping from the bike, but not folding it because she wanted to be able to access it again super quickly, Zin immobilized the nyreg, which Tanner had just dismounted, by hurling a small stone from her pocket that had a Stock-Still Spell on it. Blessedly, she was close enough to make good contact, which caused the beast to immediately fall onto its side.

Zin and Linn knew Tanner was a sorcerer not only because of the signature colors of his robe—worn a little shorter in style than those of older sorcerers because younger ones favored this—but also because he was carrying a staff, this one much like a foldable baton, which was also favored by protégé sorcerers. With one rapid motion, like a single hard shake, Tanner unfolded his staff in order to enact a wind spell, in the form of a blast directed at his opponent.

No stranger to wind, Zin simply crouched down and was largely unaffected, though her bike, some twenty feet behind her, was knocked over. Being strapped on and about ten feet to one side of the direct path of the blast, Linn was also safe, and was in the process of making an adjustment to his bike.

In keeping with the etiquette of dueling, Tanner paused to let Zin make the next move, which she did by pulling a chess piece from her pocket, a black knight. As she tossed it at her opponent, the piece turned into a life-sized knight that charged both the sorcerer and the nyreg that was struggling to its feet because the immobilization spell was wearing off.

As Tanner used an oak leaf from one of his pockets to enact his next move—that of erecting a huge leaf-shaped shield between himself and the knight—Zin made a dash for her bike. In knowing the spell on the chess piece would wear off as quickly as the one on the nyreg had (because she hadn't lately taken the time to add Length-Strengthening Spells to any of her tricks), she felt it more prudent to flee than to continue to duel.

Her instincts were wise and timely because Linn had just managed to completely disconnect the stealth function on his bike, which meant he would now be able to match Zin's speed during their flight.

Sure enough, as soon as Zin righted her bike, hopped aboard, and took off, they were able to outrun Tanner aboard the nyreg, the chasing pair giving up after only about forty miles.

Back at the plantations about two hours later, while having a late lunch together at their favorite cafeteria, Zin was in a joking mood. “Well, at least you got to put the bike to a real test,” she said smiling.

Linn was rather subdued; but this was not from the stress of the morning or from still feeling tired and sore (which he definitely was), but more because he was feeling bad about not being much help during the encounter with the sorcerer. “In fact, I was a burden,” he said, his tone basically as downcast as his posture.

Zin was shaking her head as she replied. “You’re my brainy friend, not my brawny friend. I’d much rather have a first-rate brain along on a trip than just a big fist. Plus, I like taking care of myself; and I like being challenged. And I feel like if I’m able to protect you once in a while, it’s like I can pay you back a little for all that you’ve done for me over the years. Truthfully,” she added, rising to give him a big hug, “I wouldn’t want to hang out with you if you weren’t you, exactly as you are.”

Meanwhile, at around the same time Linn and Zin were lunching, Quin was stopping time in a camp outside of Supercity Fourteen to help eight people escape from the camp.

In order to get around the five-second time limit of the pin-on watch, she often stopped time several times in a row along a specific path in order to extend the help. Unlike the powers of spreesprites, who could greatly vary the size of the area in which time was stopped (even stopping time in large areas such as whole countries), the range of the watch was exactly one hundred and twenty square feet. So Quin pretty much had to do sequential time stops on many occasions in order to truly help the folks that needed helping.

On this occasion, Cuoré was doing a little fancy flying, mainly circling and hovering, while the white hummingbird, the watch, and his mistress did their work. He also often employed another fancy move—that of knocking ESS personnel and creatures like megahobs over within the areas of stopped time. Having to get up after time started again helped to slow any possible pursuit.

Quin often stayed away from home several days in a row. On this trip, she had been checking on certain dragons, most of which were still sleeping in their hidden spots, though a few were missing, which caused her no small worry.

When making passes over camps and cities, she and Cuoré had performed certain tasks, such as helping a group of women reach a safe house in Supe-5. As they were flying over North Dakota, Cuoré had fire-blasted a herd of megahobs coming out of a Demon Pocket. A female thunderbird named Naya arrived just after to create a rain shower to help put out a grassfire accidentally started by Cuoré, who could have put out the fire himself by either smothering it with his wings or soaking his feathers in a nearby lake to drench the flames. Now, blessedly, he didn't need to do either.

Aboard Naya was a gifted fifteen-year-old boy from West Virginia that the thunderbird was charged with protecting. Birch Hathaway had the power to calm storms, much as a halcyon at sea might. But he only did so in conjunction with doing God's work, mainly calming demon-raised storms and leaving most natural ones alone unless God directed him to do otherwise. Since Quin had never met him before, they shared a meal and spent some time talking before going their separate ways.

From North Dakota, Quin headed overseas for a bit where she and Cuoré ended up helping travelers in both Sweden and India.

After nearly a week gone from home, Quin suddenly felt a need to return, not only to get caught up with school, but also to help her mother and grandmother with the hippotherapy program, which was smaller in scale than it once had been, but was still operating.

Dropping his mistress off on the front lawns of Netherwind, Cuoré made his way to a particular bigfoot cave where he liked to sleep while waiting for his next trip with Quin. The bigfoot family living in the cave didn't mind sharing it with a dragon, particularly because Cuoré kept to burnished-dove form while staying there, which meant he took up no more room than an ordinary building brick would have.

At around the same time Quin made it home, which was mid-morning, Rhett and his companions were in the process of battling two stealth hobs that had been tracking them from Supe-7 for the past few days.

Having dropped the pack containing her dime and sapphire, Muriel sustained a deep fang gash to one leg, which might have been a problem because no one amongst the company had dragon tears; except that Gavin had the next best thing, one of his healing sapphires, which healed her just about as well as dragon tears would have, other than

leaving a small scar, which wouldn't have been the case if dragon tears had been used.

Rhett later explained that stealth hobs were now able to extend their invisibility much longer than in previous years, which was why Muriel hadn't noticed the one that smashed into her and gashed her until she was under attack. "Their invisibility was originally only about forty-five seconds," the sorcerer said. "Now, it's up to twenty and sometimes even thirty minutes before they need to revert to a visible state to rest for a minute or so to gain enough energy to become invisible again. Each new generation of stealth hob is getting stronger."

"But God is making His gifted stronger with each new generation too," Gavin declared. "So we should still be able to manage in the future."

The others agreed, even Muriel, who was feeling much better now that her leg was no longer searing with pain. A raccoon had been looking on in great sympathy during the healing process, and wishing he could claw out the eyes of the stealth hob for hurting his human friend.

Both beasts were slain while briefly visible. One, Rhett took care of using an energy blast from his staff. The Sparrow sliced the throat of the other one, who hadn't noticed her sneaking in to place herself right next to him. The three knives the company had found in a cache two days previous and which the girls and Gavin were carrying were certainly coming in handy.

In the evening, Cecelia used her knife again to skin two snakes to roast for their dinner.

They were just about to eat when they were joined by someone Cecelia knew from Lion Mountain, a gifted man in his mid-twenties named Layden Merrick who was currently traveling on foot because the rookh that had been carrying him was needed elsewhere.

Invited to join the group for dinner, Layden produced ripe pears from his pack to share with everyone.

Layden was a person who could sense demons, who were experts at hiding. Even when getting close enough to humans to plant their ugly thoughts, many people couldn't sense them. Other than a coldness that some folks could feel, even people with excellent awareness of their surroundings, heightened discernment, and super sensitivity to evil

vibes had difficulty sensing demons. But this was because of the way demons were designed, by Satan and his fellow fallen angels. They had a shield quality built in so that they could get close to humans without being noticed. And being shapeshifting, they could scrunch themselves into some pretty tight places—attic trunks, chimneys, tree hollows, even large watering cans.

In addition to being able to sense demons near and far (even hundreds of miles away), Layden's gift was such that he could tell their numbers, which was why he was able to share the fact that sixteen demons were presently about fifty-three miles from their location. "I don't think they'll trouble us," he said. "I get the sense they are of the lazy sort." This was indeed the case. Camped out near a cavern, the demon pack was actually in the process of deciding whether or not to simply tuck themselves away into various nooks and crannies of the cavern in order to sleep away the rest of the year.

Layden was the one who said grace before dinner. "Our hands we fold; our heads we bow; for food and friends we thank Thee now, Amen."

Muriel almost laughed to hear the rhyming grace because it was so different than what she and her mother said before eating, which was usually something along the lines of, "Thank you, Lord, for Your many blessings, including this wonderful dinner in the company of family. In Your name we pray, Amen." But, to each his own. Simply remembering to thank God for His provision was all that was truly important.

Relating that he was heading for home, as soon as Gavin invited him, Layden said he would be happy to join their company.

His gift had begun to present itself when he was about age four, which was when he had been given up for adoption by his single mother, a heroin addict. And while he had always been able to sense basic garden-variety demons, in the past couple of years, he had begun to be able to sense mimics and print doubles as well, which were evidently trickier to pinpoint due to being more complex in their shielding.

"I'm usually able to sense nyregs, megahobs, and stealth hobs too," he told his companions.

Layden also related that he had recently sensed and then seen an efel, which few people had seen yet since the sorcerers were only now just sending out the prototypes for testing.

As he had previously explained to Gavin, Rhett told the others, “The sorcerers created them to carry messages since so much electronic stuff is getting messed up by gremlins.”

For the past six years, Layden’s job had been that of traveling the lands surrounding the mountain to locate entrances to Demon Pockets, which were then destroyed by various means such as thunderbirds and mirror cannons. However, his wife had recently given birth to their first child. With a newborn at home, Layden was reluctant to do so much traveling and was therefore planning to switch jobs, though he wasn’t sure at this point what he might want to do.

“Astrid had suggested that I move to the twin plantations to work with the Underground Army,” Layden related. “I did meet General Dawson once, and I wouldn’t mind working for her; but my wife doesn’t want to move. We like living on the mountain, close to her mother. Well, fairly close anyway; it’s six miles farther than it was three years ago. But that’s not a horrible thing,” he added jokingly, “to have some distance between home and the mother-in-law.”

Whether or not Layden would ever end up working with Weatherly, she had had an enormous impact on his early life, in his toddler years, when she sent a task force back in time to stop the snuff film, *Urchins*, from being made. Layden was one of the toddlers slated to be tortured and slaughtered in the film for the amusement of certain depraved individuals. So the actions of Weatherly had basically saved his life, though she hadn’t studied the details, as in the names of the victims, and therefore didn’t particularly know that she had saved him. Layden himself would also never become aware of this. But God definitely knew, as did Etowa, since several of his game moves had actually brought the film to the attention of Weatherly.

Also unknown to Layden, his birth mother had had a version of his gift. However, instead of being able to use it, it pretty much drove her to drug use, near insanity, and eventual death.

The next day as they traveled, the talkative Layden continued to chat, sharing with everyone the details of the new cabin Bear was building for his growing family. Bear Hammermill was still in charge

of construction on the mountain; and when he wasn't heading up large-scale projects, he liked to build cabins.

After talking about stair spindles, cabinets, light fixtures, and the stone fireplace, Layden next shared a story of something that had happened about a month previous, involving Bear.

"He accidentally moved a rock that he wasn't supposed to," Layden said, with laughter in his voice, "one harboring a stone spirit. Well, the spirit was definitely roused, and threw Bear about a mile, but into a lake, so he wasn't hurt, thankfully. But I think he got his feelings plenty hurt. Probably nothing else in the world could have thrown Bear. It took a stone spirit."

Muriel was smiling when hearing the story. Though tales tended to get around the mountain, she hadn't yet heard this one about Bear, whom she was very fond of, mainly because he was one of the people of the mountain that she got on well with. Better at communicating with animals than people, she sometimes had trouble relating to others. But, of course, Bear was very animalistic. He had even in recent years taken to sleeping in a dugout den.

As a small skunk that had been riding on her left shoulder for the past mile or so began nuzzling her cheek, Muriel fed him berries from her pocket as she nuzzled him back.

Rhett was fascinated to hear about the nature spirits, none of whom he had ever seen close up before. "As protective as they are, I wonder if they'll even let me onto the mountain," he speculated.

Layden was just about to reply when Muriel beat him to it. "Anyone with the Holy Spirit inside can come onto the mountain."

And this was indeed true. In fact, the Holy Spirit had just prompted her to say this.

Chapter Seven

Whistles and Paddocks

“Listen to advice and accept instruction, that you may gain wisdom for the future. Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the LORD that will be established.” Proverbs 19:20-21

Four weeks later—early morning in a forested area outside of Supercity Nine, with acorns falling all about him because autumn was on the approach—Vidas Farr was using a Mancer’s Sphere (a device all necromancers were adept with) to commune with the spirit of Jerome. This was something he would have been capable of doing from his office, but he often preferred the solitude of the woods, particularly enjoyable today because he had been anxious to get away from Tanner for a time. While it was necessary for sorcerers to mentor, Vidas had found Tanner to be something of an annoyance lately, mainly because he was overly smug and cocky in his abilities, which were definitely advanced for his years; but, still, no one particularly likes arrogance.

Vidas had also been anxious to talk to Jerome in complete privacy, to discuss the escape of Rhett and Gavin from Supe-7.

“I never had any idea that Rhett had defected,” Vidas said, still in a slight state of shock over everything that had happened.

“I had an inkling about him,” Jerome responded, “but I ignored it. It’s human nature to ignore inklings, when we shouldn’t.”

“Telén being good friends with Rhett for so long has led me to wonder about him,” Vidas offered.

Shaking his head slightly as if considering, Jerome replied, “I’ve never gotten any bad feelings about Telén; but, then, I never spent as much time with him as people might have imagined. We were both busy with our Governor duties which, as you know, don’t intersect all that often for most of the Twos since each is in charge of different things.”

Vidas was nodding because this was correct. He very seldom spent time with his counterpart in Nine.

“I would suggest you watch Telén,” Jerome added. “If you can get someone to cover for you in Nine, spend more time in Seven. And maybe assign a couple of print doubles as watchers too.”

As Vidas nodded again, the conversation ended because he had only enacted a four minute Call-to-the-Dead.

Meanwhile, back at the twin plantations on the same morning as the call to Jerome, Vini and Samantha had just left before dawn on a trip to Lion Mountain, taking several hippotherapy horses with them because they were planning to set up a program on the mountain. Quin and her dad would be taking charge of the one at Laurelstone for the next few weeks while the pair was gone. This was not going to be a problem because the program had plenty of experienced volunteers, mainly from a university located in one of the pockets on the plantations.

Linn was anxious to help out; he still used the program himself sometimes. This happened to be the first Saturday in September; and just as the sun was coming up for the day, he was already at the main hippotherapy corral, waiting for Quin to arrive. A couple of the college students saddling horses were smiling at him because he looked rather funny, with sparrows lined up on the back of his airchair and on his shoulders, and two field mice sitting on his left foot.

All of a sudden feeling very tired, he decided not to stay, and headed home for the day instead. Linn was puzzled as he soared away. The tiredness wasn't from a lack of breakfast because he had eaten a bowl of oatmeal topped with strawberries before leaving the house.

His mother had thought he might be depressed, which many people were wary of in this day and age. Being so worried about his lack of energy lately, she had insisted he see a doctor the previous week. Linn knew he wasn't depressed. For one thing, he had been feeling very upbeat for most of the summer. He was doing well in school, getting a lot done in the lab, and looking forward to starting on even more projects. The doctor had concurred that he wasn't depressed, and had found nothing else wrong either. But Linn definitely knew something was wrong because, in addition to bouts of fatigue, he was also experiencing frequent nausea, headaches, and loss of appetite.

Though he had mentioned these things to the doctor, Linn was reluctant to tell his mother about them because he didn't want to cause her further worry. He also hadn't told his friends exactly how poorly he felt at times. He didn't want to worry them either. Plus, he had never been a complainer. The doctor had actually told him not to worry because all of the tests had come back fine. However, he couldn't help but worry, at least some, because he had lost about five pounds in the past month, despite trying to eat more. Always having been a bit thin, he really couldn't afford to lose too much.

Speaking of thin, Etowa happened to be very near the corral on this day, and he was still just about as thin as ever; though he did now have plenty to eat, thanks to the boy he was watching fly off to home.

Being within about twenty feet of one of the college students didn't matter because Etowa wouldn't be noticed, since he was outside of time. Still, it was prudent to keep slightly behind a laurel tree. Since quite a few humans these days had exceptional sight gifts, Etowa knew it was possible someone might see him. A nine-year-old girl inside one of the areas in which Quin had stopped time had recently spotted Cuoré in camouflage. Though everything in that area was frozen in place, the sight gift of the girl had allowed her to make out the white dragon hovering above her.

Etowa was watching the horses on this day in an effort to cheer himself up from the ongoing disappointment he felt regarding the poor choice of a particular one of God's children, who was about to give in to temptation and commit an impulsive act. However, while he was definitely disappointed, Etowa actually felt bad for the person, and almost felt a need right now to be close to that individual, whom he had watched for many years.

Deciding he might have a peek at Doyle Mansion while in this part of the country, Etowa set off at a strolling pace. It didn't matter how long it took to get there, which ended up being four days as humans count time.

Arriving early morning, Etowa noticed Zapor just heading out, along with a gnome flying a little super-powered airship, which needed to be super-powered in order to keep up with a gryphon. Etowa had to smile. In many ways the gnomes were just as clever as the genies, and often more industrious.

Etowa hadn't noticed Kisi and Pipac on board Zapor. They were actually heading to the plantations to pick up Louetta, who was still living in the garage apartment there that also served as her studio.

After picking up Louetta, the group headed out on two errands, the first of which was to Nebraska so that the gnome could show Kisi and Pipac several groupings of topiaries that had not yet been brought to life by puck trolls. Members of the Leaf Lovers group, which Jenny was still in charge of, had only just completed these creations one month previous, and gnomes had only just a week ago finished refining the shapes. Included in the menagerie were an eagle, a bigfoot, three ponies, a turtle, an albatross, a huge goat, a swan, an orangutan, two greyhounds, and an enormous swallowtail butterfly. The albatross and swan were particularly breathtaking. However, since a gnome was along, Zapor and Louetta were careful not to compliment any of the work.

Pipac was still learning the skill of bringing artistic creations to life, which his sister had already mastered, and she ended up coaching him a few times. But pucks (even learning ones) are generally pretty fast, which meant the whole troop of topiaries was brought to life in less than four minutes, amidst a fabulous show featuring many swirls, sizzles, and sparkles of multicolored lights.

As the gnome bid them farewell and headed off in a separate direction to check on the progress of other topiaries, Zapor carried Louetta and the pucks to a point just outside Supercity Three, where several murals were done on city walls. These were not visible because they were done in invisible paint, the creation of a person in a lab much like the one Linn and Jitterbug worked in at Laurelstone, but this one was in a pocket in Wyoming. Though the work was invisible, people could still hide inside the lovely creations, which featured nature scenes of meadows, mountains, waterfalls, farmlands, woods, and such. Using a version of rose-colored glasses (also developed in the lab in Wyoming), the visitors were able to see the works. Kisi and Pipac stood on Louetta's left shoulder in order to peer through the glasses she was holding out for them.

Now, it was simply a matter of bringing the paintings to life so that people could hide in them. This would be of great benefit to many

escaping Supe-3 because anyone passing into the murals would be as invisible as the paint used to create them.

After completing their task, they took a leisurely trip home. Flying slowly, they observed an orc in a mothership community in Colorado chopping firewood for the residents for their upcoming winter. This particular orc had adopted this particular community; and he often did chores for them like weeding gardens, squashing gremlins, and occasionally retrieving children's kites from trees. As an orcling, he had been tamed by a genie, which meant he still grew up disagreeable, but not dangerous. And being genie tamed meant he was destined to do good deeds, though he did tend to grumble a lot whilst performing them, as he was doing on this day, even when taking a break as two children brought him a pie. A thick blanket arrived next because a farmer's wife was worried over the nighttime air turning colder and the dampness of the cave that the orc liked to sleep in. After accepting the blanket, the orc continued to grumble, while loosening the lid of a jar of beets the woman was carrying.

When Saturday morning rolled around again on the plantations, Linn didn't feel any better than he had the previous Saturday, having been both tired and headachy for most of the week. Plus, despite all of the rich foods his mother had been forcing down him, he had lost another two pounds.

Zin and Quin were both as worried as Linn's mother; and while Quin usually waited for God to direct her to heal someone, she ended up trying to use her gift on her friend on this day without His instruction.

When it didn't work, she was truly surprised, and even a little scared in thinking that her gift might be broken. Though the healing touch never worked to cure things like diabetes (or in Linn's case muscular dystrophy), and she couldn't bring people back from the dead like dragon tears could, she could usually heal things like cuts, measles, sore throats, broken bones, and such. In order to perform a test, she headed to the hospital on the grounds of Netherwind where she healed one person with the flu and two people with burns.

Zin was also on the case and had tracked down a healing sapphire, which she brought to Linn's home shortly before lunchtime, just as Quin was leaving to make the test at the hospital. The sapphire also didn't work, and Linn seemed just as tired as he had before the stone

came onto the scene. Plus, he ended up throwing up, probably because Quin, shortly before Zin arrived, had coaxed him into drinking a thimbleful of dragon tears, which also hadn't worked.

Quin and Zin were both basically terrified for their friend. Maggie Linn had taken her son to Antica during the week, and the doctors there hadn't been able to find anything wrong with him either. *So what was going on?*

Not knowing what else to do, both girls ended up going home to pray. And while neither got an answer right away, both felt much better. At least they were calmer and less afraid in knowing that God always hears the prayers of His children and always makes all things, even trying and stressful things, work out for good.

Samantha and Vini made it to Lion Mountain that afternoon. They actually knew what was happening with Linn, but hadn't wanted to relate the information to anyone, not even to Linn or his mother, because they didn't want to scare them.

Charlie had recently related to Vini that the time was nearing for them to mount a rescue for both the captured unicorn and over two hundred dragons being kept in the same location. Vini had already been in touch with Albert who would be helping with the endeavor. Samantha had especially kept the information from Quin because she feared her daughter might get it into her head to try to rescue the trapped dragons by herself.

Using a stolen unicorn whistle, Unicorn Hunters had managed their first capture roughly seven weeks before, this being the unicorn directly connected to Linn. More hunters would now be trained. The whistle was not yet duplicated, but the sorcerers were in the process of working on this and would soon figure it out so that they could capture more. While they couldn't kill the unicorn using things like knives, guns, fire, or even various supernatural means, they could starve the creature, using a containment box designed to cut off the supply of food, basically starving the unicorn of human goodness. More containment boxes were already being made, as well as floating paddocks to house the boxes. Since unicorns have power over anything on earth, the containment boxes could not be connected to the earth and still work. So they had to float.

Doctors could find nothing wrong with Linn because it was mainly his soul that was being affected. His soul was being drained of all energy because his Soul Shadow was being starved.

While the goodness Linn was producing was definitely seeping into the Demon Pocket in which the unicorn and dragons were being held, it could not penetrate the material the box was made of.

The dragons were being held in paddocks (though not floating ones) designed to contain their fire and movement. They were not being starved because the sorcerers holding them were trying to convert them to evil, which was not an easy task, but it could be accomplished, as evidenced by the four dragons they had already done this with. The converted dragons were now in the process of fighting others of their kind by ganging up on particularly stubborn ones that showed no signs of weakening in their fight against evil.

It had been fifty years since Vini learned to summon unicorns. Because so few people in the world were able to call unicorns, the creatures weren't at present playing much of a part in helping to thwart evil. Vini had long known not to call unicorns frivolously, or often. For one thing, the light of unicorns could be harmful to humans in that it could cause blindness. The unicorn whistles, kept in a large safe in the Labyrinth Library, were also used incredibly sparingly, only for particularly dangerous missions where many lives were at stake and no other way could be found of saving those involved.

When the whistle was stolen by a mimic, over twenty years ago, a lookalike had been put in its place to conceal that it was stolen; and this was a ruse that had worked for a very long time. In fact, Samantha and Vini had only recently discovered what happened through daydreams and dreams.

It had taken the sorcerers a full two decades to learn how the whistle worked. Because the workings were based on earthly music, some of which was closely connected to and corrupted by Satan, tech-savvy sorcerers had been able to corrupt the whistle, basically modifying it to be used to call specific unicorns.

Even Vini had never been able to figure out how to call specific unicorns. But, satanic forces are often very powerful; and Samantha and Vini should have known to be wary of anything connected to music. They probably should have destroyed the original whistle. But this

simply hadn't occurred to them because they had wanted to use it for good. They very much regretted not praying more and listening to God. Now, Linn was paying the price of human carelessness; and if the rescue was not successful, the rest of the world would pay as well, in the form of the starvation of many of the world's magical creatures who were dependent upon Linn for their sustenance. The stolen whistle would also need to be recovered, before it could be duplicated, in order to thwart the sorcerers' plan of targeting others of God's children by killing their Soul Shadows, starting with the gifted, to get them out of the way first, then moving on to other human beings.

The tech sorcerers had had to take the whistle apart in order to try to duplicate it. While apart, it wouldn't work to call more unicorns. Plus, individual signatures (like musical fingerprints) were needed to call specific unicorns; and it was taking mimics and Unicorn Hunters some time to gather this data. So those planning the rescue had a little time to work with before other unicorns could be captured. As far as Linn's situation, because his Soul Shadow was strong, he would also have a little time, though the fact that he was thin and losing weight was a pretty big concern.

As Vini and Samantha were getting settled in, some fifty miles from their location, Ruth was having an afternoon nap; and she was dreaming.

She first dreamt of unicorns on the mountain. Even in her dream, Ruth was skeptical. Though she had seen the white dragon, she doubted she would ever see a unicorn in real life. Her father had always said unicorns were rare, and serious business. However, he had also told her that if she ever saw one, to look away if the creature started to light up.

After watching two unicorns frolic in a meadow on the mountain, Ruth, in her dream, took a path through the woods. At this point, things turned rather dark, not from the shade of the trees, but because demons were nearby. She couldn't see them, but she knew they were there.

This also couldn't be real, the dreaming Ruth decided, because no demons were allowed on the mountain. The spirits wouldn't let them come here.

But she could definitely feel them. She had been around enough demons in her life (albeit a short one so far) to know what they felt like, even if they weren't right in front of her, because the ones in the cities

often didn't bother to use their shielding to hide their presence. She also knew what it felt like to have them put their ugly thoughts inside her head.

Waking up, Ruth hugged Bunny and Teddy who were napping beside her on the bed. It felt good to have them with her because she was rather scared. Her dream had seemed so real.

Should she tell someone?

Just like how she got the idea in her head that she shouldn't tell anyone about what had happened in the bamboo field when she was waiting for her parents on the day they escaped, she was now getting the idea that she should tell someone about the dream.

Her mother was resting. Being pregnant meant she needed to rest more than normal, and Ruth didn't want to bother her. Her dad had just started his new job in water treatment. According to him, he was helping to make the water on the mountain clean for everyone. He would be home in an hour.

Ruth knew how to tell time, so she watched the clock in her room while playing with Bunny and Teddy on the rug by her bed. She tried to stay quiet, and she told Bunny to be quiet because he liked to sing, mostly church songs. So Bunny just hummed softly instead of singing.

In exactly an hour, her father made it home, just as her mother was getting up from resting. So Ruth told them both about the dream of demons on the mountain. It had felt so real, she believed it.

"But there can't be," her mother stated. "The spirits are strong and won't let them onto the mountain. No demons, no sorcerers, no hunters of any kind, and not even people from the gangs that loot in the Rubble Cities and waylay travelers."

Ruth's father agreed with his wife, but he was wise enough to know there might be something to the dream. The look on his daughter's face was enough to convince him there was very probably something to it. But at this point, he didn't know what to do about it.

After thinking for a bit, the family decided they would tell the pastor at church the next morning.

Meanwhile, at the same time the Evans family was deciding this, Zin was working, in her own Magicians' Laboratory set up in the subbasement library at Doyle Mansion. The lab was only mini in comparison to the ones at Netherwind and Laurelstone because a good

chunk of the library was still filled with bookshelves, display cases, tables, and such, which had been rearranged to make room for her lab. The rearranging had been no problem; there was plenty of room because some books and artifacts had been moved to the Labyrinth Library, not only for safekeeping, but also so that Vini could have easier access to them.

Zin was trying to come up with something magical to help Linn feel better. This was not going to be anything like what a doctor might cook up because there were no chemicals or even botanicals involved, just a bit of magic, mainly spells, such as *Breath of Birthday Cake*, which allowed a person to breathe, taste, and smell birthday cake for six hours straight. (This always had the effect of cheering someone up.) Thinking a little longer, Zin pondered creating a *Laughter of Juggling Clowns Whammy*, which planted a recurring image in the mind that could clear headaches. (In this case, the clowns themselves were being gently juggled by a behemoth.) She also thought *Smell Rain See Rainbows* might be a good option. Each of these, Zin had created herself, and she liked to call them her *Frivolous Trivialities*.

In the end, she decided on the *Tea Steeping Jinx*, which generally helped to clear sinuses and stimulate the appetite. She also made up some special bath salts for Linn, ones whose bubbles both giggled and massaged. While working on the bath salts, she made notes about something else she wanted to eventually make—a whistle that could call butterflies. Unlike the other critters that Linn attracted, insects tended to keep their distance. Since he was an avid butterfly watcher, she felt he might like to have a way to call them.

While Zin was working in her lab, Quin was writing in her journal, specifically about Linn, whom she truly admired. He never complained about being in an airchair; in fact, he often said, “This is how God made me. I’m supposed to be this way.” He had also told her he felt incredibly blessed, and honored, to be chosen to help feed magical creatures all over the world.

Quin had met a lot of disabled people over the years while working in the hippotherapy program; and from her perspective, Linn had always been more positive and upbeat than many others in similar circumstances. Even though he might have liked to have known what it would be like to walk or run, he never seemed sad to be confined to a

chair, or that he couldn't go with her on very many trips. He had gone with her a handful of times; but for the most part, it wasn't safe for him to ride a dragon, for as much action as she and Cuoré tended to be involved in.

That very night, Quin had a dream of Zin creating a spell that would allow Linn to feel what it would be like to walk. And this was not categorized in her Frivolous Trivialities because it was not at all frivolous or trivial.

At Doyle Mansion around midnight, Zin was struggling to get to sleep because she was still thinking about Linn. While most gifted people had to be active in the use of their skills, his gift was truly special because he simply had to exist. But what if he didn't exist much longer? Even aside from the lack of food for magical creatures, she couldn't imagine the hole in her life this would leave. The thought of this left her truly scared about whatever might be wrong with her friend. Although everyone was destined to eventually die, this was way too early for Linn.

Out and about early on Sunday morning, Martella was heading to Supercity Nine, and in something of a hurry because a lot of horrible things had been happening in Nine lately

Sure enough, as soon as she arrived, she saw a puck troll cornered in an alley by two demons. But just as she was reaching for her triangle to call a white hummingbird, a zipakola water lizard emerged from a rain barrel in the alley (his favorite hiding spot). Upon reaching the demons, the lizard tore at their ankles and knees, which allowed the puck to make a run for a gutter downspout, which led to the entrance of a secret puck tunnel in the wall of the building containing the puck troll's den. Rather than continuing to battle the zipakola, who was quite ferocious, the demons took off flying.

Martella was smiling. Puck Troll Hunters had given up over the years because they had never been successful, mainly because the little trolls had so many friends willing to protect them. But while pucks generally didn't need much help from spreepprites, people did.

Next flying to a train station, Martella observed children being loaded into several passenger cars. These were mainly babies and toddlers in the keeping of several mimics who looked like nannies. Being able to sense the evil, the children were not fooled, and most

were crying. Martella was crying herself in knowing that these were kids being shuffled between cities, to make it harder for their parents to track them down and rescue them. Sadly, she could do nothing about this on this day because there were no older humans nearby who could take charge of the fifty or so children if she stopped time or did something like killing the mimics with her wand. So she reluctantly moved on, to a camp just outside the city.

Lately in Supe-9, people captured during escape attempts were being thrown into a pit in this camp to be punished by a particular sorcerer who delighted in tossing out handfuls of twigs and pebbles that respectively turned into three-foot poisonous snakes and fist-sized lethal spiders. This, Martella could do something about. Swiftly calling a white hummingbird, she managed to stop time in the half of the pit containing the spiders and snakes before they managed to reach the six people, who climbed out of the pit and set off at a run toward the stone wall acting as the containment barrier for the camp. Stopping time again to prevent the sorcerer and four stealth hobs from following, Martella was pleased to see the six make it safely over the wall.

Spreesprites rarely stopped time on a super-large scale, like in whole cities or camps, their normal range generally falling somewhere between six feet to a mile square. (The whole-country thing as far as stopping time had only happened twice in all of history.)

Of the six thousand and forty-eight total spreesprites in the world, seventy-three girls were currently operating in observation mode, with some only going home once a month or so; though many were like Martella, who preferred to only be out two and three days at a time before going home to her cozy little house inside a hollowed-out tree burl. The leaf gardens overhanging the house were quite pleasant as well, mainly because Weyland did such a good job of keeping them tidy. He also kept the plants in the gardens very healthy by singing to them. (While girl spreesprites liked to dance, the boys generally did most of the singing.)

Martella also enjoyed the food at home. Like other magical creatures, spreesprites didn't need to eat; but many ate things like flower petals, seeds, and nectar, as well as an assortment of baked and canned goods. From their gardens, they enjoyed all sorts of fruits and veggies, including frizalees, which were like tiny bell peppers in over

sixty varieties, with some being solid in color but most sporting stripes, streaks, spots, and swirls.

As soon as the six people made it over the wall, the white hummingbird left, as Martella blew a kiss to him and headed back inside the city where something funny was going on. Actually, it had been going on the week before too when Martella last visited Nine, and she had almost gotten a bellyache laughing over it. Out of frustration at not being able to break a walnut radio, a gremlin had swallowed the device, and was now spouting bible verses all day long because the walnut had been set to a station broadcasting exclusively bible readings. Things either made or enhanced by genies were, of course, very difficult to break, which would mean the radio would continue to broadcast, nonstop, for many years to come. The poor gremlin was currently wandering through the factory district looking for a place to hide while dodging rocks other gremlins were throwing at him. Sadly, gremlins were never very good at hiding. (Being invisible, they never needed to be.) A human looking out of a factory window and wearing a stealth version of rose-colored glasses was laughing as he watched the scene. The glasses had been developed by a city scientist in an underground lab in Supe-8. Though exclusively used in Eight for the past few months, the invisible glasses were starting to make their way into other cities, such as this pair in Nine; and thanks to a little help from the Great Multipliers, they would soon be plentiful enough to allow many people to discreetly keep track of the activities of gremlins, stealth hobs, and the like.

Entering a window in a high rise, Martella next peeked in on Vidas who was in his office and using a Mancer's Sphere to commune with Jerome, and she was able to catch a good chunk of their conversation.

"I have assigned two print doubles to watch Telén," Vidas said. "And I'll be heading to Seven next week for an extended stay."

"Good," Jerome responded. "I can't tell anything in my present state, only relate things I knew of before I was murdered. The only thing I know here is that the Master is very unhappy that more sorcerers seem to be switching sides than in previous years. In fact, he suspects there are far more traitors than we can imagine." (Satan was the Master Jerome was referring to.)

With genuine surprise sounding in his voice, Vidas asked, “What kind of percentages are we talking about? And how are they being converted?”

“Those are complete unknowns,” Jerome replied. “And that’s what’s frustrating Satan and the other Fallen Ones so much.”

After a short thought, Vidas said, “Sounds like cherub mischief to me.”

“Or magic,” Jerome answered. “I had noticed when I was alive that each new generation of magician seems to be getting cleverer.”

Jerome was hesitant to tell Vidas what Satan was most unhappy with—the fact that the sorcerers weren’t even noticing when one of their own defected. In his view, this made them unworthy of the power he had bestowed upon them. However, as a kind of warning, Jerome did say, “The Master is watching many of his servants, and is in the process of judging how many are unobservant and incompetent. I think there may come a time when he’ll decide to clean house, rather than risk having traitors continue to spoil his plans.”

This ended the conversation; and as Vidas closed the cover of the Mancer’s Sphere, the image of Jerome swiftly faded from the office.

Martella was giggling as she flew away because she knew exactly how a lot of people like hunters and sorcerers had been, and continued to be, converted. But this was information best kept confidential, so she wasn’t even planning to tell a bumblebee, not even the one near her home that she often shared secrets with.

She next flitted into one of the secret safe houses in the city, the entrance of which was in a janitor’s closet in a factory. This was a dorm and cafeteria for the elderly, and nothing much was going on here, except for a few people knitting socks and sweaters for the upcoming winter, and an eidetic person reciting a chapter from *Treasure Island*.

Heading to a shantytown, she made her way into a secret garden, basically a mini pocket, whose entrance was through a small tool shed behind an apartment building. Inside, the garden was nearly half an acre planted with multitudes of fall vegetables.

A bit of a bustle was going on inside a roomy corral situated in one corner of the garden. Evidently, hairy vetches were not the only magical creatures who could help people hide in the cities. It was recently discovered that enormice, while they couldn’t become invisible

like vetches, could extend their camouflage to cover people, and thus could pretty much provide the same service. Whole herds of enormice were evidently lining up to do so; and there was quite a bit of pushing and shoving going on (with so many anxious to help), and this was why the man organizing their efforts had built the corral.

“Just keep calm,” the man said, scratching the fluffy ears of the nearest two as he bent over the railing. “You’ll all get to go, just be a little patient. You have to wait your turn.” In order to keep the enormice occupied, he tossed a few soccer balls into the enclosure for them to bat around with each other.

Since enormice were really too big to sit on a person’s shoulder like vetches could (though the mice had been known to balance on a head or two), they mainly scurried alongside whomever they were assigned to protect, which worked to perfectly conceal a person, often allowing them to cross from one side of the city to the other easily without being seen by anyone. Whenever possible, enormice were being sent with those escaping from the cities. After getting their assigned persons out, the creatures would then sneak back in, to be available for another trip. Of particular delight to the enormice was helping children to escape.

A small pond was situated in another corner of the garden, and this was where Martella discovered a green darner dragonfly, upon which she hitched a short ride, just for fun, because riding beetles and hummingbirds and such was never anything spreesprites needed to do. They just sometimes liked to.

The dragonfly took her out of the city where she said goodbye to him near another pond on an abandoned farm.

A short while later, Martella observed that the Leftovers had crossed into Arkansas. They might have made more progress on their trip except for deciding to stay two full weeks at an earthship community in Oklahoma, where they were outfitted head to toe for the next leg of their journey, including packs full of dried food.

While in the community, Alex shared his secret of how to fly with a small boy, who believed every word he was told, and would eventually learn how to apply the information to his own body; thus, he too would be able to fly. So this was one reason the Leftovers had needed to take a longer-than-intended journey—so they could share a few of their talents with others along the way.

People in the earthship community had done a bit of talent-sharing as well, in that Clara had received some flute training during their stay. And she was getting better, both in accuracy and in confidence.

Martella was relieved to see that all members of the Leftovers were still whole and sound. They had had a little tussle earlier in the day, but it was nothing they couldn't handle. A nyreg had grabbed up Meg by her shoulders; but Alex, who had been working on his flying speed lately, had been able to pursue and save her by cutting one of the beast's legs in midair, after which, he caught Meg as the nyreg dropped her. Clara had then used her flute to ward off additional advances, and the nyreg fled soon after.

In traveling along with the Leftovers for a bit (though unseen of course), from snatches of conversation, Martella was able to piece together a little more of their story, to add to what she had learned a couple of other times she had followed along.

Before finding the earthship community, the group had been searching for pockets, but had only discovered that a manger was just a manger, and a trap door next to a flattened house led only to an old root cellar. Their friends in the earthship community had helped them determine their new destination, the Inn at Magnolia Hills, from which, they would be able to travel underground to the plantations, and from there, make it to the mountain through a magical doorway. Now that they had a clear direction, a map, and other supplies, the Leftovers hoped to be able to make it all the way to the inn without having to stop anywhere else for any length of time.

Martella smiled in noticing that the Leftovers were becoming something of a family to one another. Mr. Weiss especially seemed to need a family, not just because he had so recently lost his wife, but because he had never had children. Mrs. Weiss had had an accident as a child that left her unable to conceive. Considering her worthless, since she hadn't and couldn't produce the required four children, the sorcerers of Supe-2 had at one time wanted to do away with her; but they didn't because Mr. Weiss was a skilled machinist, whom they valued as both a foreman and for training others at a hydro plant.

Suddenly noticing that two megahobs had just started tailing the group, instead of stopping time to hold up the hobs, Martella opted for a

bit of fun. She had an item recently given to her by a genie that would be just the thing—a Bengalburr whistle.

Only genies could tame ferocious Bengalburrs, which resembled both Bengal tigers and large burrs. And while the tiny striped hamster-sized creatures generally didn't like anyone but genies, after being tamed, they did like to perform chores, such as chewing all of the hair off of a megahob in about ten seconds flat.

True to form, arriving on the scene exactly one minute after Martella blew the whistle, the Bengalburr dealt with both hobs in around nineteen seconds, sending the yelping beasts running back to their home inside a Demon Pocket, their hides stinging painfully from having just received the equivalent of a super-close razor burn.

After watching the Bengalburr streak away into the Arkansas hills, Martella decided to check on the group she was calling Converted Sorcerer and Crew. Muriel was in the process of talking to a bird in an ash tree that was telling her they were about to run into a Dragon Hunter, which Layden couldn't sense because the man was not demonic, just simply a bad person. So the group changed direction to avoid the hunter. They were traveling a rather zig-zag path, which was taking much longer than expected. But since they were enjoying each other's company, the group didn't mind. Plus, both Muriel and Cecelia were used to long breaks from school, which was easy for both girls to make up.

Coincidentally, another spreessprite had looked in on this group only two days previous, and had been impressed that Layden was able to tell that demons were hiding in the bushes nearly four miles ahead on their path, which allowed a change of route to avoid the danger.

In addition to the zig-zag path, the travelers weren't making as much progress on their trek to the mountain as others might because they had spent twelve days in a large pocket community in order to see a couple of plays and visit a library, which enabled the girls to attend to some of their schoolwork. While in the pocket, they had crossed paths with Muriel's mother, who carried messages back to Lion Mountain from Cecelia to her parents and Layden to his wife, who had her sister staying with her at present to help care for the new baby, so he wasn't particularly missed at home at this time.

As Martella next made a visit to Lion Mountain, she noticed that Bear and two of his helpers had finished work on a large stable and paddocks for the hippotherapy program, which Vini and Samantha were helping the horses get settled into. Deciding to stay on the mountain for the rest of the day, Martella settled herself in a crook of one of the rafters of the stable to watch the horses and people for a while.

Meanwhile, back at the plantations, after attending a church service led by her Grandpa Ben, Quin was making a visit to Linn who had stayed home from church due to feeling tired and nauseas.

After the visit, Quin headed home and on a whim tried auto-writing, the result of which let her know exactly what was wrong with her friend. In addition to learning about the trapped unicorn and dragons, she also found out that her mother and grandmother had known about this for some time. Wishing they had just told her, she reasoned that they hadn't wanted to worry her. In learning about the plight of the two hundred plus dragons Quin felt just as nauseas as Linn, especially in thinking how many she hadn't been able to protect from hunters over the years. And she might have been tempted to try to mount a rescue all on her own, except that a voice in the back of her mind, and a feeling in her gut, were telling her to talk to her mother first. (These are the sort of inklings that human beings should pay attention to. We shouldn't ignore them.)

She had a good excuse for going to Lion Mountain even aside from needing to talk to her mom. Already missing the horses that had just been moved, she had planned to visit them on occasion at their new home. So she asked Cuoré to take her to the mountain late in the afternoon, where she found her mother and grandmother both at the new stable and corrals. (Martella was still watching, though only a couple of the horses knew that she was in the stable; none of the humans noticed her.)

After blurting out what she knew about the trapped dragons and unicorn, and the effect on Linn, Quin quickly recognized that God was speaking through her mother in her response, which included a warning for Quin not to take matters into her own hands, particularly because others were already on the case and taking action. "We all just need to be a little patient at this point," her mother advised. "Even though it's going to be hard to wait, we have to."

With Quin voicing that she was particularly worried about how long Linn might have, her grandmother stated, “We can’t know that, so we have to pray and ask for the Lord’s guidance. He will tell us exactly what to do and when. We want the best chance of success when we make our move, so we have to make sure we don’t rush God.”

Hugging her granddaughter, Vini added, “We are very sad that this happened; but since nothing is outside of the control of God, there has to be some reason the unicorn was captured. Aside from learning a lesson about carelessness with regard to things like unicorn whistles, one reason might be that we were meant to rescue the dragons. Charlie’s visions of the trapped unicorn started way back when. If the unicorn had never been trapped, we might not have become aware of the dragons that need help too.”

As far as the dragons being held too, the plan of the sorcerers had always been to convert the creatures. Knowing their role in the Endtimes of helping to remake the earth in fire, Satan and his followers very much wanted to thwart as many of God’s plans as possible, as well as use the power of the dragons on their side, if possible. It was also part of their plan to use the converted dragons against humankind, which would cause people to hate and fear dragons.

Satan has always been the Great Deceiver. And like his demons, he is also shapeshifting. Over the years, he has taken on the form of a dragon exactly for the purpose of deceiving people into thinking that dragons are bad. However, since dragons are also shapeshifters and their primary form is that of a dove, God’s children need not be deceived. The One True Dove is at work in the hearts of dragons, and nothing is outside of the control of the Father.

For years it had been difficult for those on the side of good to decipher the mysteries involving Demon Pockets. In truth, each one was a separate realm of evil, created by Satan’s followers using Dark Energy. Originally designed as traps for human beings, who were lured in by various temptations (even sometimes simply by over-curiosity), Demon Pockets were now mostly being used as depositories for evil beings like gremlins and demons, as well as serving as centers for activities of evil such as the dragon conversions and unicorn starvation. Occasionally, a Demon Pocket was created within another Demon Pocket, as was the case with the one containing the trapped unicorn.

This had been done in order to make it harder for anyone trying to rescue the prisoners to do so.

With regard to Charlie's early visions of the trapped unicorn and dragons, she had known that the Bermuda Triangle was a Demon Pocket, but hadn't known about the second pocket situated within it until very recently.

Satan had taken particular joy in his followers being able to use a triangle to create a place of evil, since triangles were most often associated with those using Light Energy. But we needn't worry because an even larger sea triangle existed, containing much more power than the Bermuda Triangle. And this was already being used by God's children.

There is always more power on the side of good than on the side of evil, even if it isn't always obvious that this is so. And human goodness is so powerful that it can permeate any Demon Pocket, even one situated within another pocket, which is why the sorcerers had to create a special box in which to starve the unicorn.

In wrapping up the conversation with her mother and grandmother, Quin asked, "But just to confirm, someone is doing something about this?"

"Yes," Samantha answered. "Many people are involved, and at the highest levels. So you don't need to worry."

This did relieve Quin's mind slightly, though she did still fully intend to take appropriate action herself, when the time was right. After all, it was her job to protect dragons; and she felt it was equally her job (if not more so) to protect her friend. So when the time came for the rescue, she would definitely be involved.

Chapter Eight

Death by Nitch

“No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.” 1 Corinthians 10:13

Linn wasn't the only one who was tired these days. As Weatherly and others had noticed, many people were growing weary of living in a world dominated by evil—the persecution, the trials, and various dangers. The worsening of natural disasters often seemed the most trying of all.

Georgia and South Carolina were currently experiencing horrible flooding due to the remnants of a hurricane. As a result, two mothership communities were being wiped out, with many residents dying, unable to flee the swiftly-rising waters.

Birch was sad not to have been able to stop the torrential downpours prior to the flooding. Having heard about the advancing storms through the underground news stream, he would have wanted to do this; and he would have been capable, but had been instructed not to. At this time, per God's instructions, he was to focus his efforts on fighting demon-produced storms, like the one currently going on near a camp in Pennsylvania, raised by mimics to stop a group of escapees. Arriving atop Naya and driving away the lightning, wind, and drenching rain, Birch was pleased to witness the sixteen fleeing people make it to the safety of a pocket some four miles from the camp.

Because he wasn't always allowed to put his skills to full use, Birch often felt depressed, like a lot of people, this being part of the tiredness epidemic that seemed to be sweeping many parts of the earth. Though he tried to take care of himself, he did still frequently experience symptoms such as distraction, low energy, and poor sleep. Blessedly,

his parents and Naya were pretty much constantly around, which meant he always had someone to discuss troubling problems with. They were also very good at reminding him to do things like eat right, exercise, read the bible, and pray. “Remember,” his mother often said, “God is always in charge, and His ways are often mysterious.”

In many parts of the world, those waiting expectantly for the Endtimes often used bible quotes such as Isaiah 33:2 to remind themselves to be patient. “O LORD, be gracious to us; we wait for thee. Be our arm every morning, our salvation in the time of trouble.” Psalm 27:14 was another favorite. “Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; yea, wait for the Lord!”

Hearing members of their congregations voicing frustration over waiting for the Second Coming, Ben and many other preachers were reminding people that not everyone is saved, and that we need to bring as many as possible to Christ before the Endtimes. Encouraging patience, Ben often quoted 2 Peter 3:9. “The Lord is not slow about his promise as some count slowness, but is forbearing toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.” Many people agreed that this might be one reason as to why we must wait, because the Great Commission is not yet completely fulfilled. While not everyone will be saved, because some people will simply choose the opposite, we must be diligent in witnessing. And since we can’t know when the Endtimes will happen, we will simply have to endure.

“God also is driving people to Him,” Ben often stated, with regard to things like the natural disasters. “We’re supposed to depend totally upon Him, and not on ourselves.”

In the realm of weariness, Boko was also very tired. Though time was nothing to him, or Etowa, Boko was basically tired of their game, and somewhat anxious for it to end, despite knowing his outcome—that of being resigned to live in hell with Satan. With regard to that, Boko often thought, *If only the Sixteenth Dimension had never been created.*

The thinking of many human beings often fell along the same lines. *If only Satan hadn’t rebelled. If only Adam and Eve hadn’t given in to temptation. If only, if only....* The world lately seemed to be filled with regrets, and dreams of how wonderful our lives might have been if we hadn’t given in to sin.

Etowa had known the unicorn capture was going to happen; but this was an event totally unrelated to any of the moves in his game with Boko, instead being related to the exact thing many were pondering—how different our lives might have been if we hadn't given in and become such sinful creatures. When discovering how the unicorn whistle worked, Samantha and Vini had not been careful. They had forgotten to ask for God's guidance, and had rushed ahead with having more whistles made. Now, because of their carelessness, the Almighty was going to have to fix things. But, as usual, according to Romans 8:28, "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose."

While Samantha and Vini both knew they had done wrong and had regrets, they were now trying to do right; and despite the gravity of the situation with the unicorn, and the possible effects on the future if the rescue they were planning wasn't successful, they were trying to keep positive, mainly through prayer and reading the bible, but also in looking after themselves, which was important because no one can look after others very well if they aren't taking good care of themselves.

Sadly, many people less able to cope with the stress of the times were seeking escapism, which was why alcoholism was such a problem. Drug use was also bad, particularly among the youth and mainly in the form of two pill drugs, Sunshine Daydream and Nightwatch, their respective street names being Shream and Nitch. Both had been invented by sorcerers some thirty years previous and at first had been given away free, in order to get many people hooked. Now, despite costing credits or bartered goods (often stolen ones), the drugs were fairly easy to obtain. Both were also easy to OD on because their current makers, mainly people in makeshift home labs, didn't particularly care about the quality of what they were providing and often ended up with a product slightly more potent than what was considered par.

However, potency was not a factor in what happened with Ignacio. Instead of an accidental overdose of the drug Nitch, which he had been using on and off for nearly five years, he had clearly intentionally killed himself, leaving only a simple note on his bedroom dresser which read, "Sorry, Dad. Sorry I wasn't a better son."

Preston, like many others, was completely shocked, particularly because he hadn't at all known that his son was doing drugs, which had never been much of a problem on the plantations because the residents were so closely monitored by pastors, teachers, family members, friends, coworkers, and others. Even the likes of gargoyles, bigfoots, and gryphons were on the lookout for problems of this sort. But human beings have a way of hiding things from others, especially things like weaknesses and poor choices. Ignacio even managed to hide his death for a couple of days, having told his father he was planning to spend some time with friends in Kivetel.

Dragon tears were used to try to revive him, but didn't work. As far as anyone knew, no suicide victim had ever been brought back by dragon tears. Whether this was because the tears were never meant to work in cases of suicide, or whether the victims were all found too late, no one really knew. There was evidently a time limit with regard to use of dragon tears, but no one knew exactly what it was. This was a puzzle many felt we would never have the answer to, mainly because human beings are all so very different from one another, and each situation is different.

Eizel had planted a few dreams recently that had caused suicides, but she didn't have anything to do with what had just happened with Ignacio. Simply put, he had never been able to handle stress as well as others. Plus, depression often runs in families. Vini had had her share of depressive episodes over the years. Preston, too, especially after his wife, Maria, died. Ignacio had recently been depressed, but hadn't sought help in the same manner he had in the past, from counselors and doctors. He had instead been using Nitch for periodic escapes; and, in this case, as a final escape.

As far as the efforts of daisy chains, sadly, they weren't very often able to save victims of impulsive acts, which was the case with Ignacio. He had made the decision, written the note, and taken the pills all within the same hour. He told no one what he was planning and had simply acted. So even if a daisy chain had been alerted, he or she likely would not have arrived in time to prevent the death. While Trista hadn't been alerted to help, having been a friend to the family for many years, she did come to the plantations for the funeral.

Drugs were not presently a problem on the mountain, at least not that anyone knew about. However, one might have thought something hallucinogenic was going on because several people aside from Ruth had reported dreams of demons on Lion Mountain. One seven-year-old boy, just discovering his gift to be the same as Charlie's, had seen in the shiny surface of a pond a vision of hundreds of demons swarming the mountain. Another person had been having daydreams with similar content, and a set of twins reported hearing in music words of warning of demons on the mountain. While most people insisted this was impossible, others were wise enough to be wary.

When Astrid was made aware of the various messages and visions, she speculated that they might be related to a battle far into the future, when perhaps there might be less spirits guarding the mountain. Or perhaps Satan was planting thoughts into people's minds. She also thought it possible that demons might have found a way to extend their thought-planting abilities. "Or it could simply be a case of a gifted individual using his or her talents for ill," Astrid suggested to a man reporting to her. Many people these days knew of Eizel and others like her, so this was a valid guess.

Since she didn't know exactly what was going on at this time, Astrid simply asked the spirits to be as diligent as possible in keeping watch. She also sent a message to Weatherly to ask if she could possibly send a few of her military personnel to the mountain, if any could be spared.

Weatherly did send two hundred Locusts through Laurelstone's window passage.

Also, as it happens, Sam was in the process of moving to the mountain, so an extra firebird was going to be around. With Lyydu already present, Astrid felt Lion Mountain would be well reinforced for whatever may come. In addition to wanting to set up a pottery studio on the mountain, Sam felt free to move because he was no longer needed to help care for his Uncle John, the man who had raised both Ben and Sam and who had recently passed away.

Astrid often consulted a certain twenty-year-old man gifted in the same manner as Charlie, who had visions so often that he wore a shiny steel cuff armband in which to view them. While he had not as yet had

any visions pertaining to demons infiltrating the mountain, he assured Astrid that he would remain diligent in watching for them.

While picking up a blueberry pie baked especially for her in one of the mess hall kitchens, Astrid also checked in with Charlie, who reported she had had no visions lately pertaining to demons. Nor had she had any visions relating to Ignacio, which truly surprised her, the lack of foresight perhaps as much as the suicide itself.

With many people in shock over Ignacio's death, the next few weeks on the plantations were destined to be a time of much emotional turmoil.

Preston, in addition to being grieved, felt cheated and angry, with the death of his son bringing back memories of having lost his wife so early; and now, Ignacio, far earlier than should be. Parents never expect that they will have to bury their children. Feeling guilt over not being a better parent, he was also distracted and not sleeping well; and in seeking his own escape, he started drinking. Playing over and over in his mind was the thought that he should have spent more time with Ignacio. Plus, in hindsight, he wondered if he might have intentionally overlooked clues that his son was doing drugs because he wouldn't have wanted to admit that this might be a possibility.

Knowing he couldn't do his job while drinking, Preston started not showing up most days, which actually wasn't a problem because Merri was more than able to pick up the slack.

While many were praying for Preston, most people were at a loss as to what exactly to do for him, or say to him; and since he seemed to want to be left alone, most of his friends and family did just that. Preston himself, particularly because he was so angry and distracted, was forgetting to pray, as well as forgetting to eat most days.

A certain kind of distraction, in the form of staying as busy as possible, was actually welcomed by many of Preston's family and friends. Vini and Samantha, who had returned from the mountain earlier than expected due to Ignacio's death, were keeping busy with the hippotherapy program, while checking on Preston as often as they could, bringing him food and trying to coax him to eat, talk, pray, whatever might help. Sadly, nothing seemed to help, particularly because Preston seemed keener on drinking than anything else.

As far as staying busy, Weatherly, as usual, focused on military operations, specifically at this time, assisting the NUR, helping Dell with organizing several time-travel task forces, and planning a certain large-scale project slated for the early spring. With Preston currently not engaged in his job, she also took the opportunity to help Merri conduct a few training exercises.

Early on a Tuesday morning, at first in a classroom setting before heading out to a training station for physical practice, Weatherly went over quite a lot of information, demonstrating on the training board as she spoke.

When discussing what were known as Shadow Strategies, she said, “Since using a rope takes a lot of freedom of movement, if one is being used against you, get too close for the enemy to wield the rope successfully.” This would indeed be a good strategy, since effective use of a rope generally depended on a target being no closer than ten or twelve feet.

“That would work with other long weapons too, like lances or spears,” one of the students, a ten-year-old girl named Helen, cleverly surmised.

“Correct,” Weatherly replied.

“Being close, like a shadow, can also work if an enemy has explosive weapons,” Merri interjected. “If you get really close, your opponent likely won’t use his weapon for fear it will injure him too.”

While still in the classroom, Weatherly ended up telling the students why she often preferred mirrors to ropes or flutes. “They are better in gray landscapes, as well as in extremely calm, less-breezy landscapes. As you use your weapon, it will lose its charge; and the colors needed to recharge ropes can be difficult to find in an overcast or wintry setting. So too wind in a still setting. You would have to expend more energy to recharge a flute if there is no breeze. But a mirror can collect the faintest of light. Even at night, a mirror can pick up moonlight and starlight to be more quickly recharged.”

Next, Merri posed a question to the students. “Why might it be a good idea to carry two mirrors at all times?”

A twelve-year-old boy named Philip responded first. “In case you drop one, you’ll have a spare.”

“True, but that’s not the exact answer I was looking for,” Merri answered.

“One for each hand,” Helen correctly deduced.

“Exactly,” Merri replied, smiling.

Having learned from their studies that very few people ever master using two mirrors at once, most of the students were skeptical.

“Like only one in a million people can ever learn to use two mirrors at once,” Philip said. “Plus, it’s too dangerous. People are not usually coordinated enough. They might cross the energy streams and blow themselves up, or kill unintended targets.”

Merri actually couldn’t argue with this response because the information was basically correct. But she was smiling (as though she knew something others didn’t) as the group all headed out to a training station for physical exercises.

Meanwhile, at Doyle Mansion, Em was in the process of telling Zin to brush up on her curse-breaking skills. “Maybe get a few extra lessons from Marlon,” she said. Em was suggesting this partly as a means of distraction (to keep her daughter occupied and her mind off of Ignacio and Preston), but also by necessity based on something Vini had just informed her of.

“O...kay,” Zin replied, but somewhat hesitantly because she was actually better at breaking curses than Marlon. This was indeed true, and a fact she shared with her mother.

“Then maybe work with Mr. P to get some pointers,” Em responded. “We all need a fresh perspective from time to time.”

“Okay,” Zin answered, more quickly this time and with a smile. She kind of knew better than to question her mother, who always had a reason for her instructions, even if the reason wasn’t explained. *Like the Father*, Zin privately reckoned. *We have to obey, even if we don’t understand, because He always knows best. And Mom always knows best too.*

Mr. P had been spending some time at Doyle Mansion of late, in preferring the quietness of the subbasement lab to the bustle that often seemed to overrun the Magicians’ Labs at the plantations. On the same Tuesday morning that Weatherly and Merri were jointly conducting training classes, Mr. P was hard at work in the subbasement. Since Zin had no classes scheduled until the afternoon, she took the opportunity to

ask him to set some curse-breaking exercises for her. He was more than happy to oblige, in the form of placing hexes and whammies on twelve objects for her to reverse-curse (in magicians' lingo) over the next few weeks.

The reversing took Zin a mere eight days to accomplish, reassuring her that she was just about as up-to-speed in curse-breaking as any magician could be, though she had had some difficulty with a spool of thread that was hexed to unwind itself into a hopeless tangle of ravels each time someone tried to use it. But while the spool problem had taken her a full two days to figure out, a book that when opened to page seventy-one filled a room with a thick fog had been an easy ten-minute fix.

Again on the subject of staying busy, to help keep Quin's mind from focusing too much on Ignacio and Preston, or Linn (who had lost another five pounds), her father assigned her to help get a group of people who had just arrived at the plantations ready to be sent on to the mountain.

The group about to be sent on to Lion Mountain was none other than the Leftovers, who had made it to the Inn at Magnolia Hills on the same day that Ignacio died. After staying a few days at the inn, they had then ridden oodoo through the underground tunnel system to reach the plantations.

While Quin did focus on getting the group ready to depart for their new home, she didn't stop thinking about Linn. While doing just that, she came up with the idea to have him wear her pin-on watch. She had long known it was capable of multiple tricks, one of which was acting as a talisman to protect a person sensitive to crossing realms from symptoms such as headaches and queasiness; but she hadn't thought it might work to protect her friend from the effects of the starving Soul Shadow, particularly because Zin had already had Linn wear her sapphire ring. Since the sapphire hadn't worked, Quin hadn't thought of trying the watch; except she started thinking of this at the exact moment she was picking a strawberry seed out of her teeth. From an auto-writing session directly following the teeth-picking, she knew it definitely would work to help Linn, who immediately felt better when Quin pinned it to his chest. While the watch couldn't stop what was happening, it would help to slow the effects.

“What if you need to stop time on one of your trips?” Linn asked.

“I won’t for a while,” Quin replied. And she was sure in her words because God was telling her this. He was also reaffirming in her mind that the watch would slow the effect the starving unicorn was having on her friend. The evil undertaking was already slow going for those in the Demon Pocket because unicorns are rather hearty creatures, slow to kill. The unicorn in the containment box was weakened, like Linn, but was not yet close to death.

Linn still had not been told exactly what was going on. According to Quin’s mother and grandmother, they still had over a month to wait before they could make their move. Though wishing it was sooner, Quin could tell through good discernment that this was correct.

While Linn didn’t know, his mother had just been told, by Weatherly, who suggested that the family might like to move to the mountain. Worried that even after the unicorn was rescued, the sorcerers might try to find another way to kill Linn, Weatherly said, “The spirits on the mountain are even better protection than bigfoots, gargoyles, gryphons, or the military.”

This was of course true, which was why Maggie Linn immediately agreed. She didn’t care where they lived as long as they were safe, and she could teach on Lion Mountain as easily as at the plantations.

As far as the move, Linn was told that the doctors on the mountain could better care for him, and that the mountain air would be good for him. So it was settled. They would move in a few days, accompanying the group that had just arrived from the Inn at Magnolia Hills.

For most people arriving at the plantations, readying themselves to go to the mountain meant mainly having medical checkups and resting a bit from their journey so far. They were also outfitted with packs full of clothing, toiletries, food, and other supplies. While these things were readily available on the mountain, Weatherly wanted to lessen any burden to the welcoming parties, especially because she knew they were often taxed with getting large groups of people settled at once.

Meg and Alex were particularly thrilled with the packs, which were created by magicians to be like pods in that they were capable of holding much more than their outer appearances might suggest; and when laden, the packs had a lightening spell attached so that those carrying them wouldn’t feel the true weight of the contents.

The Leftovers had truly become a family on their journey so far. Sisters Clara and Marie considered Mr. Weiss to be a father and Alex to be a son. Mr. Weiss very much felt he had gained two daughters, a grandson, and a granddaughter. Meg thought of Mr. Weiss as a grandfather and Alex as a brother. And Alex felt as though he had gained two mothers, a grandfather, and a little sister. So without even any discussion, they were all unanimous in wanting to live together as a family when they reached the mountain.

“I wonder about the cabins,” Marie ventured to say as they were having breakfast together in a mess hall, “if they will have any larger ones that are vacant.”

“We might have to wait for one,” Mr. Weiss replied. “And I can help build us a home.”

“Me too,” Clara said. “I’d love to help with that.”

“I don’t mind still sleeping under the stars for a while,” Alex offered.

“Me neither,” Meg said. “That sounds like fun.”

“It’ll be a lot more fun than what we’ve been doing,” her mother said, “having to take turns standing guard.”

They were all definitely looking forward to the safety of the mountain, whether sleeping out in the open or not. And they would come to discover in a few short days that they weren’t going to have to wait for a place to live. In fact, they were going to get to take their pick of two roomy cabins recently vacated by large families. With the expansion of the mountain, people were moving around more than they might ordinarily, in order to stay close to friends and loved ones.

While most people traveling to the mountain from the plantations went through the window passage in Laurelstone’s Upstairs Library, this group was going by wind horse and rookh because it was easiest on Linn to ride a wind horse. And even though the trip would be relatively short and safe, for extra protection, Jelzey and Folto would be accompanying them.

Several of Weatherly’s Locusts and Ants had already moved some of Linn’s and his mother’s belongings through the window passage, and Folto’s girls were in the process of making a few trips to carry heavy and large items. Magsen and Halli didn’t mind making the trips, and even had great fun carrying a few favored tables, lamps, a dresser, and

an armchair. The weight was never a problem; it was more that the larger things were awkward, which meant the pair couldn't fly as fast as they might have otherwise.

Tulko and Dara carried Linn and his mother, and the Leftovers each rode rookhs. Quin atop Cuoré was also going. Though the trip would likely only take ten or fifteen minutes, Weatherly had wanted to make sure they would be as safe as possible. If they were noticed by anyone on the side of evil, the chance of an attack would be miniscule because not many creatures would want to challenge a group such as this.

Eleta happened to be watching from a secluded spot in the gardens as the travelers departed. She had been keeping to herself much of the past couple of weeks, in grieving for Ignacio, and Preston, who had been pushing her away a lot lately, only seldom letting her sit on his shoulder, as had been their custom for many decades long, especially during times of trial and heartache. In some part, Eleta was grieving for Weatherly too because this was turning out to be a very trying time for her as well.

Tamfa was actually worried for her charge, not necessarily for Weatherly's safety, but for the unstable nature of the situation because things were not settling and smoothing out as they generally did in matters of death.

Three weeks after Ignacio's suicide, Preston came to Weatherly and requested that she go back in time to change things, to prevent Ignacio's death. "Then I can do a better job of parenting," he stated.

Weatherly was forced to tell him gently but firmly, "No." When he protested, she followed up with, "I can't go back and save my mother from cholera. And believe me, I've wanted to and thought about it, many times."

On the next day came another plea from Preston. "I'd do it for you," he stated, through tears of both grief and anger at his friend, because this was true.

Telling him no again, after Preston left her study, Weatherly actually dropped to her knees and wept because she already had done what he was asking, on her own, without anyone asking her; and the result had been more devastating than she could have ever imagined. Perhaps her main mistake was in not involving someone like Trista. If she had, things might have turned out differently. But Weatherly hadn't

wanted to involve others. Changing the past always changed the future, and she hadn't wanted to risk too many people knowing. Having acted entirely on her own, it was now all a matter of regrets and second guessing. If she had involved a daisy chain, would it have made a difference? Weatherly had thought she would be able to get Ignacio the help he needed on her own, and she had truly believed the less people involved, the better.

Arriving two hours before the event and taking the pills from him, she had spent nearly three hours talking to him. From this, they had made a different sort of plan. She would be going with him the next day to see a counselor. During their talk, they had also discussed seeing a vocational specialist that could help Ignacio discover what he might enjoy, be good at, and what might be fulfilling and rewarding for him to do as a job.

In addition to taking the drugs from him, she had made him promise not to do anything rash. "Ask for help instead," she had stressed. "People do care about you, and you know this would be devastating for your father if you went through with it."

On the day following Weatherly's initial intervention, and roughly three hours before they were supposed to meet to go see the counselor, Ignacio had again committed suicide, but this time by a different means.

Though he was high at the time of his death, instead of choosing to OD, he had taken a joyride with a friend from college, a girl named Beth Ann Rice. Ignacio was driving and had purposely run the car at high speed into a huge oak tree about ten miles from the plantations. So this time, he had not only killed himself, he managed to take someone with him.

Ignacio had left a note at home similar to his original note. While Beth Ann hadn't left a note, many who knew her suspected the two had made a suicide pact.

Weatherly wasn't so sure, more feeling that Ignacio had done it just without thinking and without a particular care for others. This was something he had demonstrated many times over the years toward his father and other members of his family, as well as friends; and he had no real close friends precisely because of his selfish nature.

No one would have been able to argue with the fact that what happened the second time was far worse than the first, except that

Weatherly, having acted alone, was now the only one who knew what happened originally. And she only knew because, prior to time traveling, she had made careful notes to remind herself of the facts upon her return, this being a practice she often engaged in. In this case, changing the past had changed the present in a devastating way; and now, the second act was what people were going to have to find a way to live with. And who knows what the future repercussions might be. The whole situation was truly haunting Weatherly, who actually had difficulty believing she had acted so recklessly.

She wouldn't at this time be sharing with Preston the details of the original act, or what she had done subsequently that changed things; and part of her reasoning for this had to do with the guilt and shame she was feeling over disobeying God.

While He hadn't directly told her not to go back in time to try to fix things, she knew better. For one thing, she hadn't asked, being afraid He would tell her no. And since God hadn't stopped her from stepping through the arbor window, she had talked herself into this being something He was allowing. But all the time in the back of her mind, clear as a bell, she knew she was doing wrong.

In truth, Weatherly's main mistake was similar to what happened with Vini and Samantha over the issue of the unicorn whistle. We often unwisely take matters into our own hands, not praying as we should, not listening, and not paying attention to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Seeing Preston so distraught over the initial act had practically broken Weatherly's heart. Now, she almost couldn't stand to see him in what she judged was even worse agony, based on the more-violent nature of Ignacio's death and the fact that he had killed someone else as well. So at present, she was practically eaten up with regrets, guilt, and what ifs. If she hadn't done what she did, Preston might be less troubled, and he might not have succumbed to drinking, which was surely making any depressive symptoms worse.

But as far as Weatherly's motives in this whole situation, we have to go much further back in time than Ignacio's overdose, to a time when both Preston and Weatherly were teenagers. From around their high school years, though she never acted on it, Weatherly had secretly had a great crush on Preston, often thinking that, if she were to marry anyone, it would be Preston. Then in college, Maria came along, and that settled

the issue, so much so that Weatherly had decided she would never marry, instead simply focusing on military operations, time-travel missions, and the running of Laurelstone. After Maria died, it just didn't seem right to pursue anything. Not only because of Preston's grief and the busyness involved with his being a single parent, but Weatherly herself was incredibly busy, to the extent that her long list of things to do had to take precedence over something like a relationship. Now, of course, this was still completely out of the question, not only because of his current anger towards her, but also because Weatherly still had many other obligations to tend to, not to mention the fact that they were both getting on in years.

At around the same time Preston was stumbling home after the second time of asking Weatherly to go back in time to save his son, Vini was praying by herself in Laurelstone's chapel; and she was mainly praying for Preston, though her thoughts and petitions were also for Linn, and the upcoming mission to rescue the unicorn and dragons. With the day being overcast, and very little light making its way through the stained glass windows, the inside of the chapel was rather dark and shadowy, making it a very calming and pleasant atmosphere in which to pray.

Ben happened to be passing the chapel; and in peeking in, he saw something quite astonishing: Kneeling in prayer in the center aisle, his wife was completely aglow with light. And this was something much more than an aura because her entire body was lit up from the inside out, as though someone had turned her on by a switch.

With his first thought being that an angel was visiting Vini, and his second that the Holy Spirit might be overflowing her, after only a few seconds of being startled, Ben quietly backed out of the chapel, so as not to disturb his wife's quiet time with God.

A short while later, though no one else noticed, a gargoyle on top of Laurelstone observed a flash of bright white light inside the chapel that was so intense, if a person had been present to witness the flash, he or she would have been forced to shield their eyes and look away.

The next day, Merri happened to catch sight of one of the smarmy guys Ignacio had been occasionally keeping company with before his death. Roland Carson, whose friends called him Roly, was walking fast to try to catch up to Preston, who was on his way into a pocket to buy

booze. From recent inquiries, Merri had figured out that this was one of Ignacio's dealers. Managing to head off Roly, she prevented him from entering the pocket entrance to follow Preston.

"His son owed me credits," Roly told Merri. "So now, he owes me credits."

"You won't be getting paid," Merri firmly answered. "Furthermore, you have exactly two hours to leave the property of the plantations. And you will not be coming back."

"You can't kick me out without getting approval from General Dawson," Roly defiantly replied.

"Actually, I can," Merri said taking a step toward Roly, as her stare into his eyes turned into something that could just about make anyone shudder with cold. "And I will, physically, if I need to."

Roly knew better than to continue the confrontation. After rather meekly backing away, he scurried to his apartment to pack.

This was one of those times when Merri seriously thought about reviewing the plantations' pretty much open-door policy of allowing just about anyone sanctuary.

Roly was one who had once roamed the Rubble Cities with a gang as a predator, but he had been allowed to come to live in one of the pocket communities on the grounds of Netherwind after putting on the guise of wanting to change his life.

In less than three hours (through various operatives), Merri found out two of Roly's friends that had also been dealing; and she set about routing them as well. Like their cohort, they protested by using the name of General Dawson and citing that she would have to be the one to kick them out.

"Believe me, you don't want her involved," Merri said. "I'm not sure you'd survive it. I'm going rather easy on you here. Take my advice. No, take my *orders*, and leave. Quickly," she stressed.

Like Roly, they too knew not to disobey or challenge her in any other way.

For Merri's part, she knew not to let her Aunt Weatherly know of the three. At the very least, the men would have been locked up; and Merri felt it likely they would have been dealt with even more harshly, if God told Weatherly it was okay to take more drastic action. Just getting them away from the plantations would be best, Merri judged.

She had already summoned one of her officers, a person expert in the use of the Mind Key, to make sure that the brains of those leaving were wiped of memories relating to certain things such as the Underground Army.

While Merri was doing her routing, Etowa was in the process of pondering Ignacio, who had had the same chances as everyone else, even many second chances. Like Charlie's cousin, Dana, who had also committed suicide, people had tried to help him; but he wouldn't take it. Having made several game moves over the years to try to help Ignacio, Etowa was disappointed in his death. However, what he had actually been steeling himself for was what happened with Weatherly. She was actually his biggest disappointment. *Who could have predicted that she would give in to temptation, having all of her life resisted?* Both Etowa and Boko were experts at giving nudges and suggestions; but ultimately, people made their own choices.

Blessedly, God always forgives, if we repent. And He always has a back-up plan when we choose to make unwise decisions. This was also something Etowa was thinking about. *Now, God is going to have to straighten things out, if the people involved will stop meddling and let Him. He's not likely to bring back either Ignacio or Beth Ann, but He will make things work for good, as He always promises He will.*

Although disappointed in Weatherly, she was also the human being Etowa most admired. As he was pondering, she was in the process of kneeling in prayer in her study to ask for God's forgiveness.

Though many of us have much to ask forgiveness for, Weatherly's life so far contained very few instances of disobedience to the Father. But while she knew this mistake was truly a horrible one, she also knew she had to move on. She couldn't let this completely cripple her because she still had things to do for His Kingdom, important things. Plus, she knew that God offers truly remorseful believers His forgiveness freely and fully, no matter what the offense.

Although she had thought about going back in time again, to try to put things back to the first outcome, Weatherly realized that more meddling might mean even more mistakes leading to yet another unpredictable, and possibly even worse, outcome. She had never feared or shied away from time travel, but she now wondered if this situation

might be an indication that it was time for her to stop. Dell was pretty much running things anyway.

So I won't ever time travel again, she determined after much contemplation. *It's time to let that part of my journey go*. And for the moment at least, Weatherly believed her decision in this matter to be perfectly correct.

Chapter Nine

Protection and Promises

“But the Lord is faithful; he will strengthen you and guard you from evil.” 2 Thessalonians 3:3

The start of autumn on the mountain was marked by an explosion of color as the trees began showing off, while at the same time thinking about shedding their leaves. On the third Saturday in October, Ethan happened to be setting out on one of his adventures, on his favorite horse, an appaloosa filly named Wendi Lee.

An hour on the trail put horse and rider just leaving the protection of the mountain and venturing into the lands beyond, where the scenery wasn't much different because here, too, the trees populating the rolling hills were doing a good bit of showing off and thinking.

However, another hour along told quite a different story as Ethan and Wendi Lee passed through a Rubble City that had recently seen some action in the form of several explosions and what appeared to be a lightning storm whose strikes had left two enormous blackened trees still smoldering. *An attack of some sort*, Ethan's mind reasoned, *then likely a thunderbird intervened.*

The pair ended up seeing action of their own as they reached the outskirts of town and came upon Rhett and company engaged in a fight with several stealth hobs that Wendi Lee could sense as far as their invisible locations. Rearing, she knocked one in the head several times with her front hooves, almost as though she were boxing. While this didn't kill the hob, it did temporarily disorient him.

Though Layden had also been able to sense the demonic creatures prior to the encounter, there had simply been too many of them spread across the area for the group to avoid a confrontation. At present, while wielding a fighting stick, he was calling directions to Gavin who was battling with a sword, and Rhett who was using his staff to direct energy blasts at the hobs. Muriel and Cecelia, each wearing their rose-colored

glasses, were throwing bricks and other debris at the nasty beasts, and hitting their marks most of the time, though this only served to slow the advance of the creatures.

Finding his staff largely ineffectual against so many invisible foes, Rhett fished in one of his robe pockets, producing a blue crystal which he held forth on the upturned palm of his hand. Doing his best to avoid hitting his friends, and the horse and rider, he cast a strong breath across the stone in the direction of their opponents. The effect was nearly immediate, and within about four seconds, the six nearest stealth hobs fell into a deep sleep, falling to their sides and becoming visible as they did so.

With only two hobs left awake and invisible, the travelers might have felt pretty well assured of their triumph, and assured of escaping serious injury, until, that is, another rearing boxing match by Wendi Lee unseated Ethan, who fell to the ground and immediately came under attack by one of the hobs, which he could neither sense nor see because the rose-colored glasses he had fished from his pack and put on had been swept from his head during the fall.

With a hard kick of her rear legs, Wendi Lee managed to knock the creature sideways. As this hob too lost invisibility, Gavin swooped in to stab him in several key spots, including the heart, which he knew was not in the chest but closer to the groin.

Unfortunately, with the wind knocked out of him, Ethan was unable to rise quickly enough to avoid a demon that had just landed amongst the fray and that managed to stab him in the chest with a thick piece of ragged metal roof flashing gleaned from the rubble.

Sidling in, The Sparrow easily dealt with the demon using her knife, which she was lately becoming very skilled with.

By this time, Layden had managed to take care of the final awake hob; and Rhett was just polishing off three more demons that had landed, having inserted a small red crystal into a niche in the head of his staff, which sharpened the staff's energy blasts and split the creatures in two as easily as if they had been hewn with a large axe, though one flashing with a sort of greenish fiery light. Rhett quickly followed up with slicing strikes to the sleeping hobs.

As Muriel was talking to Wendi Lee, to calm her, Gavin was leaning over Ethan. Raising his shirt, he was surprised to see almost no

blood, and even more surprised to watch the wound in his chest swiftly closing itself.

Finally managing to catch his breath, Ethan sat up, and was helped to his feet by Gavin.

Layden, Cecelia, and Muriel were all well acquainted with Ethan and were therefore not at all surprised to find him alive and healed, though how this was possible was going to take some explaining to Rhett and Gavin, who by this time assumed Ethan was gifted in some way, perhaps in the ability to heal himself, though they would soon come to find out that this was not correct.

While all people have gifts, and many even have extraordinary abilities, Ethan was no more gifted than the average person. Instead, he had been given a special gift in the form of a magical object known as the Fifty-One Medallion, which each year gave him fifty-one chances to cheat death. On these occasions, his body often didn't sustain as much trauma as it did on this day. For example, once when he was run over by an ESS transport, he was merely stunned for a few seconds after, with no broken bones or internal injuries. Also, blows dealt by opponents that would have killed anyone else often only caused scratches, bruises, and scrapes. However, at other times (such as today), when he did receive penetrating stabs or other serious injuries, they always healed right away, provided he hadn't used up all of his fifty-one chances for the year.

He kept careful count each year of anything that might have been fatal in order to know how many were left so that he didn't run out before December 31st. As far as the normal bumps, sprains, and scrapes that anyone might receive, Ethan had good discernment and always listened to the guidance of the Holy Spirit so as to know which injuries counted towards his remaining chances for the year. Going all the way back five years, to the time when he was first blessed with the medallion, he had managed to stay alive while helping many people on the run from the camps and cities. Most of the time, his scars healed up too, though some tended to take a while to disappear; and Ethan figured the lingering ones were reminders to keep careful count of his chances. He definitely had to have the medallion on his person because the protection didn't work from a distance. Since it was easy to wear on a sturdy chain around his neck, or carry in a pocket, basically the only

problem was in the form of his occasional forgetfulness. Only two weeks before, he had left it sitting on his dresser when setting out on an adventure, which freaked his mother out when she saw it sitting there, knowing he was on a trip that could involve any number of mortal dangers.

After the battle with the stealth hobs and demons, instead of heading off on their own, Ethan and Wendi Lee decided to escort the group to the mountain. This was a chance to get to know a sorcerer and a Sapphire Boy, and Ethan felt his mother would be pleased to have him home early. He sometimes rode for days before finding escapees or other travelers to help. On those occasions, the only issue was making up missed schoolwork, which was never a problem because he excelled in school.

As Ethan decided to walk in order to better visit with his new friends, Wendi Lee trailed along behind the group without anyone needing to lead her.

Rhett was the first sorcerer to ever set foot on Lion Mountain, which they arrived at in roughly five hours of casual walking, while blessedly meeting no further danger on this day.

The somewhat travel-weary group was glad to finally reach their destination, the journey having taken much longer than they had originally expected. In addition to the twelve-day stop in the pocket, and taking many roundabout paths to avoid various dangers, they had decided to spend nearly three weeks in an earthship community that had recently been hit by a tornado to help with several rebuilding projects. Layden and the girls had sent word to their homes by dawn pigeons. Though Muriel and Cecelia would be extra busy making up schoolwork for the next few weeks, they had enjoyed the whole of the trip, especially the chance to learn some carpentry skills while working on repairs to several homes and a barn. Layden's mother-in-law had been able to help his wife and her sister with the new baby, so the delay in reaching home hadn't created too much of a hardship for his family.

As Ethan was just passing Gavin and Rhett off to a welcoming crew, and as the others were heading off to their homes, Otto and Isaac were arriving on the mountain by rookh. Isaac was set to stay for a week or two to help with the remapping, but Otto was just there to see a friend for an hour or so before heading out to a spot in North Carolina

where a couple of pod structures in a work camp had been damaged by a hailstorm.

An enormouse ended up sneaking Otto into the camp in the early evening to examine the storm-damaged pods that were in the form of an outhouse and a storage bin acting as safe rooms. While pockets were never affected by outside storms or other damaging exterior forces, pods could be, and could leave someone trapped inside and in need of rescue. Blessedly, no one had been inside either structure at the time of the storm. The two pods also weren't damaged beyond repair and so were easy fixes. After making the repairs, Otto was off to open a new pocket in Minnesota in which he was planning to build housing pods to accommodate settlers. Though many people were migrating to the mountain, quite a few were still choosing to live other places, thus, the continuing need for additional safe settlements.

At around the same time Otto was repairing the damaged pods, Astrid was visiting Linn and his mother in their cabin. Offering Linn water from a small hip flask she was wearing, Astrid said, "Oh just take a sip; you look a little dehydrated to me."

Though he didn't feel thirsty, somehow Linn knew he could trust Astrid, and so he did take a sip, after which, he felt better right away, stronger and with a lot more energy. Though the sip had tasted just like water, because he was feeling so much better, Linn wondered if the flask contained some sort of magic vitamin water. The liquid had been somewhat silvery in appearance, as though it might be more than simply plain water. And there were magicians living on the mountain, so it was perfectly feasible they might make such a concoction, particularly if they were working in conjunction with healers. The magicians at the plantations often worked with doctors and nurses to try to help people.

In truth, Astrid was fully aware of what was going on with Linn and was trying to help him with a special drink, though magicians had nothing to do with it; rather, it was something God had specifically provided for her. Although the time was nearing to mount the rescue of the unicorn and dragons, since they still had a little while to wait, she wanted to help her young friend.

After she left the cabin, Linn sat pondering. In addition to feeling better, he got the idea that he might have met Astrid somewhere before he and his mother came to the mountain, though he couldn't think of

where this might have been. This was actually only the second time Linn had seen the woman. According to neighbors, she kept to herself a lot, and had even before her husband (who was evidently more social than she) died some twenty-eight years back. Linn hadn't gotten a clear picture of Astrid's age from talking to anyone. In truth, few people on the mountain could even speculate about her age with any accuracy. The best guesses of some of the oldest residents tended to put her at around a hundred and ten.

As far as what was going on with him, though no one had voiced anything, Linn had a pretty good inkling, particularly because he had recently had a dream that his Soul Shadow was in some sort of trouble. But instead of worrying, he decided to trust, specifically, trust in God, in His ways; and whenever he started to feel slightly anxious, he quoted Psalm 34:19 to himself. "Many are the afflictions of the righteous; but the LORD delivers him out of them all."

Ethan, just before going to sleep, was also pondering, in specific, about being given such an awesome gift from God, for which he was truly thankful. The Fifty-One Medallion had been produced by one of the six bagicals currently in existence, the one made of brocade, which Astrid had in her possession.

Having been told by God exactly what to do, Astrid had put into the bag an old third-place bronze medal from a bowling tournament that was etched with the words, Strike and Spare Fifty-One, with Strike and Spare being the name of the bowling alley and fifty-one referring to the number of house lanes. When producing the magical object, the bag's way of thinking seemed to have been something along the lines of, *Spare a person from a strike fifty-one times a year*. This made perfect sense because the tournament at that particular bowling alley was a yearly event. Once the Fifty-One Medallion was produced, Astrid had been told exactly whom to give it to.

In the same way that bagicals can get attached to particular people, the medallion was very much attached to Ethan, to the point that it refused to work for a man who had once stolen it. Sadly, it meant the man's death by carelessness when he jumped from a bridge while showing off for friends.

In addition to the common sense Ethan already possessed, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Fifty-One Medallion itself was capable

of telling him when to use the chances, and when to back off and save some. As far as other types of protection, though Gavin had just given him a sapphire, he had never tried to acquire one before because he doubted it would work. Once in possession of a dime, the medallion had imparted to him that it wouldn't work when he was carrying the medallion. This had been confirmed by a magician who told him that often the magic of one object will cancel out that of another, with the more powerful object generally coming out on top.

Ethan couldn't have wished for anything more, not even to be gifted in any supernatural way, because he already felt incredibly blessed to have God providing such amazing protection for him, which he reasoned was because he was a faithful servant and because he had long hoped and trusted in the promises in the bible.

Isaiah 45:2 was definitely one of Ethan's favorites. "I will go before you and level the mountains, I will break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut asunder the bars of iron...."

In actuality, God makes amazing promises to all, which anyone who trusts in Him can claim; and the Book of Isaiah is chock full of them, such as the ones in 52:12. "For you shall not go out in haste, and you shall not go in flight, for the LORD will go before you, and the God of Israel will be your rear guard."

Many of God's children were finding strength in the promises of the bible. Just before going to sleep, Muriel was reading some of her favorites, as she sat in the easy chair next to her bed with a squirrel perched on her shoulder and peering at the bible, as though reading as well. In specifically thinking about how she was afraid sometimes when she traveled outside of the protection of the mountain, she chose Deuteronomy 31:6 to remind herself not to fear. "Be strong and of good courage, do not fear or be in dread of them: for it is the LORD your God who goes with you; he will not fail you or forsake you."

She next read Isaiah 41:13. "For I, the LORD your God, hold your right hand; it is I who say to you, 'Fear not, I will help you.'"

Finally, as the squirrel was just leaving through her open bedroom window to head to his own home for the night, she read Psalm 107:16. "For he shatters the doors of bronze, and cuts in two the bars of iron."

If we backtrack about five hours on what had turned out to be a busy Saturday for many folks, we find Martella on one of her trips, and

specifically in Supercity Six, watching an ink artist modify one of the hexagonal barcodes people were now being marked with so that the sorcerers could better keep track of them. As Gavin had predicted, people were finding ways around the new rules.

Martella next soared to Supe-3 in order to sneak into a pocket located in the factory district. Inside the roomy pocket, the sun was shining brightly over a large field in which a good deal of activity was going on in the form of city residents training with spears, swords, and at an archery range. This was in keeping with what most people believed about the future—that things like guns weren't likely to work, so they needed to be able to use other, less-mechanical means of defense. Martella knew of another facility like this in Supe-11.

As she was leaving Supercity Three, Martella observed a Muslim man killing a sorcerer and a mimic, before being knocked unconscious and dragged off by ESS personnel. This was a retaliation killing because several of the man's friends a few days earlier, while praying in one of their designated spots, had been set upon by loose megahobs.

This was not the first time Martella had seen this man murder someone. Only two months before, he and two of his companions had beheaded a man who was gay. In this day and age, other than a few exceptions among wealthy families, people were not openly gay anymore. They basically couldn't afford to be because so many Muslim extremists rooted in high places within the Supercities and camps were openly persecuting them. And with the large populations of Muslims in the U.S., there were definitely many extremists among them, who were not just bent on a cause, but who were also extremely cruel. In addition to throwing gays from buildings (a common practice of the past), they often delighted in torturing them before doing away with them. The man Martella had seen beheaded showed signs of having been tortured.

Sadly, Muslims often seemed to have the run of the cities, along with more privileges than the average person. Intent on keeping people in fear, the sorcerers did indeed favor that population, long known for their willingness to go to extremes, particularly when citing their religion as their motive, though it was often an evil nature that was spurring them on. With regard to the persecution of gays by the extremists, many victims were older people who had married twenty and thirty years back, but couldn't hide because they were easily tracked

through the marriage records. So while many people had thought the decision in the U.S. and other places to legalize same-sex marriages had been a good one, now the issue had truly turned into something dangerous. Of course, this had been Satan's plan all along, to increase despair and danger, and make people lose hope.

The instilling of fear in peaceful Muslims had also been his plan. While most people of the Islamic faith were not about violence, for decades, many Muslims had feared speaking out. Not only were women oppressed, anyone willing to say they thought the extremism was wrong was called a traitor, ostracized, or worse. Sadly, even when people knew that friends or family were about to commit unspeakable acts, they often didn't contact authorities or try to prevent the violence in other ways.

Though Martella hadn't been able to prevent the beheading, she had only a few days before been able to stop time to help two other people escape a similar fate. The spreesprite, of course, wasn't the only one helping. Many Christians were doing their best to help shield members of the gay population, including giving them priority positions on escape lists. Also at this time, many gay people had turned to Christianity, so God Himself was providing protection for His children such as in the form of enormice being led in their roaming to the exact right places to help hide those who were being hunted. Watchmen were also involved in saving many people.

Heading to Netherwind and Laurelstone next, Martella observed a puck troll in a tree giggling while throwing pecans at people and bigfoots passing by underneath him. However, he stopped giggling and caught his breath when he just missed getting hit with a pecan thrown back at him by a bigfoot hard enough to have easily knocked him from the tree if the nut had found its mark.

Perching herself on a sill at Laurelstone, Martella looked in on Weatherly in her study. The military leader was not alone, as she was being visited by a man named Edward Moore whom two of her operatives had recently liberated from a prison in Supercity Two where he had spent a full fifteen years.

Mr. Moore had been the victim of print-double mischief, in that his fingerprints had been planted, making it look as though he had committed a crime that he hadn't. While several time-travel task forces

were still going back in time to undo many of these atrocities, Mr. Moore was one whom they hadn't been able to save from incarceration.

From their starting conversation, Weatherly discovered that he knew about the task forces. With the memory of what she had recently gone through with Preston fresh in her mind, she assumed that Mr. Moore was probably going to ask her to go back and change things.

"I am sorry that we couldn't save you from the ordeal of prison," she told him. "We do careful research, and sometimes it's just not feasible to change things because doing so would affect too many other people's lives, and affect certain things that were meant to happen."

Somewhat taken aback, Mr. Moore answered, "I'm not here to complain, but to thank you. You got me out before my death. Now I can live probably another twenty years as a free man. And I wanted to tell you that my time in prison was well spent because I was able to witness to a good many people. Plus, there was an eidetic person right in the cell next to me for nearly ten years who had memorized a bible. What a blessing that was. He was the one who told me about the time-travel thing because you evidently saved a couple of his friends from prison."

"So he was witnessing too," Weatherly said, smiling to learn of this.

"Yes, and mostly about you and your wonderful God-led efforts," Mr. Moore replied.

Quoting Psalm 102:18-20, Weatherly murmured, "'Let this be recorded for a generation to come, so that a people yet unborn may praise the LORD: that he looked down from his holy height, from heaven the LORD looked at the earth, to hear the groans of the prisoners, to set free those who were doomed to die....'"

To this, Mr. Moore replied by reciting from Psalm 146:7-8. "'The LORD sets the prisoners free; the LORD opens the eyes of the blind. The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down; the LORD loves the righteous.'"

Enjoying their banter, Weatherly next quoted Psalm 94:14-15. "'For the LORD will not forsake his people; he will not abandon his heritage; for justice will return to the righteous, and all the upright in heart will follow it.'"

Having fun listening to this back-and-forth quote-fest, before zipping off, Martella stayed to hear Mr. Moore recite Psalm 147:5-6.

“Great is our LORD, and abundant in power; his understanding is beyond measure. The LORD lifts up the downtrodden, he casts the wicked to the ground.”

On her way home for the evening, Martella flew over a mothership community in Kentucky where one of the twenty-seven athletes who had escaped at the same time Rhett and Gavin left Supe-7 was attending an outdoor bible study around a fire pit. Referring to some of God’s awesome promises that he had taken comfort and strength in over the years, the former football player was quoting Isaiah 41:15. “Behold, I will make of you a threshing sledge, new, sharp, and having teeth; you shall thresh the mountains and crush them, and you shall make the hills like chaff...”

Relating to the athlete escape, there had been a lot of secretive talk between Vidas and another member of the Council of Twos as to the wisdom of Telén being given charge after Jerome’s death. If he couldn’t even prevent an escape of this magnitude in his own Supercity, was he really competent to lead all of them? The talk hadn’t particularly gone anywhere, mainly because it was determined that Telén was well-liked and probably would end up winning the next election to retain the seat of Governor Ruler. However, it was also determined that Vidas and his confidant would be watching Telén most carefully.

At around midnight, Ruth woke up crying from having a bad dream, which she tried to tell her parents about, though what she was saying was coming out mostly as tearful ramblings from being so upset.

After about a half hour of listening and trying to calm her, Mr. and Mrs. Evans were finally able to get the gist of what their daughter was telling them, after which, they got her to drink some warm milk to help her get back to sleep, while assuring her they would take care of the matter in the morning.

The matter, as turns out, was directly related to Ethan, whom Ruth had met at church when the Evans family first arrived on the mountain. Noticing her by herself on the church porch after the service, while her parents were inside talking to the pastor, he had given her a set of ball-and-jacks from his pocket and had taught her how to play. Ethan had also recently visited the Evans’ cabin with his mother, who had knitted mittens for both Ruth and Bunny for the upcoming winter.

The next morning at church, Mr. and Mrs. Evans arrived an hour before the service to talk to Ethan and his mother, who generally came early to make coffee and set up chairs in the bible study rooms.

“She was sweating and crying so hard after the dream that she almost turned purple,” Mr. Evans said, addressing Ethan. “She said that in the dream, you counted wrong and you were dead. So you evidently need to count again.”

“Do you even know what she’s talking about?” Mrs. Evans questioned, since the family didn’t yet know about Ethan’s protective medallion.

“Yes,” Ethan slowly answered, eyeing Ruth thoughtfully. “But I’m always careful with counting.”

Ruth was shaking her head quite vigorously. “No, it’s wrong,” she insisted. She was a good counter; even Bunny knew how to count (this being something she had tried to tell her parents in the nighttime).

“She definitely knows how to count,” Mrs. Evans said. “So is it possible you miscounted?”

“That’s it!” Ruth cried. “Miss Counted can help you count!”

“Okay,” Ethan said. With Ruth being so adamant, he basically couldn’t do anything but agree to recount. And with the issue being so important, he did so right away, pulling the mini calendar and notepad in which he kept his records out of his jacket pocket.

Carefully going over everything for the year so far, which took nearly ten minutes, he turned white as a sheet (as the saying goes) upon discovering he had indeed made a mistake in forgetting to count one of the chances he had used in July.

“She just saved my life,” Ethan said, when finally able to find his voice a couple of minutes later. “Thank you, Ruth.”

“You’re welcome,” Ruth said with a grin before running off to greet one of her friends that had just arrived.

Ethan then hurried off himself to begin setting out chairs.

Having coffee a short while later with Mr. and Mrs. Evans, Holly Stanley told them about the Fifty-One Medallion, and expressed how grateful she was for Ruth saving her son. They also discussed Ruth’s gift, which was obviously that of prophecy.

And what a blessing it was that God gave Ruth the dream and that she had known to share it. Even in her young life so far, she was

getting very good about knowing what to share and what not to. She still was not supposed to tell what happened in the bamboo field, but that time would come soon enough.

After setting out chairs, as he was having a cup of cocoa, Ethan joined his mother and Ruth's parents.

"Do you always use all of the chances each year?" Mrs. Evans questioned.

"I try to," Ethan responded. "I want to make good use of the gift I've been given."

"It might be good to start giving yourself a buffer each year, like saving one or two," Mr. Evans suggested. "You know we tend to get more and more forgetful as we get older."

Ethan's mother agreed, but Ethan only replied with a smile, "I'll think about it. Better yet, I'll pray about it, and do what God tells me to do." At this point, he felt God would still protect him no matter what, if not with the power of the medallion, than through other people, such as Ruth bringing to light his mistake; or perhaps through someone like Gavin because the shield sapphire he had given him probably would work if he were to run out of chances and need the extra protection. Ethan had declined a blessed diamond when Gavin offered, feeling he was already incredibly blessed (in many ways) and that the diamond could be put to better use.

During the prayer-time of the service, Holly gave special thanks to God for Ruth saving her son. Ethan was not her only child. She had produced three by the Law of Four, all of them boys, and all of them from being impregnated in a medical facility because she wasn't married. Her younger two sons were taken away, and she had only been allowed to keep Ethan because her aging mother could look after him during the day while she worked. Just after Ethan turned five, her mother died, which was when she took her son to a safe house and shortly thereafter escaped with him from Supercity Thirteen. Holly also thanked God for the Fifty-One Medallion. Knowing Ethan's personality, he would have wanted to be out in the wilds helping people even without any sort of protection, so the medal was truly an amazing blessing.

After the service, people generally gathered in the churchyard to hobnob for a bit. As Linn parked himself in the shade of a great tree to

wait for his mother, who was visiting with a group of ladies, several sparrows landed on the arms and back of his airchair, shortly followed by a bunting, who was soon joined by two tiny lizards that jumped from the trunk of the tree to join the group of those drawn to Linn, whose gift was still working perfectly; though the birds and lizards could actually tell that he wasn't feeling very well, and would have wanted to comfort him, if they could. In truth, he mainly just felt tired today, which wasn't from lack of sleep because he had slept very well after the sip of water Astrid had given him. Blessedly, he wasn't nauseas and didn't have a headache; and his weight seemed to be holding steady, for the moment. Based on his latest doctor's visit, he had only lost half a pound since moving to the mountain.

As it turns out, birds and lizards were not the only creatures drawn to Linn on this day; both Alex and Ethan were too, and not just because he was rather a funny sight, with a squirrel, four wrens, and a small blackbird having joined the throng on the airchair.

The boys visited together for about twenty minutes while having glasses of fruit punch that Ethan had fetched from inside the church.

Just as Alex's grandfather was calling to him that the family was about to head home, Ethan invited both Linn and Alex to his house for the next afternoon.

Over the next few weeks, the three would end up hanging out together quite a bit; and despite Alex being a couple of years younger than Linn and Ethan, they were all destined to become good friends.

Linn and his mother were both pleased with this. He hadn't had many male friends at the plantations, mainly because he hadn't participated in sports, or even anything like debate or chess because he was prone to shutting himself up in the Technology Lab with his mentors. Now, he was finding it kind of interesting to hang out with guys his own age. Though still often feeling weak, with Astrid periodically giving him sips of her Magic Water (as he began to call it), he wasn't so bad that he couldn't at least be a little more social than he was used to. Plus, with his personality and gift, he was finding it easy to make friends. On the part of Alex and Ethan, they were both surprised that Linn didn't ever complain about being in pain, even when it was obvious that his head or stomach was hurting.

But just to be clear with regard to friends, the Three Musketeers had by no means been disbanded by Linn's move to Lion Mountain. In fact, it was quite easy for both Quin and Zin to visit, either by the window passage at Laurelstone, or by Cuoré and Zapor bringing them, which tended to happen quite often. On the part of the girls, though they did miss seeing Linn every day, they knew the move was for the best; and they were truly happy to see that he was making friends.

Chapter Ten

Time in Antica

“Thus says the Lord: ‘Stand by the roads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls.’”
Jeremiah 6:16

The last week of October found Kip heading to Antica, and trying to coax Preston, who had lately taken to brooding, to go with him. From what Kip had been able to observe, his friend was not drinking as much as he had just after Ignacio’s death, but was keeping pretty much entirely to himself lately. Even Vini hadn’t been able to get him to come to dinners with the family, or to church.

Preston cut the visit short by sullenly saying, “No, I don’t want to go to Antica. I just want to be left alone.”

Needing to get going, Kip didn’t have time for more coaxing on this day. He would try again later. In heading to the mezzanine, he reflected that he hadn’t seen Weatherly much lately either.

In truth, she was mostly secluded, while praying a lot, though she was keeping busy with training, generally by herself using simulations, but also sneaking off to Kivetel on occasion.

Kip was excited about a certain project going on in Antica that had actually been many years in the making. With Merri more than capable of helping Weatherly run things, over the past fifteen years or so, Kip had spent a great deal of time in Antica, which the whole family had grown very attached to from Jane having to live there to give birth to Brent, this being at a time when the Single-Birth Law was in effect and when she would have been forced to abort him otherwise.

The project mainly involved boat building. However, the type of construction was not at all like what had been going on in our own realm during the last few decades. In fact, it was quite the reverse, in that many older means of ship building were being employed.

Of God's seafaring children, many had recognized the need to revert to the old ways, not just because of the issue of gremlins, who were becoming more adept at getting onto docked skimmers and dippers and breaking things, but because of human complacency and laziness, which had caused a fair amount of brain rot over the years, in addition to various health issues. Automation had made our lives too easy, with many people simply sitting around touching screens and pushing buttons most of the day. Without exercise, knees and hips became incredibly weak; and people gained weight. Eating in restaurants was incredibly overdone—it was easy to go often and overeat. And with not having to clean up afterwards, no energy was expended after eating. Of course, even those eating at home had that problem, mainly since the time dishwashers were invented. Many people didn't even know how to wash dishes by hand. Quite a few people also didn't know how to cook, which was why Charlie's restaurants had done so well for so long, before closing when the Supercities came into being since there were no longer any cities to support them. With regard to not knowing how to do certain things, some folks didn't even know how to open and close their garage doors manually, having simply pushed buttons or used their phones to do so for so long. The whole time this was happening, people were talking about innovation and forward thinking, without stopping to think of what it might mean to the future, especially with regard to matters of health.

In truth, relying too much on gadgets was starting to get a lot of people into trouble, namely the sorcerers and their followers. No matter how closely guarded their weapons, they couldn't guard them against invisible and crafty sources. Gremlins had always been crafty; now, in such great numbers, they were an incredible force to be reckoned with, especially in not really being on anyone's side except their own. Their love of breaking things was genetic and could very seldom be controlled.

But, of course, gremlins weren't the entire cause, though they were at the root of a lot of problems, such as causing malfunctions of the magnetism mixers, which had started affecting the sorcerer's own equipment because it was also easy for gremlins to break the shielding of various electronics, allowing them to be more exposed to things like

the magnetism mixers, and solar flares, which had become more intense in recent decades.

Also, many scientists were coming to realize that electromagnetic pulses (long known as EMPs) were not just from solar flares or nuclear activity, but were emitted by leviathans as well. These ocean giants had long slept, in a dormant state, but had in recent years awakened to roam the seas, and were much more numerous than many might have imagined. And these godly creatures weren't just roaming for fun, but in search of giant squids, krakens, and sea serpents to battle. The EMPs were simply as natural to leviathans as songs were to whales.

Many of the self-sustaining communities, though they had electronics and complex machines, were no longer relying on any for their operations, instead choosing old-fashioned methods, making use of water wheels, oxen, and simpler mechanics such as pedal-operated threshers and corn shuckers. While obtaining fuel wasn't currently a problem, things like tractors and bulldozers were not reliable. Plus, they were noisy and tended to pollute. With hard work becoming habit, people were finding that they didn't mind expending energy and a little more time to grow food and raise livestock in the same manner their ancient ancestors had. The health benefits were hardest to overlook, and so appealed to many.

All in all, there were many reasons to revert to an ancient path; but this was what boat builders in Antica had always been extremely good at. Though many of their more recently-made watercrafts were sleek and modern in design, they had never lost the ability to make older vessels, which were much like the early sailing ships of our world, made without incorporating a lot of sophisticated electronics or mechanics, and so would not be affected by gremlins, magnetism mixers, solar flares, and such.

People in Antica had always been very accommodating to visitors, and were helping to build many naval vessels for our world, teaching many of their techniques, while learning some of ours. And the progress of the boat building always seemed to go very smoothly. While those working on the project occasionally felt urgency, there was never any frenzied hurry, probably because of the peace saturating this realm. When encountering certain challenges, trust and diligence

always trumped fret and frustration. This was trust in God because He always provides and He always makes a way.

Occasionally taking breaks from their work, the boat builders from our world enjoyed touring Antica, entirely by watercraft. There were no planes; and while a few airships were in operation, most natives and visitors alike preferred water travel. Children who were visiting especially enjoyed an enormous water amusement park located in Antica's Central Region.

Many of Antica's unique water creatures were incredibly interesting, particularly an enormous silver leopard, nearly the size of a behemoth. The leopard made the Southern Region his home, but liked to wander, and so often could be seen by travelers. He especially liked to race alongside watercraft, amazing many visitors not only with his speed, but also because people found it hard to imagine that a cat would like to swim so much.

While Kip was a general in the Underground Army, he had no problems taking orders from his longtime friend, Admiral Albert Nolan, the one basically in charge of the boat-building venture, along with all underground naval operations in the world.

Though facilities were located all over the world, Albert's naval operations were headquartered in the Polynesian Triangle whose corners were formed by Easter Island, Hawaii, and New Zealand. And this was a region containing much more power than any other water expanses of the earth in that merpeople, huge pods of leviathans, halcyon, and many other magical creatures abounded in this triangle. Of particular interest was an enormous sea serpent made of both light and a mysterious energy that many thought might be related to unicorns. The serpent seemed to like the naval vessels, often traveling before them to provide light during nighttime maneuvers or during storms. Sailors also frequently came into contact with water sprites, which were quite a bit larger than spreesprites, at generally one to three feet in height. Also discovered was a creature called an ávany that most often simply looked like waves and sea spray, but was capable of leaping up, like a dolphin but higher, to drown demons and nyregs in midair. Despising evil creatures, ávanies often gathered in great swarms in order to do just that.

While several underwater facilities did exist, the cost of building them was prohibitive, so most naval operations were hidden in pockets

located on islands, with many pockets containing huge harbors in which ships were stored and where battle drills and sailing exercises took place. Taking the ships in and out of pockets was not a problem at all because the doorways designed by gifted architects and magicians were expandable, in addition to being connected to island coastlines.

Unlike the Underground Army, Albert's naval endeavors had been given a specific name—that of W'eeppers, short for Water Keepers because navy personnel considered themselves to be guardians of seas, lakes, and even large rivers. The name was also appropriate because Albert had actually started off his career doing a lot of weeping at the state of the U.S. Navy, as well as the rest of the United States Armed Forces. When he joined, there was practically no religious freedom, no free speech, and our inept leadership (at the highest level) was not only allowing but encouraging terrorist attacks. But as bad as this was, it had served a purpose in that it had been easy for Albert to recruit other Christians to fight against evil.

While the building of ships for the W'eeppers had mostly taken place over the last fifteen years of our time, this equated to much more time in Antica. With one year of our time roughly equal to eighteen years in Antica, the ships were built over a period of time spanning about two hundred and seventy years. The difference in how time passed in Antica never affected visitors adversely because people from our world still aged according to time at home. And since the people of Antica aged incredibly slowly, very little difference in their lives was noticed as those from our world went back and forth. Indeed, nearing the end of this massive ship-building project, it really only seemed to Kip as though around fifteen years had passed as far as the lives of people in Antica. The only thing that could be slightly disorienting was when returning after not visiting for a few months to new buildings that might have popped up, and new watercrafts that were sometimes slightly different in their improved designs.

People had long pondered why time passed so much faster in both Antica and Kivetel as compared to our world. Without even having anyone like Alex helping his brain along, Kip had long ago figured out the answer to this mystery. When God gives His children a task, He always makes a way for it to happen. In this case, God was giving certain people time to do the things He was calling them to do.

Basically, He was being the Great Time Multiplier, including not only the time needed to build boats, but also time needed for various individuals to get training. It was no accident that Weatherly became the greatest rope wielder of all time—it was thousands upon thousands of hours of training that accomplished this.

In other incidences, Jane, a botanist, was given time to develop certain plants. Her ear orchids alone would have taken over thirty years in our world to develop, but were something she had managed to accomplish in a mere two years of our time by doing most of her work in Antica. Additionally, she had managed a medical breakthrough with a plant that could act as a pacemaker. This would have likely taken over fifty years to complete in our world. Another plant she had worked on with a colleague regulated breathing in sleep apnea patients without having to be attached to the patient like traditional devices needed to be.

But we must get back to the ship building. With the help of the extra time, an amazing amount of progress had been made in the form of entire fleets of ships built, many using old-timey methods, but with some having modern features, such as sailing vessels that could fold up and dive, if necessary. Several fleets of catamaran-style crafts, a favored design in Antica, were also produced. Only a small percentage of the materials needed to build the ships came from our world, because a good deal of what was needed came from Antica, whose metalworking techniques produced lightweight but incredibly strong materials for the modern-style vessels. Kivetel aided with providing most of the wood for older-style ships. And a creature somewhat akin to a giant moth liked to produce and weave a cottony-like material that was used for the sails.

In recent months, the builders had stepped up efforts on a specific fleet being called the Ark Fleet, which was going to be used to rescue the unicorn and trapped dragons.

God had shown Vini and Ben the location of the remains of Noah's Ark in their youth for a very good reason, because the wood would be needed to help build certain ships.

Those working on the Ark Fleet were incorporating wood from the original ark into the new ships, totaling twenty-four in all; and while

this might seem like a small number for a “fleet,” this one didn’t need to be as large as others for a very special reason.

Because Noah’s Ark had been divinely produced, and protected by God’s blessing, the remnants of it were still very magical, providing safety in many situations, in this case, for God’s children intending to enter and leave the Bermuda Triangle and the additional Demon Pocket within it. Aside from the protection ingrained in the wood, certain magical creatures would be protecting the Ark Fleet, along with the secret activities of several watchmen.

Those harvesting the ark wood from the mountain valley in Turkey ended up bringing most of it to Antica, for use in many ships under construction, even more than the twenty-four of the Ark Fleet. Many people liked to use reclaimed wood, and this was the ultimate example of this. A few pieces of the ark were also incorporated into churches that were being built on Lion Mountain.

The reason it was okay to use all of the remnants had to do with the fact that the earth and everything upon it will be remade in the Endtimes. We don’t need to save certain things for use after the Second Coming because, at that time, there will be plenty of other blessed and amazing building materials to work with. The bible doesn’t mention gold, carbuncles, agates, and such for nothing. What is going to be made will be immensely incredible, and barely comprehensible by our understanding of things we currently consider to be grand and amazing.

Some of us have an inkling as to what our jobs in heaven might end up being like. Perhaps helping with the building? At least, that’s what Bear often dreamt about—being a heavenly carpenter and helping to build New Jerusalem. Otto, too, had such dreams, of being a heavenly architect. And Isaac had, on occasion, fantasized about mapping all of heaven, if God would allow him to do so. Since eternal life will be just that, eternal, he would have plenty of time for mapping, unless God had more important plans for him, that is.

At this point in our story, we might be wondering how the military was going to get the ships out of Antica and into our world. In truth, this had already been happening for many years and was not at all a problem.

The ships were being resized, shrunk down, by a sorcerer named Kinza Sopor who had been converted, like Rhett, but whose conversion

was still being kept incredibly secret. Rhett didn't even know about him. Nor did most of the people working with him in Antica know that he was a sorcerer because Kinza didn't dress like a sorcerer, and his staff had been secretly made into a foldable pocket-sized model by a genie.

After being shrunk down, the ships were hand carried out of Antica, this being rather an amusing prospect and sight—that of sailors toting their own vessels. Upon arriving at their new destinations, Kinza simply sized the ships back up again.

With regard to the rescue of the unicorn and dragons, the Realm Key was definitely going to be needed, to unlock the doorway to the inner Demon Pocket. While he could change the sizes of ships, Kinza wasn't going to be able to resize the Realm Key because Boko, through one of his game turns, had actually been the one to change the size of the sphere. And certain magic done by powerful beings was often difficult for others to undo. However, the resizing of the sphere was not going to be difficult because the resizing trunk, designed by a clever magician, could do just that. Sorcerers also generally couldn't undo each other's curses, which was why Kinza wasn't going to be able to lift the curse that had been placed on the Realm Key. But we needn't worry because Zin, already one of the greatest curse breakers of all time, was going to be able to do that. Though sometimes in roundabout ways, magicians pretty much always triumph over sorcerers, this being reflective of how good almost always has the power to triumph over evil.

In addition to helping the naval efforts, Kinza had been instrumental to the Underground Army as well in helping certain operatives gain access to the cities. But while he most often stayed hidden and disguised while working with the W'weepers, Kinza's help to Weatherly had been done in his full sorcerer persona, which had to be so in order to bring into the cities the infiltrators, who posed as various hunters and other evil-doers when traveling with him. Now, operatives were established in every Supercity, coordinating NUR activities and helping to stem as many of the evil goings on as possible.

Chapter Eleven

The Long-Awaited Rescue

“Better is the end of a thing than its beginning; and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit.”
Ecclesiastes 7:8

As November began on Lion Mountain, Mrs. Evans had just given birth, and Ruth was delighting in having a new baby brother. Bunny and Teddy were happy too, but they all had to be very quiet when little Howard was sleeping.

Linn was doing fairly well. Whenever he was feeling poorly, he would clutch the pin-on watch and pray, after which, he generally felt better. The Magic Water that Astrid was stopping by with every three or so days was giving him more energy; though by this time, he had lost another six pounds, which meant he was way too thin, a fact that worried Alex and Ethan. Having noticed Astrid’s visits, neither pressed for information from either Linn or his mother about what was obviously a very serious situation, instead choosing to pray. By this time, Linn knew fully what was going on; but he also knew he needed to be patient, and give God time to work.

On the subject of patience, it had been nearly five decades since Charlie had had the first vision about the trapped unicorn. At that time, the creature was of course not yet trapped and only four dragons were being kept at the location that she later learned was a Demon Pocket within the Demon Pocket of the Bermuda Triangle that was originally designed to lure seafarers into a realm inhabited by demons and other evil creatures.

Quin had visited Linn the last weekend in October. Seeing him so thin had left her not only worried, but feeling rather desperate. Her mother and grandmother both had been encouraging patience, even quoting bible scripture to her, such as Romans 12:12. “Rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.”

Staying as busy as possible helped with exercising patience, though it was still hard not to worry, which was why Quin was overjoyed the second week of November when her Grandma Vini told her the time was finally right to mount the rescue.

Vini had just received God's direction via a dream featuring the talking peacock she had heard from since her youth.

The rescue started early on a Thursday morning, and the first step actually involved Quin. She was to retrieve a certain dragon from a cave in Mexico, a female dragon named Sei Sei, who would be going with them into the Bermuda Triangle to help perform the rescue. When Quin related to Cuoré where they were heading and which dragon they were going to retrieve, he was overjoyed, and made no delay in relating why to his mistress. Sei Sei was one of the original seven dragons, five of which were still waiting for God's command to perform some extraordinary task. The other two were off sleeping somewhere, having already finished their tasks—one helping to bring about the Great Flood (the Rain Dragon) and the other posing as the Star of Bethlehem (the Star Dragon).

With the original seven dragons each corresponding to one of the seven colors of a rainbow, Sei Sei was the orange dragon. Upon finding her, Quin was amazed. This was easily the largest burnished dove she had ever seen, twice as big as most; and Quin reasoned this was because Sei Sei was a very old dragon. Also, females of species were often larger than males. Actually, Quin hadn't seen nearly as many female dragons as she had males in her lifetime (probably because males outnumbered females at around five to one), but she did recall from her training with Professor Fulhausen that the females tended to be a little larger than the males.

At the same time Quin and Cuoré were retrieving Sei Sei, several people were heading into the Demon Pocket that currently held the Realm Sphere. This was a pocket similar to the one in which the unicorn and dragons were being held, but was actually located about halfway across the world from it. The same crew that went after the indigo sphere once before (but hadn't taken it on advice of the mermaid, Lutani) went after it again this time. This included Vini, Ben, Albert, Charlie, Tulko, Dara, Folto, Sima, and Lyydu.

Once again, Sima easily found the crack-of-light doorway in the skies above the plantations so that they could all enter the pocket.

Though numerous demons and several nyregs were present, the group was so quick about their task, with the protectors doing a fabulous job of holding the evil back, they had very little trouble. Plus, they were all wearing necklace crosses of Aunt Eugenia's designs (even Folto who had absolutely adored the late sculptress), which helped to keep the demons at bay.

Sima calmed the storm the demons were producing to try to thwart their efforts, as Vini called to Lutani, who arrived in less than thirty seconds to retrieve the bowling-ball-sized Realm Key from the bottom of the sea for them, whereupon, the mermaid handed the heavy sphere off to Vini aboard Tulko who had lowered himself to a position just above the surface of the water. Though a little awkward and slippery, the sphere was not so heavy that Vini couldn't lift it and hold it securely in her lap, particularly because Tulko was doing his usual good job of holding her on with his aura.

As the group made their swift departure led by Sima, Lutani waved to them before quickly diving to avoid the dangers in the skies above her. Blessedly, the demons hadn't aroused the kraken of these parts, so the sea was fairly peaceful as she swam away.

Back at the plantations, the Realm Key was handed off to Zin, who began work right away to break the curse on it, which was fairly complex by curse standards, necessitating a brief visit by the magician to the Realm of Sextessence through the doorway on the mezzanine. After returning, the remainder of the task took Zin about five hours. It would have taken less time, except for having to track down a porcupine quill from a specific species, one of the old-world varieties. Good thing Zapor was pretty fabulous at tracking things down. Zin had to hand it to the designer of the curse, a sorcerer who had been very clever in that, not only was the curse complex, but only a female magician could break it. At the time the sphere was cursed, very few female magicians were in existence, which made it unlikely the curse could have been broken at all in decades past.

Once the curse was broken, it was a fairly simple task to lug the sphere down to the safe room in the Labyrinth Library where the resizing trunk was kept and where it made short work of the size

change; though initially, the trunk did groan a little as the object was placed into, in slight complaint because the sphere still held a small stink from the curse that had been upon it, which the trunk could smell. When the lid was again raised, the trunk gave off a small contented sigh from the curse stink having been removed with the resizing.

The now baseball-sized sphere was going to be much easier to carry on the next leg of their journey, which they would be starting on right away because Quin had just arrived with the sleeping burnished dove in her lap. Cuoré was shushing everyone nearby so as not to awaken Sei Sei who was going to need her rest for the task ahead.

While Samantha was there to see her daughter off, she was not going with her on the trip. Neither were Ben and Charlie going, though Vini definitely was, being uniquely qualified to accompany Albert due to her connection with unicorns. (In truth, she mostly wanted to be along to help her granddaughter.)

Though Zin wanted to, she was not going along, mainly because Em didn't want her traveling on the seas with such little sailing experience in her life so far. Though somewhat disappointed, she recognized the wisdom in her mother's decision. Not one prone to pouting, Zin would instead be praying for the safety and success of her friends.

Lydydu was accompanying Charlie back to the mountain and so also would not be going this time. Zapor too was staying behind, feeling the need to be near his charge.

With Kip still in Antica, a very safe realm compared to ours, Folto decided to go, accompanied by her daughters and two other gryphons from the plantations. A small herd of wind horses led by Dara and Tulko were going as well.

Kinza had restored the shrunken-down Harvey's Ghost to its original size, and Albert would be leading the Ark Fleet from the ship's deck. Though smaller than the other vessels in the fleet, Albert felt very comfortable aboard what was basically the first ship he had ever commanded, as a teenager when he, Louetta, Vini, and Ben were lured by the cursed sphere into the Demon Pocket. Harvey's Ghost, while not originally built with wood from Noah's Ark, had several large sections of front hull clad with planks hewn from the relic. Several railings fashioned from the blessed wood were installed as well, along with a

large cross, also made of wood from the ark before being fastened securely to the ship's bow.

Vini on Tulko carried the Realm Key as they flew alongside Albert aboard Folto and Quin atop Cuoré to the spot where the fleet was already assembled off the coast of Bermuda and where the other gryphons and Dara had already joined the herd of wind horses. Upon reaching the Ark Fleet, Vini and Albert were deposited on Harvey's Ghost, while Quin stayed aboard her protector.

As far as male to female sailors, the ratio in the W'eeppers was just about equal. In the Underground Army, men outnumbered women, but only two to one at this time. With regard to naval personnel aboard the Ark Fleet, there were slightly more women than men.

Getting into the Bermuda Triangle was easy because it was a pretty well-defined area, the three corners being Florida, Bermuda, and Puerto Rico. Entering the actual Demon Pocket, which was basically a parallel realm occupying the same space as the triangle, was slightly trickier because the entrance was a large curtain-style energy doorway located near a waterspout that erupted every sixty-two minutes. The doorway was invisible except during the time of the eruption. Knowing the approximate location, with a little searching and patience, they were able to locate the doorway and enter.

The inner pocket doorway contained a complex lock that only a sophisticated key, like the Realm Key, could open. From auto-writing, Vini had learned the coordinates; and slipping the Realm Key into a mounting on the bow of Harvey's Ghost would allow it to work when nearing the doorway.

Sailing into a great fog to find the exact location, when the Realm Key activated itself, they could actually see the workings of the key in the form of intricate triangular lines etched into the dense fog from the magical energy acting like the cuts of an elaborate key, and perhaps one come to life to perform a geometric dance similar to what swiftly-slashing chef knives might produce in a thick blanket of meringue. If the fleets' passengers hadn't known this was the Realm Key at work, they might have thought the beautiful patterns to be a mysterious message being spelled out for them in the fog by angels with swords, or perhaps by an otherworldly poet wielding a large quill and using a

language presently indecipherable to them, but that was nonetheless a joy to watch being written.

When entering the pocket, they immediately encountered thousands of demons hovering in the darkened skies above the sea. Undaunted by the evil pressing in about them, the Ark Fleet sailed toward a massive island where the prisoners were being kept. The wind horses were providing a constant strong stream of air to the sails that kept the ships moving swiftly along.

The demons couldn't get too close to the fleet because the wood of the ships was burning their eyes, noses, throats, ears, and skin much like the effect close proximity to a bible or a cross would have, though the intense pain didn't fully hinder the evil creatures who were already producing storms over a wide area that was growing ever darker and more ominous with each nautical mile.

Albert had anticipated the darkness, and the ships were equipped with lights that intensified in output as the darkness increased. This not only served to help the sailors do their work, but also to illuminate a variety of crosses gleaming brightly from railings, figureheads, and even sails. This truly was a godly fleet.

However, while the ships were well protected, the mission was still dangerous because they were going to have to get off of the ships to rescue the unicorn and the dragons.

Quin and Cuoré were flying close to the gryphons for protection; but aside from that, Cuoré was blending in fairly well even with the dark clouds, so much so that the demons had yet to notice him. The Protector of Dragons and her protector were waiting to act because their part in this battle had been carefully planned, and the timing needed to be perfect.

Several nyregs had shown up amongst the throngs of demons, but were not much of a problem for the gryphons and several of the wind horses to keep pushed back. Sima was very much doing her part in calming storms surrounding the ships, while making sure not to interfere with the wind that was propelling the Ark Fleet.

While the powers of the protectors were pretty amazing, those aboard the ships were not by any means helpless. Rows of mirror cannons had been installed, and had been fully charged with light ahead of time, again in anticipation of the darkness. Music weapons were also

in play in the form of enormous drums and horns mounted on decks and sturdy masts. Under the skill of their users, these were as precise as flutes carried as personal weapons, but probably close to a hundred times more powerful. The music weapons worked best to control the masses of demons, not just in the powerful bursts that made physical contact, but because the sound of the musical energy horribly bothered their ears, causing bouts of disorientation and terror.

At one point, the ships came under attack by four huge nyregs, easily three times the size of normal ones and spitting three times as much acid with each shot. Military Intelligence hadn't known the sorcerers had been breeding larger of these beasts. Blessedly, those manning the light cannons were able to shoot one of the creatures down fairly swiftly. Another was brought down by Magsen, Halli, and Folto using a massive team effort.

The other two backed off slightly, though this wouldn't save them in the long run because the cannons were far reaching, even to the point of extending many miles over the land. The personnel staying aboard the ships would continue to work on these two monsters after the land rescue teams disembarked.

Vini was afraid to call a unicorn to help. Hunters had captured one already, they might capture another. This was good discernment on her part because the containment boxes, now numbering in the thousands, had a magnetic quality that could draw unicorns into them and keep them from fleeing this evil realm. Also, while the light of a unicorn could kill great numbers of demons and nyregs, it wouldn't kill humans such as hunters and sorcerers. Nor would it have blinded them because the ones inside this Demon Pocket had taken to wearing goggles to protect them from possible exposure to the captured unicorn.

There was no need to drop anchor because a couple of the wind horses would help keep the ships in position close to the shore.

In preparation for the ground maneuvers, naval personnel had already boarded scores of drop ships, each holding twenty sailors. Once in the water, these were helped along by wind horses.

After landing on the beach, the rescuers began battling hordes of demons, mainly with flutes and ropes, but some also with light weapons holding fairly strong charges, the danger from the explosions being worth the risk to free the dragons and unicorn.

Vini was among those on the beach; she had some skill with a rope and very much wanted to fight. Tulko was keeping watch on her, though he soon found he didn't need to because the demons were not even coming close to her. This was because she was glowing in an almost unearthly way; just looking at her hurt the demons' eyes. Albert and many of his crew nearby noticed and quickly realized they were not imagining things. She was definitely glowing, almost like something saturated by phosphorous, or perhaps like a creature or plant capable of bioluminescence. Engaged in battle, no one really had time to ponder specifics. Knowing she was a gifted woman, most simply assumed this was part of her gift, possibly what allowed her to call unicorns.

With the demons staying back, other than sneaking up on a few, Vini didn't have much of an opportunity to use her rope, and so instead drew a flute from her pocket. Though she wasn't as skilled with the instrument, she would at least be able to make some impact.

The wind horses were using their forces to push back hordes of demons in order to make paths for the rescuers who were split into two groups, one larger and heading for the clusters of dragon paddocks approximately a mile inland, and the other making their way along the beach to the rows of unicorn boxes lined up along the coastline and hovering just above the water at the edge of the shore.

All the while this was going on, Samantha was at home praying, for the safety of her mother, daughter, and others, and for the success of the mission. As far as the past issue of acting rashly with regard to the unicorn whistle, Samantha was truly remorseful. Having asked God for forgiveness, she didn't feel guilt over the matter, and often took great comfort in Isaiah 44:22. "I have swept away your transgressions like a cloud, and your sins like mist; return to me, for I have redeemed you."

Vini and Albert were among the larger group on the island, which was making the most progress based on their numbers and having more weapons; and they had almost reached the first of the dragon paddocks.

In the skies overhead, Quin and Cuoré were active. Quin hadn't taken her watch back from Linn for this mission, but she wasn't going to need to stop time. With Cuoré's camouflage protecting her, she used a flute against the swarms of demons below her. Since they couldn't see her, many of the demons assumed they were under heavenly attack, probably by watchmen. In truth, several angels were in the Demon

Pocket keeping watch, but wouldn't intervene unless they had to. For this particular group of God's children, if it was not yet time for certain ones to meet the Father, the watchmen would protect them. A couple of the angels were smiling at the orange burnished dove resting in Quin's lap in recognizing that some human beings were hearing God's voice clearly.

Sei Sei was awake, but had been waiting. Dragons were often models of patience, basically needing to be, in often waiting long periods of time for God to call them into action. However, as soon as the rescuers below started breaking into the paddocks (mainly using mirrors and flutes), she lifted off from Quin's lap in order to shift into dragon form, which ended up being easily twice as large as any dragon Quin had ever encountered. Not only that, but the spiny feathers surrounding her neck and crest were much more prominent than those of other dragons she had seen, making Sei Sei look much like a queen warrior dragon with a heavily-armored collar and spikey crown.

The orange dragon had been brought because the imprisoned dragons were going to need someone to lead them. Many were weak; not from lack of food, because Linn's goodness was fully saturating the Demon Pocket, but more from fighting. Not only did the sorcerers and hunters employ torturous methods to try to break them, many dragons were being forced individually to fight all at once the four dragons that the evil men had managed to convert. Numerous of the captive dragons had been killed in the past couple of years. (Losing some of the dragons didn't trouble the sorcerers because the hunters were adept at acquiring new ones.) Others were wounded. Since dragon tears were designed to heal humans, they didn't work on dragons or other magical creatures and animals, and so the wounds were going to take some time to heal up on their own.

The delay of the rescue mission had actually been partly related to Sei Sei. Though sleeping much of the time, she had lately been needed to perform a task, that of making several adjustments to the Clock of the Universe. Even though the clock itself was not at all related to the way human beings measure time, each of the adjustments had been somewhat time-consuming. Also, being the largest of the original seven, Sei Sei was definitely the right choice for this mission, and so they had needed to wait until she was available.

She was precisely there to rally the others and take on the converted dragons. It was almost unthinkable to her that any could have been converted. Most dragons would rather die than serve evil, this concept being ingrained into the very fibers of their being from birth. Yet, here they were, and they couldn't be denied. Now, she was going to have to fight some of her own.

Of the four converted dragons, one was female and the other three were male. These were younger dragons. Put together, they all did probably outsize Sei Sei, but not by much. Having stayed together and near the paddocks, the four hadn't yet entered the fray; but they were about to be forced to as Sei Sei landed directly in front of them.

The dragons being rescued did indeed take heart from Sei Sei's presence; and while many might have wanted to join her in the fight, they were being told very clearly by the thoughts of Cuoré and Quin to head to the ships. Particularly adhering to Quin's commands, they did obey. (Few dragons would ever question the authority of the Protector of Dragons.)

As far as being able to break into the paddocks, the cages were made of some sort of energy that dragon fire couldn't melt, but that was not immune to being shattered by the energy emanating from flutes and mirrors. Smaller enclosures similar to the large paddocks held scores of burnished doves which were also liberated. Most of the dragons were not so injured that they couldn't fly. For the ones whose wings were injured, Quin was telling them to revert to dove form and was instructing other dragons to carry them to the ships. She was also telling all to revert to dove form on the ships so that there would be room for everyone.

In addition to the efforts of the wind horses, Cuoré's fire was helping to clear a path through the swarms of demons both on the ground and in the air so that the rescuers and escaping dragons could safely make their way to the boats.

No resistance from sorcerers or hunters was met by the group rescuing the dragons, but this was because the evil men were focused on the area of the containment boxes. The unicorn was much more valuable to them than the dragons; plus, they didn't know about Sei Sei and thought the four converted dragons would have things well in hand.

Sei Sei actually had things pretty well in hand, deciding to stick to ground fighting in order to keep the four distracted from and out of the skies. Though after only about five minutes of the biting, clawing, and fire-blasting scuffle, she had managed to slash the wings of only two of her opponents in order to keep them grounded long-term (until their wings healed that is, in a few weeks' time). The other two, having recognized that stopping the escaping dragons was a priority, took flight and headed on a streaking path toward the ships; though they were met by cannon, horn, and drum fire from the Ark Fleet of such magnitude and precision that they were kept fairly well at bay.

Some close hand-to-hand combat was occurring on the ground. While all of the navy personnel were wearing crosses, some demons simply didn't care if their eyes, skin, and such were burning. Blessedly, many of God's children were armed with daggers and short swords, and so were still able to effectively fight when their flutes, mirrors, and ropes were knocked or wrenched from their grasps.

With regard to the hunters and sorcerers along the shore, they were being forced to take cover from the assault of the gryphons who were making incredibly speedy and claw-slashing passes at them. Magsen and Halli had very early on managed to knock the staffs out of the hands of the six sorcerers present, the instruments very quickly being lost in the throng of trampling demons and the sea waves along the shore. Most hunters had training so specialized that they were only adept at hunting down specific creatures, which meant the guns they were trying to use against the invaders were practically useless in their hands, most often only ending up accidentally wounding demons. The hunters actually each carried a secret weapon; but since they thought the four converted dragons and the many demons could handle things, they had chosen not to reveal their secret, in order to save it for another time.

The unicorn rescuers were making progress along the long line of shimmering boxes, with five members of the group hearing God's voice very clearly as to which one contained the unicorn. Upon reaching it, they also knew that blasting the box with mirrors and flutes wouldn't in any way harm the creature, but would serve to split the box, from which, the majestic golden unicorn immediately emerged, glowing. A moment later, though weak from the ordeal, the creature lit up, as the many nearby rescuers shielded their eyes. The bright white slow-

motion flash served to dissipate several herds of demons nearby, and five nyregs in the air, with their slight remains merely blowing away like ashes. The unicorn then simply disappeared.

As they made their way back to the drop ships, the rescuers along the shore destroyed many of the other boxes, just for good measure.

Sei Sei's battle with the two grounded dragons had just come to an end, but not by her choice. Rather than die, the pair had chosen to retreat to nearby caves, where they were soon joined by the other two converts who had judged continued assault on the rescue fleet to be a waste of time upon discovering that the wooden ships were protected in some mysterious way, to the extent that they couldn't be burned by dragon fire.

Instead of pursuing the converted dragons, Sei Sei judged helping to protect those returning to the Ark Fleet by drop ships to be more important; and those on the beach and in the shallows were very happy when she showed up because two more of the oversized nyregs had just arrived, though the pair didn't last long under the assault of the orange dragon.

Two hundred and three dragons were rescued from the island, and the sorcerers were plenty hopping mad because this was the total number of live dragons in their custody that hadn't been converted. This project had taken decades of work to get to this point; now, it was in complete ruins.

The rescued unicorn made a brief appearance on Lion Mountain, just outside of Linn's bedroom window. This was in the early hours of the morning, and the strange light seeping in through the panes woke him. To conserve the energy he would have expended getting in and out of bed, he had lately taken to sleeping in his airchair, in the recline position. Moving closer to the window and opening it, he stared into the creature's eyes, which were identical to his own. The encounter lasted only briefly though because the unicorn disappeared after a mere four seconds of staring at him. Linn reasoned that his Soul Shadow had simply wanted to make sure he was okay. Having gained strength almost immediately, Linn actually felt more than okay; he felt incredible, as though his body, mind, soul, and spirit were suddenly free from some terrible weight. Closing the window, he found he had more

than enough energy to get himself into the bed, where he soon dropped into a deep and restful sleep.

Meanwhile, the Ark Fleet was sailing out of the Demon Pocket with relative ease, the small amount of resistance and pursuit being easily taken care of by Cuoré, the gryphons, and the wind horses.

Many of the rescuers were injured; but remarkably, only two had been killed. Folto and Halli had managed to recover the bodies to bring them on board Harvey's Ghost. Medics aboard each ship were healing the wounded with dragon tears, which also brought back to life the two sailors that were killed. Quin's gift of healing by touch came in handy, though she couldn't spend a lot of time doing this because her priority was protecting the dragons. Blessedly, the medics were quick and dragon tears were plentiful (obviously).

Vini breathed a huge sigh of relief as they were leaving the Bermuda Triangle, and as Tulko was flying her home. Though she never doubted the outcome, the rescue had been a very long time in coming. She was also pleased that the whole thing from beginning to end had taken less than twenty-four hours.

At first light, Quin and Cuoré made a trip to Lion Mountain to get her watch back from Linn because she was very soon going to need it. He was still sleeping, but his mother let her into his room to unpin the watch from his chest, after which, Quin lightly stroked his hair for a few moments before placing a kiss upon his cheek and leaving.

The Protector of Dragons was going to be busy for the next week, making multiple trips to hide the rescued dragons in various locations, many in an area where hundreds were already hidden inside three specific volcanoes. While it might seem dangerous for so many to be in one location, dragons had been gathering there for centuries, and Quin had never thought of a better place for them. Few people ever explored the insides of volcanoes, so they were likely just about as safe there as anywhere. As far as she knew, the dragons themselves had chosen the spot, probably from God leading them. Quin reasoned this because of something Cuoré had related to her: The four converted dragons were forbidden by God to reveal the location of the three volcanoes to anyone. And even though they had turned to evil, they would be adhering to this particular Law of God because it was not one of those things about which they had a choice. Rather than break this law, they

would surrender their lives because it was more than just ingrained in their make-up, it was Divine Command. Although sky serpents were godly creatures, they were not under Divine Command to serve humans on the side of good. They chose to do so, which was why some of them could choose to serve the side of evil. They were however under various unbreakable magical oaths not to do certain things, which God set forth as forbidden.

The severely wounded dragons were going to be kept safe in pockets under the W'eeper's protection for a while. There were lots of caves in various island pockets for them to sleep in, and they could leave at any time because they were not locked up. Dragon wounds could generally heal up without being tended to, but they would need rest in order to heal. As for Sei Sei, after providing a few large flasks of dragon tears for the navy to use, she soon headed back to her favorite cave in Mexico.

At around the same time the dragons and unicorn were being liberated, a few other important rescues were going on. Some of these had to do with the activities of Eizel, who had been up to quite a bit of no good lately. However, Coco Riley, a gifted fifteen-year-old living on a self-sustaining ranch in Montana had just learned of Eizel, from an auto-writing session and because a friend of Coco's had lately been having bad dreams caused by Eizel. Though the act of auto-writing gave her helpful information, this was not Coco's main gift. Rather, she was able to block dreams and thoughts being planted into the minds of others; and while she was especially good at blocking demon-planted thoughts, her skills in blocking people like Eizel were improving.

Coco's range was not as great as Eizel's because Coco generally had to be within two hundred miles of the perpetrator. But upon learning about Eizel, it was not hard to take trips to Supercity Ten in Ohio where this malicious girl lived in order to sight her, and then tail her as often as possible. Though Ohio was a fair distance from Montana, Coco had always wanted to tackle a project such as this. God had given her a wind horse named Agzata (a mare slightly older than Tulko) as a protector several years back, so she knew she was destined to do something like this.

Coco had regularly spent afternoons and weekends blocking demon-planted thoughts in and around the ranch and other communities

fairly close by, most often in Idaho and Wyoming. Now, the prospect of traveling more was very exciting. Through prayer and auto-writing, she could tell this was what God wanted her to do, specifically, thwart the malice of Eizel and others like her. Coco wasn't alone in these specific efforts; in fact, she had recently discovered a teenage boy with her exact same gift living in China. And she had just sent a kite message to him to arrange for her to visit him in China over the Christmas Holidays.

On the part of Eizel, it would be a while before she would realize that someone was regularly shadowing her, and blocking what she was doing.

While Coco's rescues involved people's minds, many physical rescues were going on as well, such as several by Westerwing, a rookh with the unique talent of being able to fly forty times faster when traveling west than in any other direction. On the very day of the unicorn rescue, Westerwing aided a total of thirty-five NUR escapees and operatives in five separate locations outside of camps and Supercities. Westerwing lived on Lion Mountain and, like Cecelia, was often sent on special assignment by Astrid, whom he had known for many decades.

Several of the Underground Army's Badgers living in a Rubble City had helped Westerwing by hiding eight people. They often hid travelers in certain places in this city for a few days before sending them on, equipped with maps, gear, food, weapons, etc. While not quite as good as Lizards at infiltrating and hiding (often in plain sight), the survival skills of the Badgers were truly remarkable, as far as their resourcefulness, physical strength, resilience, cleverness, and fierceness. Fierceness was a particularly prominent trait, as evidenced by one of the Badgers taking on five stealth hobs at once, and laughing the whole time because, although this was a serious matter, the hobs basically had no chance against him.

At around the same time the Badger was laughing, a puck troll in Supe-13 was rescuing an ink artist who had been modifying people's barcodes and had gotten found out. This rescue might have been laughable too because the puck ended up hiding the artist in one of his own art pieces, framed on the wall as one of the samples people could choose from when picking tattoo designs. The artist would be moved

the next day, to a fancy hanging rug. From there, he would be taken into a safe house in a week's time.

Another rescue involved a flock of peafowl that had wandered outside of the twin plantations, where the birds came under attack by demons and nyregs. While peafowl could fly, their adversaries could too, and faster. The bigfoots were outraged at the attack and ended up bringing down many of the demons and their flying beasts by throwing huge rocks at them. Once within reach, the nasty creatures were basically ripped to shreds. It was easy for a bigfoot to deal with several demons at once, and not a problem at all to take care of nyregs one-on-one, which meant the peafowl were safely back at home in no time, though the birds did receive a little scolding from the bigfoots about the wandering.

Possibly the most important rescue involved getting the unicorn whistle back. This took place the moment Vini returned to the plantations. Just as she was placing the Realm Sphere into the walk-in safe in the Labyrinth Library, Dell was leading a team of TKTs through the arbor window. The rescue of the unicorn and dragons needed to take place before the whistle was recovered so that changing the past wouldn't unexpectedly change anything important, such as the location of the trapped creatures, or anything related to the timeline. In truth, another reason the Bermuda Triangle mission had been delayed was because Dell had needed to do a massive amount of research. With his mission linked so closely to the dragon-and-unicorn rescue, and a whole slew of variables involved, he had simply needed to be very careful. He wouldn't have wanted to risk messing anything up for his friends, or risk losing an opportunity to recover the whistle and possibly have the whole nightmare repeated again.

From the careful research, he was able to pinpoint the exact best time to liberate the whistle from the sorcerers' grasp. He knew he shouldn't simply go back and prevent the whistle from being stolen. Although the theft had been the result of an act of carelessness and poor judgement, it had been allowed by God for various reasons. For one thing, Linn and his mother were meant to move to the mountain, which might not have happened if the unicorn hadn't been captured. Also, this event had served as a warning—to take better care when dealing with powerful magical objects. It was also a reminder that we need to pray

more, and listen more carefully to God's voice and the guiding of the Holy Spirit. For these and other such reasons, Dell also would not be going back to try to erase the whole thing by destroying the original whistle. There were reasons (some of them good) as to why it had come into existence.

Dell ended up going back to a point in time just after the sorcerers trapped the unicorn, and he was able to get hold of the whistle easily. The timing of this took time away from the tech sorcerers with regard to their efforts to study the whistle more closely in order to make more of them. It also didn't allow them time to set the whistle to call any other unicorns by the creatures' individual musical signatures.

When he took the whistle, Dell replaced it with a fake one, just as the thief who had originally stolen the whistle had done.

Chapter Twelve

A Season of Healing

“And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, establish, and strengthen you.” 1 Peter 5:10

It was coming up on Thanksgiving, which wasn't highly celebrated anymore in the U.S. A few low-key private celebrations in the self-sustaining communities still took note of the history, in contrast to folks in the Supercities who weren't much familiar with that aspect. In fact, if schoolchildren in the cities had been asked about Thanksgiving, most would have given the answer that it had to do with being thankful for food. In schools outside of the cities, while history was being taught and there was much to be thankful for, children gave thanks every day to God, so they didn't particularly need a holiday set aside for this.

On Thanksgiving Day itself, Weatherly was again helping Merri conduct training, first in a classroom setting before heading out to a training station. One thing the group was learning was that ropes could be thrown like spears. Few could ever master this technique; in fact, only two of the twenty trainees would end up being willing to continue trying after the first lesson, and only one of the two would eventually manage to actually perform the skill, and he would never become a master at it. But the trainers still had to cover this because someone eventually would find this to be their gift.

Merri and Weatherly were also teaching that, while those on the side of God were the ones primarily using flutes, mirrors, and ropes, we shouldn't discount the possibility that an enemy might also have them, and be able to use them. “Sometimes people change sides,” Merri warned. “Weapons can also simply fall into the hands of our enemy, who might take the time needed to learn how to use them.”

“If an opponent is using a flute, mirror, or rope against you, switching to a sling, mace, throwing stars, sword, or bow might be

necessary,” Weatherly interjected, after which, she and Merri demonstrated how to use a short sword to disarm a rope wielder, and a sling to knock a flute from someone’s hands. These were techniques that were actually pretty easy. On the flip side however, the trainers also showed ways to hold onto a rope, mirror, and flute so that an adversary would have a more difficult time disarming them.

The students then paired off to practice both sides of what they had learned.

Jitterbug was visiting Lion Mountain for Thanksgiving. He had been working lately with Bear on a special surprise for Linn, as something of an early Christmas present—a Technology Lab set up on the mountain. Of course, this was going to benefit a lot more people than just Jitterbug’s young friend; but it had been built mainly with Linn in mind, to give him a place to work.

Jitterbug had not only helped to outfit the lab, he was planning to come regularly to work in it. He had long felt he could use a change of scenery. “It’s lovely here on the mountain,” he remarked when first showing the astounded Linn the new lab.

Alex would make use of the lab too, and his puzzle-solving would end up being of great help to Linn. Ethan would also be involved, by way of helping to test many of Linn’s creations on various adventure trips.

One of first things Linn did in the lab was make walkie-talkie walnuts for Ethan and Alex, linking them to the ones the Three Musketeers carried. The devices worked just as well from the mountain as from the plantations, so Linn had still been able to keep in touch with Zin and Quin. Now feeling better, he definitely wanted to be part of their escapades again, and to include his new friends in the circle. He also made a modification in the form of a distress signal and locating beacon added to the walnuts. If the devices ever stopped working and his friends needed help but were unable to call, the signal could be used and the locating beacon would help a search party find them.

Linn had indeed been feeling much better lately, thanks to a lot of his neighbors being extremely interested in helping to fatten him up, and doing so by regularly bringing him things like black forest cake, fried chicken, and peanut butter fudge. Astrid herself had baked him a

batch of blueberry tarts. The strategy was working, and he had already gained back about eight pounds of the weight he had lost.

While Linn was healing up nicely, getting Preston back to something of his old self was going to take a different type of healing. At this time, he was still very much steeped in grief. Plus, with accusing himself and ruminating over being a bad parent, he was still feeling very guilty.

As soon as the unicorn rescue was completed, Vini had turned her attention to Preston. In discussing the situation with Ben, she said, "He's in trouble, so angry and confused, and rejecting help right now."

The same morning as her discussion with Ben, Vini had observed Weatherly checking on Preston, trying to coax him to put down the bottle and come back to work. His response to her had been, "What are you going to do, execute me for treason or desertion if I don't come back? Go ahead! This was all supposed to be voluntary, even from when we were kids."

"His thinking just seems totally irrational right now," Vini remarked to Ben.

Eleta hadn't lately been able to make any headway with Preston either, as far as being able to help or comfort him, though he wasn't pushing her away quite as often anymore, which she was taking some comfort in because she felt this meant that there was still hope for him.

Since their mother had passed away some five years previous, Vini had acted in a kind of mother-and-sister roll to him, which made sense, since she was the elder sibling. And while some people of Preston's acquaintance might have been tempted to give up on him, she had no intention of doing so, nor had any of his close friends, though they all were fairly busy at this time.

By coming every day to see Preston for three weeks, Vini was starting to see progress. She arrived early, to force him to get up at a certain time each morning. Cooking for him to get him to eat right was also helping, as was dragging him out of his apartment to take long walks each day. Often they would visit with the horses and take short rides. Keeping to a certain regimen, along with proper nutrition and exercise, definitely helped.

At two weeks before Christmas, though he was still occasionally beating himself up over having been too busy to notice that his son was

having problems, Preston's depressive symptoms had improved, to the extent that he had more energy, was sleeping more soundly, and thinking more clearly. He also wasn't drinking as much; in fact, he had had no alcohol for the past five days.

With regard to this thinking, Vini had thought of calling a unicorn, but had talked herself out of it. In truth, Preston actually didn't need this because, over the years—just in spending so much time with his sister—he was brain-trained to see the good in bad situations. Plus, having her around so much lately, he was starting to be able to turn around many of his darker thoughts. In fact, on her last visit, a revelation had basically flooded his brain that if Ignacio had continued on, he would have hurt more people, particularly related to the drugs because he had no intention of stopping the use of them. Beth Ann was also a druggie, so she might well have done the same. Of all of Preston's thoughts lately, this was what was ringing most true to him. Less true to him were the thoughts that other people have it so much better than he, that nothing much bad ever happens to others as compared to him, and that others don't care. If his sister didn't care, she wouldn't be spending time with him. If Kip didn't care, he wouldn't be coming by several times a week to check on him. And everyone on earth faces trials and losses.

Vini and Preston were also praying together.

However, while he seemed to be improving, Vini had discerned that it was going to take a team effort to truly bring Preston back to himself, and so she made a few discreet arrangements among their friends.

At eight days before Christmas, he was already up when Vini arrived at six in the morning, which pleased her to no end. Preston was up early because Kip was taking him to Antica for a few days, which would amount to less than a day gone from our realm, so he would actually be back home in the afternoon.

In Antica, the pair took a few boat rides, saw a great many waterfalls, whales, and pulleymons, which were something akin to seals, but with gleaming turquoise and magenta fur speckled with bright green spots. The friends also visited the cliff cave containing Antica's Peace Puzzle, which Preston pieced, into the form of a circle (as opposed to the other option of a triangle). Once the piecing was

complete, Preston did indeed feel more peaceful, perhaps more so than at any other time in his life.

Preston returned from Antica to a nice surprise in the form of a letter from Em. While she had visited him recently, and would again soon, Preston recognized that she was using her wordsmith gift.

The letter was simply two handwritten pages that related a story from when Em was a little girl and visited a zoo. Of particular note was her stroll by the monkey cages, and how talcum powder used by the zoo staff was supposed to make them smell better, but really didn't. As a post script, she included a paragraph describing a more recent event—that of Zapor rolling in a pile of leaves and giggling from pill bugs crawling all over him and tickling him.

After reading the letter, Preston felt full of energy, and like he could just about conquer anything. With this, he headed out to help some of the bigfoots with the winter gardening in the largest greenhouse.

Feeling very sore the next morning, he vowed to get back in shape by doing some training in the Weapons Room.

Over the next few weeks, whenever he started to feel a little down, Preston would end up getting out Em's letter and re-reading it, while marveling. It was almost like an energy drug, but with words used, instead of chemicals.

Ben had been visiting Preston too, to talk about a great many things, and one of their discussions was specifically about his anger toward Weatherly. While Ben didn't know specifics, he did quote 1 John 4:20 to Preston. "If any one says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen."

Preston was able to recognize that he did still hold some anger towards Weatherly, even though he had already reasoned out that she had done the right thing in refusing his request. Ben's reminder that we are to love no matter what offenses we might cause each other allowed him to recognize that his anger toward Weatherly was very irrational.

Early Christmas Eve morning found Preston on the mezzanine and leaving to spend a week in Kivetel with Varjo

"I'll be back in the afternoon," Preston told the portraits of Lizzie and Edna, as he propped the door.

They visited the Pillars of Wisdom and did a little training together. It was nice to spend time with an old friend, though Varjo was still not showing his age at all as Preston was—his blond hair having gone nearly all gray by this time.

As far as the visits to both Antica and Kivetel, again, the concept of having enough time was coming into play, in this case, enough time to heal. In addition to time, which is often the only thing that can truly ease grief, God gives us places of refuge in or lives, and sends certain people to help us.

Returning home in the afternoon, Preston was surprised to find Weatherly waiting for him on the mezzanine, particularly because they had been avoiding one another of late.

Leading him to the doorway to the Garden of Stars, she waited for him in the hall as he entered. God had told her to bring her friend here, and she very much hoped it would help him.

Inside, with the starlight twinkling upon him, Preston was immensely surprised to see the spirit of his late wife drifting towards him because he had thought he was going to see Ignacio. But this was actually even better, to get to see and say goodbye to Maria, after all these years.

She didn't seem unhappy, not even about Ignacio's death, of which she was fully aware. The fact that she wasn't at least somewhat upset surprised Preston.

While spirits visiting through the Garden of Stars couldn't recall all of the details of their eternal home (because heaven was meant to remain largely a mystery), Maria could tell Preston that the thinking was different there. "I can't be unhappy about anything. No one can be unhappy about anything. I believe we gain more of God's perspective when we're in heaven. After all, we are with Him there."

Though she hadn't seen Ignacio yet, she knew he was there.

So this settled the issue of whether or not the sin of suicide was unforgivable, which some people tended to believe, though this was not a scriptural belief.

However, while it was obviously not unforgivable, Preston did figure Ignacio was paying some sort of price. God was surely in some way dealing with his disobedience, and he might have lost something

(possibly a great deal) of his reward. But it was at least comforting to Preston to know that his son was for certain in heaven.

After hugging Maria and watching her drift away, Preston slowly turned and left the starry realm.

Back in the hall, though they were a little tentative around one another, Preston realized that it felt good to be in Weatherly's company again. He had missed her.

They walked to a café to have a pizza and talk about a schedule to ease him back into work. "I think I'm ready to come back now," he said.

After enjoying root beer floats for dessert, they hugged one another before setting off to their homes.

"See you in the morning," Weatherly threw over her shoulder as she was heading in the direction of Laurelstone. Preston would be having Christmas breakfast with Kip and his family at Netherwind, and Weatherly had also been invited.

Back at his dorm apartment, after thanking God for allowing him to see Maria again, Preston read the bible for a while, a fitting thing for Christmas Eve, he decided. Eleta sat on his shoulder to read too.

A particular quote seemed to jump out at Preston, that of Lamentations 3:31-33, and he ended up taking great comfort in it. "For the Lord will not cast off for ever, but, though he cause grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love; for he does not willingly afflict or grieve the sons of men."

As Preston flipped pages, Eleta, by thought, pointed out a quote that had just jumped out at her that seemed fitting, Isaiah 46:4. "...even to your old age I am He, and to gray hairs I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save."

From his living room window, Preston happened to notice that the hippotherapy barn was lit up, so much so that he wondered what might be going on. *Maybe they set up a Nativity scene*, he thought, *and I just didn't hear about it.*

Deciding to investigate, he and Eleta both went, but found only Vini inside the barn, currycombing one of the horses. And there was only a small lantern lit, which seemed very odd based on what Preston had observed from his window, though he didn't mention it, instead simply saying, "Goodnight."

“See you tomorrow,” Vini said.

Preston nodded. He was very much looking forward to having Christmas midday dinner with his sister, Ben, Samantha, Dell, and Quin.

Meanwhile, at around the same time on Lion Mountain, a boy spreesprite named Figlin was paying a visit to a kitchen in a certain cabin, in order to hide a cooking spoon from a woman who was busy preparing things for the family’s next-day Christmas feast.

“It was right here, I know it was!” the woman whined, very much needing to stir her pot of peanut brittle.

Figlin often delighted in visiting this particular lady, not necessarily because it was fun to cause a little innocent mischief, but more because he enjoyed snacking on many of her creations. She did manage to find the wooden spoon (on the top of a framed picture on the wall) quickly enough so that the brittle wasn’t ruined.

With regard to spreesprite pranks, most these days were being played on people in the Supercities and on girl spreesprites; and earlier in the day, Figlin had done just that by shrinking a business man’s suit in Supe-4 three sizes, and oversizing a girl spreesprite’s flower-petal dress in a woodsy area in Maine. Figlin had also hidden the girl’s shoes.

Since girl spreesprites didn’t like to be out and about without their shoes, this was definitely a problem, particularly because boy spreesprites were good at finding good hiding places. But this was often meant to be, in the form of the delay helping the girls to avoid danger because hobgoblins liked to shoot blow-darts at spreesprites. While spreesprites were incredibly fast, if they weren’t looking in the right direction, they could easily be hit because hobgoblins have very good aim. Though not consciously done (because it was divine intervention), the phenomenon of boys sometimes delaying girls was part of the checks-and-balance system built into nature. And we might wonder if this could be why some human wives delay their husbands by taking long periods of time to get ready to go places. Unknowingly, being late by ten or fifteen minutes (or more) likely helps the couple avoid a car accident, or perhaps puts them in the right place at the right time to help someone else.

Heading to an earthship settlement after the spoon prank, Figlin moved money from a little boy's piggy bank to a sock drawer, which was something he liked to do over and over again in this particular room for some reason. While people didn't use a lot of older-style money like coins and bills, some were still saving their dimes and pennies; and a good many of the self-sustaining communities did allow people to use older money as currency. In truth, the moving of the money was helping the little boy learn to count. (He wasn't quite as good at it yet as Ruth and Bunny.)

Preston found the Christmas breakfast to be very festive, as well as delicious, particularly the blueberry scones which were Weatherly's favorites. Em had also been invited to breakfast, but arrived a little late because she and Dara had been busy since dawn, spelling out Christmas cloud messages in the skies over several of the Supercities. Zin wasn't at the gathering because she, Quin, and Cuoré were paying a morning visit to the mountain to see Linn.

At dinner later, Preston declined eggnog. He had never been much of drinker, but had simply gotten lost in it as a kind of escape after Ignacio died. Though the drinking wasn't good, it had actually allowed him to see why it had been so easy for Ignacio to get into drugs. We all might crave escape at times, but we all need to be very careful. Preston had already taken it upon himself to see a counselor with regard to the drinking, and he might end up seeing the man weekly for a time, to make sure to keep a firm handle on the problem, particularly the thinking that went along with the drinking.

Around midday on the mountain, the Leftovers were praying before having their dinner, to thank God for their many blessings. Mr. Weiss had made a couple of his wife's favorite recipes. He still missed her terribly, but he knew she wouldn't have wanted him to be in despair, and would have rejoiced in his new family. Little Meg was learning to knit from an elderly woman at church; Mrs. Weiss had been a knitter. Strangely enough, Mr. Weiss was seeing something of his wife in the eyes of Marie, Clara, and Meg, as though they all had been related by blood, and not just by circumstance.

At a small party at the village's Guest Lodge in the evening, Marie actually tripped over Cecelia who was sitting on the floor while playing with building blocks with a toddler.

Cecelia waved off the mishap with, “They’ve been talking about getting me to wear a bell or a crazy feathered hat so that people will notice me.”

Maggie Linn and Holly Stanley were becoming good friends with each other, and with Clara and Marie Washburn. The four had together cooked most of the food for the party in the lodge kitchen. The party was mainly to welcome newcomers to the community, people who had only just arrived and might be feeling a little unsettled. While this was a wonderful gesture, in truth, people were able to get settled on the mountain fairly quickly, just in being able to sleep in safety and have resources they weren’t used to, such as enough food, warmth, and medicine.

Not too far from the Guest Lodge, a wind spirit was helping to save a man who happened to be in awkward place during a rapid expansion of a section of the mountain. Using powerful gusts and billows, the spirit ended up catching the man in midair from a fall that occurred when a hill he was crossing suddenly developed a gully in the middle and split into two hills. The man was fine, and was not even all that surprised because this sort of thing was common on the mountain, not just the unexpected terrain changes, but spirits coming to the aid of those who were caught off their guard.

Anei and many other gargoyles were celebrating. Unknown to most other creatures, gargoyles definitely liked to celebrate Christmas, doing so mostly in the eye of their minds. Connected with each other telepathically, their thoughts were of colorful and happy scenes of Christmases past like sleigh rides, Nativity scenes, carolers, crowded worship services, parades, acts of charity, snowman building, and such. They also liked to engage in silent group gargoyle prayer and chants to honor Christ.

Christmas evening at the little burl house of Martella and Weyland was quite a celebration. Before their feast, they read genie-made bibles that were so tiny, even the genies themselves would have had trouble reading them.

Martella had been out and about during the day, helping with a lot of things in the cities and camps. Outside of Supe-14, she had picked up a wee sand dollar that, while tiny compared to most, was still as big as her head. What a special thing to find. She had brought it home to

top the nut tree Weyland had already decorated with juniper berries, pink peppercorns, and milkweed strands.

Weyland had played an early-morning prank on this day, but not on his wife. Instead, he had made a visit to the closets of a couple of his tiny nieces, while they were having breakfast, in order to turn their hair ribbons invisible and make their shoes chirp like birds. It felt good to play the prank; he hadn't played any for a while. In truth, younger boy spreepites, the ones not yet married, were the main ones playing pranks. Husbands like Weyland were often too busy keeping up the house and gardens to do very much of this. In truth, Weyland had been super busy in the past few weeks, decorating the house and crocheting a set of spider-silk doilies for his wife as a Christmas present. The hair ribbons and shoes were easy for the girls' mother to put back to right, so no real harm was done. And the time Lynda and Nanci spent searching for their ribbons allowed their mother to secretly wrap two presents each for them (ones Santa had just delivered).

Christmas had always been a subdued affair at Doyle Mansion, going all the way back to when Mrs. Doyle was living there, because the residents and guests were always focused on Christ, instead of bling and excessive gifting. The only exception was in the area of the food being a little overdone, a necessity due to the attendance of the puck trolls. Pipac and Kisi were now eating just about as much as their parents. Em was hosting an evening party at the mansion, for which Tobin and Mira had sent food reinforcements from the farm via the underground tunnel. Though invited, having plans with their own families, those on the farm weren't attending the small gathering at Doyle Mansion.

Em was fondly thinking of Christmases past at the mansion, as she set out a spread of food in the parlor. Though deceased, her parents were not by any means missing from the house on this day because the portraits in the parlor of Dave, Violet, and Mrs. Doyle (all painted by Pizzo) were visiting with one another.

Zin was pleased as punch about a particular present for her under the Christmas tree that was actually what Marlon had been secretly working on in the Tech Lab, which was a special tool, a crystal in fact. And it perfectly fitted into the empty slim pocket in the pack Linn had

made for her, which shouldn't have been surprising because Linn had been in on the secret.

Jenny had adopted two more elderly people from the Bookends program, making four in total, for which she had cooked a Christmas feast. With the four sleeping off their Christmas dinner, after doing the dishes, she came to the mansion to spend some time with her neighbors.

Otto was home for Christmas, and having a nap, but not for long because things were about to get a little rowdy. No sooner had Jenny arrived than Pizzo and Heike began bringing things to life, including several Christmas ornaments, an angel sculpture, several knights and ladies from a tapestry, four nutcracker soldiers, a village inside of a snowglobe, and two marionettes. Pipac and Kisi were throwing butter mints and toffees around, while Cinders, perched on a windowsill, was simply watching the happy festivities.

This particular Christmastime was not so happy for the sorcerers. Of course, by law, the holiday was no longer called Christmas, but was rather called the Gifting Season. For the past nine days, about half of the rail systems were in a complete mess, not functioning at all, and this was affecting both holiday travel and the goods coming into the cities. The labor at the camps was in chaos as well because workers couldn't be shuttled in and out per their usual schedules.

While it was obvious that some of the problems were related to gremlins, something else was also going on. Huge EMPs of unknown origin were disrupting electronics in the entire Western U.S., almost as though some gigantic force in the Pacific Ocean was involved. In the East (along with parts of the North and South), the sorcerers suspected human sabotage, though they were never able to concretely prove anything, probably because the ESS that were bumbling around in utter chaos couldn't see the troops of bigfoots at work (smashing, ripping, and bending), looking just like trees and rocks when not moving.

The sorcerers were completely confounded; this was so large scale. *Who could have done this?* But this was exactly why they had started breeding bigger nyregs, some ten times the size of the originals. They had intended that the creatures be used for transport, mainly humans; but they could possibly be used for goods as well when the rail systems were down. The problem was that it takes time to breed nyregs. When

considering their present dilemma, the sorcerers were again maddened that horses had over the years refused to work for them.

While factory managers, sorcerers, camp overseers, and such were all wringing their hands, many of the wealthy in the cities were complaining because they couldn't get certain goods, this being particularly troublesome this time of year.

Christmas had long since been more about Commerce than about Christ, but it was now totally a season of excess for the wealthy and their families, especially the children, who often couldn't get enough presents to satisfy them; hence, the name, Gifting Season. Many of these children didn't even have enough room in their gigantic bedrooms and playrooms to hold all of their toys. However, instead of giving some of them to the poorer children of the cities, they regularly burned great piles of their belongings—toys, games, clothing, and such—in order to make room for the new stuff.

All was not completely horrible for the sorcerers because the converted dragons had started to produce healing tears for them. Several Dragon Hunters and one Unicorn Hunter injured on the island during the rescue were healed. Also, two extremely old sorcerers who were insane (from having so long taken the elixir to keep them from aging) had been cured of their insanity.

Meanwhile, Santa had been busy aside from deliveries to spreesprite families. Oddly enough, instead of using his reindeer-drawn sleigh, he had been delivering things to many settlements by airbike. He had also received a good deal of help in delivering presents from dawn pigeons, gryphons, and wind horses.

Chapter Thirteen

Using Our Eyes and Ears

““And he said, “Hear my words: If there is a prophet among you, I the LORD make myself known to him in a vision, I speak with him in a dream.””
Numbers 12:6

The New Year is often a time of reflection and resolution, and for many, a time of making firm plans for the future. But to do so we must see clearly, which helps us think clearly.

Vini was certainly looking ahead and seeing very clearly, thanks to the magic peacock feather Aunt Fiona had given her, the one found in the treasure room at Netherwind that would allow a person looking into the eye to see certain future events. This didn't happen every time of looking into the eye; in fact, other than swirls and haze, Vini often saw nothing at all. But for some reason, the feather tended to show her several visions around New Year's each year.

The feather had at one time been placed into a bagical, but might have been magical even aside from that because legend had long held that the eyes of peacock feathers were windows through which God was watching us. Sometimes just holding the feather made a particular bible verse spring to Vini's mind, that of Proverbs 15:3. “The eyes of the LORD are in every place, keeping watch on the evil and the good.”

In addition to getting data about future events from the feather, Vini was also connecting with Charlie and several others who had the same gift as Charlie. From the information she was piecing together, Vini was able to provide help to Weatherly who was planning something really big on the not-too-distant horizon. In order to make a good job of what she was planning, she very much needed this help. Weatherly was also using the Sage Key to get information regarding the event; and the sphere was allowing her to see certain future plots of the enemy, as well as a few of her own plans playing out. This enabled her to make

adjustments to strategies already formed in her mind, such as the position assignments of key players. Weatherly had learned throughout the years that rethinking and adapting were often keys to success.

The same talking peacock that frequented Vini's dreams was starting to appear in Quin's daydreams, and she had just learned about a couple of dragons that would need to be moved in the near future.

Zin was also able to see into the future, using the very tool Marlon had just given her, a crystal known as a foreshard, which was something of an equivalent to a crystal ball. Only certain magicians were able to master the use of foreshards, and Marlon had been fairly sure that his protégé would be one of them. He was correct; in fact, it only took her three days to start seeing the messages in the crystal, and her skills would rapidly improve as she gained more practice.

The foreshard mostly allowed her to see images in the eye of her mind, similar to how gargoyles are able to know what's going on in places thousands of miles from their locations; but, of course, what Zin was seeing related entirely to the future since the crystal was specifically a looking-forward device. From the information she received, she knew to ask Linn to work on a particular project in his lab, one that she would help him complete and that would be of great help to Quin in the future.

One of the shard messages directly related to Tanner, in that Zin was able to know exactly where he would be on a certain day, crossing paths with a friend of hers, a female magician living in Japan who was the same age as Zin. This gave Zin the opportunity to send a warning by kite message to her friend. Zin also knew that she herself would have an encounter with Tanner not too far into the future, though she couldn't tell exactly when from the information the shard shared. However, any warning was a help, to lessen the chance of Zin being caught off guard.

In addition to learning about the future, certain events of the past were coming to the attention of Weatherly and several others thanks to the use of Jane's ear orchids, many of which had been taken into the past by TKTs to act as spy devices against the enemy. Task-force members and other time travelers were easily able to pick up the dropped petals containing recorded information. Skilled botanists and their protégés were then easily able to decipher the information, about

an array of subjects such as the sorcerers' plans with regard to constructing secret tunnels and rooms beneath certain buildings in the Supercities. So too were the TKTs learning which people were being targeted by mimics and print doubles for assassination and impersonation.

Kinza was hearing a few things about the past too, using an older model of a Mancer's Sphere that had only a listening function, without the apparition feature like the one Vidas had been using to talk to Jerome. While he could have gotten a newer model, this one had belonged to his mentor, also a converted sorcerer, and so Kinza was fond of it. Being a necromancer by specialty, it wasn't a problem for Kinza to commune with dead sorcerers, especially his mentor, a man named Piers Lombardo, dead not too long past. Piers was one who hadn't wanted to use the elixir to stay young and so had died of natural causes at age eighty-seven.

While choosing not to use the elixir was considered unusual (though not as much so as being converted), Piers was unusual in another way too in that he had time traveled; and by unicorn no less. A woman in India who could call unicorns had helped him, and he had gone back in time to help make something really important happen, namely, to convince a particular literary professor to nominate Em for the Nobel Prize for her novel, *Graham Rumpole*. The idea to do this had been planted into Piers' brain by an even-through move in the game of Etowa and Boko. Boko had hoped the nomination would cause Em to succumb to pride, which was why he had chosen not to counter his opponent. Originally, before Piers went back in time, *Graham Rumpole* hadn't won any prizes. The novel still converted quite a few people, but not nearly as many as it did after the nomination and win of the Nobel Prize in Literature.

Piers himself had been converted as a young man because a genie had decided to grant a wish to someone, namely, his mother. Through other actions, he had been successful in quashing several of his colleagues' early attempts to ban *Crimson Damselfly*, Em's play that also brought many people to Christ. Thus, the banning of the play was delayed for over two decades. So while she had thought the sorcerers were just too stupid to notice her play, a sorcerer had actually been the reason *Crimson Damselfly* was so successful, by God's standards that

is, since this was all part of His Master Plan, and the definition of success for Christians was often wildly different than the world view.

Coco had a friend who was a magician, a boy a year older than she, and he also had a foreshard, from which they learned that Eizel would very shortly not only be able to plant thoughts and dreams, but read them as well. This would come about due to an elixir designed to enhance her abilities, just developed by Tanner, who was definitely destined to become a conjurer by specialty and who was Eizel's friend.

While reading minds had long been on many evil people's wish lists, this wouldn't end up being one of Eizel's favorite activities, mainly because it would turn out to be very time-consuming, having to wade through a lot of irrelevant stuff in people's brains to get to what was really important.

Linn was hard at work in the lab early morning on the first Saturday in January, and making good progress on several projects, one of which was making five more stealth airbikes, as well as improvements to the original design in that the stealth model could now match the speed of regular airbikes. However, he was slightly hindered in his efforts in that several of his tools kept getting moved around the lab. Since hardly any human beings knew about spreesprites, Linn assumed a mischievous puck troll might be visiting the lab. Pulling a toffee from his pocket and setting it on the countertop by the row of sinks, he hoped this might appease the little guy, or girl.

In this case, the mischief maker was a guy because Figlin was visiting the lab. In truth, just like various people and small critters were drawn to Linn, the spreesprite had been too; and being a boy spreesprite, he couldn't help but play pranks. However, as the hours rolled along, though the toffee was never touched, Linn noticed that the pranks switched to acts of helping. Not only had several needed tools somehow been moved from a chest across the room to just within his reach on his workstation, but several hard-to-find materials suddenly became available, seemingly out of thin air. Linn had already ruled out the idea of a puck troll (mainly because things weren't being thrown at him) and had started to assume a genie was involved, one that might have the power to become invisible.

When noontime arrived, being at a tricky juncture in one of his projects, Linn was going to have to delay going home for lunch, which

was his custom. Retrieving a small vase attachment from a cabinet, he noticed that a bunch of grapes and a cupcake had just appeared on his workstation. At first, he was slightly suspicious, mainly because he knew that the sorcerers wanted him out of the way. Plus, his brain was recalling something about a poison apple from a fairy tale that he was only slightly familiar with. He was also wary because quite a few people were now convinced that demons had infiltrated the mountain, but just hadn't shown themselves yet for some reason, probably in fear of the spirits that were protecting the place.

While demons could hide in places like storage cupboards and tool chests, since the lab was secure and Linn didn't get any bad feelings, he could fairly quickly discern that the grapes and cupcakes were okay, and so he ate them. They were actually just what he had been craving, and what he needed as an energy boost to finish a certain tedious task.

A short while after the snack, Linn heard something rather strange, but very pleasant—a sound softly reverberating through the lab much like the chirping of an extremely small cricket. The chirping had a faint humming to it in the background, and what seemed to be rhythmic but barely audible words accompanying the humming, almost as though a tiny creature was trying to sing a hymn. Though he listened very hard, Linn could never pick up on any exact words in what he would end up calling “musical chirping murmurers” when later describing them to his mother.

Sitting on a window sill in the lab and swinging his legs, Figlin was singing. While many boy spreepprites liked to sing, Figlin ordinarily did not; but he had felt inspired to on this day in the company of this boy, whose presence felt different than most other human beings, more pleasant, which was why Figlin was spending so many long hours in the lab, instead of moving on after a few minutes of the visit, as per the custom of spreepprites.

Linn, listening to the song, the words of which he couldn't quite understand, suddenly had ideas about a couple of projects that he might want to make in the future, along the lines of genie-made things, like a communication device camouflaged to look like a buttonhole flower, and a barrette that could unfold as a roving map. Roving maps that changed as the users moved about already existed, and were small enough to be easily carried in pockets; but for people like undercover

operatives, whose pockets might end up getting searched by ESS or mimics, a map disguised as a barrette might be just the thing.

Though Linn's ears thought they hadn't picked up on exact words, Figlin's song was about a girl spreesprite's hair barrettes being hidden in a valley full of flowers, and the girl later being given a map of where to find them because, otherwise, she never would have amongst the masses of flowers. So, heard clearly or not, it seemed that certain song words had prompted the ideas that had popped into Linn's brain.

Linn also had an idea for an amplification device he wanted to make, to better hear the song of the cricket-like creature. While the idea of a cricket was in Linn's mind, in truth, spreesprites actually looked like tee-tiny people, though ones with gauzy wings that were generally kept folded against their bodies when not in use. However, since spreesprites were so fast, and the boys generally stayed invisible when playing pranks, people were unlikely to ever see them. As far as the amplifier, Linn would start working on this device right away. For some reason, he felt he might need it very soon.

The second week in January, Ethan was off on another adventure early in the morning, this time by rookh instead of horseback because he needed to travel a good distance fairly quickly. Based on a vision by one of the gifted, Astrid was sending him to a camp just outside of Supercity Eight.

Tanner had just designed a weapon based on flutes, one of which he had gotten his hands on some months back. Astrid wasn't surprised that the enemy had been able to convert a flute weapon because humans had long been warned about Satan's mastery over music.

The young sorcerer was just about to test his new toy out on a group of workers in the camp. *They're just a bunch of slaves that no one will miss*, he told himself. *There are lots of slaves, so the camp overseer won't miss a few.*

Blessedly, a spreesprite managed to stop time, just in time; and exactly when Ethan arrived, the cornered "slaves" were escaping by way of a hole cut through a containment fence. Tanner and two ESS personnel were frozen in place.

Ethan wasn't at all surprised to discover the frozen scene because this was a common, though mysterious, phenomenon in the cities and camps. While very few people knew about spreesprites and their

powers, God's children couldn't deny the magic and miracles coming to them by way of their Father, and many simply assumed angels were looking out for them.

This was supposed to be just a spy mission for Ethan, who was to gather information and report back to Astrid. However, he quickly saw this as an opportunity to get his hands on the new weapon. Since he hadn't been inside of the spreesprite's time-stopping range when she had acted, he wasn't at all affected when sneaking in and out to liberate the weapon from Tanner's hands.

The newly-designed weapon was based not only on music, the rhythm of which regulated the charge and amount of storage, but also on fire and air. Gathered wind acted to fan flames that were delivered in curved blasts, basically boomerang in shape.

In studying the weapon, and employing a little common sense, gifted technologists on the mountain were easily able to figure out simple ways to counter the flame flute, as they began calling it. With earth and water being the grounding counters to air and fire (by yin and yang philosophy), the flame flute could be disabled by use of either earth or water, such as dirt clods and soil being dropped by rookhs, or a thunderbird producing rain or redirecting spray from a waterfall at the weapon. With the flute having such explosive power, Tanner never even considered that his creation might be easily neutralized. But, then, sorcerers tended to lack common sense, and so were often easily foiled.

When emerging from his frozen state, Tanner was absolutely furious to find his new toy gone. He had only made one prototype, and it had taken him two months to complete. And, to top it off, he had been thwarted only three days previous as well, bested by a female magician in Japan while dueling. In fact, he had barely survived the encounter. Not only was his opponent extremely skilled, it seemed almost as though she had been expecting him, though he didn't see how this could have been possible.

His anger fueling him, Tanner set a tight schedule to keep busy for the next few weeks. Instead of brooding, he would channel his energies into honing his dueling skills daily using a simulator. He would also tweak several poisons, and formulate a couple of elixirs. Right away beginning work on one of the elixirs, he sneezed hard several times, which prompted him to stop crushing herbs and take a dust rag to the

den, though this wasn't truly necessary because the sneeze wasn't from dust, but from having inhaled a radish seed.

Boko strolled away from the sorcerers' den rather slowly. He had found himself lately growing even more tired, and as such, almost longing for the Endtimes. With this in mind, he decided to take a peek at the Clock of the Universe, which he knew was counting down toward the Endtimes, though he had no idea when they would occur. *Only the Father knows*, he recited to himself. Since Boko was outside of time, the "exact when" didn't truly matter; but still, he liked to guess, as many of us do.

Boko often pondered what it might have been like to have stayed on the other side. If he had, the game he and Etowa were playing wouldn't even exist; and neither of the players would have ever grown weary. But he couldn't go back and change things, just as Adam and Eve couldn't. Just as they had chosen sin, Boko had chosen this; and he almost felt bad on occasion that he had trapped Etowa into the game too. Though destined to spend eternity with Satan, Boko believed he would feel some relief when his worldly duties finally came to an end.

And speaking of Satan, Astrid was now convinced that there were demons on the mountain, the certainty of this coming not just from prophets telling her about their visions over the past few months, but from her own reasoning. While God was still in full control, and giving His children safety, the earth was still Satan's domain. However, even though she was now sure, Astrid couldn't do anything about the demons yet, not until they revealed themselves, or at least until she had more information.

At around the same time Ethan was stealing the flame flute, Vidas was in his office and communing with a dead Dragon Hunter, one who had died fighting on the island when the dragons and unicorn were rescued. From the conversation, Vidas learned something about the fleet of ships and the people who had attacked.

So they had been very organized and the fleet was well outfitted, Vidas thought after discontinuing his connection with the hunter. *The ships were also supernaturally protected by something more than just creatures like wind horses and gryphons.*

Resetting the Mancer's Sphere, Vidas next got in touch with a deceased sorcerer, one who had been involved with stealing the unicorn

whistle in the first place and determining how it worked. Vidas hadn't known much about that project, but had felt inclined to contact someone who did because the sorcerers had just discovered the whistle in their custody to be a fake. Since it hadn't yet been duplicated, unless they were able to get their hands on another one, they couldn't even start over at this point, as far as being able to call and trap another unicorn, which was extremely irritating.

Disconnecting after only a few minutes, Vidas was frustrated. He had learned almost nothing from his fellow sorcerer, and what the hunter had told him wasn't particularly surprising or useful. The Council of Twos had long suspected the operations of a secret navy, which was why the sorcerers themselves were working on creating their own fleets of ships.

A two-hour meeting after lunch also went nowhere for Vidas. *What a waste of a day!*

Mulling everything over, he was particularly annoyed with regard to the security of the whistle. *How inept do you have to be to let an important object like that get stolen?* Since they hadn't been able to determine exactly when the whistle had been taken, blaming specific ESS guards was going to be difficult.

Also irritating was the fact that the orchid on his desk was constantly shedding petals, one of which Vidas tossed into his waste bin. *At least it grows them back,* he thought. *If it didn't, I'd pitch the whole thing, pot and all.* *Except it is kind of pretty,* he decided, *brightens up the room.*

Leaving his office a short while later, Vidas never noticed the dawn pigeon picking up the petal.

At right about the same time the dawn pigeon was picking up the petal, Samantha, while feeding horses, was having visions while daydreaming, mainly about two important events, one past and one future; and the visions were somewhat difficult to watch.

In the first, two demons had dragged a teen boy out of a school in Supercity Three and were throwing him into a large furnace, fully stoked and flaming hot. Miraculously, when the door was opened a short while later, the boy emerged fully whole and healthy, without a burn or scorch of any kind on his body, though his clothes were entirely burned away. This was a Sapphire Boy and a sorcerer immediately took

him into custody, to first clothe him again before leading him to an underground prison cell.

A slightly irrelevant vision interrupted the two important ones as Samantha saw Weatherly hunting around in her kitchen for some blueberry syrup to put on the pancakes she was having. Alas, there was none to be had. Knowing how busy her Aunt Weatherly often was, Samantha would end up picking up some blueberry syrup for her on a trip to the commissary early the next morning.

Samantha's second important vision began with a worker from a camp outside of Supercity Five being thrown into a pen of hungry tigers. Supe-5 hadn't engaged in Trials by Tiger for some time, so those watching by television were eagerly awaiting the bloodbath, which never came because the man evidently had the same gift as Muriel; and the hungry tigers simply weren't keen on eating the man who was talking to their minds, and actually telling them stories about things like how Adam had given the animals their names. The tigers were also interested in hearing about the pairs of animals kept safe on the ark during the Great Flood, and the animals watching over little baby Jesus in the manger. Instead of eating, the tigers cuddled up to the storyteller, their heavy purring tickling him to the point that he was actually laughing out loud. So confused were two mimics and the camp overseer that they simply let the man go, before going about their other business for the day, which included feeding the tigers a hearty meal of pork and chicken from the freezers in the camp's mess kitchens.

Smiling as she quickly finished feeding the horses, Samantha was thinking, *Out of darkness comes light*. Her mind was also quoting 1 John 2:8. "Yet I am writing you a new commandment, which is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining."

The vision of the Sapphire Boy was the past event. With Samantha knowing exactly where he was being held, and contacting Gavin that very evening with the information, it was a simple thing for Rhett and Gavin to mount a rescue, which was accomplished in one day. Henning Kosch was fourteen, and his parents were both deceased. He had been living in Supe-3 with his aunt, who was now hiding in one of the pockets inside the city. Though they hadn't been able to rescue her, Rhett had managed to get a message to her. While waiting for his aunt

to escape and come to live on Lion Mountain, Henning would be staying with Gavin, who was going to mentor him.

On the same day that Henning was rescued, Vini, looking into the eye of the peacock feather, saw a vision that sent her rushing to the mezzanine.

“Everything okay, Aunt Vini?” Merri in the foyer called as Vini rushed down the hall to the side staircase. “Need any help with anything?”

“No, thank you,” Vini answered over her shoulder.

Standing in the hall of the mezzanine out of breath a few moments later, she was confused because what she had seen in the eye wasn't there—a door, an extra one, which, if it had physically been there, would have numbered thirteen in the magical hall that always simply contained twelve. Vini's confusion was only brief as she remembered that visions shown her by the peacock feather were always of the future. *So at some time in the future, there will be a Thirteenth Door here*, she mused, heading home. Though she gleaned no additional details by trying auto-writing, Vini did record the information about the mysterious door in one of her journals.

While her grandmother was writing, Quin had a vision by daydream of a mouse living on the mountain whose fur was mostly a lovely white color, though with some bits of other colors like browns and reds mixed in. As she watched, the tiny creature crept towards Linn whose airchair was parked under a tree outside his home as he read a book. Just as the mouse reached Linn, to give his toes a small sniff, the tiny creature lit up like a rainbow, so brightly that the intensity forced Quin in her daydream state to look away. When she looked back, the mouse was gone and the still-reading Linn seemed not to have noticed.

Flipping through her bible a few minutes later, Quin's eyes were drawn to Psalm 119:18. “Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law.” Continuing to turn pages, Job 33:14 also caught her attention. ““For God speaks in one way, and in two, though man does not perceive it.”” Finally, she read Proverbs 20:12. “The hearing ear and the seeing eye, the LORD has made them both.”

Chapter Fourteen

A Different Drummer

“Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” Romans 12:2

Sixteen-year-old Sasha Loll had long been a neighbor and friend to Eizel, and the girls over the years had spent a good deal of time together. While Sasha had always been somewhat afraid of her friend, Eizel had never done anything particularly horrendous to her; though one time when they were much younger and playing hopscotch, Sasha had thought she might. A spreesprite kept moving Eizel’s hopscotch pebble, and Eizel kept accusing Sasha of doing it. The girls, of course, didn’t know about spreesprites; but Sasha was the first to recognize that some sort of magical mischief was going on, mainly because she knew she hadn’t moved the pebble. However, Eizel was so angry, she had been hard to convince, and Sasha had truly feared some horrible retaliation. Fortunately, she finally did convince Eizel, and both girls ended up thinking a gremlin was doing the pebble moving.

“I’ll wring his little neck if I can get my hands on him,” Eizel had said. (The boy spreesprite, wide-eyed nearby, was actually rubbing his neck, as though it might already have happened.)

Sasha was an only child, like Eizel, and this was fairly common among the wealthy (though Tanner had a younger brother). After Sasha was born, her mother had gotten an exemption from the Law of Four for medical reasons, though there was nothing wrong with her that would have prevented her from having another three children. Mrs. Loll had basically paid a doctor to provide the excuse. This sort of thing was common and didn’t particularly interest the sorcerers, who didn’t care how many children the elite had because they weren’t going to be used as slaves, or for organ harvesting, anyway.

Even as a little girl, Sasha recognized a lot of the ugliness surrounding her, which was why on her birthday candles each year, she wished for the future world to be a better place. She had never been one who burned her excess toys, but instead had been secretly giving them to a lot of the children of the people working in the shoe factory her dad managed.

Sasha had for years felt badly about a lot of what was going on around her, like the Trials by Tiger and the fact that most people living in the cities didn't have enough to eat. But something that happened about three years back had really shaken her, driving home that something was horribly wrong with the cities, mainly the way they were run and those running them, but also with a lot of the wealthier residents. As a tennis player and fan, Sasha had really enjoyed watching a young woman named Arlene Daniels play on the professional circuit. Sasha had even gotten to spend some time with Ms. Daniels at a tennis camp. But just overnight, it seemed, Arlene Daniels disappeared from the tennis scene, which made Sasha extremely worried for her. It didn't take long to reason out that her favorite player was no longer playing because she hadn't won enough of her matches; and it also occurred to Sasha that people betting on sporting events had had something to do with it. Arlene Daniels was already dead; but not being aware of this, Sasha often hoped she was okay somewhere. (In truth, she was okay, in heaven.)

Lately, just knowing what Eizel was often up to, made Sasha's insides hurt. Sasha was not a Christian, and had never even seen a bible, but she definitely knew that certain things were wrong, such as some of the things going on in her father's factory. She often overheard her dad talk about the favors he was obliged to give the Muslim workers over other workers, not only extended breaks to go to the prayer spots, but shorter hours, more credits, and excusing some of the bullying that went on, as well as things worse than bullying. Just recently, Mr. Loll had watched mimics remove two men from their workstations, never to be seen again; and he knew this was from several Muslim coworkers turning them in for crimes they never committed. Mr. Loll knew the two men were gay, and knew the Muslims wanted them punished for this. But it had all happened so quickly, too quickly for Mr. Loll to figure out some way to help them—like trying to get the men into the

keeping of someone who could then get them into one of those rumored safe places.

While Sasha didn't know a whole lot about politics, because this was not taught in schools, it was obvious to her that because there were a lot of high-ranking Islamic people in government positions, this was why Muslims were getting preferential treatment.

Sasha often wondered why she didn't have a gift like Eizel's, and she might have been tempted to be jealous, except that she wouldn't have wanted that particular gift. If she had the ability to mess with people's thoughts and dreams, she felt the temptation to abuse others, as Eizel often did, might be too great. At this point in her life, Sasha didn't yet recognize that empathy and the desire to help others were gifts. Nor did she know that all human beings have gifts, and we must each make our own decisions as to how to use them.

Eizel could have been giving out good dreams—dreams of help, healing, and hope. But she was choosing not to. And as far as gifts, who's to say which are more powerful than others. Giving a meal to someone hungry might be just as powerful as the ability to fly, and the act might have even more impact. If we give a person help and hope, we give them the ability to use their own gifts, which feeds the cycle of good.

As far as disliking the unfairness abounding in the cities, Sasha especially hated it when people were cruel to animals. The previous year, a couple of bored neighboring teen boys were being mean to a stray cat, so she ran out and stopped them, though she had been taking a chance because these two boys were notorious for being just about as mean as Eizel could be sometimes. (Actually, Sasha being friends with Eizel had made the boys somewhat fearful.) The cat, Bouncer, now lived with the Loll family, and Sasha kept a very close eye on him.

On the last Saturday in January, early morning, Sasha was watching Bouncer bat a ball around the family's roomy loft as she was getting ready to go out. This was one of her secret jaunts, and getting ready meant donning a long coat with roomy pockets, both inside and out. In fact, for the purposes of her outings, Sasha had sewn two of the inside pockets into the coat herself.

Sneaking out by taking the stairs rather than the lift, Sasha walked two miles to reach a ghetto, where she handed out sandwiches, apples,

shoes, toys, and medicine to the people living there. Doing this nearly every weekend made her feel better, though she didn't think she was doing nearly enough.

The few times when her parents had found her out, they were very upset; not because they disapproved of her actions, but because they feared for her safety. (They actually more feared mimics or ESS members discovering what she was doing, than any residents of the ghettos trying to hurt her.)

To try to blend in and stay safe, Sasha always dressed down on these jaunts—her coat, pants, shirt, and shoes being plain in both design and color. But in truth, she had had one close call, when a man tried to drag her into an alley. Thankfully, another man had stopped him, while telling her to run home, and fast.

Even with her parents' disapproval, Sasha had no intention of stopping. If something bad happened to her, so be it. While she did sometimes fear, she was determined to keep doing the only thing that actually made her feel somewhat better. In fact, it was helping her to sleep, concentrate, and not worry constantly.

On the same cool and breezy Saturday morning that Sasha was handing things out, Birch was calming a storm in Kentucky, actually somewhat near the suspension bridge. His mother was with him today atop Naya, and they were on their way to the Inn at Magnolia Hills in Mississippi. The calming of the storm was just something Birch needed to do along the way per God's instruction. The family often stayed at the inn, in order to use the library; though his father, a construction engineer, couldn't come this time because he was busy helping to build a dam for two earthship communities situated in a pocket.

When he was younger, Birch often found libraries to be safe havens, mainly from bullies. Sadly, some of this kind of nonsense was still going on in the world, even in many of the self-sustaining communities. This was due to human nature, our weaknesses getting the better of us, especially the young, when we don't yet know to rely on God for help to rescue us from our sinful nature and behaviors.

Birch as a youngster often felt lost and alone, and therefore enjoyed the escapism found in books. However, when he learned of his gift at age eleven, things changed, and he became more confident and able to face challenges. Often, when we discover our gifts and begin to employ

them, the world around us changes, including the aspect of dealing with people, even difficult ones.

The library was not the only draw of the inn for many of its visitors. In addition to the books, the company of so many interesting people often helped to ease feeling tired and depressed.

Trista definitely knew a thing or two about depression, though her symptoms were much improved over previous years because so many other daisy chains were now helping to prevent suicides.

Fewer eidetic people were living at the inn than had been in the past because a great many of them had moved into the cities. But this had been the intent of Trista's Aunt Leona forming the original eidetic gathering—to take books to places they weren't allowed to be, living books in this case. Though there were less people around memorizing books, the inn was still often crowded because a lot of other gifted people regularly visited; in fact, the inn had turned into a kind of mecca of safety and resources, almost like a little vacation spot, albeit one mainly featuring an enormous underground library. But this was because many people still absolutely loved books, the old-fashioned ones in particular. And the genies were still making sure the books were kept in good repair.

All in all, the inn was still filled with a bunch of misfits, that had often been called weirdos in years past, and Trista was still extremely pleased to be counted among them.

Muriel was staying at the inn for a few days, and talking to the many animals about the place. The dogs, cats, guinea pigs and such inside seemed to enjoy her company as much as the deer, rabbits, eagles, salamanders, and the like outside.

Meanwhile, if we take a pause to briefly look in on Vidas in Supercity Nine, we find him in his high-rise office and talking to another sorcerer, a living one this time.

Vidas' main confidant these days was a noted Council of Twos member from Supercity Four named Hajo Bin, who had been mentored by the late Piers Lombardo, a man Vidas had highly admired; and so it had been easy to also like and respect Hajo.

As they had previously talked about and planned, Hajo had been discreetly watching Telén lately, making frequent trips to Supe-7 to do so.

“Nothing suspicious so far,” Hajo reported. “But I will keep at it.”

“Good,” Vidas proclaimed. “We don’t want any more converted sorcerers on our hands.”

Yet another reason to keep the orchid, Vidas thought as Hajo left, *since it was a gift from my good and trusted friend here.*

At the same time Hajo was leaving Vidas’ office, Preston and Eleta were visiting the Realm of Biessence on the mezzanine, mainly just to breathe in the lovely scent of the flowers from the biosphere while watching the two hummingbirds inside flying backwards in little figure-eight patterns, almost as though they were ice skaters, but ones cutting figures into the air instead of into ice. The realm of joy and renewal had a very lovely impact on the visiting pair, though Preston had lately already found himself often joyful and much renewed, mainly from spending a good deal of time in Kivetel, both training and soul searching. Actually, Preston and Eleta were on their way to Kivetel, but had simply stepped into Biessence on a whim; so they now needed to get going.

Just as Preston and Eleta were entering the door to Kivetel, Linna was climbing out of the doorway in Heritage Oak to pay a visit to Weatherly, and offer assistance. Linna was still very much as she had been in her youth. Though perhaps a tad taller, she still looked only slightly older than a teenager. Because she truly believed in her best friend’s causes, Linna had over the years frequently wanted to help. “With battles, training, covert operations; whatever you need me to do,” she said.

Weatherly had, as yet, declined the offers. However, with what was currently being planned, she thought she might very much welcome having her friend alongside her. They still trained together on occasion, with Linna still marveling at Weatherly’s skill that had long since surpassed hers and had yet to dim.

Meanwhile, on Lion Mountain, Charlie had been having visions relating to a particular man in a neighboring community who was claiming to be a preacher and had managed to convince a few people to handle poisonous snakes as part of their worship to God.

When Charlie informed her, Astrid immediately became involved. She had dealt with this sort of thing before—false teachers and odd religious practices. The snake thing was not only troublesome, but

baffling, as to why some people couldn't understand that the reference to handling the snakes in the bible wasn't meant to be taken so literally. While it is true that the power of God can make all things possible, that doesn't mean we throw our common sense out the window. Astrid personally felt Mark 16:18 was a metaphor about learning to resist Satan and his influences, and was not about handling real snakes.

"We don't accept false teachings, false prophets, or this type of biblical misinterpretation in any of our communities," Astrid explained to the so-called preacher.

"You can do whatever you want," the man said, "but we'll keep handling snakes here. You can't tell us how to worship; to each his own."

"I can and I will," Astrid replied. "You will cease this absurd and dangerous practice, or you will leave the mountain."

"What about being an individual and having freedom of religion?" he retorted. "Why should you dictate to us?"

"Because people come here to live in safety," she answered. "Possible death from sheer recklessness, thrill seeking, distortion of God's Word, or whatever it is you're doing, is not safety."

To this, the preacher didn't respond.

Sadly, he also didn't heed her warning, and held a snake-handling service the very next day, which prompted Astrid to act, and swiftly.

However, while she was more than capable of physically excising this miscreant from the mountain, in arriving at the man's cabin in the early evening, she discovered that she wasn't going to need to because Bear had already thrown the preacher over one shoulder and was carrying him off. And he not only took him off of the mountain, but out of Tennessee entirely. From this point on, based on Astrid's instructions, the spirits would be watching for any possible return of the man, and would not let him back into any of the communities.

Blessedly, no one had been bitten by the copperheads and rattlesnakes that were taken back to the areas the man had acquired them from and released. While some might argue that everyone should be allowed to do as they please, Astrid would continue to stand firm about things that could cause harm. Though dragon tears could easily heal a snake-bit person, there was no guarantee that the preacher or any of his followers would seek help quickly enough. And people still

didn't know how long someone could be dead before he or she could no longer be revived by the tears.

Alex actually knew the answer to this, but he wasn't sure if he should share it with others. As with other strange and difficult-to-explain things, people might not believe him. Plus, some things were better left as mystery. Although he was completely certain of the answer, he wouldn't have wanted anyone to try testing it because, as Jesus Himself said, we shouldn't tempt God.

Heading home after watching Bear trot down the mountainside carrying the screaming and kicking preacher, Astrid resolved to stay firm on these sorts of issues. *No distorting of God's Word. No watering down of the bible. The bible is truth, with no errors, so there will be no contradicting. And no picking and choosing.*

For Charlie's part, she was reminding herself that the bible warns of false prophets. In fact, not too long past, a pope warning of false prophets turned out to be one; and he managed to mislead many people.

The same evening as the screaming and kicking, Martella was at home and scribbling furiously in her journal. It had been an incredibly eventful and pleasant day—pleasant in the fact that no one had needed her intervention because nothing she had observed while out and about was all that bad. So she was writing everything down, in order to be able to leave a record for the future describing that much about the world was still good in her time. Many years into the future, a genie would copy her notes about this day into a larger journal, so that the eyes of people could actually read what she had written, which transcribed as such:

“In an earthship community, a young boy was making a splendid space rocket; and his grandfather was helping him, while talking about how the government space program in the U.S. had been cancelled some twenty years back. The boy didn't seem to care that no one was going anywhere in space anytime soon; his smile and his eyes conveyed that he could still dream about space adventures, even if they were unlikely to happen.

“I watched a gargoyle sneaking out of a pocket in Georgia to stretch his wings and fly around for a bit. This is not a common sight because

gargoyles seldom move; they don't need to since they can see things at great distances in the eye of their minds.

"A teen boy in Supercity Twelve got into trouble in school by delivering a speech about Creationism to his teacher and fellow students. 'Human eyes could not have evolved,' he said. 'They proved that about a century ago. Yet, here we are in a school that teaches evolution as fact, though the theory is completely flawed. It's actually so ridiculous that real scientists laugh at it. Creationism has more truth in one thimble of it than in all of the evolutionists' teachings combined. The size of human males and females alone proves Creationism to be true. Females in nature are frequently bigger. But human beings are designed so that males are more often larger than females. This can't be argued. If we had evolved like other species, girls would probably be twice as big as boys.' Just then, a mimic came into the class and dragged the boy out. The classes are monitored and the educators don't tolerate this sort of thing. But I didn't have to stop time to help the boy because the mimic handed the boy off to a sorcerer, who secretly took him to one of those safe places. Then the sorcerer got the boy's mother and father into the same safe pod. This is the second time I have seen a sorcerer help someone; but the first time, I thought my eyes were playing tricks on me.

"I saw several gnomes tending topiaries in a garden in Connecticut. They had foldable tools that were light to carry, and I thought at first that they might be made by genies; but then I remembered that gnomes are extremely clever designers and they probably crafted the tools themselves. One of the gnomes was scolding a wolf topiary (one about the size of a large horse) to stand still. Another was trimming on the antlers of a moose, and the moose was wriggling a little because the trimming tickled. About five miles from the wolf and moose, in a pocket that holds a huge hydroponics greenhouse, other gnomes were sneaking into the greenhouse to do some work.

"An ESS member in Supercity Two accidentally blasted a hole in a city wall through which eleven people escaped. All eleven made it to safety, and the ESS guy didn't get into trouble because his supervisor was napping through the whole thing.

"On my way home—I couldn't believe it! A rookh was shadowing me! Just above me in the skies. Who knows how long he might have

been there. I've seen him before; his name is Westerwing. I thought I might have heard him snickering when he flew away after I shook my finger at him. I guess I shouldn't be surprised. Rookhs are a lot like owls; they have soundless flight, complete stealth. Sneaking up on a spreesprite is not an easy thing to do. I guess I have to give him credit for that; or, rather, the credit goes to God for designing the rookhs that way.

“That’s all for now; all in all, a pretty nifty day!”

Rhett had settled in pretty well on the mountain, though some people were naturally wary of him, especially because he most often chose to wear sorcerers' garb and carry his staff.

Not knowing his full story, we might be tempted to think Rhett's conversion was him choosing to march to a different drummer. Or perhaps someone witnessed to him, and it made an impression. But these speculations would not be correct. In fact, the conversion had been forced upon him.

Not long after capturing Rhett, Weatherly decided he wasn't much of a risk for suicide and so she did not have him sedated, as other sorcerers in her custody had been.

Since he was awake more, she took to talking to him, in the hopes of learning a few things previously unknown to her, such as that certain words spoken by a sorcerer could cause hallucinations, though this trick wasn't often used because it also caused the one uttering the words to hallucinate.

She got his name fairly quickly without having to use the Mind Key because he just gave it up, which surprised Weatherly based on her previous experiences with sorcerers. In the past, they seldom revealed their names; but since their activities were now pretty much all out in the open, they no longer saw any need to hide their identities.

Though belligerent during their initial conversations, Rhett actually wanted to talk. Being resigned to his captivity, he wanted company on occasion, even if just in the form of the enemy. Isolation was hard on many people, including those on the side of evil. Plus, being a fairly clever man, Rhett saw this as an opportunity to mislead an adversary. For this reason, Weatherly, being much cleverer, was always wary.

During one of their first discussions, Rhett told her how wrong it was for everyone to assume that sorcerers are serving Satan. “I’ve never heard from him in my whole life,” he said. “I know he exists, but I don’t actively serve him. I’m just going on my own judgement. With regard to working with demons, sorcerers have always seen the advantage in being able to control demons. We actually serve no one.”

To this, Weatherly countered with, “Many people are serving Satan and don’t know it. They serve the flesh, serve their feelings, serve the world, serve a craving for power, and so on.”

When she handed him a bible during one of their meetings, Rhett said, “You think this is going to burn my eyes. I’m not a demon, just a man. So it’s the same with that cross around your neck. It’s not going to affect me.” (Though he didn’t show it, both the cross and bible did cause various inside aches and pains such as stomach cramps and burning lungs.)

By this time, many people, including Em and Weatherly, had realized the power behind *Graham Rumpole*, in that anyone reading to a certain sentence just past mid-way in the book would definitely come to know Christ in their lifetime.

While Weatherly couldn’t force Rhett to read the book, she had an easy means of delivering it to his mind, through eidetic people, a team of two that took turns reciting the book to him while he was gagged so that he couldn’t make noise while being forced to listen. The reciters were sworn to secrecy because this was a very important mission, as it had always been Weatherly’s intent to involve Gavin and put on a good show of the escape from her custody that sent Gavin and Rhett to Super 7 to kill Jerome.

The eidetic people always used the exact wording of the book, never paraphrasing. Even when their tongues fumbled on occasion, necessitating repeats of sentences, they always made sure the words spoken were exactly as they were originally written and published, which had the exact same effect as someone who had willingly read the book. However, since Weatherly was wise enough to know that the conversion might not happen instantaneously, after the full recitation, she used the Mind Key to hurry things along, after which, she used the Truth Key to determine if Rhett was truly saved, which he indeed was.

While most people in the world were given a choice as to whether or not to become believers, in this case, Rhett was not given a choice because Weatherly's philosophy had long coincided with Em's—that this is war, and God's children have a right to fight back when being driven into extinction. Plus, this was what God was telling Weatherly to do, as a military decision. Also, she knew she couldn't keep Rhett locked up forever. After accepting Christ, he could choose to live however he wanted, but she had faith that he would help her. Why else would God have told her to do this?

As far as extremes being taken, Em had to consider the fact that for most of her life she had been engaged in a war against the persecution of Christians, against those who were intent on wiping Christians out. This included a variety of peoples such as atheists, activists, and Muslim extremists. Her growing-up years in particular had been dominated by people more worried about political correctness and "being sensitive" than in saving other people's lives. What a crazy time in history, fraught with people focused on silly things, like which public bathrooms people should use, all the while ignoring real problems in the world such as the lack of food, clean water, and medicine for many millions of human beings. And with particular regard to many atheists she had personally known (who were also activists), Em often thought of Romans 1:20-21. "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." Acting on God's command, she had written *Graham Rumpole* as a counter to some of the extreme wickedness in the world; so as far as she was concerned, the book should be used in any and every way possible to save people.

Rhett's reaction at first had indeed been one of outrage at having something forced on him. But when he stopped to think about it, he was supremely grateful; and he decided he wouldn't go back and change things even if he could. In fact, he considered the concept of changing things to be an absurd notion—the idea of giving up eternal blissful life in order to live eternally in hell. Only a fool would choose that. Rhett very much recognized that he had had it wrong for so many

years, and had acted wrongly. Now, he was repentant. With regard to his future, he would occasionally suffer some guilt over certain atrocities he had committed; but he knew that God forgave him.

Chapter Fifteen

Following Rainbows

“Like the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud on the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness round about. Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. And when I saw it, I fell upon my face, and I heard the voice of one speaking.” Ezekiel 1:28.

Preston was back at work in early February, and was so well prepared from having spent such a lot of time in Kivetel lately that it was easy for him to step back in and take up his full military duties. Early morning on a Tuesday, he was just about to head into one of the training caverns when he paused to look at a rainbow.

Sasha was also looking at a rainbow on her way to school for the day. She often didn't like looking up because of the demons constantly occupying the skies, but she did look up for rainbows. (Who wouldn't?) She also enjoyed the occasional mysterious Cloud Writing, as did many of the elite in the cities, though they never would have voiced this. Demons were still called demons by the wealthy and privileged of the Supercities, though most people, and especially the younger generations, never thought of them in biblical terms. Not having any understanding that demons were common throughout bible history as being servants of Satan, most people simply thought they were naturally connected to sorcerers, to help protect them and the cities, much like creatures such as gryphons and firebirds were available to protect the self-sustaining communities “out in the wilds” as many in the Supercities referred to them.

Rainbows were often markers of safe routes and hidden caches containing supplies for travelers. While some of the bows came into being simply by way of miracles from God, a good many were created by magicians and gifted artists. The rainbows were safe to follow because demons, nyregs, hobgoblins, and such were not able see colors

the same way human eyes that were specially designed by God could. Most of the evil creatures didn't even see the markers; and while the hunters and sorcerers could, there were less of them than the other forces of evil out in the wilds.

Zin had once survived a Magician Hunter coming after her by following a series of rainbows, several of which she had actually helped to create and which in turn helped her reach safety. While the hunter could see the rainbows too, he didn't know they were leading his prey along a route guarded by topiary armies, and what the hunters termed "flute fanatics." These were actually people from pockets who often spent their spare time watching various escape routes in order to help protect travelers. (For some reason, the people with the most time to spare seemed to be ones that favored using a flute as a weapon.)

Birch and his mother were staying at the inn a little longer than expected since Mr. Hathaway was busy working. On the same Tuesday that Sasha was looking upwards, for one of his school creative-writing assignments, Birch was working on a short story called, "The Ocean Takes a Breath," about a tsunami he had once helped to calm. Inspired by the tide going out just before the tsunami waves hit, the story ended up being mostly about sea creatures knowing what was about to happen and rushing to help, while yelling the warning, "The ocean is taking a breath!"

Relating to the miraculous aspect, rainbows had long been seen in the skies over places whose names had been changed, like when San Antonio became Cedars South. Before becoming Supercity Four, Phoenix had also been renamed, to Fallow Sands, though the phoenix wasn't particularly a creature associated with Christianity, nor was it one often seen in the world of today. No, it was more that the sorcerers had long since considered anything related to renewal and rebirth to be repulsive.

Albert was currently keeping the Ark Fleet in a pocket because rainbows kept appearing in the skies over the ships, often spectacular bows in unique shapes that were prone to undulating like the aurora borealis. Not wanting to draw too much attention to the fleet (at least, not until the right time), it was best to keep both the ships and the flashy rainbow displays hidden.

Vini and Ben had long been rainbow watchers, particularly in knowing that seeing more rainbows meant the world was drawing closer to the Endtimes, though they also knew we can never know the exact time until it actually happens, per Matthew 24:36. ““But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.””

Children on the mountain following rainbows were often led to spots from which, with patience and diligence, they could catch glimpses of the white lion.

Kinza was watching a rainbow from a guest bedroom window on Netherwind’s third floor as he was communing with Jerome using his older Mancers’ Sphere, the style of which was an advantage in this case so that Jerome’s spirit wouldn’t be able to see the setting of the manor, or anything out of the window. Kinza had regularly been talking to Jerome lately, though casually, using the pretense of having never visited any of the Central or Eastern U.S. Supercities. Originally from Hawaii and then living in Supercity One, Kinza had led a somewhat cloistered life before secretly taking up residence in Antica.

“So you say there are some good restaurants in Nine and Ten,” Kinza said, “but what about places to work? If I start traveling, I’m still going to need to get some things done. And I need seclusion to do my best work.”

“Oh, there are plenty of places in Nine and Ten to get away from it all,” Jerome replied, “and in Seven and Eight too, for that matter.”

Kinza began taking notes from this point on as Jerome proceeded to describe many of the secret tunnels and dens in various cities. Not only that, but nearing the end of their conversation, he told Kinza where in Supercity Seven to find detailed architectural plans showing the exact locations of hidden passages, holding cells, etc. in all fourteen Supercities.

How stupid this former Governor Ruler is, thought Kinza, to spill such secrets to practically a total stranger—what a complete dunce. No wonder he got murdered. But, my kind in general are pretty clueless, Kinza had to admit.

Yes, like many sorcerers, Jerome was largely stupid. But at this time, he was also lonely, and so took a small measure of comfort in talking to anyone who might contact him. Isolation had long been

known as one of hell's tortures, though Jerome, when communing with the living, didn't particularly remember that he was totally isolated from others in the burning pit that was now his permanent home. (Like the spirits from heaven visiting the living through the Garden of Stars, the minds of those connecting from hell also temporarily couldn't remember too many details.)

Conversing with Jerome was relatively safe because Kinza was careful not to say anything to give himself away as being converted. Plus, Jerome's only other contact these days was Vidas, who didn't know anything about Kinza, having never met him, and having never worked with him on any projects, not even remotely. As far as what was going on in the world, Jerome only knew details up to the point of his death, plus what Vidas had been telling him recently; and Kinza's name had never come up in conversation, nor was it likely to.

A rainbow ended up being part of saving a man being beaten by ESS personnel in a logging camp in Virginia. Someone had discreetly placed a small placard on the ground against a tree near the scene of the beating. Only about greeting-card size to start with, the placard quickly grew to become a four-foot painting of a soft rainbow watching over a sleeping forest. The start of a winding, mossy, leaf-strewn path was etched into a dense patch of trees that were making way for the path to enter their midst. This happened to be a copy of one of Morgan Scull's paintings, genie enhanced to change sizes, and still very much capable of cooling tempers and settling conflicts, particularly when sized up so that the effect was exactly what the artist originally intended. Morgan had died eight years back during a demon attack on the plantations, and had been found too late for dragon tears to revive him. From that point on, his work was in incredibly high demand, much more so than before his death. Upon catching a glimpse of the painting, not only did the Snakes immediately cease their assault, they set the man on his feet and helped to brush him off before sending him first to the med clinic, then to his bunkhouse for a rest. Then, the painting was hung in the camp mess hall (despite various anti-art laws). From seeing it every day, both the people and the operations of the camp soon became the most peaceful of any of those serving the Supercities.

On the second Saturday in February, The Sparrow, while sneaking a few people out of Supercity Nine, ended up seeing what she thought

was a rainbow, but that was actually a windbow from frolicking wind horses leaving their colorful ribbon-like imprints in the skies. Since windbows tended to fade much more quickly than rainbows, she basically only caught a glimpse of it. Though brief, the sight heartened and inspired her, to the point that she felt motivated to spend all of Sunday looking for her family in Supe-9. And even though she didn't find them, she didn't feel the energy and time were wasted. Someday she would find them, she was always hopeful; and the act of looking often helped to fuel the ongoing hope.

At the same time on Saturday that Cecelia was sneaking people out of Supercity Nine, a NUR operative, replenishing maps and weapons to various hidden caches, ended up finding a stash of nearly a thousand sand dollars in one of them. Not knowing what they were for, he ended up bringing them to the mountain, his current home base. *These will be nice to hand out to kids*, he thought.

Only the previous month, an older gentleman living on Lion Mountain who liked to roam on horseback outside of the safety of the mountain to collect things, had found another large stash of the dollars in a cache in a Rubble City. He too had brought them home, also to give out to kids mainly.

For the next few weeks, following rainbows, many escaping the cities and finding their way to the mountain ended up bringing sand dollars with them that had been found in various spots along their journeys. Long thought to be magical, as well as having many legends surrounding them, the dollars that started showing up all over the place on Lion Mountain were highly treasured.

Tanner and Eizel had been teaming up a lot lately. On the last Friday in February, he was anxious for her to try out an elixir he had made for her, designed to enhance her abilities. It worked as planned, giving Eizel the ability to now read thoughts and dreams, as well as plant them. Her skills also gained more strength and intensity, allowing her to get through to the brains of people carrying sapphires.

Watching the miscreant pair from a distance, Boko had just planted a daisy seed, but lackadaisically, because he was indeed tired. *What if I just decided to up and lose the game?* he pondered.

No, his mind answered, *I have to keep playing. I made this choice; and unlike God's children, I have no Savior.*

While time didn't particularly matter, having all the time in the world actually gave Boko too much time to ponder. Sadly, many of his ponderings were not at all pleasant, particularly those relating to the Second Coming and what was destined to follow. At the end, his fate would be the same as that of the fallen angels—the burning pit. He had seen the pit firsthand, and it was much worse than any human brain could imagine. Boko would remain outside of time even in hell, so he was not sure if it really mattered to him whether he got there sooner or later, except that sooner was starting to look better than later, though he had to admit that he barely had a clue as to what either “sooner” or “later” actually meant.

At the same time Eizel was trying the elixir, Meg was riding the funicular home from school. Seeing a rainbow from the window, she pondered something that had been on her mind lately—what her gift, or gifts, might be. Her mother kept telling her to be patient and that these things would eventually reveal themselves. While this was good advice, Meg found it hard to follow. Alex had been able to fly since he was eight, and Meg had just turned eight. So she was, naturally, rather anxious to be getting on with things in life, important things. Even if she couldn't fly like her brother, she wanted to do something special too. To Alex, Meg just being such a sweet-natured, kind, and helpful little sister was special enough; and he simply wanted to protect her, and the rest of his family. For Meg's part, she adored her brother, for many reasons, but largely because of his protective nature. If he had been a superhero like in stories (which of course he was not because he was determined to be low-key and most of them were flashy), she would have wanted to be the one to iron his outfit or mend his cape. As the funicular was nearing Meg's exit platform, she was drawn out of her ponderings from hearing some sort of horrible distant commotion going on at the base of the mountain. She also saw flames and smoke.

Though it hadn't yet entered the confines of Lion Mountain, and therefore wasn't near any of the settlements, a fire demon was attacking the mountain, and particularly the welcoming station at the pass near Gatlinburg. Fire demons were rare, but could be raised by certain powerful sorcerers, such as the one from Supercity Twelve that had raised this one for the express purpose of attacking the mountain, and testing the powers of the spirits protecting it.

Lyydu was trying to battle the massive demon that was nearly a hundred feet in height and about sixty feet wide and whose flames were far more reaching than that. Alas, the fiery creature was rather easily warding off the drenching rain the thunderbird was producing. Beme was also trying to hold off the flame demon, who barely took any pause at the power of the firebird. While neither Lyydu nor Beme had any intention of giving up, something more was definitely going to need to happen to keep the mountain safe. The people and horses at the welcoming station were fleeing, but the demon was advancing fairly quickly.

Several wind horses were in the skies above the fray; but other than swooping down to scoop a few human beings out of danger, they knew to stay well back so as not to fan the flames of the demon. A nearby sylph from the mountain was worried that her air might do the same, and so she didn't act to try to counter the creature. She did, however, fly like the wind to the other side of the mountain to alert Astrid of the situation.

With the wind of the sylph whipping her clothes about her body and her hair about her face, Astrid acted swiftly, dashing to a stream and bending down to run her fingers through the gently-moving water in order to get the attention of and communicate with a tiny water spirit, no larger than a droplet, who got her message quickly, and thus raced through the stream with the speed of lightning to reach an enormous lake (one that had lately doubled in size from the expansion of the mountain and recent heavy rains).

The lake contained a cousin to the droplet spirit, this being a much larger water spirit, who rose from the lake looking like an enormous angel, with waterfalls cascading down his robes from shoulders to ankles and from amazingly-gigantic wings. Striding to the scene of the flaming commotion, where Lyydu and Beme were still valiantly battling (though not making much progress), the water spirit, being significantly larger than the fire demon, was able to quench the flames of the creature.

Medics on the mountain were quickly on the ball, healing the burns of several people who had been scorched, and reviving with dragon tears three people who had died. Beme and Lyydu were not injured, just exhausted.

A wind horse had brought Astrid to the scene just as the angelic water spirit was quenching the demon. Regarding the attack, the mountain leader was concerned, but not worried. While evil appeared to be getting bolder, stronger, and sometimes larger, God had always provided help. However, something did end up slightly worrying her, relating to a man that had arrived at the welcoming station just before the demon appeared, an escapee from one of the work camps. As the man was passing her on a path, she got the feeling of something rancid, festering, and almost evil about him.

Many travelers showing up on the mountain were in pretty bad shape from the trials faced on their journeys such as not being able to care for wounds, bathe properly, and from not having enough food. But this felt like something different. He wasn't a sorcerer, hunter, or mimic. She would have been able to tell. In the end, she passed the feeling off to some people just being a little more unsavory than others. All are sinners, and some are in a less-healthy state as Christians than others. She might just have been sensing something like a person up to no good, like the feeling we often get when people are trying to sell us things we don't need or want, and scheming to get far more for the goods or services than they should. Astrid had dealt with a number of greedy confidence tricksters on the mountain over the years; but they didn't generally stay long, since the mountain was mainly filled with people who weren't particularly prone to buying into these sorts of schemes.

The water spirit had already returned to the lake, and Lydyu was busy putting out various small blazes caused by the approach of the demon. As Astrid left, those cleaning up after the attack noticed multitudes of rainbows forming in the skies from the effect of the afternoon sunshine meeting the rising steam.

Chapter Sixteen

The Day of Seventy-Twos

“He determines the number of the stars, he gives to all of them their names.” Psalm 147:4

On the second Saturday in March, quite a few things were happening over the landscape of the U.S.; and for some reason, many of them involved the number seventy-two.

For instance, on Lion Mountain, in the still-dark early hours of the morning, seventy-two people had dreams of demons running amuck in various communities on the mountain.

As the sun rose, Bear and his helpers began putting the finishing touches on seventy-two cabins they had built over the past two months.

Gavin, who had started mentoring Henning, had just discovered that seventy-two shield sapphires were missing. Enlisting the aid of a snail to find them, the Sapphire Boys were led to a tree hollow where a family of raccoons had been stashing the gems. So this wasn't something malicious; and Gavin even related to his young protégé that he should have guessed something like this because a family of magpies had once stolen eighteen of Chelsea's diamonds, which she had had to track down because several were cursed. Though the birds were not affected, the stones could have hurt anyone that might have found the stash.

Meg had organized a bake-sale fundraiser for this Saturday to raise credits for a church bell. The bell was already in the works and was being donated to the church by the metalsmith who was making it. However, because he didn't want to in any way lessen the effect of Meg's efforts, he would take the seventy-two credits raised from the sale and use them to purchase materials to make two more bells for other churches on the mountain. (Though Meg hadn't yet recognized one of her gifts as being service with a charitable spirit, others certainly were starting to.)

In a small river near the base of Lion Mountain, a narck had just laid seventy-two eggs. Narcks were magical lizards that were not as large as zipakola water lizards, but were camouflaged very like their distant cousins so that many people couldn't see them even when the creatures were in plain sight. However, since narcks were prone to hissing and spitting, people were pretty easily able to tell when they were around.

The jury was still out on whether or not narcks were good or bad. While somewhat aggressive and not particularly helpful like other magical creatures such as oodus and enormice, they were not destructive like gremlins nor malicious like hobgoblins; therefore, most people didn't quite know what to make of them, particularly because the narcks didn't exhibit any specific skills, other than that they seemed to like to move stones and branches around in streams and rivers. Perhaps they helped to keep waterways running smoothly, though this didn't ring totally true because they never seemed to bother beaver dams.

Nearby in the forest, a wood spirit, looking much like a ball of roots, was watching over seventy-two youngling wood spirits that mostly resembled gnarled twigs, though ones jumping and dancing about amongst the leaves and vines.

Seventy-two sightings of the white lion had occurred this week, counting six this very day.

Seventy-two Muslims who were now Christians by faith were welcomed on the mountain on this Saturday, and several related a journey similar to that of Alex and his family in that it had taken them some time to reach their destination from the various cities and camps they had escaped from. Even if the seventy-two hadn't chosen to convert to Christianity, they would have been welcome. However, anyone not of the Christian faith wishing to take refuge on the mountain had to come by the Gatlinburg Pass because the suspension bridge would not work for those who were not Christian. Non-believers crossing simply ended up on the other side of the river. This had to do with the way the magician designed the bridge, based on the concept of the narrow path and narrow gate being the only way to heaven and eternal life. With regard to living on the mountain, as far as Astrid was concerned, those of the Muslim faith could live anywhere they wanted

to. But they would do so peacefully because no extremism would be tolerated.

In truth, very few Muslims wanted to live on the mountain, and instead choose to form their own communities, in part because they didn't want Christians constantly witnessing to them. These settlements were often helped by people from certain mothership and earthship communities to become self-sustaining. However, observers kept watch on the residents in order to help victims of the many forms of domestic violence that were still commonly practiced in many Islamic families. Sadly, members of the Police Corps regularly had to get involved. In addition to beatings and punishment disfigurements of wives, the practice of genital mutilation of young girls had never been fully eradicated. Also sadly, people had been ignoring these crimes for centuries. Specifically in the U.S., many of those "on the march" for women's and children's rights seemed to care more about bashing other people in the head (or using pepper spray on them) for being pro-life and conservative than about helping women and children being horribly abused, even when the abuse was occurring in their own communities. After leaving their picket signs littered about the streets, most of these "marchers" tended not to do anything good toward an actual cause, instead simply returning to their oversized homes to sip their lattes and bottled water, and plan their next riot, all the while touting their "good deeds" on social media.

Meanwhile, at Netherwind on this same remarkable Saturday, bigfoots were setting out seventy-two new bee boxes that were a specific design of Mr. Michaels who had passed away some eighteen years previous. At that time, the bigfoots had been extremely grieved because he had been such a great friend to them over the years. On the day of his funeral, they sang for twelve hours straight, the singing sounding something like the chants of monks, but also like mountains humming, flowers sighing, birds chirping, and water playing gurgling lullabies over smooth brook pebbles.

Seventy-two people currently lived on Wharton Farm (outside of the pockets on the property that held thousands of others), and all seventy-two had just come through the tunnel from the oldest barn on the farm to the root cellar at Doyle Mansion. Escaping from huge numbers of demons and megahobs invading the farm, Mira had led the

group, with Tobin bringing up the rear. The bigfoots and gnomes on the farm had chosen to stay and fight, though Tobin had tried to usher them into the tunnel. In truth, the gnomes and bigfoots didn't want to leave the topiaries that had roused themselves to battle the invaders. Lyydu being at the mountain a lot lately had made the farm a little more vulnerable than normal. However, quickly enlisting the aid of those at the plantations and a nearby ranch, the demons and megahobs were routed in less than two hours by wind horses, gryphons, gargoyles, and firebirds, as well as other gnomes and bigfoots that had gladly come to the aid of their farm friends. Remarkably, no one on the side of good died or was even seriously injured; plus, with the whole resistance thing happening so quickly, the invaders had little time to do much damage to homes, farm buildings, livestock, or any newly-planted gardens and crops.

At around the same time the farm battle was ending, Merri was stepping through Laurelstone's study portal on a time-travel mission, and she ended up using the magic twenty-dollar bill her Aunt Weatherly had given her for her twentieth birthday. The bill always came back to Merri (this being its magical trick), as it had for Weatherly for many years. But unlike her aunt, Merri always recorded the incidences of the bill's use and return in a journal. With the twenty coming back to her late in the day, in making her notes, she discovered that she had just reached seventy-two of what she liked to call "round trips."

The wordsmith gift had been used seventy-two times on this day. Em out on Dara early in the day had contributed eight cloud messages to the mix. The sixty-four other uses were of a great variety such as a man living in Idaho spelling out four messages in a crop field, as though creating a maze using the letters of words as his patterns. Two twin teen girl wordsmiths in a mothership community were using plowed furrows in fields in much the same way. A man in a work camp in Michigan was using leaves to write out messages. And an eight-year-old girl in Supercity Five was spelling things out on streets and sidewalks using pebbles.

Also in Supe-5 on this day, seventy-two people were healed by doctors in various secret pods and pockets. NUR operatives had been busy lately, not just helping with escapes and supplying travelers'

caches, but also with channeling things like dragon tears into the camps and cities.

When noting things relating to the number seventy-two on this day, we must briefly turn our attention to hell. A Muslim terrorist had just arrived in the pit. Like many people of Islam, he had been misled into believing that martyrs of his faith would receive the company of seventy-two virgins in the afterlife. He certainly considered himself a martyr, having killed over six thousand Christians in the U.S. in his lifetime, and having died when suicide bombing a church building on a large self-sustaining ranch.

What he found waiting for him in hell was not seventy-two virgins, but rather, seventy-two enormous scorpions that would sting him seventy-two times each day for seventy-two days straight. After the initial seventy-two days, the man would briefly be given a reprieve from the stinging in order to be involved in seventy-two days of another kind of torture: Each day, something painful would happen to him that he hadn't experienced on earth. For starters, he caught a disease he had never had, and experienced all of the horrible symptoms for an entire day. On another day, he ate a food he had never tried before which made his stomach burn with pain all day. On one of the days, he took a journey to a beautiful garden filled with plants and flowers he had never seen before, but that sadly caused his feet to ache, his face to sting, his limbs to bruise, and his hands to swell. In another instance, he was trapped for a full day in a cold and icy land unlike any he had ever known.

After seventy-two days of varying tortures, the man ended up back in the burning pit, the fire being very real, though he couldn't see it because hell was actually darker than pitch black. In complete isolation from other human beings, he also couldn't hear anything, other than his own horrific screams when the scorpions again came to him. Over the next few years of his eternal death, before going mad, the man would occasionally hear inside his head a human voice reciting seventy-two quotes from the bible relating to hellfire. If only he had heard something like this during his lifetime, he wouldn't be in this endless and painful predicament. Now, it was too late. This was the most correct thinking his brain had ever experienced because, truly, if a person hasn't accepted Christ before dying, it is permanently too late.

While some might argue that the degree of punishment in hell is directly related to how people live their earthly lives, and that some won't suffer nearly as much as others, there is no guarantee of this argument being correct. Plus, why should people even ponder it, when they can live in eternal bliss from taking one simple step—across the line and into Christ's waiting arms.

Seventy-two storms had occurred in the U.S. on this day, some large and some small. These were mainly in the form of tornadoes, sand storms, and lightning storms. Oddly enough, the most damaging ones hit places dominated by evil such as the compounds and private retreats of certain wealthy individuals. These were places of excess and debauchery where, at any given time, any number of horrible abuses against innocents could be found to be occurring. The elites who managed to survive the storms were rather shocked, to lose practically everything, including some of their loved ones. Being on the side of Satan (as many of these individuals fully knew they were), they couldn't understand how something horrible and dark could happen to them. The answer was pretty simple: Satan and his fellow fallen angels were not interested in peons. To them, human beings were simply insects to be stepped on. Sorcerers long ago had fallen into the trap of thinking they were going to get certain favors (something lasting), for their services to Satan, which couldn't be more wrong, as Proverbs 11:7 reminds us. "When the wicked dies, his hope perishes, and the expectation of the godless comes to nought." On the flipside, while believers are also as helpless as tiny insects, God loves His children. Although some are perishing for the sake of His Kingdom, they will eventually rise to have eternal life, while those steeped in iniquity will forever perish.

Eizel happened to be doling out her seventy-second bad dream for the week. (Coco had been able to block all but fourteen of them.) Sasha, on the other hand, had just finished giving out seventy-two items to the poor of her city.

Figlin was visiting Supercity Nine, and had just played his seventy-second prank for the year, on a mimic who currently looked like a man with blond hair and a moustache. The prank involved a mirror in which Figlin was making the demon see a double image of his reflection. The double image was present even when the mimic shapeshifted to look

like a woman with long dark hair and lots of freckles. Having a brain largely inferior to that of a human, the mimic not only couldn't work out that a prank was being played on him, he also couldn't figure out that there was no second demon in the room. He kept looking over his shoulder. Finding no one each time, he was very much confused and upset.

At the same time Figlin was playing his prank, seventy-two gremlins were being routed from a ranch in Montana.

Seventy-two hidden caches had been raided by mimics on this day using a device recently created by a sorcerer that was something like a magnet designed to seek out magical objects such as dimes, shield sapphires, flute weapons, and roving maps. Raids such as this had been going on for the past month or so, necessitating the need for the relocation of many caches. However, something was about to happen that would make the caches largely unnecessary; and so these particular seventy-two would not end up being relocated.

A basketball game was being played in Supercity Eleven featuring the teams from Supe-4 and Supe-11. Many of the spectators were none too happy with the home team because it looked as though a couple of the players were not even trying, and were basically letting the other team score easy points. In truth, something big was about to happen—something that would begin when the visiting team's score reached seventy-two. Being anxious for the big thing to happen, the athletes on both sides were indeed manipulating the score. And exactly when Supe-4's score reached seventy-two, the players of both teams abruptly stopped playing, simply giving a bow to the bewildered crowd before taking their seats on the sidelines where they would refuse to continue the game even when the referee threatened to have them all jailed.

Chapter Seventeen

Come Hell or High Water

“When you pass through the waters I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm
you....” Isaiah 43:2

The basketball game was being broadcast to many more locations than just the fourteen Supercities and their outlying camps. In truth, the visiting team’s score reaching seventy-two was a signal for people worldwide to act, in a massive uprising of all of the oppressed prisoners of every Supercity and camp currently existing in the world. And the initial stage of the uprising involved the W’eeopers.

The sorcerers had a decade past suspected that a secret navy was operating, and the recent liberation of the dragons and unicorn had confirmed this, though they didn’t know exactly where this navy was operating out of. In seeing a need not only to counter the secret navy, but also maintain their dominance on coastlines and seas, the sorcerers had a navy of their own that they had been growing for the past ten years. In addition to commandeering many of the world’s skimmers and dippers for their own use, they had been building boats in various coastal Supercities. Of the sorcerers’ navy, only four main fleets were prepared at this time, one operating out of a large Connecticut harbor connected to Supercity Eleven, and the other three attached to the Supercities of Lisbon, Tokyo, and Sydney.

The opposing naval operations were largely inconsequential to the W’eeopers’ superior forces that had taken up positions off many shores to help liberate cities all over the world. Four fleets were off the coast of the U.S. near each of the four coastal Supercities. Ten other large fleets and several smaller ones had taken up similar positions, such as three in various spots along Africa’s Western Coastline, one off the coast of Portugal and Spain, another between Australia and New Zealand, one near Taiwan, two in the Indian Ocean, another along

Brazil's coastline, and so on. Albert himself was aboard Harvey's Ghost and commanding the Ark Fleet, which was situated in the waters surrounding Easter Island.

Some twenty years previous, the sorcerers had installed a stronghold on Easter Island in the form of several large Demon Pockets currently filled with the products of their evil machinations, such as many thousands of megahobs, demons, and gremlins. Sadly (for them), those on the side of evil hadn't done their research well in locating there. Though the island was remote, and a strategic spot from which the sorcerers and the various creatures under their command could easily travel by nyreg or cargo vessel to many countries, they didn't stop to ask themselves what the enormous stone heads were truly for. (Most of the guessing and legends were not correct.) The sorcerers also never stopped to consider that Easter Island was one of the three landmasses forming the corners of the Polynesian Triangle, or that the island itself was basically triangular in shape. Having somewhat successfully operated in the Bermuda Triangle over an extended period of time, they had gotten rather cocky, which had led to carelessness.

While the sorcerers over the years hadn't noticed very many of the W'eeper's activities (probably because the Polynesian Triangle was such a huge area and had given the navy a lot of room to work), Albert had easily recognized the evil operations on Easter Island. Coinciding with the offensive he was launching, he saw this as the perfect opportunity to clean out the large Demon Pockets, and save what was left of the population of Easter Island. Those who hadn't fled to Chile were currently hiding in pockets of refuge on the island.

Though the sea wasn't the main focus, the battle had begun at sea for a very good reason, to divide the attention of the sorcerers, basically acting as a distraction and division of resources. Demons and nyregs could fight over sea as well as land; thus, many were being drawn out of the Supercities, which served to lessen the defenses inside the cities and camps.

In addition to easily battling the evil creatures that were attacking the ships, the W'eeper's had started targeting the enemy's military camps, mainly to cripple missile-launch capabilities. Many of the weapons on the ships were long ranging and had no problem reaching even inland cities and camps. While the W'eeper's vessels positioned

along the U.S. coastlines couldn't quite reach Supercities Five, Six, Seven, and Eight, all other Supercities were within range. Along with military targets, the navy was knocking out certain skyscrapers that people had been forewarned to evacuate, slaves that is. Mainly just concentrating on buildings containing city operations, the navy didn't target residential high rises or hotels.

Many people in the cities had gotten messages ahead of time, roughly in the past two weeks, as to what was going to happen and exactly when. Dawn pigeons and kites had been busy, quilts had been receiving messages in their stitching, walnut devices had been active, and so forth. Em and Dara had been Cloud Writing messages in code lately for Weatherly's various city operatives.

While the ships were busy taking out certain targets, and fighting off flying demon and nyreg assaults, inside the cities and camps, many Snakes were blasting huge holes in city perimeter walls and cutting through camp barriers.

We, being good observers of our story, of course already knew that many of the ESS personnel were on the side of good, and that some were only acting like bumbling idiots while really being saboteurs. The sorcerers, hunters, mimics, and such, not being such good observers, were completely surprised. And with quite a few of their demonic sky patrols heading to the seas, they were not able to prevent very many of the breakouts and mass exits that were occurring.

However, while things had definitely begun inside the cities and camps, some waiting was occurring due to the fact that it wasn't completely safe for many groups of slaves, particularly families with children, to escape right away because there were too many megahobs, hunters, gremlins, stealth hobs, and such to prevent them. Also, quite a few nyregs and demons had remained in the camps and cities, particularly along the borders. But the safety factor was about to change; those waiting just needed to be a little patient, which they were. Great battles were often taken in stages, and this was not going to be an exception.

Many inside the cities took refuge in pockets, as well as the underground tunnels that the sorcerers had made for their own secret uses, but that were now fully known to the other side. Those hidden would wait until certain strategic times to move, mainly when they

could be safely led out of the cities by military personnel, many of which were already in the cities and camps, some being ESS members. Others were simply ordinary citizens who had been part of the Underground Army for years, having been trained in the cavern facilities at Netherwind and Laurelstone before taking up normal positions in society. This included all four divisions of the Underground Army, though the Lizards had been the first to infiltrate, before Ants, Badgers, and Locusts were brought in.

The sorcerers actually had very little true military to serve them. Not long after the fourteen Supercities were solidified, the ESS and U.S. Military had melded and were now indistinguishable from one another. With the consolidation of everything else, it only made sense to consolidate security operations as well.

In case we might be wondering what happened to the basketball players, the ones who knew how to use weapons had already taken up arms, in the form of flutes built into many of the chairs in the arena seating. These were easy to break loose for use. The athletes' towels were actually rope weapons, as were the hoop nettings. And mirror weapons were magnetically attached under the tables of the commentators and statisticians. The athletes that were not trained to fight were ushered by their coaches, and even a couple of their concerned sponsors, to a safe place to await exit from the city. Many Snakes (really Locusts and Lizards) in the arena had retrieved and were using the weapons, as were several of the commentators.

At this point, we might also be wondering how the ESS were telling each other apart, as far as who was on the side of good and who was not. In addition to being able to recognize certain aspects of military training, members of the Underground Army all currently had sewn into the shoulders of their uniforms the overall emblem of their army done in special genie-designed thread called light thread that was invisible until activated. When activated, in this case by the visitors' basketball score reaching seventy-two, the thread lit up in a spectacular blue color, bright and very noticeable like an intensely-blue sky. Art deco in design, the symbol featured a stylized peacock with a serpent underfoot and a dove overhead, to represent the treading down of evil and taking shelter in Jesus. While each division of the military had its own symbol, for the purposes of this uprising, Weatherly had chosen the overall emblem,

which was often used for NUR operations. The uniforms had been brought into the cities and camps over the past two months.

If anyone had been able to stop and take the time to count just how many ESS were actual undercover military personnel, they would have been able to correctly discern that one in three of the Snakes were actually part of the Underground Army.

The start of the evacuation of the cities involved many ESS personnel locking up sorcerers, mimics, print doubles, and hunters in various cells and dens in the underground systems of the cities, as well as in the stockades of the camps. This prevented them from commanding their legions of demons, megahobs, nyregs, and such. While there were a good many Senior Demons amongst the throngs, they were not as bright as humans, having lesser brain functions from being lesser creatures (designed by Satan, rather than by God). So when in command, they tended to make somewhat poor decisions. They were also easy to trick, as evidenced by the fact that it took many of them a good deal of time to stop following the orders of the Snakes with the brilliant blue patches on their shoulders. Before figuring out that these were infidels, many Senior Demons managed to lock whole troops of their subordinates in city prisons, while also herding many hobgoblins into pens of tigers that were easily able to deal with the nasty creatures.

This of course was not just going on in the U.S. work camps and Supercities, but also in Toronto, Monterrey, Madrid, Salzburg, London, Stockholm, Moscow, Shanghai, Rio, Sydney, and so on.

Weatherly and Albert had arranged all of this, having long been determined not to leave things status quo, just making small impacts here and there. Instead, they felt a strong need do something big. In the planning stages, Weatherly was actually calling this endeavor the Big Bang Operation. When Albert jokingly remarked that her name for this offensive was just about as unoriginal as the name of her army, she replied, "Given how much excitement we tend to see, and how much of 'the unexpected' comes our way, I don't mind a few things being blasé."

Albert had been determined to win the battle over evil no matter what since his teen years, which was around the same time Weatherly began training in Kivetel. In fact, both leaders had long been full of

incredible determination, rooted in the promises of God, Who always keeps His promises. Both also knew that, with God on their side, they couldn't lose. Satan was in fact already defeated, by Jesus. It was now only a matter of time.

All of the W'eeper's vessels were outfitted with communication devices similar to the walkie-talkie walnuts (but ones geared to sea specifics by naval technologists), so that the ships might efficiently communicate with one another. Albert, like Weatherly, preferred using dawn pigeons; but walnuts were quicker and thus more appropriate on this occasion. However, many dawn pigeons were standing by (hovering over the fleets actually) in case communications went out and they were needed to carry messages.

Many demons and nyregs were being called out of Demon Pockets around the world to reinforce the efforts of the sorcerers; thus, the sea battles continued full force into and throughout the night.

In the early hours of the morning, though some of the light cannons were losing their charge, the music weapons like horns and drums were working fine, their function based on air. Some hand-to-hand combat was going on because, in the nighttime, and particularly in cloudy areas of the seas, the crosses on the ships were less visible to the demons, who then became emboldened enough to land on decks and fight. The nyregs, being more fearful of water than their smaller counterparts didn't try to land on the ships, instead continuing their assault from the air, though many were tiring at this point because their acid was having little effect on anything it touched. Not only were most W'eeper's carrying either dimes or sapphires, the materials that went into making sailing vessels were pretty tough; they had to be to withstand wind, salt, pounding waves, and such. So a little acid here and there didn't do much damage, and was not a problem at all against the Ark Fleet. Nor were torn sails from clawing attacks because many of the sails were magically designed to repair themselves.

Light weapons were not always made from mirrors, but could be made from anything that could catch the light. For hand-to-hand encounters, Albert was using a light weapon made of a piece of sea glass that could easily catch starlight and moonlight, even in the faintest forms.

The fleet off the coast of Supercity Two actually had no trouble seeing throughout the night because the light serpent had shown up just after sunset. And no matter how many storm clouds the demons produced to make the seas darker, the serpent's light couldn't be quashed by the darkness; in fact, the creature shone more brightly in counter-effect.

Demon-produced storms were also easy for halcyon, one accompanying each fleet, to calm. So the energy that the demons were expending in raising storms was actually being wasted. Even when huge legions of demons stirred things up, the storms were nothing the birds couldn't handle within just a few minutes.

When four enormous nyregs in a team effort swooped down close to the water to try to attack the serpent, they were permanently blinded by the creature's light. Disoriented and crashing into the sea, the beasts were set upon by ocean sprites who swiftly bound them with ropes resembling glowing seaweed strands. Without being able to move their wings or legs to either fly or swim, the nyregs quickly drowned.

Back at the Easter Island scene, swarms of ávanies were drowning many nyregs and demons in midair, mainly the ones swooping down to within forty feet or so of the waves, which was about as high as most ávanies could leap.

A select group of demons were riding nyregs laden with baskets of fireballs with which they were pummeling the ships. Not only did this not affect the wood of the Ark Fleet, even sails and rigging were not catching fire from being attached to the ships made of divinely-blessed wood.

When morning dawned, Albert gave the command to start knocking out some of the factories in the Supercities. Having received instructions ahead of time, workers overnight would have had adequate time to evacuate these targets. The W'eeper's weapons specialists were extremely skilled, and so the chance of hitting places where civilians were hiding, most in designated spots, was very slim. Plus, many of the navy's targeting devices had been genie enhanced for absolute accuracy.

The sorcerers in residence on Easter Island had stayed holed up overnight. However, aboard ships often used to transport megahobs, gremlins, and such, they emerged with the daylight from one of the Demon Pockets, the main doorway of which was located in a harbor.

Mainly having been used for cargo, the sorcerers' ships were not military, but were armed with missiles. They also outnumbered the Ark Fleet at three to one.

The morning was somewhat foggy and visibility was fairly short, which didn't afford the sorcerers with an exact count of enemy vessels. However, in seeing rainbows in the skies over each of the Ark Fleet's ships, the sorcerers wondered if this secret navy was ultimately on some sort of suicide mission. Did they want to draw attention to themselves, and be perfect targets to get easily clobbered?

Busy fighting off air assaults from more and more demons and nyregs coming out of the island pockets, the rainbow ships had not yet targeted the cargo ships, which advanced cautiously to what the sorcerers deemed ideal positions from which they planned to launch their missiles to destroy what they thought was a fairly pesky fleet.

Being overconfident, the sorcerers were extremely surprised to find themselves soon surrounded by another naval fleet materializing from seemingly out of nowhere. Double in number to the Ark Fleet, these were ships outfitted with enormous shroud mirrors, and so had remained entirely hidden, until Albert gave the signal for his captains to deactivate the shrouds.

This was of course the same strategy being used to empty the Supercities and camps—that of drawing out the enemy, this time to surround and overpower, which the previously-hidden W'eeper's fleet did indeed do, and easily.

As many of their ships were disabled, and several began to sink, the sorcerers gave the signal for the Demon Pockets to empty; and more demons, megahobs, gremlins, hobgoblins, and nyregs than most brains could have ever imagined flooded the island (like an ant mound overflowing with angry ants), and raced headlong to the aid of their masters struggling in the sea. While most of these creatures didn't particularly like swimming, they all could swim when needing to.

The timing was unfortunate (for the sorcerers and their servants) because this was exactly when the stone heads on Easter Island decided to get involved; except that what got involved was actually something inside of the heads, not the heads themselves.

The original residents of the island had erected the enormous monuments for the express purpose of attracting certain stone spirits,

who would make their homes in the heads and help protect the island. Having some difficulty communicating with the spirits (because we all know how hard and time-consuming this can be), the island residents had made the large heads as a message to the spirits, as to what they wanted them to do, which was watch out over the large expanses of ocean. The sculptors' efforts worked. Many stone spirits did indeed inhabit the heads, and were keeping watch. Having merely watched the battle thus far, what had just stirred them to action was the sheer numbers of creatures coming out of the Demon Pockets. Worried that these armies of foes might not be manageable for God's children, the stone spirits would get involved. Plus, it was high time for the island to be returned to the people originally inhabiting it.

Emerging from the heads, and looking like giants made of boulders and huge rock columns, the stone spirits set themselves in earnest upon the clumps, long lines, and clusters of megahobs, demons, gremlins, hobgoblins, and nyregs that were exiting the Demon Pockets in streams and herds. While the spirits mainly enjoyed squashing their prey with gigantic fists, some resorted to sitting on the nasty creatures. And their efforts were not just confined to land because many were so large as to be able to wade into the ocean and do battle with low-flying demons and nyregs, as well as the masses of megahobs, gremlins, and hobgoblins that were trying to board ships. A kraken that had been roused by demons had suddenly appeared and was also easy for the large spirits to deal with, which was a good thing because no leviathans were currently in the area to counter the creature. Nor were any merpeople nearby who had the power to call leviathans from long distances, as well as command them.

The ávanies were continuing to take care of matters as well, which meant that in just three short hours, over ninety percent of the sorcerers and their servants were killed. The surviving sorcerers had started fleeing on nyregs, though there wasn't going to be many safe places for them to go for a while, with the Supercities all currently under siege. Many would end up hiding in caves, as they had before their kind came into dominance in the world.

With things so well under control at Easter Island, in communicating with various fleets, Albert found himself needed off the coast of Lisbon. He ate a protein bar and a handful of dried apples from

a ration pack while aboard the rookh that was taking him, and they arrived in approximately an hour of flight.

Albert's commander and captains in this location were actually not in too much trouble, though they were facing the largest of the sorcerers' fleets, roughly equal in number to the hundred and fifty-three W'eeper's vessels in this location.

To the sound of the familiar boarding whistle announcing his arrival to the captain and crew, Albert boarded a ship named the Belinda Rose. Using a genie-enhanced naval spyglass, super-powered with regard to distance and one that could see in multiple directions at once, he was able to quickly determine that one of his opponent's vessels was clearly a mothership because he could see what appeared to be thirty or more sorcerers on board.

In addition to being laden with sorcerers, the mothership was presently targeting the Belinda Rose. Blessedly, the first three missiles fired in rapid succession were deflected by gryphons; and a fourth one went astray seemingly on its own (but really due to the actions of a watchman because it was not yet time for many aboard the targeted ship to meet the Father).

Albert countered by simply swinging his ship alongside the mothership in a very zippy fashion, an easy feat with the help of a wind horse, who was none other than Valo on loan from Camp Burberry Wiffle, which had become a thriving self-sustaining community, and one that Valo had continued to protect even after his charge, May Burberry, passed away some ten years back. Several people who had once lived at Camp Burberry Wiffle were sailors, and two were aboard this very fleet, so Valo basically had no problem extending his protection duties to other areas worldwide.

The members of the Underground Army were not the only ones to employ Shadow Strategies, which was exactly what Albert was doing. Once the Belinda Rose was alongside the mothership, the sorcerers stopped firing, in knowing they likely would blow themselves up as well from being too close to their target. Senior Demons aboard other ships were also afraid to fire for fear of harming the mothership.

Pretty stupid to have so many sorcerers on one ship, Albert thought, giving the signal for the flute and drum attack that followed. After the initial assault on the starboard side, with Valo helping to maneuver the

Belinda Rose to the port side of the mothership, the flute and drum experts easily finished disabling all of the weapons on the sorcerers' vessel in less than four minutes. The controlled power of the music weapons lessened the risk of any W'eeper's ships incurring damage when in close combat, as an opponent's missiles would have; and so the Belinda Rose incurred merely a splintered deck rail and two small scorches from the conflict.

With this initial phase of the Big Bang Operation not being about taking any prisoners, and Albert not particularly caring if his enemy's ineffectual fleet was totally destroyed or not, he allowed the mothership to limp away, under half motor power since its second motor had just been disabled by gremlins.

Meanwhile, another sizeable battle was happening off the coast of Tokyo, where the W'eeper's were engaging the second-largest of the sorcerers' fleets.

Scores of demons aboard nyregs were pummeling ships with fireballs; and Lyydu, high above them, was drenching them with rain. Charlie's grandson had just joined the navy. This was Tobin's firstborn, William, and Charlie was very proud of him. Watching over William was mainly why Lyydu was in this location.

A demon-controlled kraken was threatening the W'eeper's fleet, which prompted several merpeople in the area to send out a call to leviathans. However, knowing none were nearby, the mermaids of the group ended up driving the kraken away using their own power, in the form of light channeled from the stars. Though not visible in daytime, starlight was still available for mermaids to use anytime. The kraken very much feared the powerful beams of light wielded by his foes, and so was easy to drive far out to sea, where the mermaids put a spell on the monster so that he would sleep for a full year without waking.

The sorcerers' Tokyo fleet was equipped with magnetism mixers that did nothing to disrupt the function of the enemy's ships. Even the walnut devices, being originally of genie design, had continued to function well, with only minimal static. The sorcerers had mainly wanted to disable the W'eeper's firepower. Confounded, as well as infuriated, they eventually reasoned that light cannons and music weapons were just mirrors, horns, flutes, and drums after all, so there really was almost no way to disrupt or break them.

Even swarms of gremlins managing to board the W'eeper's ships had a hard time figuring out what to do. Compared to electronics, pulleys and rudders were not all that breakable, especially since gremlins were not super-muscular. They also found they couldn't break the mirrors of the light weapons because the glass was too thick; the most they could manage were a few scratches and chips here and there. In finding so little to work with, the gremlin left to board the sorcerers' fleet, which contained a great many gadgets and mechanicals to mess with. Thus, the sorcerers' ships soon found themselves well disabled, basically dead in the water.

A demon-raised giant squid had unexpectedly appeared, and had capsized two W'eeper's ships. The mermaids hadn't yet returned from driving away the kraken, and still there were no leviathans nearby. (*Where's Godzilla when you need him!?*) Not to worry, because the mermen had a few tricks up their sleeves. While mermaids could channel starlight, their male counterparts were more connected to the power of the seas, and thus had great command over things like tides, whirlpools, and waves. Acting swiftly, the mermen trapped the monster in a huge whirlpool as the wind horses in the area helped to get the W'eeper's ships clear of the rising and churning waters.

A leviathan did arrive on the scene very shortly to deal with the swirling squid, in addition to scuttling many of the sorcerers' ships by ramming them.

In the waters off the coast of Sydney, the W'eeper's were engaging the third largest of the sorcerers' fleets. Several sailors aboard the vessels had a gift very like that of Muriel's, and were talking to gulls above the ships. In addition to occasionally going between vessels as messengers, the gulls were basically acting as spotters to see the evil nyregs and demons approaching from great distances. Many of those incoming from land were not even getting close to the ships before being blasted from the skies.

The smallest of the sorcerers' four fleets was the one operating out of the Connecticut harbor, and it had already long since been subdued. Now, the W'eeper's fleet in that location was busy blasting away at additional targets in the Eastern U.S.

Others of the W'eeper's efforts around the globe had met little resistance. Having been originally designed for travel purposes, the

skimmers and dippers being used by the sorcerers weren't very effective in combat. Nor were many sorcerers or their subordinates particularly sea oriented. And the assaults from land by demons and nyregs were fairly easily countered.

Albert hadn't even tapped into the full power of the W'eeper, in that a fleet of submarines in the Antarctic hadn't been called into action. They were instead simply waiting, in readiness, with grimmpts helping to keep those aboard toasty warm. In return, the people on board the subs always made sure to have plenty of red grapes, zucchini, and sweet potatoes on hand for their heat-producing friends.

While the W'eeper had more than served its purpose in the Big Bang Operation, Albert felt slightly disappointed in not having encountered any fantastic naval strategies from the opposing side. *Nothing clever, nothing new, nothing all that unexpected, and not even anything classic, like from studying the tactics of Nelson, Mahan, or Nimitz*, he reflected. Though, upon reflecting, he reasoned that classic strategies might not have worked against the likes of leviathans, light cannons, thunderbirds, and such.

But while the sorcerers hadn't been innovative, and he hadn't had to stretch his brain, Albert was determined not to underestimate his enemy. They had had enough power to destroy several W'eeper's ships and cripple dozens more. Many injuries and deaths had occurred. Medics were treating injuries, and the dead were being revived by dragon tears. Bodies in the seas were being retrieved by merpeople, wind horses, and gryphons, and brought to medical ships for revival.

Through walnut discussions over the next couple of hours, Albert received updates from several commanders as to the status of minor skirmishes still going on. He also gave the orders for the Demon Pocket doorways on Easter Island to be destroyed so they couldn't be used again anytime soon. Several teams of W'eeper's would be helping the residents of the island get back on their feet, and also perhaps bringing some people that had fled to Chile back, if they wanted to come back.

By wind horse, Albert joined the fleet positioned off the coast of Connecticut. Sunset was just beginning as he noted that the close of the day meant the close of his part in the Big Bang Operation. His fleets had just finished taking out all of the inland targets that Weatherly had requested.

Now, unless she needs me for something on land, he thought, *I can focus on coordinating repairs and monitoring the ships taking care of stragglers.* Albert smiled broadly at the fairly absurd notion that Weatherly would ever need his help for anything under her jurisdiction.

Chapter Eighteen

Fury as a Mantle

“I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the crippled, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will watch over; I will feed them in justice.” Ezekiel 34:15-16

Albert had done a remarkable job of drawing out the enemy, which Weatherly (if teaching a lesson) would have called “divide and conquer” as far as strategy. But while he had managed to occupy and destroy a good many of the sorcerers’ resources, she knew this was still going to be a long haul. The cities and camps were by no means left defenseless just because approximately a third of their forces had taken to the seas, never to return. Nor was the destruction of certain high rises and factories all that consequential because this merely served to cripple some of the enemy’s communication, command, and organizational abilities. Being disorganized much of the time anyway, the added chaos wasn’t truly going to be much of a stumbling block for the sorcerers. Plus, while the enemy’s missile capabilities had been reduced to nil from the destruction of military targets, this did nothing to counter the fighting capabilities of the many demonic creatures in service of the sorcerers.

Not only did many megahobs, nyregs, and such remain inland, reinforcements had started flooding out of various Demon Pockets. This amounted to hundreds of thousands more nasty creatures to deal with in order to liberate the remaining prisoners, and keep safe those already on the run to the mountain and various self-sustaining communities, all of which had been alerted to expect great quantities of escapees.

For known Demon Pocket doorways, army personnel were stationed outside, blasting anything that came out. This was a better strategy than simply destroying doorways because Demon Pockets always had multiple doors. Plus, simply limiting access to our realm didn't serve the purpose of cleaning out the nasty pockets and destroying what was inside. And Weatherly had always been wise enough not to send troops into this type of enemy territory, where unpredictability, as well as evil power, dominated. No, she never sent anyone on suicide missions into Demon Pockets; rather, she made plans, careful ones, guided by God to ensure success. The best strategy in this case was to get the pockets to empty, despite the inconvenience of having to fight more foes.

Surrounding the cities and camps, many ground troops were already battling, mainly using hand-to-hand combat. But the sheer numbers of stealth hobs, mimics, nyregs, gremlins, and such were almost staggering. Mimics were particularly troublesome because they often couldn't be recognized as not being human. This was of course by design, so that they could get close to people, milling amongst them to spy, attack, whatever. Mimics had long been successfully used as assassins.

While demons didn't generally use weapons, many were emerging from the Demon Pockets with enormous sickle-shaped blades; and some were carrying maces and spears. But the Underground Army had been trained to combat various armed foes, such as swordsmen, bowmen, and the Snakes loyal to the sorcerers who were using guns; though many guns were jamming due to gremlin tampering.

Based on the W'eeppers' impacts on both the Eastern and Western U.S., and the fact that several of her most trusted and competent generals were taking care of matters in those regions, Weatherly had chosen to concentrate her personal efforts on the Central Region of the country. Like many who were hiding in the cities and camps, she had had to be somewhat patient while waiting for the initial phase of the Big Bang Operation to end. But now, at midnight, which marked the beginning of the second full day of the uprising, she was dressing for battle—donning ropes, mirrors, and flutes. A small belt pack contained concentrated food tablets, and a shoulder pouch held water. A walnut device, with which she would be communicating with various

subordinates, was attached to her collar. Weatherly chose not to carry a dime or sapphire. While abundant, there were still not enough of them for everyone to have one; and she preferred for her troops to have the added protection. As she adjusted the ropes crisscrossing her shoulders, she found herself thinking of Isaiah 59:17. “He put on righteousness as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation upon his head; he put on garments of vengeance for clothing, and wrapped himself in fury as a mantle.”

Swiftly heading outside, Weatherly found Linna already waiting for her with two rookhs, who took the pair to join troops battling outside of Supercity Seven.

Others at the plantations were readying themselves for battle as well, and heading out. Merri had been assigned to Supe-5, and Zapor was taking her. Dell atop a rookh was heading with Halli and Magsen to Supe-9. Kip and Folto were on their way to Supe-6. Preston and Eleta, accompanied by Varjo on a rookh, were going to Supe-8. In an unofficial capacity (since they weren't military officers), Vini and Ben aboard Tulko and Dara were on their way to cover certain areas outside of Supe-12, which Jelzey had also been assigned to.

All were solemn heading out. Finally here, this day was perhaps as inevitable as the Great Flood, or the coming firestorm of the Endtimes.

Getting walnut updates as they flew, Weatherly discovered that things had been progressing well in the field. Light cannon specialists had already managed to take out certain military camps, skyscrapers, and factories in the Central Region, ones that had been unreachable by the W'eeppers but that were deemed by Weatherly to be necessary targets.

Arriving at a camp south of Supe-7, as Linna continued on to a position north of the city, Weatherly dropped into the fray from about ten feet up, so the rookh wouldn't have to pause to land and could immediately begin carrying civilians to safety. Huge flocks of rookhs were actually on loan from Kivetel for this very purpose. Upon landing, Weatherly immediately drew a gold rope and began taking out throngs of demons and megahobs.

With regard to the sorcerers in the cities, Telén, along with many other Council of Twos members, had been wise enough to go into hiding. In fact, most of the higher-ranking sorcerers would be content

to hide and wait things out. Vidas, on the other hand, being largely fearless and extremely proactive, was in no mood to simply trust that various subordinate sorcerers, hunters, mimics, and Senior Demons would be able to take care of defense matters without at least some direction. At around the same time Dell was being dropped off at a hotspot just outside the northern wall of Supercity Nine, Vidas was taking to the skies above the city on a nyreg.

Overnight, much progress had been made in the cities and camps, as many people, including civilians, had taken up arms, using the thousands upon thousands of weapons readily available to them, ones that had been hidden in plain sight. Women's make-up compacts were mirror weapons, and handles of screwdrivers turned into flutes. Cinch ties on laundry sacks were ropes, as were belts, straps of ladies handbags, scarves, and men's ties. Flutes were worked into many pieces of furniture. Coiled rugs and baskets, when uncoiled, were rope weapons. Broaches, hair barrettes, and combs not only turned into music and mirror weapons, many also unfolded into crosses wielded to blind demons and nyregs. Even kitchen items got in on the action—a spoon mirror, a coffee-filter flute, a trivet rope, a thermos mirror, and so on. Every household in the ghettos and shantytowns held at least ten hidden weapons and an equal number of crosses, with many more hidden in pockets and pods around the cities and camps.

While the sorcerers had long known about ropes, mirrors, and flutes, they never suspected so many existed, nor imagined them to be in every home. The hunters, mimics, and certain Snakes conducting raids over the years never noticed that flutes were worked into candlesticks and drawer handles. Nor had they seen ropes edging bedspreads, coiled around lamp bases, or twisted into drapery pulls.

A hunter, who was starting to recognize weapons that had been under his nose for many years, tried to use a mirror that he loosed from the bottom of a doorstep and ended up blasting his own knee. Likewise, a sorcerer whose staff was malfunctioning and who had grabbed up a keyring flute ended up accidentally taking out two mimics and a Snake that were guarding him. A demon grappling with a rope managed to get it wrapped around his shoulder and waist, the result being that he dissipated himself in less than six seconds, leaving only a small pile of greasy-looking sludge on the ground with the rope sitting on top of it.

They should have known better. Effective use of weapons of any sort took training, with godly ones being nearly impossible for those on the side of evil to master.

In addition to ropes, mirrors, and flutes, many people were using genie-made swords, spears, and fighting sticks. Many were foldable and thus had been easily hidden. Others were incredibly compact and grew as needed to be usable. A woman's necklace became a bow and her hair pins grew into arrows. What looked like a stout umbrella transformed into a two-meter fighting stick in a man's hands. A seven-year-old boy hiding in a pod in a camp never guessed his mother was a Reserve Locust until he saw her in action with a spear that had looked exactly like his school pencil.

While this whole offensive was basically one giant rescue mission—the main orders being to empty the cities and camps and protect those exiting—as a secondary goal and directive, the Underground Army was to kill as many of those they were engaging in combat as possible.

Inspired by the story of Jehoshaphat, Weatherly had chosen choir singers (mainly from among her Ants and Locusts) to praise God during the battle, beginning with sunup on this, the first day of the land phase of the Big Bang Operation. In connection to music and singing, based on something Quin had recently related to her from a daydream vision, Weatherly was using an amplification device just developed by Linn. With help from the Great Multipliers, the device had swiftly been reproduced in quantities; and bigfoots had gone on missions to each of the cities and camps to place the amplifiers in strategic spots on walls, in trees, among rock groupings, and so on. However, while the many choir members had taken their positions, they soon discovered that they weren't going to need to sing because the moment the sun first began to peek at the day, a lovely and quite unusual singing from a mysterious source started to fill the air.

Boy spreesprites were watching—perched on boulders, in trees, and on cliffs, as well as tucked into many mossy and grassy places—and many were inspired to sing with the sunrise. Now made larger by the amplification devices, their voices no longer sounded like chirps and murmurers, but more like a boys' choir singing and chanting, with the words very clearly heard. Since spreesprite songs were always

spontaneous, from God giving the boys lyrics inside their heads, many of the words pertained to what was happening in battle. Many fighters were being given directions to “look behind” or “head left” or “use flute instead of mirror.” Some were being told to “charge” while others were supposed to “retreat.”

However, these words and the lovely musicality of the songs were only heard by the godly. To those on the side of evil, the singing sounded a lot like rushing wind, clattering branches, and rockslides. Indeed, nature was often a large component of spreepsprite songs, in both lyrics and in the humming the boys did between lines of song, with the humming sounding to the godly very much like a gentle breeze rustling tree leaves and babbling brook waters flowing over smooth pebbles. The effect of the songs on mimics, stealth hobs, gremlins, and such ended up being that of confusion and disorientation. Many were unable to tell direction clearly, and some constantly thought an enemy was sneaking up on them. Some hunters and sorcerers hearing the songs felt distracted and jittery, as though they were being asked to perform a delicate and timed task outside on a windy day, or like they were being given urgent instructions in a language they couldn’t understand.

But even those hearing clearly would have had difficulty describing the songs, other than possibly likening them to classic battle hymns, but perhaps ones being sung by nature spirits trying to convey something soul rending, haunting, uplifting, and glorious all at the same time. Many in battle thought they were hearing directly from God; and in a way, they were, since God was working through the spreepsprites. Others thought angels were singing, but smallish angels, since the voices sounded like boys instead of men.

While the boys were singing, the girls were observing, and frequently stopping time to help God’s children both flee and fight. On this particular day, most of the girls were riding on dragonflies, beetles, wrens, and such. With such big battles going on, it didn’t hurt to have a little company while working. So too were many of the white hummingbirds staying very close to their spreepsprite partners in order to be available instantly, instead of taking their usual couple of seconds to arrive.

With Varjo taking care of things outside of Supercity Eight, Preston had chosen to enter the melee of the city, at first fighting from the air

with a mirror, his longtime specialty, and then by dropping down into the mass of escaping prisoners to ward off those hindering the exits. Eleta hadn't seen much action lately, but with Preston engaged in ground battle with both sword and mirror, she would on this day. Landing near her charge, she began lopping off heads of demons and megahobs left and right with her huge pinchers. When a super-sized nyreg landed in the city, she grew in size. While she couldn't match the bulk of the monster, her form only equaling about half of his, she was very fast. Dodging acid spit, she moved in swiftly to battle. Though she received several cuts and burns, she eventually managed to deal the giant nyreg a slicing death blow to the throat. Blessedly, Eleta's wounds were minor, and would end up healing fairly quickly with a little rest after the battle.

Unknown to Weatherly, Tamfa was sticking close to her. Though the tree spirit had never acted in direct defense of her charge, she would today if needed, though carefully. As old and as strong as Tamfa was, her powers were not just limited to trees. Even the earth would do her bidding if she commanded it. But those battling on the side of good didn't need an earthquake or a mudslide getting in the way of their efforts. For that matter, they also didn't need for huge trees to start tearing the place into pieces, which might happen if Tamfa got worked up enough, since nature spirits often had difficulty controlling their powers, to the extent that their efforts could sometimes be more destructive than helpful. As far as what often happened on Lion Mountain when the protective spirits were forced to act, the magical mountain had the ability to heal itself more quickly than other places of the earth, this being related to its ever-changing and ever-growing nature.

So far since arriving, Weatherly had helped her troops clean out two camps. In a slight lull in the battle mid-morning, while listening to the last of the mysterious chants and songs that were just now starting to die down, she was getting walnut and dawn pigeon updates from members of the Underground Army in Supercities and camps all over the world; and she was pleased to learn that things were going well in China, South Africa, Nepal, Colombia, New Zealand, and so forth. In cold and snowy places like Russia and Canada, many grimmpts were providing warmth to the troops. This was something the Underground Army

hadn't even asked for—the little flying piggies having just shown up on their own to help. Nor had anyone asked yetis and snow gryphons to fight; yet they were, along with bringing food and other supplies to many battle sites. In addition to communicating by walnut and dawn pigeons, Weatherly was also using a small tablet device connected to quilts in many places of the world and through which she was giving orders, such as moving troops around to provide reinforcements for certain battles or to help protect large gatherings of civilians.

Eizel was out on a nyreg in the skies over Supe-10, and was planting thoughts into the minds of many members of the Underground Army. The thoughts made the fighters think they were being attacked by forces that weren't really there, thus serving to confuse them. Coco aboard Agzata was tailing Eizel, and blocking as many of the wicked thoughts as possible. Tanner, also on a nyreg, ended up seeing the wind horse and rider, though they had been difficult to spot at first due to the horse's camouflage abilities. Coco hadn't noticed Tanner, who was visiting his friend. He and Eizel had been watching the televised basketball game together two evenings previous when this whole thing started. Having stayed hidden for two nights, at sunrise, both had been anxious to get out and help defend the city.

Though Tanner immediately gave chase, Agzata easily outdistanced his nyreg. Because Coco was used to riding her, it was safe to travel at high speeds. Giving up quickly, Tanner returned to Eizel who was still holding position above the city.

As Coco and Agzata had sped away, Eizel had been able to read certain of her opponent's thoughts, and thus learned that many of her recent efforts had been countered. However, she was only briefly able to get into Coco's mind, in an unguarded moment because Tanner had taken the girl and wind horse by surprise. Due to Coco's gift, Eizel ordinarily wouldn't be able to read her thoughts or dreams, nor plant anything. But this brief encounter did serve as the catalyst for Tanner to develop a pill as an enhancer to help Eizel get past Coco's blocks.

A large pocket in Tanner's robes contained exploding acid capsules, which he began pelting people with. Blessedly, most of his targets were carrying dimes and sapphires, and so were protected, not only from his assault, but also from spears some of the demons had retrieved from ESS weapons depositories, and from bullets from guns not yet disabled

by gremlins. The bullets and spear points simply glanced off of those carrying the dimes and sapphires as they pushed their way through the throngs to exit the city.

Slightly wondering where his protégé might be, Vidas was similarly at work in the skies above Supe-9. When not barking orders at mimics and hunters, he was using various spells on those below, such as one that froze people in place for ten minutes at a stretch so that demons could lock them into hospital wards generally used to house women being forced to comply with the Law of Four. Since the wards were easy for members of the Underground Army to break people out of, this only slightly hindered those escaping. Another of Vidas' spells animated several huge piles of rubble into an army of soldiers, each nearly twenty feet in height, though these were fairly easy for flute wielders to take down. A topiary army that had been posing as a hedge in a cemetery outside the city was also able to move in and take out many of the rubble soldiers.

In a large region between Supercities Twelve and Thirteen, Bear was actually fighting like a huge bear, and was helping many people reach the safety of a couple of farms, a mothership community, and the Gatlinburg Pass. Vini and Ben, respectively using a flute and a mirror atop Tulko and Dara, were covering some of the same area as Bear, and they caught sight of him several times. Horses staged at certain places on the ground to help people escape were being protected by a herd of youngling wind horses, though the regular horses didn't need much protection because they were well capable of pretty much kicking demons and megahobs silly, as well as running swiftly enough to help many get away from four camps in the area.

Several airborne demons were throwing fireballs, which Jelzey was catching with her wings and throwing back at them. She had grown to a larger size than normal, more like that of a nyreg, and was a pretty fearsome sight to behold.

Birch aboard Naya was out calming demon-produced rain, wind, and lightning storms in the area, which was crucial to the escape efforts so that people could have safe paths to exit. In between helping to calm storms, Naya was putting out fires caused by some of the fireballs Jelzey hadn't been able to catch.

While Vini didn't call a unicorn, a man in Russia did, as did a woman in Madagascar. As per their custom, the creatures didn't stay long in our realm, just under a minute for each one; but while here, they each managed to knock out several hundred demons and nyregs from simply lighting up for a couple of seconds. Plus, in briefly trotting about unseen afterwards, the unicorns gave many people a hopeful perspective on what might otherwise have seemed like an overwhelmingly-grave situation, from the sheer numbers of evil creatures they were facing.

Gargoyles all over the world were helping without even moving, in seeing things in the eye of their minds and simply conveying information by thought to people engaged in various battles. Anei, having been connected to Laurelstone for so long and being a good friend to both Weatherly and Vini, was feeding their minds with strategic information, such as various movements of the enemy, and how many were in certain locations, as well as what types of creatures were involved. Gargoyles were using various other powers too. Having control over rocks, they could not only cause avalanches, but also reverse them, as a gargoyle did outside of Supercity Five, in order to save fleeing families from a slide caused by nyregs landing on a mountainside. Raising dust storms was also a gargoyle skill, and one that served to help people in camps outlying both Supe-6 and Supe-4, when the storms were placed between groups of escapees and their pursuers.

Due to the location of several hunter training camps, Supercity Nine and surrounding areas held a high concentration of these evil men; and Dell was about to discover exactly what purpose their tattoo markings served, this having long been a mystery to most people. The tattoos were actually magical ink weapons. When loosed from the skin, in a method that might slightly be likened to puck trolls bringing artistic things to life (but based on Dark Energy instead of Light Energy), they became lethal metal in the shape of whatever the tattoo had been. The ink of Dragon Hunters was always paisley in shape and acted much like a boomerang in the hunters' hands, though a razor-sharp boomerang. The Magician Hunters' star-shaped weapons were likewise as dangerous because they were just like martial-arts throwing stars, but ones that also came back to their owners after being thrown. The ink

sported by Unicorn Hunters was shaped like the horns of unicorns and could be used like a short spear. This was the secret the hunters had been keeping, but were now choosing to reveal, in fear of having their butts kicked again as they had on the island during the unicorn and dragon rescue. Using his walnut, Dell sent a message of warning, for others not to make the mistake of thinking that the hunters were unarmed. Thus, the news about ink weapons spread fairly quickly.

Sasha and her family were hiding with many of their neighbors in the lowest underground level of their residential building, where Eizel and Tanner had also hidden for two nights. Eizel returned to check on her family in the afternoon.

Aside from safe places in many of the residential buildings, in all of the cities, residents of ghettos and shantytowns were helping to protect quite a few of the elite that had escaped and wished to join them. Having been prepared for the uprising as far as food and water provisions, many were now sharing.

The Sparrow had been sent by Astrid to Supe-3, and two children who had gotten separated from their parents were currently hiding behind her as she watched troops of megahobs herded by mimics pass by. Once clear, she snuck the children out of the city to a safe pocket and into the care of NUR operatives. Re-entering the city, she sought more people to help sneak out to safe spots.

Hairy vetches were also helping many to hide in plain sight, as were enormice. For kids holding hands, an enormouse's camouflage could extend easily to three at once. Outside of the cities, many enormice were traveling with troops and helping to expose the locations of packs of gremlins and stealth hobs. Rose-colored glasses were also being used; but since the glasses could be knocked off in battle, enormice were preferable. And this wasn't just due to their ability to expose invisible and camouflaged foes because the war cry of an enormouse, though generally unheard by human ears, had the ability to strike terror into the very core of creatures like megahobs and demons.

Since mimics were so troublesome in their various human personas, many escapees were wielding crosses to determine if any were around. With demons of all sorts shying away from things like bibles and crosses, mimics definitely became easier to spot.

Outside of Supe-5, while Zapor was in the skies knocking out nyregs, Merri was battling on the ground and almost laughing when taking out with a single mirror strike ten demons that were stupid enough to have had assembled themselves into the exact shape of a rack of bowling pins. Likewise, based on their stupidity, she was able to lure nearly a hundred more demons into a trap in a valley where five flute users from high vantage points easily picked off the hundred in less than two minutes. And her simple strategies didn't just work on demons. Getting a large pack of hobgoblins to follow her up and over a hill, she led them right into another ambush.

Employing a technique few could master, Merri was using a rope to toss rocks the size of small boulders at megahobs and low-flying nyregs. Once while flinging boulders, when gremlins managed to wrench the rope from her hands, it easily came back to her when she called because it was one of Marlon's retrievable designs.

Having exited Supe-8, Preston had just blown up a bridge over a river to prevent masses of demons and stealth hobs from reaching a camp still filled with civilians. With the river moving so fast, the nasty creatures couldn't swim across. Taking to the skies on Eleta, Preston soon joined Varjo who was fighting on the opposite side of the city.

Meanwhile, outside of Supercity Six, Kip had just driven nearly three hundred megahobs into the deepest pit of a quarry. Wind horses were now diverting rain clouds from a demon-raised storm over the pit, which was rapidly filling with water. In less than fifteen minutes, the megahobs were all drowned.

Outside of Supe-13, Muriel was commanding large herds of goats and flocks of geese to get in the way of demons that were pursuing people, this being her version of the gargoyle-dust-storm strategy. At one point when being attacked by a hobgoblin, Muriel easily killed her foe by stabbing him with the feather Cuoré had given her. A little later, she similarly dealt with two demons.

Throng of mimics and megahobs made the mistake of running into a large field east of Supe-10 that was empty except for what appeared to be twelve cottontail rabbits nibbling on grasses, weeds, and wildflowers. Extremely bothered by the intrusion, the twelve quickly shapeshifted to their true form of behemoths, most around the size of a three-story apartment complex, but two were even larger. As per their

usual fighting style against so many foes, the behemoths engaged in a sort of fast and fancy tap dance, which served to squash all but about fifteen of their opponents, these managing to flee the field, only to run into four rope wielders who made short work of them. Once the field was clear—except for the slimy sludge piles from those who had dissipated during the tap dance—the behemoths shapeshifted back down to the form of rabbits to continue nibbling. They didn't worry overly much about the sludge piles because those would easily wash away with the next rain.

Near a camp south of Supercity Seven, Weatherly had just heard from Linna that things were going well on the north side of the city, which was a good thing because Weatherly wouldn't have been able to leave her position at the moment even if she wanted to. She and many others fighting in the area were basically facing double what those stationed outside of other cities were, which Weatherly had expected given that Seven (as a main hub) was, for all intents and purposes, the capital of the Supercities. She had also known that there was a high concentration of Demon Pockets in this region.

At present, with a red rope in one hand and a mirror in the other, Weatherly was facing off with a massive swarm of demons. She was equally good with weapons in either hand, which was a rare talent. Even rarer was the ability to wield two magical weapons at once. She had also long surpassed even Preston in use of mirrors, though she had never made a big deal out of it.

At one point, she tossed the rope high into the air to switch hands with the mirror, deftly catching the arching rope again five seconds later. Moving so fast, she looked like a creature with more than two arms, and more than two legs for the leaps she was making. So far in this operation, she had suffered nothing more than a couple of scratches from a demon getting close enough to swipe at her leg. This particular swarm attacking her had totaled nearly two hundred at the start, and she had managed thus far to whittle them down to about a third of their original numbers. Pocketing her mirror, she swiftly drew a gold rope from its position crisscrossing her shoulders. Since the demon pack had continued to move in on her, in close contact, the second rope was more strategic than the mirror.

Though they didn't have time to really watch, many of Weatherly's troops were truly amazed at her skills, which had continued to grow over the years. Even in her sixties, she was as strong as she had been in her thirties and forties; and was even more skilled in battle tactics from so many years of both training and real-life encounters. As far as training, in addition to spending a lot of time in the Weapons Room, she had still been going to Kivetel regularly in recent months and years.

Noticing a couple of nyregs some distance away but descending on her position, as she was polishing off the last two dozen or so demons from the swarm, Weatherly tossed her gold rope into the air in order to retrieve a mirror from a pocket to deal with the pair of descenders before they could even get close the fray, after which, she pocketed the mirror again to catch her rope and finish dealing with the remnant demons, which took less than three minutes.

A short while later, in order to take care of a megahob stampede, she used two mirrors at once, purposely crossing the streams of light, the explosion of which served to wipe out nearly a hundred of the nasty creatures at once. With the force of the blast also knocking her backwards into the air, Weatherly did a sort of aerial cartwheel in order to again land on her feet, where she killed the remaining stampeders in about five minutes of normal mirror use.

A late-afternoon slight lull in the activity around Supercity Seven gave many a chance to rest and have something to eat, though Weatherly remained wary as she too rested with her back against a tree. Sure enough, as she closed her eyes and tuned in her other senses, she could not only smell stealth hobs nearby, she could hear their elbow joints clicking. She knew their knees didn't make any noise, but their elbows did, and they couldn't help but swing their arms and move their elbows when they walked. She also heard the scuffles of gremlins' feet amongst the leaves. Keeping her eyes closed, she rose and, using the red rope that had been resting in her lap, quickly dealt with the five stealth hobs and sixteen gremlins that had been trying to creep up on her.

Not too far from Weatherly's position, boulders under the command of a gargoyle some two hundred miles away were flying into the sky to take down one of the super-sized nyregs.

Ethan had been out on this day, on Westerwing, though his mother disapproved, being worried he was too young for a battle of this scope; but she basically couldn't stop him. In an area south of Supe-13, he had just landed to battle ground demons with a sword when Quin and Cuoré did a fly-by. Quin ended up stopping time twice directly behind him to slow a posterior assault and thus give Ethan a chance to finish dealing with three demons in front of him before turning to take on the five that were temporarily frozen. He had already used six of his chances today, but didn't regret doing so because he and Westerwing as a team had managed to help several hundred people exiting two camps reach safety.

In addition to stopping time periodically, Quin had all day been dropping airbikes into camps and cities to aid with escapes, and periodically returning to the plantations to obtain more bikes, though the supply of two thousand that had been made especially for the Big Bang Operation was now nearly exhausted.

Once all remaining bikes were distributed, Quin and Cuoré set about looking for people with injuries, so that Quin could put her gift of healing by touch to good use. While a lot of people had dimes or shield sapphires, in such a battle, the enemy was still managing to inflict many injuries; and the medics could definitely use the help, also from Cuoré when their supplies of dragon tears were running low.

The four converted dragons were not involved in any of the current battles because they were healing from their fight with Sei Sei. Taking some time to get back to full strength, they were currently tucked into a warm cavern in Mexico, sleeping like babies.

Heike and Pizzo, like many puck trolls, were staying somewhat close to home during all of the frenzy; but they had chosen to ride on a blue heron to Supercity Twelve, where they brought about a thousand sidewalk chalk drawings to life. These were mainly drawings of men and women with swords, spears, bows, and such that children had been instructed by their parents to draw just ahead of the uprisings. While colored chalk was scarce inside most cities and camps, the genies had supplied the children in several cities with great quantities in recent weeks for the very purpose of creating armies to help people escape. Gnomes riding stealth gliders launched into the air by wind horses had made the drop deliveries of the chalk.

Kisi and Pipac were not traveling with their parents because they were on their way by eagle to Supercity Three to bring another chalk-drawing army to life, this being good practice for Pipac because he still wasn't as good as his sister at this skill. Indeed, Kisi managed her half of the chalk soldiers before her brother got even a third of the way through his. Wearing a cute little pink and purple pinafore (made by Em, of course), the four-inch puck with her hair in pigtails looked pretty adorable commanding the soldiers with gestures, squeaks, and sparkling light swirls emitted from her fingertips.

On their approach to Supe-3, the twins had noticed throngs of megahobs and demons surrounding the city. Knowing that additional help was going to be needed for the escapees to reach safety, Kisi suddenly had a good idea. By thought while climbing a bench, she called to a wind horse in the sky. When the horse swooped down, she hopped aboard and the pair was off, to South Dakota, where the horse deposited her on a rocky ridge very near the Crazy Horse Memorial.

While some might have thought this too big of a job for a tiny puck, size of course didn't matter because small things, as we know, can often have great impact.

Though still not completely finished, the sculpture was fully a horse and warrior when speedily unleashed from the hillside by puck-troll magic. Magnificent and glistening in the afternoon sunshine, Crazy Horse and his steed swiftly charged across Wyoming to help those in Supercity Three by stomping, kicking, ripping, pounding (and a few other types of butt-kicking, like shredding and punching) the many evil creatures surrounding the city. At one point dismounting, Crazy Horse threw rubble boulders at the larger nyregs to bring them down so that his horse could stomp them and rip wings from their bodies with his gigantic teeth.

While Crazy Horse was on the initial phase of his rampage (initial, because he wouldn't be settled by Kisi back into his hill in South Dakota until three days from now) additional help was arriving from Kivetel, in the form of sixteen armies of colokos, these being very like enormous and terrifically-fierce flying monkeys. They came through the doorway in Oregon that rookhs often liked to use to travel between realms.

While twelve of the armies headed to various international destinations, four flew to Supercities Five, Six, Eight, and Ten to enter the cities and engage in battle. While inside the cities, instead of flying, they ended up using many of the buildings like monkeys in jungles use trees. Leaping around as though in a playground, they took out as many as possible of those on the side of evil, after which, they loaded up civilians onto their backs for exit from the cities. Colokos could each carry up to twenty people on their backs. The males mostly acted as the transports while the females, being fiercer than the males, continued the fighting.

During the night in the U.S., the fighting died down somewhat because even demons, megahobs, and such had trouble seeing in the dark; therefore, many of the Underground Army were able to get a little rest, particularly since many of the colokos were traveling to other cities and camps to help carry out civilians. NUR operatives in the cities were coordinating groups leaving from the pockets of refuge and various other places where people had been hidden and patiently waiting.

When dawn arrived on the second day of the U.S. land battles, to more mysterious morning singing, Ants were busy handing out food packs and replacement weapons to those who might have lost theirs or found them to be malfunctioning.

In Spain, the sun had been up for some time, and shining brightly on an aged puck troll named Binklock who was living in what remained of Barcelona, the city of which didn't officially exist anymore, though quite a few buildings were still largely intact.

Soaring above the city on a hawk, Binklock saw a horrible sight—an enormous monster called a grügg that was as large as a behemoth, though one that might have been standing upright like a gorilla. This was a recent creation and secret weapon of the sorcerers, and two were being kept in a Demon Pocket on the outskirts of this once-fabulous city. Just unleashed by sorcerers, the monster was heading to Madrid, to take care of the uprising there, the fighting of which was still going on in full force.

Though shocked and somewhat afraid, Binklock wasn't so incapacitated as to not be able to think clearly, and act. Landing in the city, he quickly brought to life Gaudi's House of Bones, which puck

trolls and various other magical creatures had been protecting for decades, along with many other artistic treasures in Barcelona.

The building, when awakened, took on the form of a huge dragon, active none too soon because the second grügg had just emerged from the Demon Pocket and was now also on the path to Madrid.

Tackling the first grügg, the dragon soon slashed and ripped the monster to shreds with teeth and claws. Having lost the element of surprise, the second grügg proved a little more troublesome to take on. However, after grappling, taking down, and rolling around in wrestle for a few minutes, the dragon did manage to pin his opponent to the ground. Having the ability to breathe fire like a real dragon, the House of Bones then proceeded to torch the grügg into a pile of smoldering sludge in less than a minute, after which, Binklock swiftly settled the dragon back into his usual spot to sleep because, also just like a real dragon, this was the House of Bones' favorite activity.

In Nigeria, a puck had just brought to life a grouping of statues in the Supercity that had once been Lagos. These were steel statues of triple-life-sized animals previously ignored by the sorcerers that had taken over the city because they hadn't thought the elephant, rhino, giraffe, lion, anteater, and wildebeest could do them any harm. But that was exactly what was happening, great harm to those on the side of evil, while colokos and rookhs were carrying many people out of the city.

Meanwhile, back in the U.S., we might take note of quite a few cowardly sorcerers, holed up in the fortified innards of several of the Supercities, most of these innards being under ground and serviced by separate air systems because the sorcerers had long worried about the possibility of being gassed. While the ductwork of these systems would have allowed fairly easy access into these safe rooms, dens, and tunnels, for the time being, the Underground Army didn't focus on clearing them out, their priority being to get civilians to safety. However, on God's orders, exceptions to this involved teams of Lizards entering specific dens and safe rooms in Supe-5 and Supe-11 to kill whatever they found inside, which amounted in total to forty-three sorcerers, six hunters, and fifteen mimics. Just as Gavin hadn't questioned, these assassins also wouldn't question the commands of the Father.

Mid-morning, yet more help arrived from friends in the various realms. This included an enormous greenish-gold lion from Kivetel that

was easily as large as twelve elephants put together, a sandy-colored wolf from Erdém that was even larger than the lion, and the near-behemoth-sized silver leopard from Antica.

Hearing of their arrival, Weatherly found it amusing that the creatures perfectly equated to Jeremiah 5:6. “Therefore a lion from the forest shall slay them, a wolf from the desert shall destroy them. A leopard is watching against their cities, every one who goes out of them shall be torn in pieces; because their transgressions are many, their apostasies are great.”

The wolf came through the cliff doorway in Mexico that gnomes and genies often used, the doorway having been expanded by magicians to accommodate the size of the wolf. Upon entering our realm, he swiftly bounded to Supe-6 to join the battle. Unnoticed by casual observers, the wolf had companions, in the form of three genies tucked into the fur on the scruff of his neck. Under their direction, he became very good at dealing with low-flying demons and nyregs simply by rearing and batting them out of the sky with his huge paws. He also enjoyed grabbing megahobs with his teeth and basically shaking them to death.

Magicians had also been able to expand the doorway in the Oregon forest that rookhs liked to use so that the lion could enter our realm. For this excursion, his woolly mane had been partially braided to help keep some of the masses of fluff out of the way. The braids flowed behind his head gracefully as he made a dash for Supe-3, where he joined Crazy Horse in battle, which mainly involved engaging the larger nyregs, sometimes leaping to great heights to bring them down. The lion also pounced on and shredded many megahobs and demons.

The silver leopard came though through a sizeable doorway in the largest pond at Netherwind, after which, he headed to Supe-10. By tremendously long and fast leaps, he reached the city in less than an hour. The acute hearing of the leopard could pick up on even the slightest movements of stealth hobs and gremlins, and so he was particularly effective in dealing with them. With his spots shining like huge platinum platters in the sunshine, the cat soon discovered that he enjoyed climbing skyscrapers and factory smokestacks in order to gain good vantage points from which to plan his next moves.

In the late afternoon, the leopard headed outside Supe-10 to patrol in circles around the city, where he allowed people escaping to leave, while keeping certain other creatures from pursuing them.

Sundown found Ethan aboard Westerwing and heading home. Having used eleven of his chances just on this excursion, he felt he had done enough for one time. It was still early in the year, and he was getting a strong idea in his head that it would be important to reserve a good chunk of his fifty-one for later battles.

Something horrific had just happened outside of Supercity Five; and this was something that would end up shocking many people to the core, particularly Em and Zin.

With her rope lowered to her knees, Merri was standing stock still in shock at the news just brought to her that Zapor had fallen, less than an hour previous. He had been gleefully battling five nyregs at once in the air, but had not seen a group of hunters targeting him with their paisley boomerangs and throwing stars. Several of the personnel under Merri's command had to usher her off of the battlefield for a time because she was so numb and shaken.

A pair of rookhs, with a NUR operative accompanying them, was taking Zapor's body back to the plantations; though per Weatherly's instructions, he was to be placed secretly into a pocket so that the news could be kept from Em and Zin for the time being.

While Merri was definitely shook up, she managed less than an hour later to collect herself well enough to continue to fight, and lead. She didn't want to let her general (a.k.a. her Aunt Weatherly) down. Merri had been assigned to lead the operations in and around Supe-5, and she would see it through. Blessedly, in the same manner as the previous night, with the darkness, came a quieter time.

Along with the continued efforts of the colokos, the rookhs were especially busy carrying people out of the cities during the night. In stealth flying mode, they made no noise at all; and black like the darkness, they were virtually invisible. The birds could each carry three people, if the people were small, which greatly sped up the efforts to empty the cities and camps.

Those carried out were being dropped off at designated spots in self-sustaining communities and on Lion Mountain. The plantations had long expected this influx and were ready. For the past couple days,

schools had been out, as children were helping to prepare housing, cafeterias, clinics, and such for those finally attaining freedom. In not fully knowing what was going on with the Big Bang Operation, many children were simply calling this event Liberation Days, and they were thrilled to meet the people from the cities who were starting to arrive, by the thousands. And it was such a joy for the kids to help feed the hungry, provide clothes and blankets, as well as lead people to medical personnel to have various cuts and scrapes bandaged up. This even included some of the elite of the cities, who had long wanted to leave, and who were now being welcomed with open arms. So too were quite a few Muslims arriving, those who had never approved of the horrors and desperately wanted peace.

While Zin had wanted to join the battle, her mother wouldn't let her. However, Em did agree to let her help with getting the plantations ready to take people. In an apartment complex in one of the pockets, Zin was making up beds with freshly-laundered sheets, stocking bathrooms with towels and toiletries, and filling pantries with various canned, dried, and boxed goods.

In the middle of the night, looking into her foreshard, she could tell where Tanner was going to be an hour after sunup; and she also knew that he was going to be causing a good deal of trouble, not only with acid capsules, but with use of various spells as well.

If I can occupy him, Zin thought, it might keep him from hurting so many others.

Heading out on an airbike, she knew she'd likely get into trouble later; but she really wanted to help, if she could. She didn't let anyone know where she was going, not even Linn, whom she had been keeping in touch with by walnut over the past couple of days. He had been forbidden to be out and about by his mother as well, mainly because he was still building back up his strength.

During most of the Big Bang Operation so far, in addition to praying, Astrid had been coordinating the efforts on Lion Mountain to get ready to welcome the many thousands of newcomers that were already starting to pour in. Though many of her subordinates were capable of this, she had chosen to stay on the mountain because she hadn't wanted to interfere with any of Weatherly's operations. Astrid had only to look back on the excitement of her own life to know exactly

what Weatherly was presently going through, the maneuvers of which would go much more smoothly without any well-meaning others getting in the way. With dawn marking the beginning of the third day of the land battle, this was an especially crucial time of focus for Weatherly and many others who were somewhat starting to fatigue.

Zin arrived shortly after daybreak to a camp immediately south of Supe-9 where she folded her bike, stashing it in a safe place amongst piles of rubble, after which, she calmly sat on a short section of still-standing wall to wait in the largely-deserted camp. (Currently, only a few rodents were scurrying hither and thither.) Tanner had overnight returned to Supercity Nine to check on his family, and check in with Vidas who had left just before dawn to make a trek to Supe-7. From the foreshard, Zin knew that the camp would be an advantageous spot to duel with Tanner who would be passing low overhead in about an hour, at which time, she planned to draw his attention. While waiting, she decided to pray.

As Zin was praying, a watchman in the desert wilds east of Supercity Four (where it was still quite dark) was battling with a fallen angel. Though the light display was incredible—from flashing swords and armor, and Light Energy colliding in great thrusts with Dark Energy—no creatures noticed, which was a good thing because the intensity might have blinded any mortal onlookers. The battle had begun because the fallen angel had decided to interfere with the uprisings, and this was not going to be allowed by the Father. Satan himself was not allowed to interfere at this time either, but was resigned to simply watching his servants try to counter the overwhelming thing that was happening to them. So too were Boko and Etowa taking a pause in their game to merely watch from the sidelines. It didn't take the watchman long to defeat the fallen angel, who disappeared in a mere blink of a flash of light, just as the sun's rays were starting to show themselves to the desert landscape.

Vidas had decided to go to Supe-7 because he figured that this was where the leader of the Underground Army could be found. Upon arriving and scanning various skirmishes going on, he easily picked Weatherly out from the crowds based on her fighting style and watching her command others nearby. He was only mildly surprised to discover this leader to be a woman. *They have always had more endurance than*

men, he thought. *Plus, female magicians have proven to be more powerful and cleverer than their male counterparts.*

Lowering his nyreg to a position directly in front of her, he warded off two of her mirror strikes with his staff, but paused slightly before launching an assault. Weatherly, in turn, took a pause to size up her new opponent. She hadn't encountered any sorcerers thus far in this operation. Knowing most were in hiding, she was wary of this bold man, though she wasn't afraid of him.

Using two mirrors at once, she easily blocked blasts from his staff into which he had inserted a multiplier crystal in order to fire a dozen energy shards at once. As his shots continued in rapid succession, Weatherly was forced to retreat backwards several hundred yards across a boulder-strewn field because the ricochets from her deflections were endangering troops fighting on either side of her. With the sorcerer keeping some distance and still firing, mirrors were still the best option of dealing with him. However, just as she was considering drawing a rope in order to spear her opponent, she was joined by Linna, who used her rope to toss large rocks at the sorcerer and his nyreg. This caused the sorcerer to have to retreat; and at this point, Weatherly let him, again fearing danger to her surrounding troops if she advanced on her foe in full force.

No longer feeling it was safe to tangle with this woman, or her friend, Vidas took to the skies to head home, dodging an attack by two colokos as he did so.

Weatherly, in addition to being naturally gifted, was so accomplished with weapons because she had had a lot more practice over the years than most others, including Kip and Preston. Starting all those years ago during the summer they all spent together at the plantations, Weatherly never eased up on her training when the summer ended, continuing to go to Kivetel most afternoons and weekends year round, as well as full summers. Plus, having never married nor had children, she had a lot of time to devote to training. So it was easy to see why she had surpassed in skill even many Kivetel natives, including Linna and Varjo.

On a nyreg in the skies over Supe-8, a twelve-year-old girl from an elite family who was starting to develop powers similar to those of a wind horse was blasting several groups of escapees on the ground with

gale force winds, as well as trying to knock people off of the backs of colokos. Birch and Naya, who happened to be patrolling the area around Supercity Eight, were not only able to counter her by neutralizing the blasts of wind, they also knocked her off of her nyreg and into Lake Michigan.

As expected, Tanner did notice Zin flagging him down as he neared her position on his nyreg. Landing, he welcomed the chance to duel with her; and no sooner had they both bowed to one another, than he made his first move.

Removing a vial full of bright red liquid from the lapel of his robe, he placed two drops onto the ground and then swiftly stepped back a good distance to watch the drops rapidly grow into gigantic red ants with huge pincher mandibles. As the ants rushed towards her, Zin dashed backwards while quickly raising strewn piles of leaves to form enormous leaf creatures in the shapes of an emu and a honey badger that proceeded to tackle and grapple with the ants.

Tanner had only unleashed two ants out of fear he wouldn't be able to control them, which was wise because they very well could have turned on him. When the ants reached the ninety-second time limit of his Ant-Animation Potion, they shrunk swiftly into nothingness.

As the leaves of the emu and honey badger started to scatter, because they too only had a ninety-second time limit, in needing to quickly counter Tanner's next move—that of throwing a toothpick at her that turned into a dagger as it flew—she raised a pile of rubble dust that speedily fashioned itself into a concrete shield to deflect the dagger.

Having made the first move in the duel gave Tanner a slight advantage in that he could continue for quite some time being on the offensive, while Zin would remain on the defensive. But Zin actually preferred this because she would ultimately be the one to make the final move; that is, if she survived each of his strikes, which was likely because she was very good at defensive dueling. Plus, there was always an opportunity to flip the offensive-defensive posture if an opponent slipped up.

Tanner's next move involved a deck of cards. This was his first mistake because cards were always a magician's domain.

As he threw a six of spades, like one might throw a Frisbee from about waist level, the card turned into a set of six spinning steel balls that hurled themselves at his opponent all at once.

Reacting with lightning speed, Zin drew an eight of clubs from a shoulder pocket to toss out in front of her, where the card became an octopus whose tentacles easily caught all six steel balls at once.

Tanner next threw a three of diamonds at her that turned into a large copper-colored trident that advanced on its own to attack her.

Zin countered with a queen of hearts that instantly came to life to clobber the trident with her golden staff.

Abandoning cards in frustration, Tanner pulled four chess pieces from his robe, hurling them out all at once, where they became four soldier pawns, advancing with spears on Zin, who just happened to have a rook in her jacket sleeve that, when tossed, turned into a wall to block the pawns.

While Tanner was getting flustered, because nothing he had thrown at his opponent seemed to be working, Zin remained calm, actually quite enjoying the duel as an activity that might have been likened to a rather gentle game of badminton, one just for fun and not for competition.

Inserting a green crystal into his staff, Tanner next created an illusion of a dozen demons and megahobs (six of each) appearing from behind various piles of rubble and advancing on Zin, who experienced only a very brief moment of concern, along with a short burst of adrenaline from the surprise. Illusions, after all, are also a magician's domain; and Tanner had rushed the crystal projection, the result of which turned out somewhat blurry (instead of crisp and clear) demons and megahobs, which meant Zin was easily able to tell that all of these new threats were trickery.

Ignoring them, she made her next move lickety-split, much faster than Tanner was anticipating. Somewhat inspired by the six-each of demons and megahobs, but more specifically by the idea of multiples, she used a split-image mirror trick to produce two exact images of herself, which simply stepped from her body very quickly in order to stand on either side of her. Then, the triplet Zins proceeded to mix themselves up, in a mind-bogglingly speedy fashion, like a magician performing an extra-fast version of the pea-under-the-walnut trick.

Retrieving another toothpick from a pocket, which turned into a fat sword, Tanner rushed forward to swipe at one of the Zins, which turned out to be one of the images.

The real Zin had pulled a blue bunting feather from her waistband, which immediately turned into a thick, curved sword, with which she engaged Tanner as the two Zin images vanished.

Sometimes magicians and sorcerers resorted to brute force when dueling. Both the toothpick and feather had ten-minute spells on them, so the swordplay was destined to be somewhat lengthy in nature. This didn't trouble Zin because, while she might have lacked some of Tanner's physical strength, she was in good shape and had had some training with traditional weapons.

But at this point in our story, we need to turn our attention to something from a couple of hours earlier. Around daybreak, Em had been helping Samantha care for the hippotherapy horses. With both Vini and Quin gone, the stables very much needed extra workers. After finishing with the horses, Em set to stocking the church and chapel on the plantations with bibles and crosses for folks to take; and she was also praying with people, particularly some of the newcomers who hadn't yet heard if friends and family members had also safely made it out of various camps and cities.

Looking for Zin around breakfast time, Em discovered she was gone. Suspecting something was not quite right, because Zin would have told her if she was heading back to Doyle Mansion, Em decided to be proactive, instead of just waiting.

Since childhood, Em had had a good relationship with Yami, one of Netherwind's gargoyles. By thought, she simply asked her friend to help locate Zin.

After only a minute or so of scanning with the eye of his mind, Yami was able to see where the young magician was, and what she was doing. (This was when the duel was just beginning.) While Zin wasn't in danger at the moment, he recognized that she soon might be, so far from home, and with unexpected things bound to happen in the still much-heated atmosphere of the uprisings.

Thanking Yami by thought, Em asked a rookh that had just dropped off a couple of escapees from a Missouri fish farm to take her to her daughter's location, and they quickly set off.

Meanwhile, back at the duel, just as the swordfight was entering its seventh minute, Eizel showed up, landing her nyreg next to Tanner's that had been told to stay and was patiently waiting. Sadly, Coco was not around at this time, which left Eizel very much unhindered.

Wanting to help her friend, Eizel planted a thought into Zin's mind that an intense wall of fire had just flared up between the swordfighting pair. Though it was but a thought in her brain, Zin currently couldn't see through this fiery wall, and couldn't see her opponent, who was still very much armed with his deadly sword. Tanner, of course, could definitely see Zin because he had no concept of the wall that was temporarily blinding his adversary; though he did notice Eizel nearby and recognized that whatever she was doing was what had caused Zin to lower her sword and start to back slowly away.

However, sighing, he too lowered his sword. Though he hadn't made another move in the duel, for all intents and purposes, Eizel's actions counted as one of his moves. And so, he felt he must adhere to dueling etiquette, and either retreat or allow his opponent to take a turn. He couldn't simply attack and kill because that wasn't fair play. (Tanner also knew that two against one wasn't fair play.) If dueling was a free-for-all, and there were no rules, then sorcerers would probably lose every time; and Tanner well knew this. Though often more powerful, sorcerers were rarely as clever as magicians; and thus, would be less capable of holding their own in a situation without a definite set of parameters.

But while Tanner had acquiesced to end the duel and leave peaceably, and was urging his friend to stop her mind assault and do the same, Eizel was in no mood to just let Zin go. In fact, she had just turned up the heat, to the extent that the fiery wall had grown larger and hotter, and was moving closer to its target. Backing up over piles of rubble, while pocketing her feather that had just shrunk down to its normal shape and size, Zin was sweating. She was also unknowingly backing herself into a corner, specifically, a tall v-shaped section of building wall that was still standing and against which she would soon be pinned as the fire pressed ever closer.

Having remounted her nyreg, Eizel was now holding position very low, about thirty feet in front of Zin, while continuing the mind assault.

Blessedly, Em had just shown up and was able to quickly surmise the danger in the situation. Leaving the boy alone, because Tanner was already taking to the skies and heading away from the scene, Em commanded the rookh to take her on a very low and swooping path in front of the remaining nyreg, upon which sat the smug-looking girl with blazing eyes that was obviously assaulting her daughter in some supernatural way.

Having both her dagger and fighting stick with her, Em might have been tempted to simply knock Eizel off her nyreg and take care of business. However, deciding to counter supernatural with supernatural, she instead chose to use a classic wordsmith trick.

Em still favored flash cards after all of these years, and as she passed within inches of Eizel's now-startled eyes, she flashed a card that simply read, "Diaper Rash." Written in red, the splotchy and bold letters had an immediate effect. Not only did Eizel (who had already ceased her mind assault on Zin) lose control of her bladder and pee her pants, her entire crotch and behind area began itching and burning like crazy. As she fled to try to catch up to Tanner, she began crying like a baby; and she didn't stop crying until the itching and burning stopped nearly three hours later.

Now free from the fiery assault, Zin quickly retrieved her airbike from the safe spot where she had stashed it, after which, she rose into the sky alongside the rookh. Though she knew from her mother's expression that she was going to be grounded, Zin had never been so happy to see her mom, and to be riding beside her back to the plantations.

Chapter Nineteen

The White Lion

“Behold, a people! As a lioness it rises up and as a lion it lifts itself; it does not lie down till it devours the prey, and drinks the blood of the slain.”
Numbers 23:24

Zin didn't end up grounded. The infraction, though severe, would end up being an exception to the household rules because Em and Zin had just found out about Zapor. Mother and daughter had straightaway returned to the plantations, instead of going home, in order to continue working. Vini, Ben, and Jelzey returned in the morning as well, with Preston and Eleta arriving just after lunch. Having made it back about an hour earlier than Preston and Eleta, Varjo and Linna had already returned to Kivetel through the mezzanine doorway. Dell, Halli, and Magsen came home mid-afternoon; and the sister gryphons told Em and Zin about Zapor. In the same way that Halli and Magsen had found out, Folto already knew. By thought, she had known exactly when her cousin died, but had chosen to stay in her designated area and continue to fight, which was what she knew Zapor would have wanted. Plus, no matter how skilled Kip was in battle, Folto wasn't about to leave her charge unprotected.

Folto had carefully timed telling Kip, waiting until most of the fighting had died down around Supe-6 so that his subordinates could pretty much take over. This was about the time that Halli and Magsen were informing Em and Zin. After finishing up a few things, and ensuring that any remaining efforts were going smoothly, Kip and Folto returned to the plantations, arriving late afternoon.

Merri returned shortly after that, and Weatherly made it back in the evening. Both arrived to an incredibly subdued atmosphere, not only because of Zapor, but also because it wouldn't have been appropriate for anyone to celebrate in any sort of exuberant fashion. Though the

uprisings were a success, thousands of deaths had occurred worldwide; and many, like Zapor, were not going to be roused by dragon tears. With regard to humans, while the tears were in good supply (because Quin had worked hard to obtain extra before the offensive began), some bodies wouldn't be found quickly enough for the tears to work. Others were severely damaged, beyond immediate recognition as being corpses, and so also wouldn't end up revived by dragon tears.

Weatherly's return home concluded three full days of land battle. Counting the sea efforts of phase one, the whole of the Big Bang Operation took basically four days, with the exception of what was still going on. This included some fighting (though nothing on a large scale), as well as continuing evacuations from cities and camps. Medics, of course, were busy, and would be for some time.

Merri was beside herself that Zapor had perished basically while under her care. The question on her mind constantly since it happened was how she was going to be able to face Em.

The answer ended up being with hugs and tears, on both sides. Of course no one blamed Merri; but she would end up blaming herself for a while, at least until a little more of the shock wore off and she was able to think more clearly.

Candar had just come home to support Folto, who was definitely grieving. He had been guarding the Christ the Redeemer statue of late, while making use of a hidden library in a Brazilian sea cliff, and helping with the uprising in Rio.

Em was greatly affected, naturally. After several hours of inconsolable weeping, she felt numb more than anything else. Because Zin didn't quite know what to do to help her mother, Kip and Otto took turns staying with her at Doyle Mansion for the next couple of days, while Pizzo and Heike tried to coax her to eat. The puck trolls too were very sad about losing Zapor.

A memorial service and funeral was held two days after Em and Zin found out, after which, though not officially grounded, Zin grounded herself for a few days, in grief, and in wanting to stay close to her mother.

Zapor was not the only magical creature on the side of good to have perished. The wolf from Erdém had also fallen, taken out by a grügg before mirror cannon specialists managed to take out the grügg. Genie

magic, though extremely powerful, generally could not raise the dead; and thus, they were unable to revive the wolf. However, the genies did raise the wolf to a floating state to take him back to Erdém. Although mourning, the genies were happy that so many people had been freed, and that the wolf had been able to help with this.

With regard to others that had come to help, the huge lion was already safely home in Kivetel, though many of the borrowed rookhs were staying for a while to continue helping their cousins here to transport people. Some of the visiting colokos had decided they wanted to stay long term because they found out that bananas were almost as good as gumcha fruit, though those staying would probably only want to live near places where bananas were readily available in great quantities year round. The silver leopard was taking a nice long swim in Lake Huron before going back to Antica.

Crazy Horse had already been settled in his South Dakota hill, he and his steed having both enjoyed their outing.

In some of the worst areas containing sludge and slime left by dissipated demons, megahobs, and such, Lyydu and Naya were creating rain showers to speed the natural cleaning-up process.

The Big Bang Operation worldwide had liberated about ninety percent of the people being held hostage; and the rest had a good chance of escaping because everything was still in a fair amount of turmoil in most cities and camps. Also, NUR operatives would continue to help, along with creatures like wind horses and rookhs.

Though largely secret, the logistics involved in receiving those liberated from the uprisings had been long in the making. In addition to the preparations constantly taking place on Lion Mountain, the Ants Division of the Underground Army had actually been busy for well over a year helping to outfit many pockets in various mothership, earthship, ranch, and farm communities for the very influx that was presently happening. As a result of being prepared, some of the larger pockets could each easily accommodate an extra four to five thousand people right away, with everything they needed—food, housing, medical care, and even jobs. Otto and Isaac had been busy working with magicians to open up more pockets and construct more pod structures, which were originally based on seed pods by design, the concept being that each could hold much more than its outward appearance might suggest. So it

was particularly satisfying for Otto to see the pockets and pods fulfilling their purpose—that of providing safety, resources, peace, and even happiness to those taking refuge inside. Some traditional building was going on too in many of the self-sustaining communities. As far as materials, there was a lot to work with in many Rubble Cities, which criminal gangs wouldn't be able to dominate anymore, with so many people now destined to travel in groups for protection.

As far as the remnants of escapees still leaving the cities and camps, the colokos were still carrying and protecting them. And the demons and nyregs were learning not to mess with the monkeys, who now had but to give a glare in their direction to make them retreat. Bigfoots were also helping. Up to this point, they had mostly been getting food stores ready for the newcomers. Now, they didn't mind getting out for a bit to travel with a few groups of people to help them reach safety.

While Weatherly was pleased that the operation had gone so well, she was not proud. She had only been able to accomplish this from God working through her, and many others. As she reminded herself of this, the words of Proverbs 21:31 sprang to mind. “The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but the victory belongs to the LORD.”

There weren't enough people left in the Supercities to keep them going at even a fraction of what they had been. Nor were there enough slaves left to rebuild factories, camps, and such. And with resources so readily available outside of the cities, the sorcerers would be less likely to again trick and trap people as they had in the past. This equaled a huge setback for Satan and his followers.

Though some elites had left the cities, many hadn't. This included the families of Tanner, Eizel, and Sasha. Most residential buildings were not destroyed, and many were not even damaged. Power was being restored to quite a few places, and there was plenty of food and clean water available. These people wouldn't be able to live the same kinds of lives as they did before, but they would have some time to figure things out, and decide what they might want to do long term. Many would choose to stay in the cities, not because this was particularly wise, but out of fear of making such a big change.

Several escapees that had been hidden in a pod in Tennessee were making a run for the Gatlinburg Pass on foot, and were being pursued by a large herd of megahobs. Although the people were getting close to

the entrance, they were soon going to be overtaken because the megahobs were very fast. Only one mountain resident was currently at the welcoming station because all others were busy ushering groups of new arrivals to various communities. Armed only with a rope and not being military trained, the welcome agent bravely stepped out to help, though he knew he would likely be overpowered fairly quickly. However, he soon discovered that he wasn't going to need to fight because the nature spirits could, of course, come off of the mountain if they chose. And two, a wind spirit and a fire spirit, did choose to do exactly that.

The wind spirit simply blew hard underneath the advancing herd, which served to lift and carry off nearly half of the beasts, who ended up landing with great splats when dropped from a tremendous height onto an enormous granite dome several states away about an hour later. All but one of the remaining megahobs at the Gatlinburg Pass were killed when the fire spirit, at first no bigger than a tiny acorn, lit up like a gigantic fireball to send down a shower of shard-like sparks to pierce the creatures all the way to their cores and incinerate them from their insides out. The one straggler hob that had managed to dodge the sparks and flee was strangled a short time later by a tree root under direction of a wood nymph who had tracked the creature by nimbly hopping treetops.

A week after Zapor's memorial service, which happened to be the last Friday in March and the start of Easter weekend, Zin saw a vision in her foreshard that directly corresponded to a daydream Quin had just had. Both girls were being told that they needed to find the white lion.

Zin on an airbike and Quin riding Cuoré met up just after lunch on Good Friday to travel together to Lion Mountain.

Following the method of some of the area school children who liked to look for the lion, the girls tried looking for rainbows, but found only one, crowning a hilltop upon which rain sprinkled on them beneath sunny skies, but no lion was there to greet them.

While hunting around in other places, they found several stashes of sand dollars that rookhs had been bringing to the mountain when found in other places on their journeys. With the dollars starting to pop up all over the place, the mountain residents had been getting the idea that they were going to be important for some reason, possibly in the near

future, and had been carrying them in their pockets. Zin and Quin ended up gathering several bags of them which they placed on the steps of various churches.

Before going home, the girls paid a brief visit to Linn in his lab. Ethan was there as well. He had definitely decided to stay home for a bit to conserve his chances; and this was giving him an opportunity to catch up on some schoolwork, which pleased his mother who fretted constantly when he got behind.

Zin and Quin shared that they had been out looking for the lion, which Ethan thought amusing, since no one had ever managed close contact with the creature, and he thought it doubtful that anyone ever would. “It’s like that Loch Ness Monster of legend,” he said. “No one has ever managed to find it.”

In truth, Quin had gotten rather discouraged on their afternoon travels. “Even if we spot him, I don’t know how we’d catch up to him. Most people say he’s there one second, gone the next.” She and Cuoré had actually once glimpsed the creature, but they hadn’t gotten to the spot quickly enough before the lion disappeared.

Zin was more optimistic. “We’ve only been at it a few hours. We can’t give up this soon. Anything worth having is worth putting some time into.”

“Plus,” Linn contributed, “you both got messages about this. So if God wants you to find the lion, you will.”

Quin was smiling inwardly at the responses of both of her longtime friends. They always seemed to have a positive attitude, no matter what the obstacles; and they always seemed to know what she needed to hear to feel more encouraged. She admired them both so much. “You’re right,” she said, this time smiling outwardly. “It’s just hard to be patient sometimes.”

On Saturday, Preston and Kip attended a memorial service and burial the genies were holding for the wolf in Erdém.

The gnomes, having long known the wolf, were greatly affected by his death. Most of the ones in Erdém attended the service, and many living in our realm came as well. The people who had long lived in this desert world (but mainly kept to themselves) related to the visitors how the wolf often liked to save others from sudden sand storms.

“He would lie down and curl up around us,” one man said, “and cover us with his tail.”

“Then when the storm ended, he’d carry us home,” a woman added.

A puck troll had been working around the clock for a week on an elaborate ten-foot woodcarving of the wolf, which was presented to the residents of Erdém after the service. Also, Em’s protégé had written a storybook about the courageous actions of the wolf. Illustrated by a gifted artist, many copies had been printed for the genies, gnomes, and people of Erdém.

Easter was celebrated much as it always had been in the self-sustaining communities, with sunrise services and people having large family gatherings at noon to share in a meal together, though this year the gatherings were even larger than usual with so many newcomers being welcomed into the fold. In addition to being thankful and worshipping the fact that the Lord has risen, many were thanking God for the outcome of the recent uprisings. The freedom of those long held prisoner and the beating down of evil forces were certainly things to take tremendous joy in.

Zin and Quin returned to the mountain Sunday afternoon for a get-together with Alex, Linn, and Ethan at Ethan’s house. Cuoré in dove form ended up napping on the front porch rail while the group of teens was inside having desserts.

While enjoying cake and cookies, the girls discussed looking for the lion again.

Alex, in listening to them, was even more amused than Ethan had been during their previous discussion.

“I’m afraid I haven’t thought of any good magician’s tricks that might work to track the creature,” Zin said.

Shaking his head slightly while smiling, Alex responded, “You won’t need any tricks. I know an easy way for you to find the white lion.”

“How?” Quin asked, completely intrigued.

“I can show you,” Alex replied, “but we would all need to go.”

Everyone was game, including Linn, who had been feeling much better lately and was definitely up for an outing. Not only that, but Jitterbug had just presented him with the gift of a new airchair that was

foldable like the bikes, so he could ride an airbike to any destination, then be able to use his chair for added comfort and mobility.

“Where was the last sighting that anyone heard about?” Alex asked, as they were gathering a few things for the outing.

Linn had the answer to this. “A couple of girls in Sunday school last week mentioned seeing the lion in Baldwin’s Valley the day before.”

“That’s about forty miles,” Ethan said.

“More like forty-five now,” Alex corrected, in knowing that a couple of large hills and a river had sprung up between their present location and that specific valley in the past few weeks.

With Cuoré carrying Quin, and everyone else mounting airbikes, the group soon set off.

No rainbows were present when they landed in the valley, though Zin found a sand dollar. “This is a good sign,” she declared.

“We won’t need magician’s tricks or signs,” Alex said, smiling knowingly.

“So what do we do?” Quin asked, ready to get a move on.

“Nothing for now,” Alex replied. “We just need to sit for a bit.”

They had brought grapes and cookies with them for snacks and water to drink, and Ethan spread out blankets for them to sit on. Linn, hovering in his airchair, was bundled up with a blanket around his shoulders and one across his legs to stay warm. Though it had just turned spring by the calendar, the mountain air still held something of a cold, wintry bite.

When they had sat for about thirty minutes, Quin began to get a little impatient, especially because she kept looking for rainbows and not finding them, not even from the presence of Cuoré. Napping nearby, he was giving off puffs of steam with a few of his dream giggles that rose into the largely sunny skies; but, alas, the puffs were not turning into rainbows as they sometimes did.

“So we won’t be following rainbows?” Quin asked, trying not to sound impatient.

“No,” Alex replied. “We won’t be following anything. Just be patient and wait.”

Six sparrows were lined up on the back of Linn’s chair. Alex was again smiling broadly, as though he knew something that the others

didn't. This was indeed correct, as was the fact that they all just needed to be patient.

While waiting, Ethan was reviewing his chances in his notebook. Ever since Ruth had brought his mistake to his attention, he had been extra careful with counting.

"A total of twenty-three for the year," he announced after counting twice. "It's a little high for it only being the last of March."

Privately, he was pondering that he didn't think dragon tears would work if he went over. For one thing, he tended to travel alone, so he might not be found in time if he died with all of his chances used up. Plus, there was the issue of powerful magic canceling out other magic. However, he mostly felt (and it was ringing true) that if he had fifty-one chances each year, fifty-one might be all that he was truly allotted, no matter what the circumstances or what other types of magic might be involved. If this were the case, even his shield sapphire might not work as a back-up.

An hour later of being as patient as possible, Quin was privately pondering that she was just about ready to go home, when they noticed a small mouse nosing around Linn's toes, that were almost touching the spread-out blanket over which he was hovering. A second later, the mouse hopped onto his left foot before scurrying up Linn's lap blanket to sit on his left knee. (The sparrows had already flown away some time before, having had their fill of cookie crumbs provided by their chair-bound friend.)

Cuoré had woken up. While glancing over at the group of teens, he was again giggling, as though someone had just told him a private joke.

"Hello, little guy," Linn said to the mouse before pulling a half cookie from his pocket to give to the tiny creature.

"Unusual colors," Zin remarked of the mouse, whose fur was mostly white, but with some mousy grays and browns mixed in, along with a few streaks of gold and red.

Munching on the cookie he had just been given, the mouse had a soft glow to him; but the underneath of the glow seemed to hold a hint that might suggest the creature could actually light up like a star.

Alex was smiling. He knew his plan would work if they just gave it time—the plan being to use Linn like a magnet. Just as many other creatures were drawn to the goodness, this one would be too.

Alex's friends didn't quite know why he was grinning so goofily, unless Cuoré might have just shared a private joke with him. Or maybe it was the other way around, if Alex had told a joke to Cuoré.

Ethan, Linn, Zin, and Quin wouldn't have time to ponder because, as the mouse hopped down from Linn's lap (having finished the half cookie), the creature grew and changed shape to become none other than the white lion (ordinary in size as lions go), who stood placidly before them, simply gazing into the eyes of each one in turn. As the mouse had been, the lion was glowing softly, and held much the same colors as before the change.

After a few moments of startled silence by the Three Musketeers and Ethan, Zin was the first to find her voice. "Of course the lion would be shapeshifting," she said. "Why wouldn't he be?"

Cuoré, like Alex, had known the mouse was the lion, which was why he had been giggling. But it wasn't his secret to give away.

The eyes of the lion displayed many things, though no one looking into them viewed exactly the same thing. Zin saw mystery while Alex saw answers. Linn saw pain; Quin, comfort. Ethan, oddly enough, saw fifty-one white butterflies slowly fluttering. Cuoré observed a mix of clouds and rainbows in the creature's eyes.

When the lion suddenly began shrinking, to briefly become the shape and size of a pure white lamb, before again turning into a mouse, the onlookers all slowly emerged from their mesmerized state to watch the mouse scurry away through the weeds and leaves dotting the valley floor and into a tree line some hundred feet from their position.

Having found the lion, the group didn't exactly know what it meant to have done so. The reason they had needed to was still very much a mystery in their minds. However, they didn't stay in the valley to ponder this, instead, each heading off to their respective homes because it was getting rather late.

On the flight home, Zin speculated as she told Quin, "We can probably find him again if we need to, and maybe that's all we needed to know for right now. I'm guessing we might need the lion's help sometime in the future."

Since Quin's brain hadn't worked anything out yet as far as a reason to find the creature, she just ended up agreeing with her friend.

Zin's reasoning was partially correct. The help of the lion was definitely going to be needed, and sooner than they might imagine, so it was a good thing that the girls had followed up on their visions right away.

The next day, unknown to Linn, the white lion in mouse form was hanging out very near the lab, under a bush to be exact, about six feet from the front door.

Watching Linn leave for home in the afternoon, the mouse tailed his new friend on the wide path, crossing hilly fields and patches of trees.

The cabin Linn shared with his mother was situated about half a mile from the lab. Winding through a secluded field, Linn suddenly found himself facing two albino pumas, each nearly the size of a small house, the pair having sprung up from seemingly out of nowhere. (In truth, they had been crouching low to the ground behind a hill before springing out to land in front of him.) He barely had time to catch his breath, and fumble for the flute he was carrying in his jacket pocket, when both cats were pounced upon by none other than the white lion, who was currently larger than both pumas combined.

Zooming backwards in his chair, Linn simply tried to stay out of the way as the lion proceeded to rip the pumas to shreds with teeth and claws. Linn hadn't seen the lion before the pounce, the creature having grown incredibly fast to such an enormous size, and so was rather shocked by the whole thing, particularly in watching the bloodbath.

Once the lion felt the albino pumas were sufficiently dealt with, which ended up being about three minutes after their actual deaths, the lion shrunk back down to about the size of a normal lion, whereupon, he padded alongside Linn who had once again proceeded to make his way home, but only after taking a few moments to catch his breath and calm his limbs that were still shaking from the encounter.

A small flock of rookhs very shortly arrived to carry large pieces of the cats away to dispose of them in a place known to be frequented by packs of wolves that would enjoy feeding on the carcasses for some time. Since the pumas were not spectral or demonic creatures, they hadn't simply dissipated like megahobs or nyregs would have. This was also the reason they had managed to make it onto the mountain without the nature spirits taking notice of them. Although dangerous,

big cats weren't necessarily evil and so wouldn't be forbidden to enter the mountain like mimics, Dragon Hunters, and such were.

However, the two pumas, while not inherently evil, were on something of an evil mission, having been bred by sorcerers in a secret location and sent specifically to the mountain to kill Linn. The cats liked to hunt and had been provided with an article of Linn's clothing so that they might track him by scent. Linn hadn't even realized that the day he and Zin were out testing the stealth bike, he had dropped a neckerchief, which Tanner had found and given to Vidas.

Linn's mother wasn't home. Still feeling shaky, by walnut, he called Alex and Ethan to ask them to come over for a bit. When they arrived, the trio sat on the front porch. The white lion was still hanging around, in lion form, and was currently lying in the tree fringe in front of the cabin.

Muriel happened to be passing, and stopped for a bit to admire the lion, and visit with the boys who were speculating that the white lion might be Linn's protector.

"He might have been just recently assigned," Alex suggested.

"And maybe he's kind of shy," Ethan input, "and that's why we needed to find him, instead of the other way around."

"You've never had a wind horse, firebird, or anything like that?" Muriel questioned.

Linn was shaking his head as Muriel stepped off the front porch and approached the lion who, after a yawn and a stretch, gazed passively at her. In his eyes, Muriel saw white doves fluttering.

Crouching to keep watching the doves, she tried to communicate with the lion. Keeping in mind that this was a magical creature, she at first didn't try using her gift on him. However, when it quickly became obvious that he didn't communicate like thunderbirds or wind horses, and she didn't think he was capable of human speech like gryphons, she did end up trying her gift, which worked because this magical lion was evidently enough like a real lion as to be able to talk to her like one.

Reaching out to pet his mane, Muriel told Linn, "He's not assigned to you. He says he just wanted to protect you. And he could sense the danger, all day, which is why he stayed so close to the lab and followed you home."

Shortly after Muriel went on her way to home, the lion suddenly disappeared—there one second, gone the next. But Linn got the strong idea he would definitely be seeing the creature again.

Meanwhile, in the field where the pumas had attacked, Bear was picking up the remaining bits of the cats that had been left by the rookhs in order to cut up the meat to feed to some of the area dogs.

At night, just before getting ready for bed, Linn was praying and thanking God. *It's funny how this whole thing coincided with Easter*, he mused. *What a blessing.*

When lying in bed later and trying to get to sleep, he pondered the lion taking on the form of a lamb in the valley. After considering for a while, he decided that he understood what it meant. *And I didn't even need Alex to solve this mystery for me*, he thought. *The Lion can become a Lamb, and the Lamb can become a Lion.* Linn had firmly decided that the ferocity of the lion was a metaphor, representing the fact that Jesus is far from docile. He is innocent as a lamb with regard to sin, but He is fully God. Even when He was in the form of a man, basically trapped in a human body for a time, He was still all powerful, and completely managed to defeat Satan. *Imagine what He can do now that He is in His ascended form, and what He'll do when He comes back.*

Well, we can't imagine it, because it's beyond our comprehension, Linn's brain told him. *But it's bound to be something amazingly spectacular.* Linn fell asleep with a huge smile on his face in thinking about this.

Chapter Twenty

Fire with Fire

“And if any one would harm them, fire pours from their mouth and consumes their foes; if any one would harm them, thus he is doomed to be killed.”
Revelation 11:5

Em had been keeping to herself a lot lately, and staying inside, not even enjoying the gardens at Doyle Mansion as she usually did in the spring, with the budding trees and bulb shoots popping out of the earth. Since she seemed to be eating and sleeping fairly well, her tiny puck family members mainly just tried to give her space, as they were also doing for Zin, who had been holed up in her lab a lot lately. Magsen and Halli were around the mansion a good deal, having been directed by Folto to provide protection for Em and Zin. Since God hadn't yet assigned the sisters to anyone as protectors, their mother felt this would be a good use of their time, and good practice for when they received their first official assignments.

On the first Friday in April at the plantations, at sunset, Quin was sitting on her bed daydreaming, and having the same vision as when she had been told to find the white lion, which featured the talking peacock who was leading her about the mountain to various spots from which they were seeing the lion scampering around in the distance. The setting was not so entirely different than that of the normal mist-filled Smoky Mountains because her daydream was sort of misty, and cloudy. In fact, she and the peacock were stepping through heavy clouds while making their way from one place to another. Finally getting close enough to have a good long look at the lion, Quin noticed he was softly glowing, like the way her Grandma Vini often looked lately. His shaggy head also held a spiky crown that appeared to be made of a vibrant, shimmering, light-filled rainbow. All in all, this was a pleasant daydream, especially since the real-life task of finding the lion had

already been completed. However, the vision was about to turn to something not so pleasant.

As the images of the peacock and lion began to fall away amongst the clouds, the rainbow crown was left behind and began to transform, rising into the sky to form a sphere, which led Quin to the top of a hill. While being led, she had an inkling of something foreboding, something she would soon see, though she didn't want to.

When she reached the hilltop, the sphere suddenly broke into seven parts, each holding a single color of the rainbow, which swiftly formed themselves into the shapes of dragons.

"The seven original dragons," Quin breathed.

She recognized Sei Sei as being orange and the largest. Kanna, whose name Quin heard inside her head, was the red dragon. Kanna was the only other female of the original seven and was slightly smaller than Sei Sei. The five males were all noticeably smaller than the girls, though they were still very large dragons in their own right, each easily three times the size of Cuoré.

Sei Sei introduced the boys, who were named and colored as follows. Talmas was yellow and Alom was green; Nyomo and Esso were, respectively, blue and indigo; and Anku was violet.

After the introductions, the seven departed the cloud-filled area, flying swiftly to the location of the large clusters of dragons inside the three volcanoes. And this is where the vision turned not so pleasant, as Eizel appeared standing over Quin who was fast asleep in her bedroom and dreaming about the hidden dragons.

The sleep dream corresponded to a dream Quin had had a week previous in which she and Cuoré were checking on the hidden dragons. At this moment, the daydreaming Quin's mind was struggling with fear and panic, in recognizing that Eizel was about to be able to tell the location of the dragons, because the geography was very distinctive. In fact, there was no mistaking the three volcanoes at Lake Atitlán in Guatemala. But she couldn't shut Eizel out because she had already had the dream. And so, the location of the dragons was revealed.

This was indeed true. While Eizel wasn't terribly good at geography, it had been fairly easy for her to do a little research and recognize what she had seen in Quin's dream, though she hadn't been standing over her, instead reading her dream thoughts from some

distance away aboard a nyreg. The standing-over-her bit was simply an informative feature in Quin's vision, to help her understand what had happened. Immediately following the recognition of Lake Atitlán, Eizel had informed Tanner who then told Vidas.

Quin's vision didn't end with the disturbing discovery that the location of the dragons was now known to the enemy. As the image of Eizel standing over her sleeping form fell away, Quin's daydream shifted to a huge cavern in Mexico containing not only the four converted dragons, but throngs of Dragon Hunters and helper demons as well, all of them making plans and gathering equipment to go after the dragons in the Lake Atitlán volcanoes, while licking their chops at being able to find so many gathered in one convenient spot. Quin was able to tell that everything she was seeing had already happened, up to the point of the Dragon Hunters stuffing into large packs their silvery nets, used to capture burnished doves and prevent them from shapeshifting into dragon form.

Even after the Big Bang Operation, there were still plenty of Dragon Hunters. Many had been killed, but their numbers were so strong to start with, the uprisings had barely made a dent, particularly when considering that quite a few had been tucked away in remote training centers.

There was also no shortage of sorcerers, especially the ones in charge, since mainly only subordinates and protégés had engaged in battle during the outpourings of the cities and camps. While a good many of these had been killed, the sorcerers' numbers were far from diminished. But despite sorcerers still being plentiful, Vidas had chosen only to involve Tanner in this particular project.

As Quin continued to watch, in something of a horror-filled state, the four converted dragons, now healed up and again ready to fight, were being roused and were getting ready to head out. Blessedly, Quin wasn't so filled with horror as to not be able to see and hear things clearly; and from certain conversations in the cavern, she found out the names of the two sorcerers. She remembered Zin talking about this Tanner fellow and what a nasty piece of work he was. The goal of the two sorcerers and their massive crew was to capture a hundred or so dragons and kill the rest, and they would be heading out on nyregs shortly after midnight to arrive at Lake Atitlán with the dawn.

This didn't give Quin much time, in fact, no time at all to actually make plans like those that had been made for the unicorn rescue and the Big Bang Operation. Nor would she have much help; but this was because the responsibility fell directly to her, as Protector of Dragons. And she was more than capable of the task, having been well trained by Professor Fulhausen, particularly in the area of keeping calm.

Don't panic, just think, she told herself. And as she did, a plan swiftly formed in her mind.

Calling to Cuoré as she donned her travel gear and headed outside, in order to save time, Quin climbed onto a boulder from which she leapt atop her protector as he swooped in, not even touching down.

Waiting in the cavern, Vidas was doing a bit of pondering. He had planned this offensive using mainly Dragon Hunters not only because of their skills, but because he was wary of sorcerers, specifically, how many might have crossed to the other side. Of course, he was well aware that some Dragon Hunters might too be converted; but he was more powerful than they, whereas, there were many sorcerers that could match him as far as power.

They had suffered such a shocking setback in their beautiful cities and camps. Like many sorcerers, Vidas had had no idea as to the scope of the enemy either outside or inside of the Supercities and work camps. The issue of the traitors had been particularly surprising, and he still almost couldn't believe so many of the Snakes had basically put one over on them. Thinking back only nine months or so, he never would have suspected anything like this. But he should have. There were signs, like the ineptness of many of the ESS. *Don't ignore inklings*, he reminded himself.

Vidas was also ashamed at how most sorcerers had acted during the uprisings, hiding in safe rooms and dens instead of getting out and fighting. This made him even more wary of how many of his colleagues might be converted. And he couldn't use the Ring of Truth on sorcerers because many of them knew how to beat it. He could, however, use the devices on the remaining ESS, to root out other traitors. (At this point, Vidas didn't know how many Snakes actually had protective sapphires implanted into their bodies to shield against various types of mind probe.) With regard to the sorcerers, many hiding during the uprisings had been afraid; and many others were simply

smart enough to get out of the way upon recognizing the overwhelming force of the Underground Army and their allies.

Although not converted, some sorcerers that had been cowering in their hidey holes were familiar with the bible, this having come about because many were scholars who felt it appropriate to carefully study the enemy. Listening to the battles raging outside, some even recalled exact bible quotes relevant to their predicament. One aged sorcerer was thinking of Jeremiah 4:13. “Behold, he comes up like clouds, his chariots like the whirlwind; his horses are swifter than eagles—woe to us, for we are ruined!” Another sorcerer’s mind was filled with the entire first chapter of Nahum, which talks about prisoners obtaining freedom and the many ways God drives His enemy into darkness—by raising whirlwind and storm, rebuking seas, drying up rivers, breaking rocks, bringing earthquakes, and so on. So too was this man’s mind filled with Psalm 11:6. “On the wicked he will rain coals of fire and brimstone; a scorching wind shall be the portion of their cup.”

Overall, the sorcerers had suffered an enormous setback. However, they were not totally defeated, and were currently meeting and making plans in various underground dens and safe rooms in the cities, and in select Demon Pockets, some of which still contained a fair number of creatures such as demons and megahobs, though these were much depleted, reduced to about twenty percent of their pre-uprising numbers. The depletion hardly seemed to hinder the activities of gremlins who were currently causing a sizeable problem for the sorcerers. Having less to work with in cities and camps, the nasty pests were now focusing their efforts on the rail systems, and had already managed to cripple nearly three quarters of all transportation functions in the U.S. and other places in the world dependent on rail. Having only just managed to fix the sabotage problems from December, many sorcerers were fairly tearing their hair out over this.

As far as the workers in the cities, about ninety percent were gone, with more somehow disappearing every day, though this was now but a trickle of what had occurred during the mass exits.

The sorcerers themselves had lost roughly a third of their numbers. Only a scant handful had been brought back by dragon tears because hardly any of their fellow sorcerers seemed to care. Per Vidas’ view, most of the dead sorcerers were inconsequential people, not worthy of

much notice, and so he wasn't particularly troubled. More of a problem in his mind was the loss of stealth hobs, nyregs, and the like, since it took a long time to make demonic creatures. It also took a long time to train hunters, about half of which had been killed during the fighting.

All members of the Council of Twos had survived, and had connected with one another after the uprisings, their meetings thus far focusing on what could be salvaged. Telén was taking charge, and doing a good job, but Vidas was still suspicious of him. In truth, many of the sorcerers were mistrustful of one another, a good deal of this coming from the belief that some of the inside help for the uprisings had to have come from higher up than simply the ranks of traitorous Snakes.

Part of Weatherly's plan with Rhett and Gavin had been to remind the sorcerers that some of their kind can and do switch sides, thus sowing seeds of mistrust and division, which the sorcerers and mimics had long done when cleverly infiltrating governments, communities, and even churches. Now, Weatherly felt it was perfectly fine to use the enemy's tactics against them. After all, turnabout is fair play.

Vidas actually had in mind to start a program to train Defector Hunters, to root out converts. But, again, who to trust was the issue. What Vidas didn't know, and didn't suspect, was that one in five remaining sorcerers was indeed converted. No one can stop the spread of Christianity because, as Jesus Himself explains in John 14:6, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life..." He is truly the only way to Salvation. And His truth cannot be denied.

Though he felt he could trust Hajo, Vidas wasn't sure about anyone else, particularly Telén. However, with still nothing to pin on the Governor Ruler, Vidas was wary of trying to turn others against him. Even recent conversations with Jerome hadn't revealed anything with regard to Telén; and Vidas wondered why Jerome was not being given inside information in his present state. This was a puzzle Alex and many others would have been able to give the answer to right away. The dead often have nothing to do with Satan. Why should he or any of the other fallen angels have anything to do with them? They are already captured for hell, so why bother with them? Sadly, the followers of Satan still alive tend to believe the lie that they will have some sort of reward for their services, though Satan never rewards anyone after they die. As far as what hell is really like, the dead communing with

necromancers can never recall specifics of their eternal home in order to warn others to repent, and cross over to the light to follow Christ, which can only be done when a person is alive. In biblical history, the rich man who went to hell had wanted Lazarus to warn his family. Sadly, as the bible tells us, if people don't already believe from the solid evidence ever-present surrounding them, they are unlikely to even with a warning from a witness.

As far as the sorcerers could surmise, the cities were probably safe to stay in for the time being, though things were destined to fall apart fairly quickly because most of the slaves who hadn't escaped were refusing to work; and while some were being executed, it didn't seem to make a difference to the others. Oddly enough, a couple of workers that Vidas was sure had been executed had shown up again. If not the same men, they were exact lookalikes. Again, he thought of the possibility of more Snakes being undercover and helping to save people. *Could they somehow be beating the Ring of Truth?* This seemed unlikely to Vidas. (Sorcerers had long proven themselves incapable of thinking outside the box.) In truth, undercover medics were using dragon tears to revive as many of the executed as possible.

A few of the slaves were offering to work, but on their terms. They wanted things like housing in the high rises and credits equal to fifty times what they had been earning. At this point, the sorcerers didn't have much choice, and so had acquiesced, after bargaining to get the credits down to thirty times what was formerly being paid. The Council of Twos had agreed in order to keep certain water, food, and energy facilities running to sustain the elites that had remained in the cities and whose wealth was going to be needed to rebuild, if that was even going to be possible. Vidas very much recognized that the new terms would lead to lines being blurred between workers and elites. However, this would only be short term because he, like many others, still felt it was important to treat workers harshly, like slaves, in order to rob them of hope. Even with the many examples throughout history of what this type of evil behavior spurred, the sorcerers were still not getting the picture. Mistreated people always revolt, and God's children are always victorious.

With regard to blurred lines, the cities were still going to have to find a way to maintain some trading with the self-sustaining

communities, whose supplies were still going to be needed, even more now than they had been in the past in the form of necessities as well as luxuries like Bigfoot Honey and wine from vineyards on ranches in California. So the whole situation was massively tricky, especially because the sorcerers were fairly sure that the self-sustaining communities were now going to refuse to pay taxes levied on them by the laws. Working together as they had during the uprisings, the commoners could protect one another if the sorcerers took action to imprison people not complying with the tax laws. With these and many other factors weighing on them, things were destined to be both uncertain and chaotic for the sorcerers for many years to come.

After dashing away from the plantations, Quin first stopped at Doyle Mansion to get Zin, who was in the kitchen and who only made a quick stop in her lab to pick up a few things before hopping onto Halli (because this would be much faster than taking her airbike). Zin didn't ask her mother's permission before heading off with Quin for three reasons: one, because her mom had gone to bed early and Zin didn't want to disturb her; two, from not wanting to delay due to the urgency of the situation; and three, because Halli was capable of protecting her. Plus, Magsen would be able to tell Em the next morning.

The girls and Cuoré were soon off to the mountain to meet Ethan, Alex, and Linn, all three of whom Quin had already contacted via walnut walkie-talkie while Zin was gathering her gear.

As they all met at the lab on the mountain, Quin filled everyone in on a few details she hadn't yet managed to share in their limited conversations so far.

Listening to her, Ethan found himself looking at Quin with great interest. This was not the first time he had cast an admiring eye in her direction. She, on the other hand, had barely given him a second glance these past few months; and it hadn't taken Ethan long to figure out that the reason for this was because she greatly admired someone else among their group, Linn, to be exact. Ethan could also tell that she didn't yet know her true feelings about him. Neither did Linn have any idea. Nor did he know that he had the same feelings for her in the deepest corners of his heart. *People are so blind sometimes*, Ethan thought. *Well, if it is meant to happen, eventually it will. Meanwhile, I'll just make sure to stay out of the way.*

Ethan was definitely going with the group, on Westerwing, because he didn't want to let his friends down. This mission was what he figured he had been saving his chances for; and if he used the rest of them for the year in just this one battle, so be it.

Linn was also going along, though Quin was a little worried because the white lion wasn't around to go with him for protection. But Linn was determined, and already mounting a rookh that had been fitted with a saddle. Folding his airchair and getting himself strapped on, he thanked Gavin, who had saddled the rookh and was rounding up several other rookhs because he was coming too, along with Henning, Layden, and Muriel who had all volunteered to help. Gavin had first noticed Zin and Quin arriving on the mountain at somewhat of a late hour and in somewhat of an urgent manner. Getting a hurried version of the story from Quin, he had immediately offered to help, after which, he rounded up the other volunteers who happened to be in the area.

Though the dragons were her responsibility, Quin gladly accepted the offers to help. *The more the better*, she thought, though she didn't intend to delay further to try to rally more support because time was greatly pressing. Plus, since Muriel and Layden were both accomplished with mirrors, and Alex was getting really good with a flute, Quin felt this would be sufficient for the mission. Unless extremely well prepared with massive firepower, people wouldn't matter much against the four converted dragons anyway, because, for certain, dragons were going to be needed to battle dragons. However, she knew that those who had long slept would be difficult to waken. In fact, extreme heat was sometimes needed to accomplish this. Cuoré's fire would work to rouse the sleeping dragons. But based on time constraints, and the numbers in the volcanoes, more rousing help was going to be needed.

While the others headed to Lake Atitlán, Quin and Cuoré raced like lightning to Mexico to find Sei Sei, in her favorite cave, which was not too far from the cavern where the sorcerers and hunters had been making their plans. Sei Sei was sleeping, but not so deeply as to be difficult to waken.

After hurriedly explaining the situation, Quin barely had time to catch her breath as Sei Sei bolted from the cave and took off, the orange streak of her departure disappearing in the sky in a mere two seconds.

Now, Quin and Cuoré raced again, this time to Lake Atitlán to join their friends. Dawn was just breaking as the lake and three volcanoes came into their sight.

Two of the volcanoes were currently dormant, while one was active, and extremely heated, though not to the point of spewing lava, which meant the area would be fairly safe for those trying to help the dragons. For the Dragon Hunters, the heat likely wouldn't slow their efforts because many were wearing protective suits for the very purpose of entering the active volcano.

The four converted dragons and one group of hunters and demons riding nyregs were just arriving. In fact, Quin and Cuoré were nearly overtaking them. Swiftly calling a white hummingbird, she stopped time four times in a row to do just that. However, she realized from passing them that this was less than half of the group she had seen inside the cavern. In truth, a number of Dragon Hunters were already inside one of the inactive volcanoes and were already gathering sleeping doves into their silvery nets. At the base of that very volcano, Vidas was using his staff to create something on the ground, namely, a sonic whirlpool, a devilish device sorcerers sometimes used to kill magical creatures.

Sei Sei had not yet arrived because she was on a special mission, that of rounding up the original seven dragons, only one of which, Nyomo, was currently at Lake Atitlán. Knowing Nyomo's location, and intent on rousing him first, before other dragons, Quin and Cuoré entered the second inactive volcano to do so.

The party from Lion Mountain had managed to get there just ahead of Quin and Cuoré, and had split up in order to try to protect all three of the volcanoes from the invaders. Per Quin's prior instructions, most had taken strategic ground positions from which they intended to deter foes arriving by air. While this wouldn't help with those already inside the one volcano, the Dragon Hunters just arriving would have some difficulty reaching their targets. However, having expected that they might meet resistance, quite a few hunters and their helper demons had already been dropped off at various ground positions, while some on nyregs were circling the massive lake in search of anyone who might try to help the dragons.

Layden was at the base of the active volcano, which Gavin and Henning were entering, having been dropped off on the top by their rookhs. Unbothered by the heat, the Sapphire Boys had intended to begin waking dragons. Given the heat surrounding them, this should have been a fairly easy task, except that a group of hunters had just been dropped off by their nyregs and were also entering the volcano. With clouds of smoke billowing about the cone, the movements of the enemy were hard to see, which was why Layden had missed when firing mirror blasts at them from below. He had also been forced to take cover when two hunters on the ground took notice of him and began throwing their paisley boomerangs. Inside the volcano, afraid of accidentally hitting dragons, Gavin and Henning were reluctant to fire at their opponents, who were already grabbing many doves into their nets as they descended into the volcano.

Alex, Muriel, and Linn were situated at the base of the volcano that Vidas was positioned outside of, though he was some distance from their location. Without any billowing smoke to hinder them, their ground efforts were largely effective in deterring nyregs from getting close enough to deposit riders either on the top of the volcano or on the ground. However, hunters and demons already on the ground were closing in on their position. So too was a group of forty megahobs on the move towards them from about six miles away, having just emerged from a Demon Pocket where they had been hiding for the past couple of weeks. Blessedly, no over-sized nyregs were going to be involved in this battle because all but two, currently hiding in a Demon Pocket in China, had been killed during the Big Bang Operation.

For safety, Linn's airchair was tucked deep into foliage for concealment. His flute was fully charged and he had a spare in his pocket, though Alex and Muriel were taking most of the shots, having opted for positions in front of their friend in order to help protect Linn.

"You'll be our back-up," Muriel told him, "so just hide for now and keep quiet."

Hiding and keeping quiet wasn't a problem, particularly because the greenery surrounding him was so dense and because his new chair didn't have a sound feature that needed to be disabled, this being because Jitterbug wasn't going to be around as much in the new lab.

Linn definitely liked his new chair, which was more maneuverable than the old one, as well as soundless.

At the base of the other inactive volcano, Ethan and Zin were already engaging hunters, demons, and nyregs. While Ethan favored a flute, Zin was using a mirror. Halli was zipping about in the air over all three volcanoes, taking out as many nyregs and demons as possible, with help from Westerwing and the other rookhs.

The four converted dragons were, at present, circling the skies high above Lake Atitlán, having been given orders to watch for and engage any of their kind that might emerge from the volcanoes. While most dragons preferred sleeping in dove form, a state in which they could be netted by hunters fairly easily, there were always a few that liked to stay in dragon form, and thus wouldn't be captured by nets. Since the hunters' ink weapons were not powerful enough to penetrate the hide of dragons, any that couldn't be bagged would need to be taken care of by the four dragons.

Eizel and Tanner had just arrived on nyregs. Tanner immediately began scanning the ground for Vidas while Eizel headed off in another direction, intent on finding the white dragon and its rider, because she was fairly certain they would somehow have known to show up for this encounter.

Having long ago sighted Quin and Cuoré on one of their trips to Supercity Ten, Eizel had been targeting Quin's mind for some time, but had been unable to get through due to the sapphire in her ankle, and the fact that Coco had been diligently blocking her. However, Eizel too was diligent, and even more so after Tanner began supplying her with the elixir allowing her to get past the protection of sapphires. As far as reading the dream of the dragons' location, not only could Coco not tail Eizel twenty-four hours a day to block her, the pill Tanner had recently developed was an enhancer that gave Eizel just enough extra power to push through Coco's blocks.

On this day, Coco and Agzata had tailed Eizel to Lake Atitlán. Aware that her rival was somehow getting through her blocks, Coco was still determined to help, and so would stay to do what she could. Sneaking up on a hunter atop a nyreg, an easy feat due to Agzata's camouflage abilities, Coco used a rope on both rider and beast.

Still determined to thwart her main opponent, Coco encouraged her protector to continue to tail Eizel, and cast a fierce wind at her, thus causing enough of a disturbance and distraction as to limit her ability to plant ugly thoughts. Since Agzata was a lot faster than Eizel's nyreg, there wasn't much the evil girl could do to counter what was happening, particularly because Coco's natural blocking ability was able to deflect any thoughts thrown back at her. The only thing Eizel could do was continue to try to outdistance the constantly-blasting wind while discouraging her nyreg from spitting acid, a dangerous thing in such gusty conditions since the acid might splatter back at her.

Quin and Cuoré had managed to rouse Nyomo, who rose from the volcano like a blue streak into the air, just as Sei Sei arrived with Kanna, Alom, Esso, Anku, and Talmas.

So the Star Dragon and the Rain Dragon aren't off sleeping amongst the stars after all, as legend holds, Quin thought in seeing the colorful spectacle overhead. While Talmas and Nyomo indeed hadn't been off amongst the stars, they were plenty mad at having their sleep interrupted. However, their anger was about to be put to good use in the battle against the four converted dragons. So too would Sei Sei, Alom, and Esso be fighting, while Kanna and Anku focused on saving dragons inside the volcanoes. As Kanna joined Quin and Cuoré, Anku made his way inside the other inactive volcano.

While Kanna concentrated on killing hunters and demons, and ripping open nets containing burnished doves, Cuoré and Quin made their way deeper into the vast volcano to search nooks and crannies for the dragons, some of which were quite spread out in their various chosen sleep spots.

It truly was very difficult to rouse dragons that had slept for a hundred years or more. The nearest Quin could figure (since she didn't have the answer, and hadn't thought to ask Alex) was that God Himself was going to rouse them when they were needed in the Endtimes. Or perhaps the light of Jesus would waken them. Even with Cuoré's fire warming them, in ten minutes of trying, they only managed to rouse one dragon, a pale purple fellow who soared out of the cone and into the sky to help with the efforts outside.

Because Kanna had managed to clear all hunters and demons out of this particular volcano, and would be staying to protect the ones

remaining inside, Quin and Cuoré decided their time would be better spent checking on the progress of things outside.

Over the lake, the five original dragons were engaged in a fierce fight with the converted four. As the sound of the firestorm shook the land, the entire lake steamed heavily from the blazing-hot battle taking place above its surface.

Like Kanna, Anku had things similarly under control in the other inactive volcano; and he communicated this to Quin as she and Cuoré did a fly-by. Sadly, eleven hunters with full nets of doves had already exited the volcano before Anku arrived, and were already making their way down the side of the mountain toward the location of Vidas and his sonic whirlpool.

Heading next to the active volcano, Quin noticed two dragons, one blue and one green, rising from its cone, having been roused by Gavin and Henning. As the blue one headed off to join the fight above the lake, the green dragon began taking out demons and hunters around the mouth of the volcano that hadn't yet been killed by Gavin and Henning who were now focusing their efforts on freeing doves from nets. From her position overhead, Quin stopped time twice to help the green dragon kill a particularly wily hunter who was sneaking up on Gavin and Henning. While the hunter probably couldn't have done much damage to the Sapphire Boys' bodies with his paisley boomerang, he might have knocked them both off of the ledge upon which they were rather precariously perched while releasing doves from nets.

Since the active volcano was fairly secure, Cuoré and Quin next checked on the ground efforts, and found Layden who was closest more than holding his own against various demons and nyregs assaulting him. In truth, he could have probably battled them with his eyes closed because his gift was working perfectly, allowing him to sense their exact locations and movements down to the centimeter. More troublesome were the two hunters targeting him with their boomerangs. However, the trouble didn't exist for long as the pale purple dragon swooped in to take out both evil men at once with a blast of fire before returning to join the battle over the lake, which was progressing nicely in favor of the godly dragons, though one of Esso's legs was badly cut, forcing him to sit out. As Quin and Cuoré watched, Alom's right wing was seriously torn, and he too needed to abandon the fight. In truth,

with the exception Sei Sei, the original dragons had been sleeping so long as to have lost a small amount of their agility and firepower, as compared to the four evil dragons that had been keeping active and honing their fighting skills over the past few years.

Blessedly, some unexpected help was about to arrive in the form of three W'eeppers' sailing vessels emerging from a pocket along one coast of the lake. In the air, Coco and Agzata broke off their pursuit of Eizel so that the wind horse could help the ships maneuver into position more quickly. Quin briefly noticed the girl on the wind horse helping. She had never met Coco before, but there would be time enough later to make her acquaintance. For now, she and Cuoré needed to stay focused, which they did by heading off to check on Zin and Ethan next.

Eizel had decided she had had enough for one day and was leaving for home. Her face and other exposed skin were severely wind burned, to the extent of being every bit as painful as the diaper rash had been. Again tearful, she was planning to immediately dive into a huge jar of aloe as soon as she reached home.

Light cannon specialists aboard the ships were just starting to target the four dragons when Lyydu arrived. He had been coming periodically to Lake Atitlán because William was currently stationed there, and the young sailor was actually on one of the ships that was engaging the dragons. But even if William hadn't been involved, the thunderbird would have helped the dragons, which he did mainly by raising storms to push back the four and give the godly dragons a bit of a breather in their efforts.

Sei Sei, while heartened by the help, was sad in knowing that the four were going to have to be killed. This far gone, entrenched so deeply in evil, there would be virtually no way to convert them back. They would continue to serve the sorcerers for the remainder of their lives; and so it would be prudent to take care of this problem sooner, rather than later.

Ethan and Zin had mainly been engaging hunters who were using their boomerang weapons, which Zin had recently figured out how to counter. This was largely what she had been working on in her lab of late. Having done considerable research, she had discovered quite a lot about magical art, in particular, Ink Magic, about which she had

consulted Pizzo, but only after making a trip into the Realm of Sextessence.

While we flash back to Zin paying a visit to Sextessence through the mezzanine doorway, we might take an extended peek inside this magical realm, which was filled with clouds, as Vini had once noted in her journal after having a brief look inside from the hallway as a magician was leaving.

In addition to clouds filling a large expanse, items in groups of sixes were floating about. The much-varied floating items were largely recognizable, though most were odd as far as their sizes. For example, mustard seeds were as large as basketballs, while watermelons were no bigger than grapes. So too were colors mixed up, as in the case of the floating green oysters, each the size of a toilet seat.

Zin knew exactly what she needed to find upon entering Sextessence, which ended up being a pair of skates well away from the floating-sixes area. Each nearly as large as a surfboard, the skates were of the old-timey sort, for which a key would have been needed to adjust the skates to different-sized feet. However, Zin wouldn't need a key because magicians rarely used keys, having the ability to manipulate locks without them. Instead, she merely stepped into the giant skates, which immediately fitted themselves to her feet.

Skating around for merely six minutes, she easily found the answer she was looking for relating to Ink Magic in a magicians' print shop.

When leaving the shop six minutes later, and stepping out of the skates, Zin saw another magician who was visiting Sextessence climbing a white ladder hanging in midair amongst the clouds. Though she didn't know the man, this was not the time for an introduction because magicians never bothered one another when doing their all-important work inside this realm. A small white rabbit was climbing the ladder just above the man. With the ladder in motion like an escalator, the climbing pair stayed in Zin's sight (never actually going higher) as she passed their position and exited Sextessence through the door to the mezzanine hallway.

They don't need to climb any higher to find their answer, Zin's brain told her as she was leaving. They simply need to be persistent, and not give up too soon. Since this was true of many endeavors, Zin

knew she was not only describing the task of the ladder-climbers, but her own as well.

Back in the lab, she actually failed in her first two attempts to create a counter to the ink weapons used by the hunters. The failures faintly reminded her of another difficult project two years previous, one she had worked on for three months straight. At the time, she had resisted using the Mage Key for help; and she was glad she had because it was incredibly satisfying to find the answer on her own.

Third time's a charm, she cheerfully reminded herself when trying again on the counter to the hunters' weapons.

And indeed the third time was a charm, with the answer being fairly simple. She had been overthinking it. Hairspray and alcohol had long been effective at getting ink stains out of clothing, and both ended up being key elements. With a light component added, and three sets of threes, the counter to the Ink Magic was now ready, in topical-potion form to be delivered by aerosol capsules, which Zin thought appropriate since, long ago, hairspray had mainly been sold in aerosol containers.

If even one aerosol droplet made contact with a hunters' skin or a weapon loosed from the skin, the Ink Magic would be permanently neutralized. In order to reactivate, they'd have to have the tattoos completely redone, and in a different spot. With the neck area being easy to access, which was why most hunters' tattoos were located there, they might not want to switch to a different spot on the body. She guessed they could go for the other side of the neck, but this might be inconvenient based on whether a person was right handed or left handed, since the tattoos were always placed opposite the person's hand preference for easy access. The exception to the neck placement involved only Unicorn Hunters, who wore their horn-shaped tattoos on one side or the other of their torsos, depending on their right-or-left hand preference.

Showing the capsules to Linn and discussing the best means of delivery, in less than a day, he had made a sort of high-powered slingshot device for her to use.

Belt or shoulder clip? he asked, when giving the slingshot to her.

Belt, she quickly decided, after which, she gave him a big hug as he handed her the clip. *Thank you, my brainy friend.*

But we must get back to the battle. While Zin was able to neutralize a good many ink weapons with her capsules, she was some distance from the location of Ethan who had just been killed by a boomerang, which had delivered an ugly slice to his neck. But he regained consciousness and healed up quickly. Quin, when checking on Zin and Ethan, thankfully missed seeing the grizzly sight and instead found the pair holding their own against those assaulting them, especially with Halli making periodic fly-bys to take out airborne demons and nyregs. The neck wound was actually the second use of a chance on this day for Ethan. Shortly after arriving, a nyreg had knocked him down before landing on him and skewering him with long talons. Blessedly, those wounds had also speedily healed. Zooming away, Quin didn't notice Tanner very near the position of Ethan who was busy blasting a pair of demons with his flute.

Speaking of flutes, Tanner had made another flame flute, and was targeting Ethan who managed to dodge the first flaming blast, and counter additional ones by using his own flute weapon to raise small walls of rocks and dirt to act as shields. Easily pinpointing Tanner's position, Ethan again used his flute to start a small avalanche above the young sorcerer. In his haste to avoid the falling rocks, on the run, Tanner dropped his new flute, which was quickly buried in the landslide.

However, of much more concern than flutes was the sonic whirlpool, one of the nastiest of all of Vidas' creations. In addition to being something like a huge garbage disposal for the creatures fed to it, the whirlpool had a powerful magnetic pull that would serve to catch any dragons that came within two hundred feet of it. Like a mini tornado in appearance, though one hovering tilted on its side just above the earth, the whirlpool was large enough to swallow up a good-sized dragon. Only designed for dragons, because it had to be specific to a single creature type, the draw wouldn't work on any other living beings; therefore, no people, demons, rookhs, or such were in any kind of danger from the device, which was why the hunters, who had started dumping nets full of doves into the wide mouth, were completely unaffected by the pull. Caught in the spin just as people might be caught in a strong whirlpool at sea, or perhaps one formed at the bottom of a powerful waterfall, the doves were swiftly sucked in. The narrower

end of the whirlpool then spewed out what had been fed to the wider opening, resulting in a pile of burnished doves, very mangled and twisted, as well as dead.

Sadly, Quin hadn't known what Vidas was planning. If she had, she would have rushed to locate him immediately after waking Nyomo, and before he had a chance to finish making the sadistic deathtrap.

Still oblivious to the existence of the sonic whirlpool, she also didn't know she was only about five hundred feet from the devilish device when checking on Alex, Muriel, and Linn, who had been battling hunters, nyregs, and the group of megahobs that had quickly crossed the six-mile distance from the Demon Pocket.

Observing Linn using a flute, Quin was very impressed, not only by his skill, but also for him getting out. The past six or so months hadn't been easy for him.

Quin knew that Cuoré had been anxious to help the dragons with the battle over the lake, and so she had her protector drop her off next to Linn, who was tremendously happy to see her and to have her help.

Speeding away, Cuoré actually didn't make it as far as the lake because Muriel, some distance from her friends, was in trouble. Having dropped her mirror in battle, she was using the feather Cuoré had given her to fight two demons and a megahob. Knowing she would soon be overpowered, she had called to Cuoré by thought. Rushing to her location, from the air, he shot a stream of fire at the megahob and one demon, just as Muriel dealt the second demon a deathblow with the feather.

Sadly, coming to her aid put Cuoré on a flight path that took him just inside the two-hundred foot range of the sonic whirlpool.

Having just moments before been extremely happy to see her friend, Muriel could now only watch in horror as the evil device swiftly drew him in. Though he fought it with all of his strength, the force of the pull was too strong for him; thus, Cuoré was sucked in. Within seconds of entering the whirlpool, his twisted, crumpled, and dead body was spit out of the other end.

Quin didn't know because Cuoré hadn't had time to telepathically call to her. Busy with a mirror, she was battling four megahobs that were closing in on their position, while calling to Linn to move, which he couldn't do because his chair was caught in the foliage. Blessedly,

Alex was nearby enough to scoop up Linn and fly him out of the reach of the nasty creatures, which Quin managed to polish off in about three minutes, after which, she also took out two demons skulking nearby.

The area was clear and Alex was just setting Linn back into his chair when Muriel arrived at their position. Crying heavily, she had difficulty describing what had happened, though Quin got the gist of what was being told to her well enough to race in the direction of the whirlpool, closely followed by Alex, Muriel, and Linn who had finally managed to get his chair loose.

Vidas was not on the scene when they arrived, having left some time before in order to check on the battle raging over the lake. Nor were any hunters in the area because those who had managed to net doves had finished bringing them to the whirlpool to be killed.

While the battle between the dragons was going well, Lyydu had suffered a crippling injury in that his left foot had just been snapped off by the mouth of one of the converted dragons. He would have lost his right foot as well had Halli not managed to slam into the beast hard enough to keep the dragon from taking another swift snap. As Lyydu and Halli retreated to land and take cover in the dense foliage very near where Alom and Ezzo were recovering, the purple, blue, and green dragons teamed up to take down their evil foot-snapping counterpart, which they managed to do within just a few minutes with help from the W'eeper's cannon fire. So too did Talmas, Sei Sei, and Nyomo—who had just been joined by Kanna and Anku—manage to kill the remaining three converted dragons to finally end the ferocious lake battle.

Watching from the ground, Vidas was very upset, and barely able to believe what he was witnessing, his plans having once again been thwarted. He could, however, take some solace in knowing that his hunters had managed to kill over a hundred dragons.

Having never incurred a serious injury before, Lyydu was somewhat surprised. But after thinking for a bit, he realized he had never tussled with a dragon in midair before, a thing that was totally unheard of because thunderbirds and dragons had always gotten along well with one another. While in some pain, Lyydu found he wasn't overly troubled about losing a foot because being one-footed wouldn't hurt his protection abilities. In fact, he could still go about his business

nearly as seamlessly as ever, flying whenever he needed to, and simply standing on one foot when on the ground.

Meanwhile, checking in on Ethan and Zin, we find Ethan continuing to battle hunters and demons with his flute, and Zin preparing to face off with Tanner, who had just decided to confront his rival and challenge her to yet another duel.

In a departure from their other two encounters, Zin decided to mix things up and take the first turn, to go on the offensive for once.

As she tossed the contents of a fat pack of seeds out in front of her, the seeds turned into large pumpkin, tomato, cucumber, and carrot creatures that rushed at Tanner, pelting him with grapefruit-sized stones and dirt clods.

Dodging the stones and clods, Tanner reached into a pocket to pull out a handful of dust that, when tossed into the air and activated by his staff, turned into a herd of boggy weevils. Landing on the ground, the weevils rushed the veggie creatures, devouring them in seconds with the sharp teeth in their gaping mouths. Long a nemesis of gardeners, boggy weevils were more than capable of eating whole acres of plants, vegetables, and flowers, sometimes as swiftly as mere minutes depending upon the numbers of the creatures; so Zin actually thought this a clever move by her opponent.

As the boggy weevils faded, Zin again tossed out seeds, basically making the same dueling move twice.

However, instead of countering with more boggy weevils, Tanner made another clever move, that of using a Dose-of-Evil Hex on the new veggie creatures, which caused them to turn on Zin.

With Tanner already having managed to turn their offensive-defensive dueling positions topsy-turvy, she had little time to regret choosing to strike first because she was busy bringing down clouds to make cloud warriors to battle the toothy veggies, until the four-minute time limit of the seed creatures was reached, which was when the cloud warriors also began to fade.

Tanner chose to use a basic vanishing spell as his next move. Since a simple physical attack was not considered a move, he was free to do so while his ninety seconds of invisibility lasted.

Zin actually found she didn't mind that the tables had been turned because defensive moves were what she was most comfortable with.

Not knowing where her opponent was, she quickly pulled a set of interlocking steel rings from her jacket pocket. Though merely two-inches each in size to start with, as she tossed them into the air, they immediately grew to ten inches each in diameter. The rings also speedily unlocked and separated. Hanging vertically in the air, they stacked themselves one above the other at about two-foot intervals to allow her to climb them like she might a ladder, and one without a top end because, as she rose higher, the rings from the bottom rose up to spots higher above her head, blessedly doing so before Tanner reached her position, which put the ring ladder basically out of reach for him.

Turning visible again, Tanner used his staff to hurl large rocks at Zin who managed to dodge all but one which merely bruised her shoulder. However, several of the stones made contact with the rings, thus breaking the spell on them and causing them to fall. Grabbing a couple of the lower rings that hadn't been hit and had retained their air hold, she managed to break her fall.

Oddly enough, Tanner had just managed to knock himself out with one of his own falling rocks and currently lay unconscious on the ground about six feet from her position.

But Zin had no time to give the sorcerer a second glance because a megahob that had strayed from its pack was closing in on her, at which point, she discovered that she no longer had her mirror on her person.

Rats, she thought, *lost sometime during the duel*. She felt the weapon had probably been knocked from her belt by a dirt clod thrown by the hexed veggie creatures, several of which had made contact while she was making the cloud warriors.

With her ring trick fresh in her thoughts, and the magician-rabbit duo in Sextessence suddenly springing to mind, Zin picked up a handful of twigs and threw them high into the air, where they grew and positioned themselves to form yet another floating ladder for her to climb to rise above the danger.

Two rookhs ended up helping her by swooping down together to grab and carry off the megahob to drop him into the center of the lake. As the pair flew off, the purple dragon circling above decided he didn't like the nasty megahob having a bath in the pretty lake and ended up torching him. By that time, Zin had already descended and disassembled the twig ladder, and was looking for Ethan. Halli arriving

to pick up Zin helped to speed the search, and the pair soon found Ethan who had just been rejoined by Westerwing.

Being so fully engaged in the battle to save the dragons, no one had been able to take the time to communicate by walnut, but they were doing so now in order to check one another's positions and regroup; and the rookhs were looking for and picking up their various riders so that everyone could meet near the sonic whirlpool.

Quin was beside herself with grief. Kneeling over and clinging to the lifeless body of her protector, she wept.

Muriel, too, was incredibly grieved, and blaming herself since she had called to Cuoré for help. However, she wouldn't end up blaming herself for long because something quite amazing was about to happen.

Sei Sei had arrived, just after Zin managed to neutralize the sonic whirlpool using a high-powered Whack Whammy, which jammed the pull and swirl of the device that simply collapsed in on itself with a loud whoosh in less than five seconds from the enactment of the whammy.

Nyomo and Talmas, carrying Alom and Ezzo in dove form on their backs, had followed their leader and shortly arrived. Kanna and Anku landed nearby mere seconds later, just as Sei Sei was approaching Cuoré's body that lay alongside the pile of mangled burnished doves. The dragons would greatly mourn the deaths of so many of their kind. However, the original seven wouldn't be mourning Cuoré because they knew something most other dragons did not.

In a consoling tone, Sei Sei told Quin by thought, *Don't weep, child. Cuoré was created just after the original seven dragons. He is the Eighth Dragon.*

After a short pause to think, Quin's mind tearfully answered, *I don't know what that means.*

It means that the white peacock who helped to create Cuoré gave him a special gift, Sei Sei's answered. *You know how cats are said to have nine lives?*

Sniffing, Quin nodded.

Well, Sei Sei went on, *Cuoré has eight lives. And he's only used up one so far. So I'm pretty sure he's destined to outlive you.*

Just as the dragon leader finished imparting this thought, Cuoré's body began to straighten itself, and his shiny feathers started to fluff up. As Quin stood to back up slightly, Cuoré himself stood up, looking

completely healthy and whole again. And he was completely well, without even any pain or tenderness, this being a very good thing because, otherwise, Quin throwing herself at him and hugging his neck, just about as tightly as a steel band, might have really hurt him.

Cuoré himself hadn't even known about his special gift, which was truly a treasure to him, as he very much wanted to continue to do his job of protecting Quin for the rest of her life.

At the active volcano, Gavin and Henning had for some time been climbing down, this being before their rookhs spotted them and picked them up. While watching the end of the battle over the lake, Gavin and Henning were reminded of Psalm 50:3. "Our God comes, he does not keep silence, before him is a devouring fire, round about him a mighty tempest." Ezekiel 22:21 also came to mind. "I will gather you and blow upon you with the fire of my wrath, and you shall be melted in the midst of it."

A little earlier on as well, while watching the purple dragon take out a bunch of hunters with a mighty blast of fire, Layden had been thinking of Isaiah 33:12. "And the peoples will be as if burned to lime, like thorns cut down, that are burned in the fire."

At right around the same time Cuoré was coming back to life, Vidas was picking up the still-unconscious Tanner and flying off with him toward home. Again disgusted with his protégé, not only his pride but his lack of skills too, Vidas was seriously contemplating just penning him up with the tigers and starting over. In truth, Vidas had never really had the patience to be a good mentor, and had never put the time into training him, an error that was common among sorcerers, in stark comparison to magicians who tended to spend a lot of time with their protégés.

In recognizing that he was upset over having experienced another setback, Vidas decided not to feed Tanner to the tigers, only a handful of which were left in the cities and camps anyway because many had been freed by the opposition during the uprisings. Although fuming over what had happened at Lake Atitlán, Vidas was already looking ahead because he had one more ace up his sleeve, a plan already in motion, and that had been for some time. With this on his brain, his anger cooled slightly as they continued to fly toward home.

Layden had a bad cut on one leg, and so Henning cried a healing sapphire. Gavin had noticed that his protégé had advanced powers as compared to his own. Not only was Henning able to cry at will, he was able to produce by his own choice either healing or shield sapphires, whereas, Gavin had never known which his tears might produce.

Muriel had a few cuts and bruises, which Quin healed for her by touch.

Lyydu, after checking on William, was already heading back to Lion Mountain. All three W'eeper's vessels had been helped along by Agzata to get back into the pocket, after which, Agzata and Coco made their way to the site of the gathering by the remains of the whirlpool.

As swift introductions were made, Quin noticed that Coco had an acid burn on her arm, which Quin healed by touch.

Wrapping things up, most of the group prepared to head home. Quin and Cuoré would be staying for a while because there was still much to plan.

With the exception of Ezzo and Alom who would be resting for a while to heal, the original dragons would stay awake for a time, to guard the other dragons, and help Quin and Cuoré with relocating them because, of course, they would have to be moved. With so many people knowing, this would no longer be a safe location for the dragons. Perhaps they could come back someday, but not anytime soon.

As far as the concentration at Lake Atitlán, the dragons had picked this spot because it was so nice and warm year round; and dragons like a lot of warmth. Keeping this in mind when choosing the next safe place for them, Quin decided on Africa, to which she would be making quite a few trips over the next few weeks. Africa held a good many volcanoes, some active, which she felt would be better than inactive ones because few people would end up entering them and thus lessen the chance of anyone discovering the doves and dragons. Cuoré could easily enter active volcanoes, and Quin could too with help from sapphires. She could also enlist the aid of the Sapphire Boys if needed.

On a brief trip home to pick up a few things, Quin had a daydream that gave her a vision of her future replacement (destined to be born forty years from now) who was none other than a Sapphire Boy. She also saw herself traveling with him to Africa as they trained together.

This reinforced that she had made a good decision with regards to where to relocate the dragons.

Making a trip to Lion Mountain three days following the battle at Lake Atitlán, Quin was surprised when Linn presented her with a gift of something he and Zin had been working on together in his lab. Related to one of the first visions Zin had seen in her foreshard, the gift was something of a mini version of the Mind Key, which would work to keep others from reading her thoughts. From this point on, Eizel would be kept permanently out of Quin's brain.

In a lovely platinum setting, the tiny violet sphere was designed to be worn as a pendant on a special chain magnetically connected to Quin's pin-on watch for easy finding if either the pendant or the watch was ever lost or misplaced. Also, the mini Mind Key would work within a hundred yards of anyone using it, so Quin didn't have to take it with her into the shower, though Zin did explain that it wouldn't hurt to get it wet. "You can even go swimming with it," she said.

While pleased with the gift, Quin still felt somewhat downcast over what had happened at Lake Atitlán. Though she had gotten Cuoré back, she was greatly affected by the numbers of dragon deaths, having never imagined it would be so many. Blessedly, most of those fed to the whirlpool had still been asleep when they died and had felt no pain.

As far as the numbers killed, Quin felt a lot like Merri had felt when Zapor fell. But she wouldn't have time to stay home and simply grieve because she needed to be diligent about protecting the rest of the dragons. The busyness of moving the doves and getting them settled into their new warm spots would help keep her mind off of feeling like she should have done more, or done something differently. In truth, there was not much more she could have done. And there was one bright side to all of this; the battle at the three volcanoes had been a good opportunity to take out a lot of Dragon Hunters. Indeed, nearly two-thirds of the ones still alive after the Big Bang Operation had been killed at Lake Atitlán.

Kinza had been staying at the plantations while deciding what he might want to do next, which he felt would probably involve going to live in one of the pockets containing naval operations. He had stayed hidden and low-key because he was still communicating with the dead using his older-style Mancer's Sphere. With as much information as he

was gleaning from dead sorcerers and hunters, it was definitely not the right time to be revealed as a convert, and so he felt it prudent to keep out of sight as much as possible.

Smoothing the bedspread in his lovely guest room at Netherwind, while gazing fondly at a picture of Christ on the wall, Kinza was speaking to Jerome. "I'm holed up in a cave at the moment. I just barely made it out of Nine before all the chaos of the uprisings started. My staff was broken as I was leaving; one of those wretched, traitorous Snakes took it out with one of those rope weapons."

"It's all still very hard for me to believe," Jerome replied, "particularly the numbers that managed to cross sides without us noticing. Plus, the lack of effectiveness and poor intel-gathering from the mimics we've sent out over the years is pretty shocking. I can't believe none ever managed to get close enough to this leader of the Underground Army to either kill her or let us know about her."

"I still haven't heard much about this woman," Kinza said, rising and looking out of his window at Weatherly crossing the lawns, very near a cluster of bee boxes that bigfoots were busily tending, on her way to a pocket entrance. "And I'm feeling very isolated," he added, with a childlike whine to his voice, "especially with my staff broken. I've been waiting for things to die down; now I think I might head to Seven. I hear a den there is operational, so maybe I can get my staff fixed. Plus, I've heard that's where the remaining Council of Twos members are congregating, so it will be a good place to be able to get up-to-date information."

"Yes, that's where they're meeting," Jerome answered. "I've heard from Vidas recently. But he's not as concerned with the rebuilding plans as he is with that project he started last year. You know, the one related to letting those thousands of people escape from the camps around Nine, Ten, Twelve, and Thirteen. From what I understand, all of those easy escapes will soon have their intended effect."

"I'm not as much interested in plans, as I am in a soft bed, decent meals, and getting my staff fixed," Kinza replied. "So I'll just leave those other things to the higher-ups. Plus, I'm too old for that kind of stuff anyway." His voice took on the whine again as he went on. "With the rails in such a mess, I'll have to take a nyreg to Seven; and I won't

even be able call one with my staff on the fritz, so I'll probably have to walk miles and miles to find one. And my feet hurt!"

"Well, at least you're still alive, which is more than I can say for a bunch of us," Jerome responded. "Good luck and safe journey, my friend."

After terminating the communication, Kinza sat thinking. And it wasn't long before he figured out what the plan relating to the "easy escapes" was. Heading downstairs and outside, he immediately went in search of Weatherly.

Meanwhile, back on Lion Mountain, the white lion was checking on Linn, hopping up in mouse form onto his lap to be exact. The creature hadn't been available to go to Lake Atitlán because he was busy hunting down and taking care of three more albino pumas. With that chore done, he would now be free to stay a little closer to his new friend. However, Linn and his human friends were about to discover that they had needed to connect with the white lion for more than the fact that the creature could occasionally act as Linn's personal protector.

Chapter Twenty-One

Dollars and Demons

“For nothing is hid that shall not be made manifest, nor anything secret that shall not be known and come to light.” Luke 8:17

Exactly one week following the events at Lake Atitlán, very near the mountain, Etowa had just employed a carrot seed to raise a whopping-great rainstorm to cause a certain person to stay home on this day, rather than venturing out; and Boko had countered halfway around the world with a lingonberry seed that served to misdirect a group of travelers who would end up crossing paths with a pack of gremlins. Since the travelers were armed and capable of dealing with these foes, Boko’s move was rather a lame and ineffective one; but he didn’t particularly care. He also didn’t care to stroll about and take in the colors and life of the springtime as Etowa was doing. Outside of time, with nothing earlier or later to either reflect on or look forward to, there was only enduring for the pair. And while Etowa wasn’t much concerned about the endless nature of their game, Boko was, being weary and longing for an end, no matter what that end entailed.

Lyydu was doing well; his stump was healing up fine. Charlie had figured out very quickly that he didn’t want sympathy, in fact, quite the reverse; and so she began joking with him about how, when camouflaged, he now looked like a normal tree with a single trunk, instead of the two-trunked tree he had always resembled before. She also told him she thought he was actually enjoying impersonating a flamingo standing on one foot. To this, Charlie heard a soft thought-chuckle from her protector, which was unusual given his normally stoic demeanor. Indeed, the idea of a thunderbird looking like a flamingo was amusing to Lyydu, who had found he rather liked a one-footed stance. His balance wasn’t affected at all; and given his strength, he reasoned he could stand on one foot for a thousand years straight if need

be. So the loss truly didn't trouble him. What came to his mind most when pondering was a three-legged dog he had once seen, who didn't seem to know he was disabled, and thus, was able to run as fast as any other dog.

What Kinza had figured out was something Astrid and many others had long suspected—there were indeed great numbers of demons on Lion Mountain, and in various self-sustaining communities nearby. But what Astrid hadn't known was how they had gotten there and exactly where they were hiding, which was information Weatherly had just supplied via message by dawn pigeon. The demons had possessed people in order to specifically infiltrate the mountain. Hidden inside human beings, the nature spirits hadn't noticed them and thus had allowed entry.

Also unknown to anyone (other than a few select sorcerers), were the exact numbers of demons, which amounted to nearly seven thousand in total, with five thousand being on the mountain and the other two thousand spread out amongst surrounding communities. Given the locations of the camps the prisoners had “escaped” from, the sorcerers had been fairly sure most of those fleeing would end up on the mountain, or at least nearby.

Most of the people possessed didn't even know they were harboring a demon inside them because they were merely being occupied. However, others were fully possessed, which meant they were aware of the demon, but had little or no control over their own thoughts and actions. These people were operating in a state akin to being on autopilot; and while the demons hadn't yet caused anyone to act out violently, it was only a matter of time. Basically, the nasty creatures had been told to bide their time throughout the winter, and wait until things warmed up. This was something their simple brains could comprehend, as opposed to the more complex instructions of waiting until more of their numbers arrived so that the greater numbers could have a greater impact.

Since the sorcerers had known it would take some months for the thousands to gradually escape and make their way to Lion Mountain, they definitely wanted the demons to exercise patience, which actually wasn't all that hard because a good many of them had turned lazy and unambitious over the years. Therefore, basically sleeping inside of

human beings for several months at a stretch wasn't any sort of problem. The sorcerers' plan once things "warmed up" had been for the demons to act in secret for a time, committing murders and other unsavory acts through people, which would serve to instill a great deal of fear and mistrust amongst the residents in the mountain communities.

Weatherly would wait to be called upon before coming to help. In the same way that Astrid hadn't wanted to interfere with the Big Bang Operation, Weatherly didn't want to get in the way of the mountain leader. Already, many Locusts and Badgers were on the mountain, the Locusts mainly helping to get people settled, and the Badgers working on various building and planting projects, as well as teaching overall survival and self-sufficiency skills. While Astrid didn't know how many demons were involved, she felt the numbers of helpers already present would be sufficient for what she was planning, particularly since Weatherly had assured more would be standing by and could come at a moment's notice.

Astrid had to admit it was clever to hide demons inside of people. Rhett had been unaware of any such plan, mainly because he had broken with many of his contacts while working with Weatherly and Gavin. But in truth, the possession plan was a fairly recent scheme, and Vidas hadn't wanted to involve many people; so it was doubtful Rhett would have known about it even if he were still involved with those in the Supercities.

The action Astrid was planning was inspired by one of Charlie's visions, and something Vini had once read in the research notes of Mrs. Doyle's journals relating to sand dollars and their ability to expose demons. When in close proximity to a demon, the dollars would spontaneously break open and the five little doves inside would fly out, thus revealing a possessed person.

Children were going to be a big part of the plan, though all would be accompanied by armed adults for safety. Making visits to homes and work places, the children and their escorts would be inviting people to events such as potluck dinners, church services, and committee meetings. To each person encountered, they would give a prayer card with a sand dollar attached.

While the teams using sand dollars would be the main forces going forward, they wouldn't be going it alone. In the same manner as to how

the demon infiltration had been methodical, Astrid would likewise be. And so, in a multi-faceted approach, various other teams were also assembled. Layden was heading one of the teams. In the past few months, he had been busy helping Bear with various construction projects, and so hadn't been around very many of the newcomers in order to be able to sense demons inside of certain individuals. While his gift ordinarily worked at great distances, with the shielding of human bodies, he needed to be much closer in order to detect demons, which he could not only sense but also draw forth from inhabited bodies. Rhett could detect demons with his staff, and so would be heading another team. Other people would be carrying bibles and displaying crosses, which demons would shy away from, thus revealing who was possessed. The Truth Key—on loan from Weatherly and wielded by a trained Locust—could expose demons as well. Linn would also be heading a team because the natural goodness seeping from him would cause demons inside of people to basically go crazy and exit.

All in all, nearly two hundred teams were assembled to scour Lion Mountain and surrounding communities. Since the wearing of crosses could prevent possession, all members of the teams were so adorned, leaving little chance of exiting demons being able to sneak into any of those hunting for them.

And so, the methodical searching began.

Once exposed, demons tended to exit possessed persons through eyes, noses, and mouths, basically streaming out in long strings of putrid-colored gasses that very quickly assembled themselves into the traditional winged shapes of demons, of varying sizes, but most six to eight feet tall. Since the teams of Demon Hunters were prepared for this, the nasty creatures were taken out fairly swiftly (before having the chance to flee), particularly because there were generally not more than one or two per household. Larger teams tackled the workplaces, but most often had no more than four or five to deal with at once. The means of doing away with the demons varied, but most often involved swords, spears, ropes, and flutes. Bear, accompanying a group of children, simply clobbered them. The people who had been possessed would physically recover fairly quickly with a little rest; after all, the demons hadn't taken up much space inside them. With regard to mental

recovery, prayer would help, along with support from pastors, family members, and close friends.

With communities, work places, and homes often well spread out, this process took some time to accomplish. In fact, Astrid had gauged that the project might take a full two weeks, possibly longer.

Her estimate would turn out to be correct. Although the teams didn't know exact numbers, as the second week began, only about a third of residences and workplaces had been tackled, which equated to about a third of the demons killed. The process was going slowly partly because the Demon Hunters were working discreetly, so as not to let the demons still inhabiting people know what was going on. They didn't want to risk a mass exit, which might endanger many lives.

However, a mass exit eventually couldn't be avoided because, mid-way through the second week, a group of demons managed to escape shortly before a party of hunters reached the dairy farm where they had been hidden inside a number of the farmhands. Racing over the mountain, the demons alerted others of their kind, which triggered most of the remaining demons to exit the bodies in which they had been hiding.

Blessedly, in addition to the established teams, many others were standing by to help.

In one of the largest central communities on the mountain, alongside Locusts, Badgers, and various others who were able to fight, Astrid entered the throng, using a rope that had been hidden inside her tunic. Facing off with nearly thirty demons at once, she soon drew a second rope to aid in dealing with them. This was a sight rather shocking to the nearby members of the Undercover Army, who well knew that the skill to wield two ropes at once was incredibly rare.

Upon taking out the demons closest to her, Astrid swiftly pocketed the ropes and drew two mirrors to rapidly take out more-distant foes. Charlie, battling nearby with a rope, was only mildly surprised to see Astrid thus engaged, having long known that the mountain leader was more than her outward appearance (of old and somewhat frail) might suggest. Between bouts of mirror strikes, Astrid took short pauses to throw handfuls of dirt into the air, rustle tree branches, and toss stones into a creek in order to call the nature spirits, most of which tended to

focus their protective efforts on the mountain's edges, since the chances of evil beings reaching interior places were rather slim.

The calls very quickly took effect. While some spirits tended to sleep in winter, springtime was not by any means a dormant time of year, and so they rose up swiftly to take care of business.

All over the mountain, tree roots started strangling demons, while branches began whacking them. Metal deposits rose from the earth to pelt and stab the creatures. Water, sometimes merely ankle deep, was able to pull down and drown demons. Mudslides and quicksand swallowed others. Stones pummeled many, while some were crushed trying to squeeze through cracks in rocks. For demons trying to escape by air, fireballs and lightning bolts took them down.

Knowing that the people and nature spirits had things well in hand on the mountain, Astrid and several others hopped rookhs to check on various other settlements surrounding the mountain.

Vini was one of the ones that had been standing by to help, and was battling with a rope not too far from Charlie's position. At one point, when a pack of fifty or so demons was advancing on several families huddled together in a schoolyard, she called loudly to the people to close their eyes. An instant after the call, she lit up like a unicorn, which served to vaporize all of the demons in a mere two seconds.

Being fully sanctified, Vini was wholly connected to her personal unicorn, and thus had the exact same powers as the creature. Being leery of blinding others, she had waited to take this action until she basically ran out of other options. Blessedly, all human beings within the range of her light had managed to close their eyes, basically only catching a glimpse of her fading brilliance as they opened them again.

While Ben and Charlie both knew that Vini had the powers of a unicorn, not many other people knew; and so this was a rather shocking sight to those in the area, perhaps even more so than what Astrid had just demonstrated she was capable of.

Meanwhile, around sixty miles away, the white lion in mouse form had been tagging along with Linn who was making the rounds with his team in a small settlement. Sitting on the back of the airchair, the creature surprised everyone by suddenly leaping from the chair and shapeshifting in midair to become the white lion who sprang into the center of a crowd of people where he lit up like a super-bright rainbow

over his entire body, to include a brilliant rainbow crown similar to the one Quin had seen in her daydream vision.

Only seconds after the lion lit up, sixteen demons possessing people in the crowd exited the bodies they had been hiding in. Before any of the nasty creatures were able to unfurl their wings enough to flee (a somewhat slow process after having been in cramped quarters so long), they were batted down and torn to pieces by the lion, who then swiftly reverted to mouse form (losing his rainbow brightness as he did) to once again hop aboard Linn's chair in order to travel with him.

So this was another reason we were meant to connect with the white lion, Linn thought, because his rainbow light can route demons from their hiding places. The lion could also evidently sense demons very acutely, as demonstrated by the fact that he repeated his transforming--and-killing act several times over the next few days as Linn and his team traveled the mountain looking for demon stragglers.

With all of the teams making a second pass over the mountain and through the surrounding communities, the whole of the routing project ended up taking nearly three weeks to complete.

An odd thing happened to a particular fifteen-year-old boy who had been possessed. Though he hadn't had control over his body while possessed, he was able to hear the thoughts of the demon inside him, and not just ugly planted thoughts, but *all* of the demon's thoughts. And so, the boy learned something about how demons shapeshift. In less than two months, he would learn this skill himself. While shapeshifting might have been a gift this young man would have developed later in life anyway, or that might perhaps have surfaced in future generations of his family, here it was already, and all thanks to the fact that he had been possessed.

Many others able to look on the bright side of things could say they had learned something valuable from this whole ordeal. Just as goodness can permeate places of evil like Demon Pockets, darkness can work itself into places of light. And so, we all need to be wary. In addition to being diligent about wearing crosses from this point on, many would now be carrying sand dollars, which were an easy pocket item to use as demon detectors.

While most of the demons had ended up in the areas the sorcerers had predicted, a few strays were hidden here and there elsewhere; and

Samantha ended up encountering two at the plantations while in one of the horse barns. She happened to have her mother's zippered bible with her. Sitting on a bale of hay, she was reading to the horses when the pair of demons entered the barn. Since the bible wasn't immediately visible from their vantage point, the creatures rapidly advanced on her. However, Samantha soon found she didn't even need to draw the rope she was wearing as a belt because, having once been in a bagical, the bible could perform various tricks, one of which was about to happen. As the demons rushed at her, a hundred words from the open pages of the bible suddenly leapt from the book and into the air to form stabbing projectiles that flew at the demons, dissipating them as soon as they hit their marks, after which, the words cleaned themselves of demon residue before slowly returning to settle back into the bible.

After catching her breath and collecting her thoughts for a few moments, Samantha in an earnest tone told the horses, "Scripture is truly powerful."

Agreeing with her, the horses tossed their heads in nod.

Weatherly, on a trip to the mountain shortly after the demon routing was finished, again did not see Astrid. According to Bear, she was "there one second, gone the next." Weatherly was starting to get the idea that they were never actually going to meet. But perhaps this was not a bad thing. In fact, she was getting a strong inkling that this was what was meant to be. Having dinner with Charlie and Frank that same evening, the voice in the back of her head, as clear as ever, confirmed this. The two were definitely not supposed to meet one another, which seemed strange. Stranger still was the fact that the mountain almost felt like home to Weatherly, as though she might have just packed up a few things from her study and bedroom and come to live here in one of the small cabins.

Because Linn felt he might never see an end to demons in his lifetime, he ended up developing a demon repellant in his lab, in the form of a spray. Starting with a bug repellant that he and Jitterbug had made years past, Linn modified it to work against demons. Joking when going out with Zin to test it, he said, "Let's see if it works like garlic and silver do against vampires." The spray did indeed work,

causing demons to back off; and once sprayed, the creatures were reluctant to advance again.

With regard to demons hiding inside people, this was how many false prophets had come into being over the years, and would continue to in the future. But, of course, the bible warns us that there will be many false prophets, especially closer to the Endtimes, some performing signs and wonders, others spouting various false teachings such as that Jesus isn't the only way to heaven, that people can reach heaven simply on good works, that religion should be watered down to accommodate fleshly living, that polygamy is acceptable, and so on. Anything that contradicts the Word of God is false, and so these false teachers should be easy to spot, except that many of these people are persuasive smooth talkers, and thus have the power to deceive. Charlie and Astrid would end up dealing with many false prophets on the mountain over the years, all the while citing references to them in the bible, such as those in the books of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Mark.

Pondering the thousands of cases of possession on the mountain, Vini recalled a time in her youth when Sam was possessed for several months and she hadn't even noticed. *How can things like this be right under our noses, and yet we don't see them?*

Perhaps it's because we don't talk to God enough, and we don't ask for His help, her mind answered her.

This was confirmed as correct a few moments later when she randomly opened her bible and read the words of Jeremiah 33: 3. "Call to me and I will answer you, and will tell you great and hidden things which you have not known." As she flipped pages, Job 12:22 also sprang out at her. "He uncovers the deeps out of darkness, and brings deep darkness to light."

Meanwhile, Vidas was absolutely fuming at yet another of his plans going horribly wrong. Satan too was upset, over many recent events; and he would end up making sure that many of his subjects, including many sorcerers, would feel his wrath.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The Gift of Time

“So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.” Psalm 90:12

Vidas and Satan were not the only ones angry these days. Once the initial shock of losing Zapor wore off, Em was incredibly angry, which was a large part of why she had been keeping to herself so much lately. Recognizing that she was grieving, of which anger was a symptom, she didn't want to run the risk of directing that anger at others.

When not angry, she was distracted, and not getting much done lately. In truth, she almost felt as though she was drifting. Over the past few weeks, she had picked up her bible over a hundred times. However, reading familiar passages that generally helped to calm her down hadn't seemed to work very well.

Recognizing that many of the ugly thoughts in her brain were being planted by Satan, she was praying for God's help, while reminding herself that she was never meant to deal with challenges such as this in her own strength, but could only conquer this with help from God.

Though Em had never had prophetic dreams before, at night on the third Monday in May, she and Folto ended up having the same dream of the future. In the dream, Em and Folto were looking on at a scene of Zapor in heaven happily meeting up with Frances Doyle and her sister, Laura. Em had never met Mrs. Doyle, or her twin sister who died as a baby; and while she was familiar with Mrs. Doyle from pictures and her portrait, Folto basically had to tell her that the other woman was Laura. Seeing Zapor with the pair reassured Em of something she already knew—that we definitely get to see our loved ones in heaven. Through the Garden of Stars, Em and Kip had been allowed a short visit with their birth parents. Now, Em was reassured that she would get to see her second set of parents again as well, along with Zapor. In fact, as

Folto and Em continued to watch, Dave and Violet joined Zapor and the sisters for a visit.

Waking feeling refreshed, and almost as though she were one of the new blooms in her garden, Em felt pretty much like the luckiest woman in the world. Though, of course, luck didn't really exist; instead, blessings did. In truth, she was one of the most blessed people on the planet, not only to have had two sets of loving parents, but many family members and friends still alive who cared deeply for her.

Having breakfast, she reminded herself how important it was to temper her anger and channel her earthly energies into doing good work for God's Kingdom during the remainder of her life. Opening the bible after rinsing her cereal bowl, her eyes met Malachi 4:2, which was the perfect passage for her situation. "“But for you who fear my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings. You shall go forth leaping like calves from the stall.””

The sun was just coming up when Em packed a small bag and left Zin (who was still sleeping) a note before hopping on an airbike and heading to Netherwind, specifically to the mezzanine.

Spending a month in Kivetel, which only equaled a few days at home, Em did some writing, weapons training, and toured the countryside. While visiting the Pillars of Wisdom, she had something of a revelation upon recalling that Mrs. Doyle was killed by a demon while Zapor was off protecting her as a young girl. He had always done such a good job protecting her, even to the extent that he hadn't been available to help Mrs. Doyle. Able to recognize that, in addition to feeling angry and sad, she had been feeling guilty over not being able to somehow protect Zapor, Em realized, *We can't be everywhere at all times to protect one another. Plus, everything is under God's control. So it must have been time for Zapor to be called home.*

While Em was in Kivetel, Linn was spending time in Antica. Having been born there, the watery world was almost like a second home for him, and the people were always welcoming. Jitterbug came too for a bit, to help Linn complete two projects, one of which turned out to be an airbus based on the airbike technology.

The second project was a little more personal—a prosthetic foot for Lyydu, who was much surprised when Linn and Charlie presented it to him. Linn had chosen a mechanical look, rather than a real one, which

Lyydu actually preferred. Since he didn't have the real foot anymore, he didn't see any reason for a fake one to look real; plus, the new foot was very sleek looking. And while he hadn't minded standing on one foot, he had to admit it was nice to stand on two once again. He actually hadn't realized how much he enjoyed putting both feet on the ground, a natural thing since thunderbirds were very closely connected to the earth.

In addition to wanting to complete projects more quickly, Linn had gone to Antica for a time in order to get away from Quin, whom he had lately started to feel very nervous around for some reason. So too had Quin started to notice that spending time with Linn was making her feel somewhat uneasy, even more so than usual, and in an odd way that probably wouldn't be helped by having Zin around as a buffer. Once Linn returned from Antica, Quin decided to spend a few days in Kivetel in order to do some training.

Because so much could be accomplished in places like Antica and Kivetel in such a short amount of our time, immediately after the uprisings, Varjo had helped Weatherly set up an operation inside of Kivetel to help match people up with lost family members from the cities and camps. Though children in particular were hard to track down because they were often shuttled to other cities, eidetic people undercover inside the cities had long been keeping records in their heads, which were now being recorded for widespread use. So too were DNA specialists on the case. Now, a little time and patience was all that would be needed for many families to be put back together. With nearly all of the self-sustaining communities connected to Lion Mountain and the plantations, both of which were also well connected to each other as far as sharing records, many children were already being reunited with their parents. Cousins, siblings, grandparents, uncles, and aunts were also being matched up. Many children who had never met their parents were now getting to. Friends were also able to connect with one another by searching the rapidly-growing database that was being established.

Cecelia had gotten in line right away when the DNA task force came to the mountain to take samples, the result being that she was reunited with her birth parents, and her little brother and sister that had been taken away, fairly quickly. Her parents had been living under

different identities in Supe-5 where her brother and sister had been sent to. They had managed to get both children out to an earthship community, but had ended up having to stay in the city themselves. Now, aside from the bumpy road traveled, the family was all well and safe. While Cecelia would still be living with her adoptive parents for the time being, her birth parents and siblings would be coming to live in a cabin in the same community in order to be near to her.

When Em returned from Kivetel, she discovered that Heike had made a life-sized bronze statue of Zapor, which bigfoots had already installed in the garden at Doyle Mansion. Inside the house, a portrait of Zapor done by Pizzo had been added to the parlor, and was already awakened. This was even more of a surprise than the bronze because, as she entered the kitchen to follow Cinders down the hall, Em could already hear Zapor giggling and talking to the portraits of Mrs. Doyle, Dave, and Violet. Giggling and talking would turn out to be his favorite activities, along with reading because Pizzo, in knowing how much the real Zapor had enjoyed reading, had made the setting of the portrait a library. Just after sunrise the next morning, having coffee in the garden, Em saw a shooting star that reminded her of how Zapor often looked either coming or going, just like a golden streak in the sky.

Vini had just gotten an inkling that it would be a good idea to destroy all of the unicorn whistles, to make sure they could never be used evilly against unicorns again. Never one to ignore inklings, she retrieved the whistles from the safe and hurriedly hopped aboard Tulko, immediately traveling to Lion Mountain to find Gavin, who went with her to an active volcano in Hawaii so that the whistles could be permanently destroyed.

In addition to the inkling, Vini reasoned that people who were meant to call unicorns would learn to do so, the key being to become more Christlike, which every person should strive for.

On the trip, Gavin was wearing one of Chelsea's diamonds set into a ring. Near the heat of the volcano, the stone was full of flaming colors, like a fiery opal. At the same time in his youth that Gavin had been given the vision of Chelsea's eventual death, God had also let him know that this was meant to be and was all part of His overall plan. *She wouldn't have wanted to hide*, Gavin reminded himself. *She wanted to be out making a difference, no matter what the danger.*

On the flight home, he realized why he had been given that early vision. He had always assumed God was warning him not to interfere with what was meant to happen. However, the real reason was that knowing ahead of time had given Gavin time to grieve, so that when it happened, his emotions healed more quickly. *Time truly does heal all wounds*, he realized as he was just reaching his cabin.

Time was able to help many things besides healing come about; for one thing, the improving relationship between gnomes and puck trolls, who had once intensely disliked one another, but who now regularly traveled together, sometimes by glider and other times on birds or certain ground animals such as bobcats who very much liked to carry small magical creatures about.

The remains of two men lost during the uprisings had just been found, decayed, and well past the point that dragon tears would have worked to revive them; though, blessedly, the bodies had not been eaten on by scavengers because they had been heavily covered in debris.

Taken to the mountain, the bodies were just about to be buried when the white lion bounded onto the scene. Briefly lighting up as he had when exposing demons, the creature simply breathed on the corpses, which had the effect of raising the two men from the dead and back to their natural healthy and whole selves within only a few seconds.

Sasha and her parents were making firm plans. Connecting with a couple of Mr. Loll's former factory workers and some of the traders from the outside communities, the family had decided to leave the city and go to live on a ranch, where they would be free to investigate this thing called Christianity. Though outlawed, it seemed to be the reason as to why all of this had happened. "And laws don't matter much now anyway," Mr. Loll told his wife, "not to me anyway."

Mr. Loll was of an age that he remembered the U.S. Constitution, though it wasn't being taught when he was in school and had been changed so much that it was eventually completely scrapped. Now, the original document, like many others, was banned. Anyone possessing a copy could be thrown into prison. He remembered his father and grandfather talking about it, specifically, how it had been based on Christian principles, and how it was designed to protect people, all people.

Sasha had firmly decided that when they left the cities, she would make an effort to track down Arlene Daniels, to find out what she was up to. While she never would find her favorite tennis player, Sasha would end up connecting with Arlene's much younger sister, Belinda, and would become something of a mentor to her. The tracking down of Belinda would help Sasha discover a hidden talent for research.

Before the family left, Sasha was still in contact with Eizel, who was often up to no good, just like before the uprisings. One afternoon while the girls were taking a stroll through the city streets together, Eizel had just started to plant ugly thoughts into the mind of a passing utilities worker when Sasha decided she had had enough of this nonsense.

Picking up a sizeable chunk of concrete rubble, she told Eizel, "Stop it! Just stop it, or I'll bash you in the head with this! Then you'll never be able to do that again!"

Eizel's first reaction was anger, and she badly wanted to hurt Sasha; and she might have done so, except that something was holding her back. This was the one person who had stood by her through everything, and had never deserted her, no matter how much wrong she did. *If only everyone had a friend like this.* (In truth, everyone does, though some people choose not to recognize and accept Him.) While Eizel didn't particularly feel guilty for her wrongs, because she rarely did, she didn't want to lose Sasha as a friend; and at this point, she truly thought she might. And so, while refraining from lashing out at her friend, she did stop with the planting of thoughts, for the time being anyway.

Things were definitely changing in the cities, including amongst many of the elites. Instead of burning belongings, people were now holding swap meets, and even sharing, no matter what class each person belonged to. In Supe-6, a former camp manager stopped one of his neighbors from abusing a factory worker who hadn't yet managed to escape the city. "That's what got us into all of this mess," the manager said, "the way we treat other people."

Once her family moved, Sasha took particular delight in visiting libraries whenever she could. At her father's urging, she sought banned literature like the *Holy Bible*, and the works of writers such as John Milton and E.R. Tremain. Also doing some research on mind

manipulation, she learned of an object called the Mind Key, a magical sphere that, among other tricks, could plant powerful thoughts. Next tracking down the object itself, which took nearly a year, she managed to persuade a person trained in its use (specifically Merri Tremaine) to use the sphere on Eizel to convince her that she had a special gift that was meant to be used only for good. From that point on, Eizel broke from her evil ways, and ended up planting only pleasant thoughts into people's minds for the rest of her life.

But backing up a little in our story, to the week after Em returned from her visit to Kivetel, Weatherly was thinking about her next task, which was going to be an enormous one, and kind of amazing. But she didn't know why she should be amazed, for everything that had already happened in her life. Only two days before, she had had no inkling as to what was about to be set before her, though she should have because a particular bible verse kept springing to mind, Zechariah 9:13, which was both a quote and a promise. "He will wield me like a warrior's sword."

The voice in the back of Weatherly's head had, only the two days previous, told her to take a trip to Easter Island, which she did by hopping a rookh. Once there, she found a bottle just washed up on the shore that contained a message for her. Oddly enough, the handwriting actually looked like her own, though she knew she hadn't written the words; at least, not yet.

The message contained instructions on how to take the first step in her new journey, which involved paying a visit to the mezzanine, specifically, the door to Duodecessence, which Weatherly found incredible because she knew this was a realm human beings in their earthly states didn't have access to.

Indeed, as she opened the door and slipped inside, the voice in the back of her head told her that she was the only living person who would ever physically visit this realm, which looked much like it had in Charlie's vision, and in Vini's dream peek inside. The Tree of Life was fabulously healthy and strong, and full of the twelve kinds of fruit it was meant to bear, and the vibrant leaves that would eventually be used for the healing of the nations. The river running through the base of the tree was bright, silvery in tinge, and clear as crystals. To Weatherly's

ears, the sound of the water was musical, like soft breezes combined with the singing of angels and the faint rush of a waterfall.

Looking upriver while standing on a mossy bank fringed by acres upon acres of luminous flower-filled meadows broken up by patches of lush forest, she could see the mountain, presently bathed in a rainbow-colored mist, which prevented her from seeing anything that might be on the mountain, though Weatherly got the idea it might be volcanic because she was catching glimpses of what looked like flames through the mist.

I'm here for the water, not anything on the mountain, her mind decided, and this was confirmed not only by the voice in the back of her head, but also by a small flask appearing in her hands, which she bent down to fill with the silvery water.

The voice was also telling her what the water was to be used for—as basically a youth elixir, to keep her from aging while performing her new task, that of going back in time, permanently, to help make specific things happen according to God's plan. While living a new life in the past, because it was destined to be an incredibly long one, she would need the water to extend her life. *This will give me the time I need to accomplish the things God will be directing me to do.* Weatherly would still age while on this next stage of her journey; however, it would happen very slowly.

Just popping into her brain as she was leaving the doorway to the mezzanine were a few of the things she would need to help make happen in the past, such as making sure that the land for the plantations would be given into the right hands. She would also need to make sure the Seven Spheres came into being, and Laurelstone's stained glass windows. So too would she be involved in helping with certain things relating to America's Civil War. Weatherly would also be helping with time-travel portals getting built in four specific places of the world. Aside from the one at Laurelstone, only one other of the four was presently being used, by a person with a device similar to the Time Key. Also, she would need to make sure the original thimble to measure dragon tears would be made. Her tasks in her new life would be both large and small. She would need to help ensure that the mountain in Tennessee didn't get sold to a land developer. There was actually a coal mine nearby, which was fine. The mining activities wouldn't affect any

of the magical expansion activities eventually meant to happen on Lion Mountain, and the mine would be out of commission by the time the main migration to the mountain began. At one point, she was going to need to steer Professor Fulhausen in the right direction in his youth, so that he truly would become a Protector of Dragons. She would also be making sure Mr. Michaels came to live at the plantations. If not for him, the bigfoots wouldn't have taken much of an interest. They truly admired and adored him. But even further back in time than all of these things, Weatherly would be key to helping certain things happen in Europe so that the United States would come into being as it was meant to, according to God's plan.

Heading home, Weatherly reflected on her the visit to the Realm of Duodecescence, in which she had been able to feel God's love more strongly than ever, as well as see the future direction of her life more clearly than she ever had.

Passing very near one of the greenhouses situated behind Laurelstone, Weatherly was knocked off her feet when an explosion rocked the greenhouse. A pair of stealth hobs had planted an explosive device, and the creatures were still in the area. Just before the blast, she had faintly been able to smell the hobs. Leaping to her feet, she drew a blue rope from her shoulders. Since this was an invisible opponent, she closed her eyes and simply listened. She could definitely hear the elbow clicks of their movements; and counting the clicks, she could tell there were two. Less than twelve seconds later, both beasts were fully reduced to small piles of smoldering sludge.

While Weatherly had gotten cuts from flying bits of glass and metal, in particular, a deep and somewhat ragged two-inch cut on her cheek, she was more worried about the three bigfoots that had been inside the greenhouse. *They can't be healed by dragon tears*, her mind fretted as she ran inside in search of them. Blessedly, the bigfoots had only minor injuries, which clinic personnel would be easily able to treat. Weatherly would not be healed by dragon tears either because she had never approved of the use of them for smaller wounds, feeling this was a waste of such a gift as the healing tears.

After getting her cheek stitched up and various other cuts tended to, Weatherly hopped a rookh to follow up on something related to the

message in the bottle. The back of the message contained a small map of the location of something important situated on Lion Mountain.

This turned out to be a small spring trickling down the side of a rocky cliff in a secluded valley. The cliff was so lush with vegetation that she at first had difficulty locating the trickle, the water of which was silvery in tinge indicating that the spring was somehow connected to the river in Duodecescence. The twisted roots of an old oak were wrapped around the trickle, almost as though protectively hugging the spring.

Weatherly knew exactly what this meant even before the voice in her head told her. After going back in time, this was where she would find more of the water to keep her from aging. She wouldn't be able to access the river again through the mezzanine because she would be going back in time way before Netherwind was ever built.

The greenhouse explosion was related to two of Boko's moves, though he knew nothing too serious would happen as a result; and he actually wondered if his subconscious was making poor moves on purpose, in order to let his opponent win. In truth, like a lot of us, Boko had regrets about many of the decisions in his life that had led to his current predicament; and he vaguely wondered if any other fallen creatures ever felt this way, as though they had made mistakes. Sadly, his was not one that could ever be corrected. Because he wasn't a human being, his fate would be the same as that of the fallen angels. There were no second chances for him, as there were for people, who could always still be saved while living in their earthly states. No matter what their transgressions, if they were truly remorseful and asked for forgiveness, God always gave it, unlike Boko whose fate, like that of Satan's, was completely sealed. However, being designed to exist outside of time, he shouldn't feel weary. *So is it just the inevitable that is weighing on me?* Boko wondered.

Etowa had actually been looking on while Boko made one of his ineffectual moves. He could tell his opponent was tiring, which was a stark contrast to God's servants, who rarely tire, and are always victors.

On the same day that Weatherly was discovering the spring on the mountain, Figlin was out and about pulling pranks, including switching the dinners of two people who didn't live anywhere near one another. He also hung someone's hat high in a tree. Martella was also out on

this day and actually saw the hat prank, though she didn't pay much attention to it because her mind was filled with much more interesting observations, one of which involved the activities of a certain collector that she often saw in her travelers. This was a man who collected things like stones and interesting bits of glass and metal from many of the decaying cities to use in adding rooms to his house on the mountain. Having an eidetic memory, the man could remember exactly which cities each collected item came from, such as what had once been Fargo in North Dakota and Denton in Texas. Rookhs were helping the collector to travel. The man's house was taking a very interesting form and substance, rather like the melting pot of the mountain itself, containing folks from practically all over the world. And Martella might have even likened it to what was coming, New Jerusalem that is, the future home of many peoples of the earth.

With regard to the Rubble Cities, Martella had also observed in her recent travels that gnomes and topiaries, along with some bigfoots and even a few tamed orcs, were cleaning up some in the decaying cities, and constructing rubble gardens. Much as they had on Paloma Drive, these industrious beings were making some spectacular things out of the mess—benches, planters, retaining walls, monuments, walkways, etc., and actually turning these messy places into something incredibly lovely.

Lastly on this day, Martella observed Kip receiving a photograph from the genies in Erdém of a desert den filled with wolf pups whose father had been the wolf that died helping with the uprisings.

The day after Weatherly's discovery of the spring found Kinza setting out on a short mission to what was left of Supercity Four. Unknown to most people, Kinza had lost his left earlobe in an accident in his younger years when it was bitten off by a gremlin. Now, his prosthetic lobe (that looked absolutely real) was a perfect hiding place for certain poisons he occasionally liked to carry, such as a particularly nasty one with which, based on God's orders, he would do away with two sorcerers currently dominating the activities in Supe-4. These were men destined never to convert, and thus needed to be dealt with so that the city could take a different direction than the path it was presently on. Upon returning from this mission, and before going to live at the naval

base he had chosen as his permanent home, Kinza would accompany Dell on a couple of time-travel missions.

With regard to those who had been feeling frustrated and tired while waiting for the Endtimes, many now felt more hopeful, and like they didn't mind waiting a while longer, maybe even a lot longer, since the world was starting to look like it might be a better place for their children and grandchildren to live in.

As to why much of the ugliness had happened (mainly the sorcerers taking over and making slaves of most people), a good many older people were able to reflect and reason things out. They remembered their grandparents (and even some parents) living in excess, and not teaching good values to their children. Many others lived on welfare, taking advantage, though they were perfectly capable of working and jobs were available. Former atheists remembered being so stubbornly stuck on false ideas that they hadn't been able to look in another direction to actually see the truth. Similarly, activists had been focused on petty social issues, like the banning of certain books and the politically-correct use of gender pronouns, rather than on important issues such as feeding the hungry and making advancements in affordable healthcare. Most of these people had omitted God entirely from their lives, while passing laws to deny those who wanted to worship Christ openly and share their beliefs the freedom to do so. However, God knows that we need Him, and He wants us to cry out to Him; and suffering truly does have the power to soften our hearts and open our minds. Now, with a clearer understanding of past mistakes, most people were intent on coming together to live as they should, revering God and with respect for others. As they did so, storms and other natural disasters around the world eased, particularly in Christ-centered communities, because God was raising his hedge of protection to again protect His children. And many were remembering the promise of 2 Chronicles 7:14. “...if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.”

The goal of the sorcerers had been to make us lose hope, turn on one another, and give our souls to Satan; while the goal of active Christians had been to foster hope and get people to places of safety.

Now, the main goal was to stay safe, help others, and listen carefully to God's direction while waiting for the return of Jesus. The earth—particularly places like the self-sustaining communities and Lion Mountain—holds all that we need to survive until the Endtimes. In fact, our current home is a most beautiful and bountiful place, and one that we simply need to take care of, while we care for each other.

Taking a short break from relocating the dragons, Quin was visiting Linn in his lab when a small open box on one of the tables caught her attention. Inside was a pair of ears, newly designed by Linn.

Noting his friend's interest, Linn said in an incredibly serious tone, "Artificial ears, for someone who lost theirs in a recent stealth hob attack."

"That's horrible!" Quin said, as Linn nodded in empathy. Examining the ears more closely, she asked, "Why are they so pointy?"

"It's the antennas in them," Linn responded. "They are super-powered so the person can hear conversations from miles away."

"So they are spy ears," Quin said, marveling at Linn's cleverness. "They're fairly small," she mused a moment later. "They must be for a somewhat small person."

Just then, Ruth and her mother arrived at the lab, specifically, to pick up the pair of ears.

As Linn was helping Ruth fit the ears over her real ears, Mrs. Evans told Quin, "She's been reading about elves in a storybook, and they are having a dress-up day at school tomorrow, so she's going as an elf princess."

After mother and daughter left the lab, Quin said, "So they are not super-powered spy ears."

Shrugging, Linn continued to keep a perfectly-straight face as he took his place at his work station.

Quin was smiling as she left the lab. It was wonderful to see Linn pretty much back to his old self, with energy enough not only to joke around some, but also to make things like dress-up ears for little girls.

Indeed this was true; Linn was much his old self. In fact, he was planning to make a pair of fairy wings next, for another little girl he had just met at church.

Chapter Twenty-Three Mountains of Mystery

“He has made everything beautiful in its time; also he has put eternity into man’s mind, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.” Ecclesiastes 3:11

Em was reading the bible the first Saturday in June when Daniel 2:20-22 specifically jumped out at her. ““Blessed be the name of God for ever and ever, to whom belong wisdom and might. 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.””

After pondering the passage for a bit, she jumped up to fish around in her sock drawer. Finding what she was looking for, she immediately hopped on an airbike to head to Netherwind, specifically to the third floor, where she opened a wall panel in order to hide the item from her sock drawer in the secret niche that Heike and Pizzo had shown her when she was fourteen. This sock-drawer item was something Zin would eventually discover, and that would end up being of great help to her.

Alex had just figured out the mystery of the expansion of Lion Mountain. Since the answer wasn’t as obvious to others as it was to him, he ended up explaining, first, to his little sister. Meg listened carefully as he told her, “The Mountain is Jesus, or at least a small part of Him, and has to expand to accommodate any number of believers. The expansion will continue because there is room for all to come to Christ, and for all to receive His love. And He definitely provides and protects, which is why the Mountain has so many resources, is so fertile, and why the nature spirits are protective. The bible is full of other such miracles of provision,” he added, “like the story of the five loaves and

two fish. Promises too; Jesus promises to always help us, and He will never leave us.”

From her bedroom window as her brother left her room, Meg saw a rainbow in the shape of a spikey crown over one of the highest peaks of the Mountain. The bow appeared to be hovering, as though waiting to be fitted to the King.

Alex had also just learned the incredible and almost unbelievable secret of rainbows, which involved promises, colors, the number seven, doves, and peacocks all rolled into one. In the future, when others learned the secret, and fully believed, many people were not only going to be able to fly, but also walk on water.

Although many mysteries end up being solved, there often seems no end to others coming into our focus. Sand dollars were a good example of this. While people had over the years figured out a lot of the symbolism reflected in the dollars, the five doves were still a pretty big mystery, though many speculated that the winged creatures were not doves at all, but butterflies, representing the transformation we all must make when becoming part of God’s family. Related to the fact that the sand dollars need to be broken in order for the butterflies (or doves) to be released, many felt this meant that people often need to be broken before they can be remade.

The true answer was something that even eluded Alex when he pondered, though Vini could have told him (if he had asked) that both doves and butterflies were correct. And in explaining about dying to self in order to truly live, she would have pointed him to John 12:24-25. “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” Both doves and butterflies were correct because both could represent human beings becoming more like God intended, having the complete freedom of the “prisoners of hope” in their “strongholds” per Zechariah 9:12. As far as the number five, this was symbolic of Quintessence and a perfect state of hope, joy, and peace, achieved by using our brains more and thereby learning to use more of our brains.

Aunt Patty had just been brought to her family on the Mountain by a former ESS member. After the tears and hugs of the initial reunion,

Ruth realized it was now okay to share the secret she had been keeping since their escape from the work camp. “He gave me a sandwich in the bamboo field,” she happily chirped, pointing to the man who had brought Aunt Patty and who was now having coffee with her father at the kitchen table.

While her parents at first didn’t know what to make of this, and thought their daughter must be confused, the statement was indeed true.

In the afternoon in the field, while petting Bunny and praying with her eyes closed, Ruth had accidentally dropped the last half of her oat cake into the dirt. By the time she opened her eyes, the cake was covered with ants. Hungry, she was very sad, and was just trying to figure out if she could somehow get the ants off to eat the cake anyway when a Snake suddenly appeared standing over her. Smiling, the man pulled a sandwich from his pocket and gave it to her, while tossing the oak cake far into the field to get the ants away from her. Then, he strode off. While Ruth was delighted to have a sandwich, and a whole one that tasted like turkey, she was a little worried that the man might be planning come back, or send someone else to come and get her. However, in keeping with the instructions from her parents, she didn’t move; and when she remembered that the man had put his finger to his lips, as if telling her to remain quiet, she began to think that she would probably be okay until her parents came to get her. In truth, the man was more of a Lizard than a Snake. And if Mr. and Mrs. Evans had seen what Ruth saw during their escape, they might have been able to guess this because the very man who gave their daughter the sandwich was the same bumbling ESS that “accidentally” shot the megahob that had been loosed to come after them.

Ruth ended up being able to return the favor of the sandwich because the man stayed to have lunch with them.

At the same time the Evans family was lunching with the Lizard, Charlie was having a vision that was a continuation of one she had had in her youth, of a pure-white horse being born in Duodecescence. She had reasoned many years back that this was the horse Jesus would ride in the Endtimes. In her new vision, she glimpsed the white horse all grown up, just before her gaze shifted to a dark and distant valley in which four more horses were being born. Very quickly discerning that

these were for the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, she wondered if the Endtimes might be close at hand.

She wasn't frightened by the thought, especially when taking note that the pure-white horse was born first, which made perfect sense because Jesus was always first, having been a part of God's plan from the beginning of it all. *But He will also be last because He is the Alpha and the Omega*, she thought, taking heart in knowing for certain that He was coming again.

As to whether or not the pure-white horse was a regular horse or a magical one, Charlie got the idea the creature was simply a regular horse. *The Lord once rode a donkey, so why not a regular horse?* she reasoned. *But if horses generally only live thirty to forty years, does that mean the Endtimes will happen that soon?*

Not necessarily, her mind answered her. *Time in Duodecessence might pass differently, like it does in Antica and Kivetel. Plus, the people and creatures in those places are incredibly long lived.*

Or Duodecessence might be outside of time? her brain suggested to her, just as she coughed from having inhaled a thistle seed.

Since human beings were not meant to know when the Second Coming would happen, Charlie knew it was pretty useless to speculate, though it was hard not to puzzle over the possibilities, particularly because she hadn't been able to tell where the dark valley was. If the birthplace of the four horses was someplace on earth, the Endtimes probably were close at hand; if not, they might not be.

With regard to the mystery of Telén, as we might have expected, he was indeed a converted sorcerer, and had been way before Rhett was converted. In fact, he had contacted Weatherly nearly two decades back, which was when their plan began to get him into his position of today, fully in charge of the Council of Twos. Locking up Gavin had actually helped make many sorcerers trust Telén enough to keep him in top position. Knowing that God's ways are often mysterious, we probably shouldn't be surprised to discover that the sorcerer in charge of all other sorcerers in the U.S. is a Christian.

Telén had actually sent Rhett to be captured, and saved. Now, the Governor Ruler would continue his efforts to convert as many sorcerers as possible. Sadly, this would not be possible for all sorcerers due to some being too faithful to Satan, as well as wily enough not to let

themselves get trapped in a situation in which conversion might be forced upon them. Jerome had been one of those crafty individuals. Vidas might be another. But it only does take one person to start a chain reaction, and turn the tide very quickly. Telén was definitely one such person. When his efforts for God began, only one in three thousand sorcerers was converted. Now, he was closing in on one in four.

Astrid was an example of a fabulous unsolved mystery. In addition to not knowing her true age, no one knew anything about her origins. As a longtime friend, Bear knew she was able to time travel, though he didn't know details, such as that she used a portal on the Mountain known only to her, or that she possessed a device similar to the Time Key.

She did keep a secret journal, mainly recording certain tasks she had completed in her life, such as one relating to Liget Trees, which had actually gone extinct a couple of hundred years past. Traveling back in time, Astrid had made a few things happen that righted this wrong; thus, the trees were available for use on the Mountain. She had also connected with magicians in the past to make sure the Seven Spheres came into being. On another time-travel trip, Astrid protected Mrs. Doyle's grandfather who was teen fighting in WWI.

Of course, much of Astrid's work had nothing to do with time travel, but simply with what she had done over the years of her incredibly long life, lived mainly in Tennessee and in the vicinity of what became Lion Mountain. With regard to certain of her tasks that people actually knew about, she was once known to have entered a Demon Pocket by herself to free two people trapped inside, which she accomplished while only incurring a couple of bruises, though the pocket was known to contain thousands of foul creatures.

Love was often described as being mysterious, and Zin had just figured out the mystery of Quin and Linn, as far as their ultimate connection to one another. Confiding in Ethan, Zin said, "I'll be the odd man out soon. No more Three Musketeers."

"You'll get married yourself someday," Ethan replied.

"Oh, unlikely," Zin snorted in mirth. "I'll be forever married to my work." (This wasn't actually correct because Zin was destined to team up with a converted sorcerer in the not-too-distant future.)

Genie wishes had long confounded human beings, though some people were able to figure out that the tiny creatures didn't grant many wishes because people didn't have the good sense to wish for the right things. However, a person in contact with a genie had just wished for God's will to be done. With God in control of everything, the wish was already granted before it was made, which meant the genie had to do nothing at all for the wish to be granted. Because this was the first time any genie had ever encountered a wish recipient with the good judgement to ask for something so wonderfully inevitable, the genie decided to grant the person a secret desire of the heart, though the person would end up thinking that God had granted the secret wish, as part of His will.

Communication was currently being enhanced between the communities, though people were wary of relying too much on tech devices, even ones made by genies, because many bible scholars still believed technical things weren't going to work in the future. Since dawn pigeons and kites seemed likely to always be plentiful, many were sticking to these choices, even though they didn't provide instantaneous communication. But the prevailing philosophy was that we all should learn a little patience. With this in mind, letter writing came back into fashion. Some children didn't even know what a letter was let alone how to write one. And so, this was being taught again in schools. Thus, the postal system was expanded, and was not profit driven, because dawn pigeons, rookhs, horses, Post Riders, etc. didn't care about profit. They simply liked to serve. If more people liked to serve rather than be served, the world would be a much better place.

Related to communication between communities, while the matching program to reunite families was going well, Ethan and his mother had not yet found his younger siblings. They were still hopeful, though they also recognized that not all missing family members would be found alive. This might particularly apply to children since many were killed for their organs, as well as abused or neglected in other ways. The Leftovers had just connected with two family members, a cousin of Mr. Weiss and an uncle to Clara and Marie.

For the sorcerers, the communication situation was much different. With nyregs less plentiful, and some beginning to rebel from feeling overworked, efels had begun to carry messages. However, since the

stealth blackbirds were still such a new creation (early models), they were crashing much of the time; therefore, many messages didn't end up where they were supposed to. This greatly added to the chaos of the sorcerers, who were still struggling to hold things together after the uprisings. "We can't even do this right!" some lamented in frustration. With everything still in such an upheaval, many of the sorcerers felt almost as though someone inside had lately been sabotaging everything they were doing.

With regard to the servant creatures, if the sorcerers had stopped to think about this, they would have realized their main problem. People were never meant to create other living beings. Only God should be in charge of this; otherwise, we simply get ourselves into trouble.

Chapter Twenty-Four

A Thousand Years

“For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night.” Psalm 90:4

We might wrap up our story by taking a snapshot of roughly a thousand years and looking at a few events—past, present, and future—occurring within this timeline.

In the present, on the second Monday in July to be exact, Halli and Magsen received official orders from God to act as protectors for Em and Zin, respectively. Folto was so proud of her girls, and the sisters were truly happy to learn that the Father felt they were ready for their first assignments.

The next day found the gryphons bidding farewell to Weatherly, who was making the rounds to say a few goodbyes before leaving on some sort of mysterious adventure, possibly never to return.

While Weatherly had thought she wouldn't be time traveling again, she would have to in order to begin her new task. But this time, she wouldn't be coming back from the past. She had no qualms about leaving the plantations and the Underground Army in the more-than-capable hands of Kip and Merri. Plus, Dell was already fully running all time-travel activities. In preparing to leave, Weatherly simply packed up a few things from her bedroom and study into a small bag. Knowing that God would be providing for all of her needs, she had decided to travel light.

In contemplating the task in front of her, Isaiah 58: 10-12 came to mind. “...if you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday. And the LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your desire with good things, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters fail not. And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the

foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to dwell in.”

Weatherly had been getting even more information from the voice in the back of her head about some of the really big historical events she was destined to be involved in, such as an operation relating to Genghis Khan in China. She would also meet Henry VIII, and make a move relating to a certain battle of the French Revolution. However, most of her work would pertain to more personal things, ones much closer to home as far as her own future. For instance, she would end up making sure Aunt Eugenia as a young girl found the Genie Diaries. She would also help ensure that Pizzo’s father would come to live at Doyle Mansion. So too would Weatherly direct certain magicians toward the plantations. Making contact with genies of the past would also be a priority, in order to get their help with certain things, like connecting with the oodus to make the tunnels in which the Labyrinth Library would be situated. Weatherly would also end up taking out some of the evil Genie Hunters of the past, which would help the genies to trust her. The fact that she had a few of their future creations on hand, such as foldable crosses and bibles, would also help gain their trust. God would give her many tasks over the years leading up to her own birth, which she would need to stay well clear of, and well clear of her younger self.

Weatherly saw the lengthy task at hand as a huge blessing, as well as a way to atone for her mistake with the Ignacio situation. While she knew God had forgiven her, and she had forgiven herself, she was also disappointed in herself. Looking back, she still almost couldn’t believe what she had done. But this was true of a lot of people. When mulling over certain past words and actions, we might be tempted to think someone else had been saying and doing those unbelievable things. When reflecting on why it all happened, one thing kept sticking in her mind. *When we are weak, we are strong, because we can see the power of God in our lives as He picks us up and moves us forward.*

Weatherly truly did see this as God taking her weakness and making it into strength. Now, she was more determined than ever. Looking back, she had been feeling a little burned out, and perhaps somewhat lacking in fresh purpose. Now, she definitely wanted to take on new challenges, not necessarily in an effort to fix a mistake (which couldn’t be fixed), or make up for one, but for making more use of her

gifts before the end, and possibly in different ways. God can change anything, and make anything happen, even when we make mistakes, because there truly is nothing He can't work with.

When deciding what to take with her, she of course made sure to pack the flask of silvery water that would be needed to extend her life to complete everything God intended for her to do. Water from the spring was what had been given to Linn by Astrid, who had been using the water for a very long time to accomplish all God intended for her to accomplish. As far as being ready to go, Weatherly only had a few more goodbyes to make, while wrapping up a couple of military things.

As far as the future of others, in taking a glance forward to an unknown time (but still within the thousand-year snapshot), we find the game of Etowa and Boko ended. Not paying much attention to time, they didn't even know exactly when they finished playing, but Boko had intentionally lost the game. Having long known he would eventually lose because Satan has already lost to Christ, it didn't matter to him when it happened. When taking his place in hell, he would frequently wonder why any human beings would choose to go there, when it was easy to take the simple step to ensure they wouldn't. The place wasn't even originally designed for human beings. Intended only for Satan and the other fallen angels, it had been enlarged to include the lost of mankind, those rejecting Christ. Enlarged didn't mean taking up space, because all of hell actually fit into a thimble. But because it was larger than originally intended, this was why God sometimes employed dragons to help keep hellfire from brimming over.

Also at an unknown time in the future, a genie received instructions from God to stop the Clock of the Universe for a short period of time. When the clock was stopped, all living things were frozen in place. Time itself didn't stop, but the activities of every living creature did, along with all movement in the universe. This had only happened one other time in all of history, and God Himself had done it. But this time, He was allowing one of His servants to help. When the clock started again, everything continued on as normal.

Within the next hundred years of looking forward in our snapshot, more and more magicians came into being. They had so long been outnumbered by sorcerers. Now came an age of balance with regard to the numbers of magicians and sorcerers.

Zin would mentor many, and would be the one to come up with the Magicians' Creed, which stated, "With knowledge and gifts given to us by God, we serve Him, for the purpose of helping humankind survive, grow in the Word of God, and bear good fruit; but we recognize that our accomplishments are nothing compared to the signs, wonders, and miracles performed by God."

The evil sorcerers had a creed too, but not a very good one, based on deception and limited thinking. Living within the confines of this creed, they seemed mainly to deceive and limit themselves.

Also within the next hundred years, we see more evolution of the gifted, with the gifts becoming stronger. For example, Birch Hathaway's descendants would not only be able to calm storms, but also raise them. The Sparrow's granddaughter would have the power to become invisible. With the completely unlimited nature of Christianity, we shouldn't be surprised by the evolution of God's children. This, of course, was not at all like the "evolution" once taught in schools, currently being called "evolution" by godly people, because it was so flawed a theory. People could not possibly have evolved from apes, and this had long been proven by scientists; yet, the theory of evolution had continued to be taught to school children as fact for nearly two centuries. What a way to cheat our children, by denying them the truth of Creationism.

Our true evolution, the one God intended, partly involves tapping into the unused part of our brains. With regard to the purpose of our evolution, God is equipping us to take on the future because the evils that are coming are going to be even greater than the ones faced previously. But for now, in the present, we are granted a small reprieve.

Weatherly was ready to go, and Preston had decided to go with her. She hadn't even asked him, but was incredibly pleased because this was very like having a secret wish come true. For Preston's part, without even knowing specifics, he could tell his friend was about to embark on something really big, and he felt she might need help. All human beings need help once in a while because no man or woman is an island. Eleta would not be going back in time with Preston because she was about to be assigned to a new charge. In knowing this was what God intended, she wasn't sad. Nor was she worried for her best friend

because she knew that Preston was more than capable of looking after himself.

Weatherly and Preston would not be using the Time Key or a portal to travel because Vini—having full unicorn powers, including the ability to time travel—would be taking them back. Preston was only just now noticing the bioluminescence of his sister, whose body was glowing all of the time. Her shadow was also much lighter, barely noticeable in fact.

While achieving full sanctification had taken much of her life, the actual change had come about super quickly. She just instantly found she had the powers, and this reminded her of the first part of 1 Corinthians 15:51-52. “Lo! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye....”

As far as how it felt to be in the fully-sanctified state, if anyone had asked (which they didn’t for some odd reason), she might have said, “My heart is tap dancing with joy even in times of darkness. My mind is blanketed in the warmth and comfort of the ultimate peace and light. And my soul is completely steeped in hope, like a garden constantly nourished by gentle rain.” Summing this up in one of her journal entries, she wrote, “Unicorns water the soil of the soul in order to grow the flowers of the heart.”

Weatherly was carrying her bag by a strap over one shoulder, and Preston was wearing a backpack, when Vini joined hands with the pair, after which, they all three simply vanished.

Vini reappeared instantly, though she had spent nearly a month with Weatherly and Preston in their new home and time, both of which would remain secret by God’s direction.

Over the years, Preston would recall seeing his sister for the last time, full of golden light, reminding him of when she came to get him all those years ago when he was time traveling and got stuck in the seventies. Her light was nearly identical to that of the unicorn that had brought them both back home.

Vini cried a little upon her return, both sad and happy tears. While she would never see her brother again, she was full of joy that he and Weatherly were embarking on a new journey together.

The key to time travel was the ability to enter Quintessence through the doorway in her mind, located in the unused part of the brain. Also

key was the fact that the horn of the unicorn can pierce darkness, any darkness, which Vini had long known in relation to the unicorn's effect on depression, and with regard to the creature's ability to dispel great evil forces.

Telén was aware that Vidas was ever watching him, which was actually fine with Telén as he had long subscribed to the concept of keeping friends close and enemies closer. With Vidas likely the only one who could currently challenge him, Telén basically needed to know what his rival was up to all of the time. However, since turnabout is definitely fair play, Telén had several people watching Vidas.

The gremlin problem was getting worse and worse. Now, no rails at all were operational, mainly because there were fewer demons to protect the systems from gremlins who, having now run out of rails, were again targeting the cities. With more and more things breaking in the cities, more and more people were talking about leaving.

Gremlins had long had trouble getting into the self-sustaining communities, mainly due to enormice, wind horses, gargoyles, and such. But gremlins had to break things—it was in their DNA—and so of course would focus on the cities, much to the chagrin of the sorcerers, who simply hadn't thought things through when breeding so many of them.

In a den in one of the cities, a sorcerer developed a gremlin detector to sniff out the creatures. However, the device didn't work for long because a gremlin broke it. Meanwhile, people from the self-sustaining communities—when traveling into gremlin-infested areas and lacking rose-colored glasses—were simply carrying flour with them to toss out. The flour worked well, briefly sticking to the gremlins' invisible shapes to reveal them. While Linn and others like him could have created gremlin detectors, they decided not to, instead choosing to put away a lot of devices, since these were not going to help us survive in the future anyway.

When the Supercities and camps were in full swing, many people had almost given up hope. But God was definitely at work, making Himself known to those who seek Him, and working through those whom He could trust, all through the times of trials and testing of Christians, who had become more staunch and devout followers precisely because of the trials. Now less fretful as to how soon the

Endtimes might come, many were content to wait, while taking heart in the promise of Isaiah 40:31. "...but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint." Any who might still be impatient were often referred by their friends or pastors to Habakkuk 2:3-4. "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."

As far as government, who knows what people would now decide to do? The U.S. had ventured so far from what our Founding Fathers intended, many were now thinking this might be the time to go back. After all, our Constitution was what had originally made this country great. Sadly, subsequent generations had torn it apart. But we are often given second chances, when evil suffers setbacks. With Christianity in the midst of a revival, God's children would now have a chance to fix things.

All in all, people were in pretty good shape for the coming times; but we of course need to stay diligent.

Quin was being diligent, in watching over the sleeping dragons that were eventually going to help remake the earth with fire. Often when contemplating their role in the Endtimes, Matthew 13:40 came to mind. "Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the close of the age." Another of her favorites was Malachi 4:1. "For behold, the day comes, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch."

Still troubled by how many dragons were lost at Lake Atitlán, Quin was given a lovely daydream of reassurance. In the vision, she saw multitudes of baby dragons being born in a volcano (location unknown) that was acting as something of a dragon nursery. Also in the daydream, as time sped forward, she saw the talking magical peacock readying itself for war, donning armor. *The peacock will have the power to wake the sleeping dragons*, she realized. The bird, as he was dressing, was reciting the following. "God is still in control; He has a plan—a magnificent plan that we are all part of. Jesus is coming again.

Until then, we need to be patient, keep the faith, and continue to wind the Clock of the Universe.”

At the same time Quin was having the daydream, a napping Vini was having a dream of angels putting on armor, to get ready to accompany Jesus for the Second Coming. In her dream, the talking peacock was reminding her, “The Lord will come like a thief in the night, so we need to be prepared, and continue to warn people. We don’t want anyone to be left behind.”

While Quin was daydreaming and Vini was dreaming, Em was writing a poem about being ready when the trumpets start blowing and the angels come reaping, because we don’t want to be late when Jesus comes again.

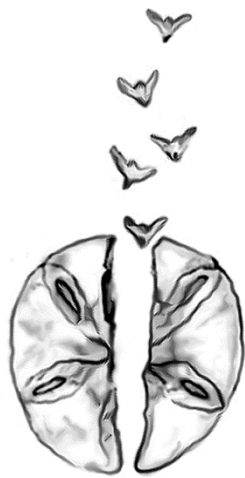
Although the Future may sometimes look rather bleak, we can have Faith that the End here is merely the Beginning...

“For behold, the LORD will come in fire, and his chariots like the stormwind, to render his anger in fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire. For by fire will the LORD execute judgment, and by his sword, upon all flesh; and those slain by the LORD shall be many.”

Blessedly, God’s children can rest assured in our future...

“...for he is the living God, enduring for ever; his kingdom shall never be destroyed, and his dominion shall be to the end. He delivers and rescues, he works signs and wonders in heaven and on earth....”

—Isaiah 66:15-16, Daniel 6:26-27





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