

Noontime in the Peacock Garden



J.H. Sweet

Clock Winders Series

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Noontime in the Peacock Garden

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But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn,
which shines brighter and brighter until full day.

—Proverbs 4:18

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Chapter One

An Underling Named Mee

To be clear, underlings generally don't have names. But perhaps we should first back up a little and explain that underlings are the lowest form of demon within the ranks of demons. In addition to being servants to higher-ups like sorcerers and Senior Demons, underlings are often assigned to prey on individual human beings to torment them in various ways such as through temptation, causing accidents, stirring up anger and suspicion, encouraging evil acts, and sometimes trying to overwhelm a person with guilt or sorrow. Underlings are often assigned to unbelievers in an attempt to keep them from ever knowing Jesus by fostering things like doubt, prejudice, and hatred. When assigned to those who have already accepted Christ as Savior, an underling might encourage some of our worst traits to come forth, such as pride, jealousy, a critical spirit, greed, a tendency to lie, etc.

When underlings are first created, they have limited use of language. Thus, when Mee first decided he wanted a name, he didn't have much to choose from. He didn't like "Scum" as a name, this being a word spewed at him early on by a sorcerer. "Toad" wasn't much better. However, upon overhearing a conversation in which "Me" was used by a sorcerer referring to himself, Mee thought this would be a fine name, the extra "e" getting added because Mee didn't know how to spell very well. The name was kept secret, of course, since he didn't think the higher-ups would allow underlings to have official names.

When the higher-ups bothered to call Mee anything but derogatory names, he was simply referred to as 8-2-4, since he was number eight hundred and twenty-four of a batch of thirteen thousand underling demons created by a fallen angel at the start of the Supercities coming into being across the globe, this being the Great Centralization that took place roughly between the years of 2045 and 2060, when most of the world's population was herded into these large cities and various work

camps to become slaves of the sorcerers and certain other elite groups of people.

In addition to desiring to be more special than just a number, Mee wanted a name by way of rebellion, in being often mad at the higher-ups who were frequently cruel to many of the underlings. Mee was tired of getting hit by flicklets (very like long bendy switches), the blue ones hurting worst of all in comparison to the red and green ones, which were also pretty nasty to get hit with. So too were whips and toe pounders (wicked hammers basically) often used on underlings whose purpose was most often that of being servants to other demons; though certainly underlings were also bossed around by sorcerers, which seemed to be happening a lot of late by Mee's estimation, and fallen angels, including Satan himself; except this would be incredibly rare in occurrence.

Four major divisions existed amongst the demons—underlings, pages, junior demons, and Senior Demons—with only Senior Demons being capitalized when used in a written manner, because Senior Demons liked to assert themselves over others of their kind. Mimics and print doubles, the most advanced forms of demons, weren't included amongst these divisions, largely because they were much fewer in number and tended to work on special projects. Already being assured of their superiority over other demons, the mimics and print doubles didn't particularly care if their titles were capitalized or not.

While many more ranks (military in style) existed within the great masses of fallen angels, who had originally created the demons to be their servants, four was enough for the ordinary demons; though certainly there was some division within the four groups, such as some underling bullies calling themselves top underlings. Plus, younger Senior Demons only gained seniority and certain privileges, like having specifically assigned underlings and pages to serve them, when their elders were killed. Pages tended to think they were higher than underlings on the food chain, when really they were just messengers and errand boys, often doing nothing but menial chores. And so, in Mee's book, they weren't any better, despite being bigger than underlings, though not as large as junior demons and Senior Demons, who could vary as far as size, but were most often not as small in their standard form as those in the lower ranks. In case we might be

wondering, standard form with regard to demons includes powerful wings with sharp protrusions, scaly tough hide, sharp teeth and fangs, muscular arms and legs, deadly claws, and pointy ears. Most Senior Demons range in height from ten to twelve feet, and in general have a wingspan of eight to fifteen feet. At not quite four feet tall, and with a wingspan of just under six feet, Mee in his standard form was midsized amongst his fellow underlings.

Aside from the issue of the flicklets, whips, and toe pounders, Mee was really tired of the constant criticism and browbeating his kind received from the higher-ups, who also often took credit for anything good underlings might have done, like keeping various human beings from accepting Christ or getting certain of God's children to commit sins. So too did underlings tend to get blamed for the mistakes made by their bosses; hence, the regular use of the punishment devices.

Though similar to higher demons, the skills of underlings were not as sharp as those of their superiors. However, advanced or not, underlings were still formidable. They could shapeshift nearly as well as junior demons, which made them capable of hiding in some pretty small places, like up skinny chimneys and inside wall cracks. Plus, they were easily able to impersonate simple everyday objects and creatures, and so often didn't have to hide at all in order to do their work. Mee was particularly good at looking like rocks, logs, and even smooth-shelled turtles. And since he could plant influencing thoughts and make other mischief from a pretty fair distance (like forty feet or so), he didn't have to worry if his shapeshifting skills were a little lacking, because unless someone got really close to him while he was looking like a fence post, it didn't particularly matter if his left foot at the bottom of the post still held the form of scales, gnarly toes, and claws. Underlings could raise storms nearly as well as higher demons, though generally not as quickly; and while their flying and running speeds were not up to par with larger demons, they could still attain and maintain flying speeds of over one hundred mph, with their footspeed being roughly fifty mph sustained.

And speaking of speed, Mee needed to get going for the day. His home base in Southern Tennessee happened to be in a Demon Pocket, basically a mini-realm acting mainly as a depository for evil creatures such as demons, gremlins, megahobs (giant hobgoblins), etc. While

Demon Pockets varied in form, this one was very like a large cavern, with the main entrance resembling a wide cave opening set deep under a cliff overhang situated high on a steep and rocky hillside. With the sun just starting to show itself on this chilly early-December morning, Mee left his home base, taking to the skies immediately to make his way to a site in Central Alabama in search of the human he had lately been assigned to torment.

Mee found fourteen-year-old Sal Ricci exactly where he expected to find him, in a Rubble Garden in the neighborhood that also held Doyle Mansion, the home of Sal's mentor, the famous writer E.R. Tremaine (better known as Em to most people of her acquaintance), whom Sal had an appointment with later in the morning. The boy had favored spending time in this spot in recent days, to Mee's dismay. *A garden, yuck*, he thought with a grimace on each visit when gazing at the masses of shrubs, large shade trees, flower beds, pecan and apricot groves, the grape arbor, and several sizable vegetable plots. In fact, the Rubble Garden was so large at seven acres to be more like a park, parks being something Mee also despised. At least right now the foliage was mostly dormant, the barrenness of it somewhat soothing Mee's discomfort at being there, as he averted his eyes from looking at a stretch of healthy rose bushes blooming in a variety of colors, the beauty and brightness of them actually hurting his eyes in a stinging sort of way. His eyes watering, Mee might have wanted to tear up the evergreen bushes, but for the risk of getting found out. He had to be somewhat careful in certain settings, such as this one, since it wouldn't be much fun for an underling to meet a bigfoot intent on avenging roses; or worse yet, a couple of gnomes, who might be even more likely to tear him to pieces than a bigfoot.

While some humans helped with things like weeding and pruning, bigfoots and gnomes mostly tended the garden, which had been fashioned out of bits of old houses, cars, fences, driveways, etc. Bricks and chunks of concrete made up walkways and retaining walls. Bathtub planters were common, as were trellises and benches made from bicycle parts and bedframes. Lettuce boxes, holding much more than just lettuce varieties, had been fashioned from old windows, with the boxes serving to protect the radishes, baby squash, parsnips, and such from both cold weather and local critters.

Sal actually lived about fifty miles away at the twin plantations, also known as Netherwind and Laurelstone. Demons weren't often able to find their way onto properties like Doyle Mansion and the twin plantations that were constantly guarded by the likes of puck trolls, gargoyles, wind horses, and gryphons. So despite having to spend time in the Rubble Garden, Mee was actually glad to have such easy access to his assignment. In truth, he was also glad to have Sal, who had spent nearly all of November with relatives in New Hampshire, back home again. Not only was this area much closer to Mee's home base, where he needed to check in every few days, the weather was much better in the South, despite the whole of the U.S. experiencing a colder-than-average fall, and with winter, basically on today's doorstep, promising to be fairly brutal as well.

In truth, demons were not often bothered by the weather, since things like cold and wind didn't affect them as they might humans. However, it was definitely easier to work when not being buffeted by wind, blasted by snow, drenched in rain, and so forth. Despite being adept at raising storms, demons were often wary when doing so, not just due to the possible hindrance to their work, but also because of the lightning the storms might produce, this being a whole problem in and of itself since lightning was much more a tool of God than of demons. Plus, with demons firmly entrenched in the darkness of the fallen world, the whole "light" aspect of lightning was extremely vexing to them, in keeping with the bible quote of 1 John 1:5. "This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him is no darkness at all." Also, Matthew 24:27 likens the impending return of Jesus to lightning. "For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of man."

While watching Sal, who was simply sitting at a picnic table (one of five in a grouping) and occasionally scribbling in a notebook, Mee was specifically thinking about light as he glanced uncomfortably in the direction of a large standing mirror that had been placed at the end of a long row of lettuce boxes, specifically to act as a heliostat to bring more light into an area shaded by several enormous evergreen oaks. Mee hated the light reflecting off of the mirror, especially when he thought of how God's children had learned to make light weapons out of mirrors. Plus, light had the ability to expose things in darkness, like

demons, and certain sins of human beings, who tended to sin more in the dark than in the light. Although Mee hated all mirrors, the one in the garden especially irked him. *Helping to make plants grow; how disgusting*, his mind told him.

At least breakfast-time had passed on this day, so Mee didn't have to watch his assignment consume any yucky oatmeal bars plump with raisins and pecans, or a nectarine, or a banana. *Or worse, grapes*, Mee thought, giving a shudder over the nastiness of it all when glancing at the nearby grape arbor that, to his satisfaction, presently only held masses of woody vines, barren of leaves and fruit.

In glancing back at the mirror, Mee considered that he might have chosen a time when the area was free of gnomes and bigfoots to come back and smash the evil device, except for knowing that a spell to make the mirror unbreakable had been placed upon it by a sixteen-year-old female magician living down the street, at Doyle Mansion actually.

And speaking of the magician, Zin Summerhaven had just arrived in the garden, to Sal's surprise as well as Mee's.

"I'm meeting Tanner here for a duel," Zin rather nonchalantly told Sal.

"Really," Sal responded, somewhat shocked at the idea of his friend actually having an appointment with nineteen-year-old Tanner Ellison, the sorcerer who had been her worst nemesis over the past couple of years. "So, like a duel to the death?"

"No, just practice," Zin answered with a smile while taking a seat at the picnic table. "We've sort of called a truce, I think, or something like one, in both just deciding we could use some practice. I got in touch with him through Patrick." (A friend to both Zin and Sal, Patrick was Tanner's twelve-year-old brother and only sibling.)

After declining a breakfast bar Sal had offered to her, Zin went on. "When I practice with Luis, he's too easy on me. He doesn't want to hurt me, I guess. But I don't get as much out of it as I'd like. Anyway, he'll be here too." (Luis Abril, age twenty-one, was also a sorcerer, but one who had converted to Christianity, and thus worked *with* the godly, instead of against them.)

"Do you want me to stay?" Sal asked, in well imagining Tanner to be bringing friends with him, and in being worried about Zin's safety. "Your mom's expecting me, but I'm early so I have a little time." On

the days he met with his mentor, Sal often came early to do a little writing in the Rubble Garden, a very inspiring setting for a gifted wordsmith.

“Only if you want to,” Zin answered. “I’ll be okay,” she added in guessing Sal’s motive for offering to stay.

About thirty feet from the picnic table where Sal and Zin were seated, Mee happened to be impersonating a leg of a stone bench, basically acting as a center leg for the bench when there really wasn’t one. Though his face wasn’t visible in his smooth disguise, Mee was scowling from being none too pleased by the intrusion of the magician. However, he stopped scowling in considering that a duel between a sorcerer and a magician might be kind of interesting to watch. He wasn’t planning to follow Sal to Doyle Mansion anyway since he couldn’t get onto the grounds. In fact, the first time he tried to, a living boulder, carved and brought to life by a puck troll, nearly squashed him with its large granite fists. Actually, the same little pesky puck had carved over thirty of these boulders, into kooky-looking creatures with long and powerful arms, in order to protect the whole neighborhood. To Mee’s benefit, none at this time were choosing to hang out in the Rubble Garden that Sal seemed to like to frequent. On his second attempt to try to follow Sal, the underling had had a scare with a couple of gnomes living in a treehouse on the grounds of the mansion, who ended up chasing him away from the neighborhood in one of their little super-fast gliders, all the while shooting fist-sized stones at him from super-powered slingshots. Mee also wasn’t too anxious to get near the Galloway Estate across the street from Doyle Mansion because, in making the mistake of getting too close the previous week, he had nearly been trampled by magical topiaries, specifically, a giraffe and a rhino.

Arriving about five minutes later, Tanner, as expected, had brought a couple of his miscreant friends with him for support, to cheer him on and to even the odds in case any of Zin’s friends tried to interfere with the duel. Actually, with sixteen-year-old Kemp Fischer being able to produce and control fire, and Penelope Coyle, who was fourteen, having powers very like those of a wind horse, the odds might have been tremendously in Tanner’s favor, had not Luis, arriving a couple of minutes after Tanner and crew, brought Trixie Greenspell, age sixteen,

with him. Although Trixie’s gift of super hearing might not have been an advantage in a fight against the likes of Tanner, Kemp, and Penelope, she was extremely accomplished in use of all three categories of magical weapons—light, color, and music. And while mirrors, ropes, and flutes were most common within the three divisions, Trixie was also skilled in the use of many of the variations of these weapons, to include reflective bracelets, light pendants, scarves, colored gauntlets, belts, drums, percussion sticks, horns, etc.

“Hey, Trix,” Zin said, giving her friend a hug, since she hadn’t seen her for a while. Although the girls were the same age, Zin attended school at the twin plantations, whereas, most of Trixie’s schooling took place on Lion Mountain in Eastern Tennessee, where both she and Luis lived in the same village community.

Sal ended up leaving a few minutes after Luis and Trixie arrived, as Tanner and Zin were deciding on the boundary for their duel as being inside a fringe of trees encircling a large open area adjacent to the cluster of picnic tables that were mainly tucked under several trees for shade. The open area—being largely free of flowerbeds, planters, and such—was where people often played kickball and flew kites, so there would be plenty of room for the duel.

“We need to stay within the bounds so we don’t do damage to the garden,” Zin said in a firm manner, by way of setting a rule. “Or at least not any damage that we can’t easily fix ourselves.”

“Agreed,” Tanner replied, in being smart enough to know that he needed to avoid incurring the wrath of any of the area gnomes and bigfoots, as well as certain humans who deeply treasured the garden.

As Sal was saying farewell and leaving, he casually waved a flasher (a flashcard) at each member of the company in turn, this being one he had hurriedly made up with markers and colored pencils. On the card, the words “PLAY FAIRLY” were written in a very even and balanced manner, with certain letters matching the clothing colors of the individuals attending the duel, and the tops of those letters made to resemble the hair color and style of the persons they were meant to correspond to. Underneath the message, in slightly fainter lettering, the two words were displayed in mirror-image fashion, like how they might appear if reflected in a pond.

Luis immediately recognized the “Do unto others...” concept of the flasher, as well as the balance aspect that often pertained to fairness.

Give a little take a little, in order to keep things even, Penelope ended up thinking.

What settled into the minds of Trixie and Kemp was the idea that if they were fair to others, this would be reflected back to them.

No matter what each person took from the flasher, the words were definitely powerful enough to instill a strong sense of fair play into the brains of everyone in attendance.

Zin smiled in recognizing that the “R” in the message corresponded to her, mainly from being done in the red and gold colors of her jacket, but also because the top of the letter had a little ponytail that matched hers.

Aside from what Sal had intended—for everyone to behave themselves basically—something about the flashcard was tickling at Zin’s brain. In knowing that God often speaks to us through other human beings, she quickly realized that there was something else about the card that she was supposed to notice. *Something important*, she thought, as her eyes caught a glint of light from the nearby standing mirror. *That’s it, the mirror image is important.*

However, with her mind fixed on the duel that was about to begin, Zin had no time to ponder further, particularly because Trixie had just produced a coin to toss to determine who would go first. (Dueling etiquette for magicians and sorcerers dictated that they take turns when making their moves.) The toss was delayed when Penelope demanded to examine the coin. “Just so we know that it’s not a trick coin and that everything’s fair,” she said. Trixie took this well, not arguing or otherwise reacting as she handed over the dime that was not a trick coin in the way that Penelope had in mind, but that was magical in having been produced by a bagical (a magical bag) to provide shielding against attack for anyone in possession of the dime.

Mee, still in his bench-leg disguise nearby, was a little disgruntled, mainly because he hadn’t gotten in any good attacks on Sal’s mind before being interrupted. He had managed to use a little puff of magic to dry up the ink in the pen Sal had been using to take notes with; and so the little underling managed to take some consolation in this, especially in knowing that his assignment mostly liked to write in old-fashioned

ways, with pencils and pens, even though Sal also always carried a pocket computer (like a small stick that unfolded for use).

Since he missed his chance with Sal on this day, Mee decided to try to plant a little thought into Zin's mind, with the intention of helping Tanner. At about thirty-five feet from the underling at present, she was within range as he rather hurriedly directed a simple thought at her—*Calm*. What Mee actually meant by this was sluggishness, something along the lines of heavy limbs and a sleepiness of the brain. Sadly, his brain was the one that was rather sleepy (in addition to being simple), in that he hadn't been able to think fast enough to come up with anything better, other than something that might have actually helped Zin in a stressful situation, if she hadn't already been calm. However, the whole thing didn't matter because the thought never reached her brain, instead having been deflected back at Mee by the sapphire ring she was wearing that served to protect her not only from physical attack, but also from mind intrusion. Thus, Mee ended up being the one calmed; and he felt pretty good actually, less angry and agitated than normal, though he had no idea as to how this had come about.

The shield dime had reminded Zin that, out of fairness, she should remove her sapphire ring. Since Tanner didn't have this sort of protection, she felt it only right that she make an effort to even the playing field. She was just handing the ring over to Luis for safekeeping as Tanner was calling "tails" when Penelope tossed the coin, which landed tails up.

Not going first was fine with Zin, who often preferred to take a defensive posture when dueling; in fact, she was smiling as they took their positions in the center of the open area, facing one another at about sixty feet apart while bowing, as was customary at the start of a duel.

Tanner was also smiling, as he swiftly activated his staff, from which issued a green streak of light to turn two thick fallen branches lying in the tree fringe into large striking snakes that made a mad dash at Zin nearly as fast as lightning.

Not panicking, Zin quickly pulled from her shirt collar a hawk feather upon which a transformation spell had been placed. As she tossed it out at the advancing snakes, the feather turned into a twelve-foot-tall hawk, one ultra-colorful and incredibly fierce in nature. Well, the snakes ended up being only a small snack for the bird that shortly

began looking around hungrily for more food; so it was a good thing the enchanted feather had a safety-precaution time limit of twenty seconds placed upon it. Thus, the bird soon shrunk in size, with the feather floating back to automatically tuck itself once more under Zin's collar.

Tanner hadn't panicked about the bird, particularly in knowing that most spells by magicians had time limits attached; and while watching the hawk devour the snakes, he had been readying his next move by uncorking a vial retrieved from a sleeve pocket. Dribbling several drops of bluish liquid from the vial onto the ground, Tanner raised six enormous silver wasps, each roughly the size of a hippo, the wasps buzzing and charging their way across the field in Zin's direction much as an angry pack of hippos might.

From a jacket shoulder pocket, Zin swiftly retrieved a handful of crushed citronella leaves that had a web spell attached to them. When thrown in the direction of the charging wasps, the leaves formed a hanging web that acted like a super-strong shield, and one that not only managed (with a loud *twang*) to stop the charge and ensnare the wasps in stickiness, but that also attacked the writhing silvery insects with potent citronella essence. Within ten seconds, all six were rendered completely still, disappearing entirely soon after, along with Zin's web, as the forty-second time limits of both spells ran out.

While Luis and Trixie might have wanted to cheer for Zin, they didn't want to distract her. Penelope and Kemp felt likewise about Tanner. Thus, the whole company, while occasionally giving a clap or two, or cringing a bit at the scariness of such things as giant snakes and wasps, ended up mostly just watching in fascination while on the edge of their seats at the picnic tables.

Tanner had to admit the web was a clever move; though he never would have admitted this to anyone, especially since he hated the smell of citronella, which, in lingering, was still pretty intense. *Yuck*, he thought.

His brain changings gears (as far as mode of attack) from creatures to weapons, Tanner next tossed a handful of ice crystals from a pouch in his robes at his opponent, the crystals turning into ice darts, strong as steel, as they picked up speed and flew towards Zin who speedily countered with a fistful of ashes that turned into huge sparks to melt the ice darts; though it was slightly a close call since the sparks only

finished their melting task when the darts were a mere four inches from Zin's face.

Raising his staff and uttering a short incantation, Tanner next used a Mechanical Rejuvenation Hex to animate a junker car sitting near the tree fringe, the shell of which was acting mainly as a sculptural element in the garden, though the empty trunk held pots of heather and pansies, and the moonroof was spouting a large oleander bush. As four tires that had been turned into planters swiftly attached themselves to the wheel rims, the old sedan suddenly sprang to life to zoom into the open area in an attempt to run down the magician, who simply used a one-minute levitation spell to raise her body to a position about fifteen feet above the ground, where she stayed in hover as the car raced around in circles below her. At the end of the one minute, Zin simply renewed her spell as the car continued to race around in a circular frenzy.

"Okay, this is something of a stalemate!" Luis announced as Zin renewed her levitation spell for a third minute. Rising from his seat to move a few feet into the boundary area, Luis employed his own staff to end Tanner's hex and immobilize the sedan, then afterwards using a float jinx to move the vehicle back to its original spot, also putting the tires into their proper places.

Drifting back down to the ground, Zin ended up enacting a restore charm on a bed of irises that had gotten run over by the car. Within seconds, the flowers were whole and healthy again, though not blooming because irises didn't often bloom in December.

In case we might be wondering, with regard to being either seriously injured or killed by the likes of giant hawks, racing cars, and ice darts, Zin and Tanner had already agreed that if anyone was seriously hurt or killed during the duel, he or she would be healed or brought back by dragon tears, a supply of which both Luis and Trixie had on hand, along with the thimbles needed to correctly measure the doses. Luis also had on hand a healing sapphire, which could be used for minor cuts or even something like broken ribs or fingers.

Meanwhile, about four blocks from the Rubble Garden, Sal had just reached the back gate of Doyle Mansion, where he was greeted by one of the neighborhood's living boulders. "Hello there," Sal said to the stony figure who was smiling and giving him a wave, while also holding the gate open for him. Sal smiled back, mainly in thinking the

boulder very much looked like a good-natured fairytale ogre, having large hands, long swinging arms, a lopsided smile, floppy ears, and big feet. Arriving a little early for his appointment, Sal ended up sitting on the back porch for a time while taking a few notes using a spare pen from his pod pack, since the pen he had started the day with had stopped working for some reason. He didn't sit on the porch for long, in soon being beckoned inside by his mentor for some hot cocoa, and to begin work on a couple of poems and an essay assignment.

In getting back to the duel, we find it interrupted by more than just the fixing of the iris bed because Mee had just been discovered, when Trixie heard him breathing from about fifty feet from her position. As a rule, demons didn't need to breathe much, being designed this way in order to hide in such locations as inside of people (when possessing or occupying them), or in suffocating places like old refrigerators and storage trunks for long periods of time. In addition to having taken several breaths, Mee's foot had rustled a few leaves that had been tickling his ankle.

Approaching the bench, Trixie gave the center leg a swift kick while also drawing a blue rope she had been wearing as a belt. She wouldn't need to use the rope on this day because Mee, knocked from under the bench by the kick and losing his disguise, immediately fled in a streak, at first on foot for about forty feet, then quickly taking to flight.

"What was that?" Kemp asked.

"I thought it was a hobgoblin," Trixie answered, "but it had wings."

"Like a little demon," Penelope pronounced.

"An underling," Tanner and Luis said simultaneously. As sorcerers, they both well knew about the demon divisions.

Mee actually didn't flee very far, just about a quarter of a mile, where he perched high in a tree to continue to watch the duel. He didn't think any of the humans could see him from this distance; but just in case they could, he shifted his form to look like a branch.

In getting back to the duel, we find Tanner, in keeping with exploiting some of his surroundings, next using his staff on sixty green glass bottles being used as edging for a flower bed, to bring them to life to attack his adversary. As the bottles sprouted arms, legs, and cruel-looking faces with sharp glass teeth, Zin used a magical rabbit call retrieved from her boot to summon in super-speedy fashion eighteen

area rabbits who dashed to the scene at six times their normal speed, where they easily stopped the attacking bottle-men by kicking them into one another and breaking them.

Deciding that they hadn't quite finished with what they deemed to be their task, the rabbits next turned on Tanner, kicking him with their powerful back feet. Since six of the eighteen were huge jackrabbits, knocking the sputtering sorcerer to the ground was fairly easy, after which, seven cottontails of the group decided to jump up and down on top of the boy, as if he might have been a mini-trampoline. Tanner only managed to escape by turning all of the rabbits into box turtles, after which, he brushed off the ones on top of him, then rising to put some distance between himself and the boxy herd.

Luis had managed to fix the broken bottles and put them back into their edging positions while the rabbits were accosting Tanner. Next turning his attentions to the turtles, in a matter of about two minutes, Luis had them all changed back into rabbits, afterwards shoeing them away with, "Off to home, or to graze, or whatever. Thank you. Bye now."

In the process of catching his breath, Tanner ended up glaring at Penelope when she stooped to pet one of the friendly cottontails hopping by her on his way to a clover patch.

Since Tanner had used a magical move to free himself from the rabbit onslaught, the dueling positions were now reversed. In not having to defend, Zin was able to go on the offensive, which she did using a slightly unexpected sort of trick. She had only two days before finished work in her lab on a batch of Bubble Beans, made from ordinary dried pinto beans and dish soap. Flicking one of the beans at Tanner, she merely watched as it rapidly picked up speed while turning into a large, bean-shaped soap bubble to run down and encapsulate her opponent. As the bubble lifted him to a floating position about ten feet above the ground, Tanner at first simply laughed good-naturedly, as did Penelope and Kemp, since it was a little funny to see their friend caught up inside the bubble. However, it didn't take long for Tanner to realize two important things: The bubble couldn't be broken from the inside out, and he would very soon run out of air. Not panicking, Tanner ended up performing a navigation charm on the bubble, which enabled him to steer it into the nearby stretch of rose bushes, the thorns of which

managed to pop the bubble after only a couple of bounces against the greenery.

As Tanner was jogging back into position in the center of the open area, Zin took a moment to consider that her opponent, from previous encounters, was familiar with many of her tricks involving playing cards and chess pieces; and so, she was wary of using any of them.

But he doesn't know any of my hat tricks, she suddenly thought, while whipping out a flattened magician's hat from a slot inside her vest, the hat popping into normal hat form as she threw it like a flying disc to land on the top of Tanner's head where it stuck like a magnet. Designed as a powerful mind trap, the hat worked as expected to immobilize Tanner, whose body stood stock still while his mind imagined himself to be trapped inside of a gigantic hat with no doors or windows by which he might escape.

To the spectators' view, Tanner was simply frozen in place with the hat on his head, as they waited with bated breath to see what might happen next.

In thinking of how hats are often blown from people's heads, Tanner managed to escape using a wind spell. And while the wind did definitely blow, to knock the hat from his head, the result was not entirely from Tanner's spell, but from Mee raising a storm that was just starting to produce strong gusts of wind, along with cold driving rain that would, in a matter of a few short minutes, turn into biting sleet.

Being fearful of the thunder and lightning the dark gathering clouds were threatening to produce, Mee chose to skedaddle; though he did so in a highly satisfied state of mind in thinking that the storm, at least, was one good thing he had managed to accomplish on this day.

The people in the Rubble Garden rapidly decided it was okay to end the duel early. Trixie needed to get going anyway in shortly having an appointment with a member of the Underground Army, which was still headquartered in the vast caverns beneath the twin plantations. Rather than using her airbike, by thought, Trixie called to Jarna, a turquoise-colored female dragon who often liked to carry her around, since they were close friends. Jarna, who had been napping in a nearby ravine, arrived within six seconds to pick up Trixie who, as she hopped aboard, simply offered Zin and Luis the common triangle hand symbol of the

times that was used for either goodbye or hello, as well as a means of expressing general well wishes.

Luis and Zin returned the gesture while watching Tanner, Kemp, and Penelope depart on stealth airbikes just as the wind strengthened and the rain hardened into sleet pellets. From having once lived under a powerful enchantment, Luis had the ability to turn himself into a rookh (a giant magical blackbird), one known as Westerwing, which he did in order to whisk Zin home to Doyle Mansion in mere seconds to land in the back gardens that were perfectly calm from being just outside of the area of Mee's storm. Lasting only about five more minutes, the rain and sleet would end up serving the purpose of giving some much-needed moisture to the vegetation in the Rubble Garden.

Inside the house, after using drying spells on themselves, Luis and Zin enjoyed cups of hot cocoa, before Luis departed to return to Lion Mountain, while Zin retreated to her bedroom in order not to disturb Sal and her mother who were working at the kitchen table. In her room, as her dresser mirror caught her eye, Zin's thoughts turned back to the mirror-image words on Sal's flasher. However, at this point, she still didn't know why this might be important; though she did end up looking up a bible quote she recalled as having to do with mirrors, Proverbs 27:19. "As in water face answers to face, so the mind of man reflects the man."

At about the same time Zin's mirror was catching her eye, Tanner and his friends were about halfway home, which was where they parted company, with Kemp and Penelope heading towards Supercity Eight in Illinois where they both lived, and Tanner veering off on a separate trek to Supe-9 in Indiana where he made his home. Although slightly disappointed that the duel had ended early, Tanner was satisfied not to have lost this one. *I count it as a draw*, his mind told him, since neither magician nor sorcerer had seemed to gain a clear upper hand at any point during their face-off.

Meanwhile, after keeping her appointment with a colonel in the Underground Army, which she hoped one day to join, Trixie was meeting up with a friend of hers, eighteen-year-old Cecelia Landris, who was also known as The Sparrow from having the gift of extreme inconspicuousness, to the extent that she often went completely unnoticed by others, as if she were actually invisible. Although Cecelia

lived on Lion Mountain, she was staying for a few days at the twin plantations in order to go on a few time-travel missions using the Time Key and portal at Laurelstone, and help Trixie complete a special assignment for the Underground Army.

After having brunch in one of the cafeterias at Netherwind, the girls soon set off on their assignment, with Trixie riding Jarna while a rookh carried The Sparrow.

Less than fifteen minutes later, they were landing in an earthship community in Arizona that held a secret art gallery, from which the girls picked up four paintings needing to be relocated. Both Cecelia and Trixie had elongated pod packs, which could hold extremely large objects while being as light and easy to carry as common umbrellas. Equipped with adjustable straps, the packs were made to be worn slantways across the back.

The artworks happened to be very special, done decades past by an artist named Margaret Keane, who was famous for painting subjects with big eyes. Having been brought to life in recent years by a puck troll, the paintings were going to spy for the Underground Army, the subjects having volunteered to do this from wanting to be of as much service to God as possible.

Swiftly departing the earthship community, the first stop the girls made was to a high-rise apartment building in Supercity Five in Colorado. Jarna and the rookh ended up waiting on the roof while Trixie and Cecelia did their work. In a common area on the thirty-second floor, they hung the first painting near a stretch of windows with a good view of the windows of a sorcerers' den (a lab) in an adjacent building. From keeping eyes on the goings on in the den, the subject of the painting, a woman, would be reporting to various members of the Underground Army through use of dawn pigeons, who often liked to carry messages for the godly; and from using message kites, which could easily be secreted behind pictures on walls, and thus be readily available for use. Several windows in the common area could open, and so the spy wouldn't even need to leave the building, unless she wanted to for some reason.

Due to her natural gift, Cecelia was completely hidden when hanging the painting, while Trixie was using a shroud mirror (a device developed by magicians and gifted technologists) in order not to be

noticed. Plus, the girls had waited until the two people having coffee in the common area had left.

Finishing their task in Supe-5, Cecelia and Trixie moved on to Supercity Seven in Missouri, to place the second painting in an office building hallway that had a good view of two glass-walled conference rooms where the sorcerers of the city and various of their cronies often met. In addition to having large and observant eyes, the two subjects of the painting, a boy and a girl, could both read lips, this often being a tremendous advantage when spying.

The locations of the works in various buildings might not have actually mattered much, since the subjects were free to wander. They would be careful when doing so, of course, often using shroud mirrors and shroud sapphires retrieved from secret compartments built into the frames of their paintings. Since people were often not as observant as they should be, the vacant paintings were unlikely to be noticed. For the same reason, any new wall art likely wouldn't be taken note of.

The final two paintings—each with a single subject, one a girl and the other a boy—ended up in Supercity Thirteen in Georgia, placed facing one another on either side of a covered courtyard in a public works building where over twenty sorcerers had their offices, along with various other elites. In having to wait for a factory manager to finish his lunch at a picnic table in the courtyard, the girls experienced only a slight delay in getting on with their project. Undisturbed for the remainder of their time at the site, they were able to finish their task quickly, with Trixie listening carefully for approaching footsteps the whole time.

Standing back to admire the painting with the boy subject, which they had hung second, The Sparrow remarked, “He’s absolutely beautiful, so expressive.”

“I agree,” Trixie answered. “And the colors are lovely.”

Looking somewhat uncomfortable, the boy blushed, while slightly rolling his large eyes and issuing a small sigh.

“Sorry,” Trixie said, in noting that the compliments had made him uncomfortable.

A shrug and a soft smile from the boy next seemed to say, *I get that a lot, I'm used to it.* The boy was also used to being useful, and was very pleased to be able to work for the Underground Army. Actually,

the four works hung on this day were not the only Margaret Keane paintings acting as spies, as quite a few others had been doing so for years in various locations around the world.

Waving goodbye to both subjects, the girls soon departed to meet Jarna and the rookh in an alley nearby.

Looking in on Mee at around the time Trixie and Cecelia were leaving the public works building, we find the little demon back in Tennessee, though not close to his home base, but rather nearer Lion Mountain, in a forested area less than a mile from one of the self-sustaining settlements bordering the Mountain. Hiding behind a large stone, which he was peeking around, Mee was covering his ears because a certain sound nearby was hurting them. *Oh, it's hideous!* his mind whined, though he had actually landed because he was more curious about the noise than he was annoyed.

The sound was that of a dulcimer, in the hands of a fourteen-year-old boy named Philip Marvel who lived in the nearby settlement. On an ordinary day, Mee might have wanted to break the instrument; but for some reason, he didn't feel inclined to at this time. In truth, the lingering effect of the *Calm* thought earlier planted into his brain was making him less agitated than he might have been otherwise. He was also incredibly sleepy for some reason, so much so that he ended up lying down beside the stone and rather quickly falling asleep.

The dulcimer happened to be a magical instrument, with a variety of powers bestowed upon it from having once been inside of a bagical. One of those powers was the ability to lull demons and certain other ill-tempered creatures to sleep. Another was the interpretation of tree language. Philip had inherited the dulcimer from his Grandma Gwen; and on this day, while sitting on a log, he was using it to talk to the trees. Actually, being gifted in both mathematics and music, Philip was already in the process of learning the language of trees. But since this could take many years to master, even for a gifted person, having the dulcimer was proving to be a great help to the learning process.

If Mee had been super-observant, or if he had managed to stay awake, he would have noticed that the boy was not playing the instrument, but simply holding it close in order to hear the musical words issuing from it as the trees themselves somehow managed to depress frets, strum, and pluck strings to get across what they wanted to

say, which could be just about anything since trees were often keen to share news, teach lessons, even offer riddles and jokes on occasion. From having lived through a tremendous amount of history, and from developing a deep connection with the ethers, many of the oldest trees had excellent foresight, and thus were able to give warnings of future events, such as crimes about to be committed like thefts and murders. For the past few years, acting on information received from the trees, Philip had worked closely with the Police Corps both on Lion Mountain and in the surrounding communities to thwart various criminals.

On this day, both a white oak and a Norway spruce were talking to Philip, who was smiling as he sorted out which tree was saying what. The spruce was offering a recipe for apple jelly that another spruce two states away had gleaned from an elderly widow in a mothership community. And the oak was sharing news of something that had just been overheard by a bristlecone pine halfway across the country in Supercity Four in Arizona. Able to communicate with one another over long distances (their messages carried on the Four Winds), the trees were often able share information very quickly throughout the world.

The news from Supe-4 might have been very helpful for Mee to know, since it concerned one of the head sorcerers of that city; if only he hadn't fallen asleep.

Chapter Two

The Seven Blessing Boxes

“Did you bring it?” Zin asked, rather breathlessly, with a smile.

Well of course he did; that’s why he’s here, her mind answered.

Jamie Reid was smiling too, at Zin’s eager anticipation, as he climbed from the glider plane he had just landed on Doyle Mansion’s front lawns. As the glider rapidly shifted shape to become a smallish cream-colored feather, which Jamie stowed in his pocket, Alex Rodriguez landed on the lawns. Ages sixteen and fifteen respectively, Jamie and Alex were best friends; and although Jamie lived in Scotland, he had been staying with Alex’s family on Lion Mountain for the past few days.

Alex was not in a glider, nor in any other type of conveyance, because he had flown himself from the Mountain, having learned this special skill from solving the mystery as to how the Chinese dragon is able to fly without wings. Although Alex wasn’t nearly as speedy as Jamie’s glider, which could fly as fast as most thunderbirds and wind horses, he had been able to keep up with his friend from traveling in the slipstream of the glider, which never needed launching, instead being thought-controlled by Jamie to take off, fly, and land.

The boys had arrived as expected, exactly at dawn, from Zin having contacted them by walnut (a communication device) the previous evening.

As Jamie removed an ornate metal box from his pod shoulder pack, Zin held her breath, before remarking in awe, “An actual blessing box. So they’re not just legend.” Roughly the same shape and size as a small loaf of bread, the box was made of various unknown types of metals, mainly copper and silver in tones, though with some gold and purple accents.

“I’ve never heard of the legend,” Jamie answered.

“Me neither,” Alex offered with a shake of his head.

“I’ll lend you the book sometime,” Zin said in something of a distant tone, from being fixated on the box that she had just gingerly taken from Jamie’s hands.

“So you said it’s one of seven boxes,” Jamie stated, “made by craftsmen angels and designed to bestow blessings on people who find them.”

Zin was nodding as she replied, “And the blessings can be physical, spiritual, whatever. The boxes can protect, heal, enlighten, meet various needs...provide all sorts of things.”

“Like my glider,” Jamie said, as this was the first item the blessing box had produced for him. Using his gift of being drawn to magical objects, Jamie had found the box in the ruins of a castle in Ireland, exactly where had God meant for him to find it.

“The seven are each made of a different material,” Zin went on. “Metal, stone, mother of pearl, bone, cloth, wood, and leaves; and all of them have a feather design of some sort worked into them, like on the hinges, handles, or carved into the flat surfaces, like this one.” The metal box did indeed have a lovely engraved feather design scrolling around its edges, both top and bottom.

“I’ve never seen the box shapeshift,” Jamie offered, from Zin having related this power of the box to him the evening before.

“I imagine if you’re ever in serious trouble, it will,” Zin replied. “They’re all supposed to be able to shapeshift. This one into swords, the bone box into a creature capable of hunting down packs of demons, the cloth one into a shelter, the mother-of-pearl one into a boat, and the leafy box into a flying-pig that likes to carry important messages.”

“What about the wood and stone boxes?” Alex queried, in wanting the list to be complete.

“Let’s see...” Zin answered, wracking her brain to recall more of the legend, “the wooden one could turn into a book capable of answering difficult questions, giving advice, and solving problems. And the stone box could turn into various kinds of tools.”

The box felt wonderful in Zin’s hands, warm in a comforting sort of way and a little tingly; and the unearthly metals had a lovely sheen, almost mesmerizing to look at, so much so that she might have just stared at the box for a couple of hours, except for needing to get on with why the boys had come on this day.

On the previous afternoon, Zin had seen a vision pertaining to Jamie in her foreshard, a tool made from a crystal. While originally designed to allow her to see glimpses of the future, Zin had recently enhanced the foreshard to display visions of certain happenings in the past and present as well, though she was limited in only being allowed to see what God intended for her to see. The vision was of Jamie in the present time holding his blessing box. In a second vision, Zin had seen herself in the not-so-distant future holding two more of the boxes, which led her to surmise that she was supposed to go on a quest to find the six whose whereabouts were currently unknown. Next putting aside her foreshard to pray, Zin had gotten a strong idea (from the Holy Spirit telling her) that this was correct. Then from reading the bible, she had received more reassurance from Isaiah 26:7 that she was on the right path, literally. “The way of the righteous is level; thou dost make smooth the path of the righteous.” Psalm 16:11 also jumped out at her as she was reading. “Thou dost show me the path of life; in thy presence there is fulness of joy, in thy right hand are pleasures for evermore.” So too did Jesus’s words in Matthew 7:7 catch her eye. “Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.” Finally, as she flipped pages, her eyes landed on Jeremiah 33:3, which happened to be one of Alex’s favorite bible verses, from perfectly fitting with his gift of being able to solve mysteries. “Call to me and I will answer you, and will tell you great and hidden things which you have not known.” *Well, we don’t know where six of the boxes are right now; so let’s find them*, Zin’s mind had firmly told her, as she also suddenly decided to contact Jamie and Alex to ask for their help on this quest.

“So how do we start looking for them?” Alex wanted to know, as Jamie was stowing the blessing box in his shoulder pack. “I mean, other than Jamie’s gift leading us around, because he said on the way over here that he wasn’t getting any pulls toward magical objects.”

“I think just my foreshard,” Zin answered. Although the crystal hadn’t shown her anything at breakfast, she was confident that it would when they were ready to set out on their quest. And she was right. No sooner had she pulled it from her pack and gazed into its depths, than the foreshard showed her the familiar landmark of a bridge in the nearby Rubble City of Montgomery.

After excitedly relating this information to the boys, Zin called by thought to Magsen, her gryphon protector, who was sleeping on a second-floor balcony of the mansion. Zin was opting for gryphon speed over that of an airbike in knowing that she would need to be able to keep up with Jamie's glider as they traveled. As Magsen waked herself and took off from the balcony, she bid her sister Halli, who had been sleeping next to her, farewell. Stretching and yawning, Halli didn't mind being roused. She needed to be getting up anyway to watch over her own charge, Zin's mother, who was just setting off on a jog around the neighborhood, as was her custom on many mornings at around daybreak.

"Could one of the blessing boxes really be as close as Montgomery?" Alex asked as he climbed into the glider that had shifted in form mere seconds after Jamie removed the feather from his pocket and placed it onto the ground. Being likeminded with Zin regarding the issue of speed, Alex had already decided that he wouldn't be flying himself everywhere on this quest, so it was truly a blessing that the glider could grow to fit two people (or three, or five, or ten), in being totally magical and not in any way limited by earthly considerations.

"Either that, or we'll be told where to go from there," Zin answered while hopping onto Magsen who had just landed on the lawn.

From speedy gryphon and glider flight, they reached the bridge in just under eight seconds where Jamie was basically able to sniff out the blessing box, which was simply sitting under the bridge in the seat of an old easy chair with faded lilac upholstery and plenty of tears on its arms, back, and seat cushion, not to mention a fair amount of soiling. This was the linen cloth box, standing out from the chair rather spectacularly in being completely pristine, without any noticeable wear or tear, and without even a speck of dirt showing on its smooth peach-colored surface that was resplendent with an intricate feather embroidery design on all sides, done mainly in plum, green, and dark gold threads. This box was square in shape, had thick cloth hinges, and was slightly larger in overall size than the metal blessing box.

"Should we open it?" Jamie asked, almost in a whisper, as though he might be disturbing the box that Alex had just carefully lifted from the seat of the chair.

“I don’t see why not,” Zin answered, in a slightly louder tone, as she reached out to raise the lid so that they all three could peer into the currently-empty box, which had a silky cloth interior of a pale sky-blue color, but no other adornment.

The blue color made Jamie smile because it was very similar to a magical, never-ending skein of yarn he was currently using to knit a bedspread. The skein happened to be the second thing the metal blessing box had given him. Jamie loved to knit. In addition to making items for himself and Tilg, the puck troll living with him in their dugout in the Scottish Highlands, Jamie often made things for friends and neighbors, as well as items to take to trading posts to exchange for various goods. Since yarn was sometimes hard to come by, it had been a tremendous blessing to receive the never-ending skein, which could also change colors (by thought command) to help keep his work more interesting and creative.

“Let’s just keep the box with the other one in your pack,” Zin suggested to Jamie, in knowing her pod belt pack to be a little disorganized inside. Plus, she thought the blessing boxes, as they were found, might like to all stay together.

“That seemed too easy,” Alex stated, glancing around them almost suspiciously, as though they might have actually wandered into a trap.

“I agree,” Jamie answered, also looking about, particularly because gangs were known to roam the Rubble Cities, looking for people to rob, kill, whatever.

Zin wasn’t particularly worried, not with Magsen along. Plus, they had been led there by God; she was sure of it.

However, they were about to discover that the boxes all wouldn’t be this easy to track down. In fact, after fishing her foreshard from her pack and gazing into it for a few moments, Zin’s face wore an expression of confusion. “Huh, nothing,” she told her friends, “at least, not yet.”

“Maybe Trixie is supposed to be along, to hear messages on the Four Winds,” Magsen suddenly thought to say, since the godly were sometimes led in this way; though they had to be super-active listeners, or have a gift like Trixie’s, in order to hear these quiet words.

While this was a good suggestion, something about the idea didn't seem quite right, so Zin didn't right away get on her walnut to contact Trixie.

And it was a good thing she didn't because Jamie all of a sudden seemed to have an answer to their dilemma. "Hang on," he said, while fishing the linen blessing box back out of his pack. Smiling as he raised the lid to draw out a lovely purple and gold conch shell, he added, "I thought something didn't seem quite right about putting it away so quickly."

Zin was actually a little surprised that the box hadn't just produced the shell for her when she opened it. However, having good sense, she quickly realized she shouldn't have been surprised. Based on his gift, Jamie had intuitively known to again look inside the cloth box. Plus, there was a providential reason he and Alex were along—because the skills of everyone combined were destined to make the godly quest successful. So, pushing aside any tiny feeling of being slighted, Zin was actually thrilled, especially when Jamie raised the shell to his ear, his smile widening as he listened for a few seconds, before handing the shell over to Zin so that she also could listen.

The shell held no sound of the ocean, but rather, faint words, and ones sounding absolutely angelic in having a lovely breathless quality to them, as though a mild wind might have been rustling distant tree leaves in a shady grove on a fragrant summer day. An underlying watery tone seemed to ground the words (perhaps to make them understandable to earthly ears), making Zin think of a meandering creek playing a lovely tinkling tune on pebbles in the water. The words also sounded a bit like sunshine to her ears (if that's possible), and she suddenly thought of the Light of Jesus, and that of the angels as well.

As Zin held the shell up to her protector's ear, after listening for a few moments, Magsen said, "It's just repeating directions: 'Head north first, about two hundred miles, before heading east.'"

Nodding, Zin next handed the shell to Alex, so he too could listen. "Well, that sounds easy enough," he stated while climbing into the glider behind Jamie. Alex would be keeping an ear on the shell as they traveled, to listen for more directions.

Keeping mostly on an easterly path, they made only slight adjustments as they traveled, with Alex calling out directions to Magsen

and Jamie, the final ones being, ““Veer a little south; now amongst the trees, look for a ridge of rocks and a big gray boulder on the left.”” They ended up landing right next to the boulder, which was actually only about sixty feet from the position of Mee, who was still sleeping next to the large stone he had been hiding behind the previous day.

Philip was also nearby, having arrived slightly earlier to have his breakfast in this spot in the forest that he liked to frequent, particularly early mornings, just as the sun was coming up. His dulcimer was leaning against the log he had been sitting on the previous day, while he sat on a blanket on the ground about twenty feet from the log.

Alex knew Philip, and swiftly introduced him to Zin and Jamie, after which, Zin filled Philip in on why they were there.

Mee had awakened by this time, due to the bustle nearby. Thinking quickly, because he was sure that the boy with the dulcimer had somehow put him to sleep the previous day, Mee planted a strong thought into his own brain. *Don't get sleepy! Stay awake and alert!*

Since the underling was generally good at planting thoughts (at least simple ones), this would be enough to counter any effects of the dulcimer, which Philip had just retrieved, having surmised that this might be the reason the visitors had been led to this exact spot. “So I'm guessing you'll next get a message from the trees, if you got one from a shell to end up here.”

As Philip wandered near a dogwood tree standing next to a red maple, with a white pine standing just beyond them, he strummed the dulcimer a couple of times to get the trees' attention. Both the dogwood and the pine were roused, and both began speaking at once, which caused the dulcimer to play lovely tree-speaking sounds, though nothing Philip could interpret right away because of the jumble (since it's hard for anyone to listen to two conversations at once, even someone used to hearing musical tree language). From being smart enough to recognize that their words weren't quite getting across, the trees eventually began speaking one at a time. While this was still confusing to the visitors, who could only make out an occasional word from not being used to hearing trees speak, Philip very clearly understood what the pine and dogwood were saying, which was definitely information connected to finding the next blessing box.

Interpreting what was issuing from the dulcimer, Philip related a complex set of directions, somewhat long, involving both natural and manmade landmarks, and a series of country roads, all of which would lead to an abandoned farm in Serbia.

“Okay, let’s write it down,” Jamie suggested.

“No need,” Magsen offered. “I can remember it all.” (Gryphons were notorious for having great memories.)

“You want to come with?” Zin asked Philip.

“Sure,” he replied, thrilled to be invited as he right away got on his walnut to let his parents know he was heading out with some friends for the day. Philip had only one class that he needed to attend in the afternoon, and nothing scheduled until then, so he had plenty of time for adventuring.

In case we might be wondering, Alex was ahead in his studies and was taking most of December off from school; and Zin’s classes at present were only scheduled twice a week, so she was easily able to work all of her other activities around them. Jamie didn’t attend school at all, from being self-taught, with Tilg often acting as his tutor, and sometimes as a scolding taskmaster when Jamie found himself slacking off in his studies.

After shaking a bit of dirt and leaves from his blanket and stowing it in his pod shoulder sack, along with the dulcimer, Philip hopped into the glider, which had just shapeshifted on Jamie’s thought command to include a third seat.

As Magsen with Zin aboard took to flight, Jamie guided the glider to follow. This left Mee, still hiding behind the large rock, practically fuming. Not only would it be useless to follow the group, because he knew he couldn’t keep up with the gryphon (and probably not the fancy glider either), he hadn’t learned anything good from spying on this day. Nor had he managed to plant any damaging thoughts into the minds of the human beings, Zin because of her sapphire ring and Jamie due to the fact that he carried a shield stone able to protect him from both physical and mental harm. While Alex and Philip didn’t have mental protection (because the shield dimes they carried were not designed for that), Mee hadn’t gotten around to them. And he wouldn’t have even tried with Magsen, in knowing that the minds of gryphons usually couldn’t be influenced by demons.

Mee had also failed to smash the dulcimer when the humans were first talking. Spying a softball-sized rock about twenty feet from his position, the underling had used a directed energy burst to propel the stone towards the dulcimer leaning against the log. However, the rock hit and killed a gremlin instead; though Mee didn't know this, in not being able to see the invisible creature (crouching next to the dulcimer) any better than the humans and gryphon could. Mee would have had more precision actually throwing the rock in a normal manner, but he didn't want to give himself away, particularly because all of the people looked like ones who probably had mirrors, flutes, and ropes on them. He was especially wary of the magician, who seemed to be everywhere these days, at least everywhere he was; and it had become obvious to him that she could handle herself.

He didn't want to follow them anyway. *Off after a stupid box*, Mee's mind grumbled. *What good is a box? They're everywhere!* No, his time would be much better spent trying to track down his assignment, Mee deciding this as he watched the gryphon and glider disappear from sight.

It was already late afternoon in Serbia when they arrived at the farm where Jamie was able to home in on the box, located in an old concrete cistern that was currently empty of water. This was the wood blessing box, made of poplar, somewhat pale in color, and having a carved feather design over a good portion of its top and sides, plus feather-shaped hinges made of pale metal resembling platinum. The box yielded nothing at this time, though each member of the company opened it in turn, while peering hopefully inside.

Although she was thrilled to have found the third blessing box, Zin was a little disappointed not to immediately be given any information as to how to track down the next one, not from her foreshard, not from the conch shell, and not from Philip's dulcimer as he strolled through a grove of sizeable oaks.

Since they weren't being given any direction at the moment, the group decided to head back to the U.S., stopping in Scotland along the way in order to pick up Tilg to take back with them so that the little troll could visit the puck family at Doyle Mansion, consisting of mama and papa Heike and Pizzo, their twins Pipac and Kisi, and little Lista, who was the one that had carved the neighborhood's living boulders. Either

Magsen or a rookh could take Tilg back later, since Jamie likely wouldn't be heading home for a while, in being anxious to spend more time with friends on Lion Mountain.

After picking up Tilg, it was decided that they would all have lunch together at Doyle Mansion, this prompting Zin to use her walnut to contact her mother to make sure there would be enough food for everyone, which there was, in the form of platters of egg-salad sandwiches, bowls of pasta with cream sauce, mounds of cheese chunks, fresh fruit of various sorts, and plates piled high with homemade vanilla pudding chock full of chocolate wafers for dessert.

They were just finishing with lunch clean-up when Jamie got the next message for their quest by listening to the conch shell. "We need to head to Mexico."

But first they need to take Philip home so that he wouldn't be late for his afternoon class. "Hope you find the rest of the boxes," he said after they landed, also offering the triangle hand symbol to his departing friends.

Listening to the shell, Alex again called directions to Jamie and Magsen, leading them to a spot in the mountains of Northern Mexico, where they landed just in time to cross paths with another friend.

Fifteen-year-old Kiana Jackson was actually from Ohio, but was running a set of mountain trails on a specific errand. Laughing heartily as she skidded to a stop, Kiana wasn't even out of breath from having run close to six hundred miles in total so far on this day. Barely able to say hello (because she was still laughing), Kiana was shaking her head as she removed her pod backpack to fish out what ended up being the fourth blessing box, which happened to be the stone one that was about the shape and size overall of a thick hardcover novel or a fat dictionary.

"I never imagined that I was being told to bring this to you all," Kiana stated, when she finally stopped laughing.

"Told by whom?" Jamie was curious to know.

"By God, from auto-writing in my journal," she answered, auto-writing being a godly gift Kiana possessed, along with the ability to run incredibly fast and sustain these speeds over long distances. (She also had the ability to call unicorns, by the way.)

The stone blessing box, with a carved feather design, was actually made of a combination of two gemstones, malachite and dark turquoise.

“I picked it up close to the Rio Grande, just sitting in a small cave,” Kiana stated, handing the lovely box over to Alex, who immediately lifted the lid to discover nothing at the moment before handing it to Jamie to stow in his pack along with the other three.

“Sorry you had to run all over the place,” Zin offered.

“Are you kidding?!” Kiana replied. “The trip was great. Plus, I’m practicing for being a Post Runner. They accepted my application, and hired me. I’ve made a couple of cross-country runs so far, but I won’t officially start until after New Year’s. And then I have to work it around my school, so it’ll probably be part time for a while.”

Alex was giving Kiana a congratulatory hug, in having long known that she wanted to join the Post Runners, the group officially designated to deliver mail in the U.S., by a variety of means such as horseback, the dwindling rail system (plagued by gremlins and lack of repair), rookh travel; and now, in Kiana’s case, by actual running.

By Zin’s invitation, Kiana was very keen to come along to help track down the fifth blessing box, particularly because she was the one who actually got the next set of directions, by whipping out her journal and engaging in a bit of auto-writing while Zin was taking a peek at her foreshard, which yielded nothing at this time, and Jamie was likewise getting nothing from holding the conch shell to his ear.

“So, Russia,” Kiana said with a huge smile as she hopped behind Zin aboard Magsen, who could easily carry two. “That sounds really exciting.”

The sun was just coming up when they arrived at a large self-sustaining settlement in the Far East of Russia. Amidst the early-morning goings on at a trading post, the visiting group happened to meet up with an elderly sorceress named Esther, whom Alex and Zin were very familiar with as a friend, and whom both had worked with before on certain important projects.

A conjure woman by specialty, Esther currently lived in a cave in the Himalayas, though she often traveled to obtain things she needed for her conjuring; and it was extremely providential for her to be at the trading post on this day because she spoke fluent Russian, and thus was able to help Jamie and Zin bargain for the blessing box, which they found at a booth dealing mainly in kitchen wares.

The vendor, a middle-aged man, was very reluctant to part with the box, even sneering when Jamie offered, in trade, a magical rolling pin that could roll itself.

In truth, the metal blessing box was not the only magical box Jamie possessed, the rolling pin having come out of a boxical (basically a bagical in box form). Boxicals, for the most part, needed to have something put into them in order to produce magical items. In this case, Tilg had put four safety pins and two pieces of broken glass into the box, which had then rendered the amazing rolling pin.

When the vendor again shoved the pin away, along with a shroud mirror Zin had just offered to sweeten the deal, nearby Magsen, who spoke a little Russian and who was shaking her head, began scolding the man. Not taking kindly to the scolding, the vendor ended up throwing an apricot at the gryphon who deftly caught it. Glaring at the man while eating the fruit, Magsen ended up spitting the pit back at him.

Esther, from her robes, had just produced a healing sapphire to add to the rolling pin and shroud mirror for the trade. When the man declined this offer as well, Esther backed away, drawing Zin and Jamie with her while saying, “We’re not giving him everything we have.”

Rounded in shape and about the size of a man’s hatbox, the blessing box they were bartering for happened to be the bone one. The feather design was simply on the lid and carved handle of the box that was a lovely pale-cream color, resembling clouds. Even looking closely at the smooth surface of the box, one could hardly tell where any of the bones were joined together.

Zin ended up fighting the urge to stay and continue bartering; and it was smart that she did because the man, in sensing her initial eagerness for the box, would have continued to up the ante, to the point of demanding pretty much everything the group had on them (plus a few things they might have been able to fetch from home). Now feeling like he was losing the sale, the vendor motioned them back. When it became clear that Esther was not going to allow her companions to part with anything more than the three things already offered, while feigning reluctance, the man did finally agree to the exchange. Although the blessing box was, of course, worth much more than the contents of the entire trading post, since the vendor didn’t know this, the sorceress wasn’t going to allow him to take advantage of the young people.

After acquiring the box, each of the company decided to open it in turn to see if it might produce something, with Esther going last of all and being the only one to find something inside, which turned out to be a currently-empty lidded stone jar about the size of a standard coffee mug.

“So that must be just for you,” Zin said.

“I guess so,” Esther replied, though at this point she had no idea what the trick might be of the jar that she stowed securely into her pod belt pouch.

Although Esther knew about blessing boxes, she had never seen any before now, and so was very interested in having a peek at the others in Jamie’s pack, after which, she bid her friends farewell before hopping onto a waiting rookh and departing.

The conch shell, which Zin pretty much figured belonged to Jamie, ended up giving the directions to track down the fifth box. “In Argentina,” he stated, after listening for a few moments.

However, Kiana needed to be getting home for the day; and while Magsen offered to take her (because Zin could ride in the glider and her protector could then meet her in Argentina), Kiana declined, while calling by thought to any creatures like rookhs or wind horses that might be in the area.

A newdu (basically a giant magical butterfly) ended up answering her call. Swiftly climbing aboard the magnificent purple and blue creature, Kiana offered her friends the triangle hand symbol just before sailing off into the cloud-filled skies.

It was early evening in Argentina when they reached the outskirts of the Supercity that had overtaken Buenos Aires. Oddly enough, the box ended up being inside a sorcerer’s den, the sorcerer having recently come across it out in the wilds of Chile. In feeling there was something magical about the box, the sorcerer had brought it back to his private den to study; though he had learned nothing useful up to this point. Nor had the box produced anything for him.

The den was in the basement of a low-rise building that also housed a Margaret Keane painting, the subject being a woman who had volunteered to spy for the Underground Army, which had a large base situated in a marble cave on the coast of Argentina. A gifted cartographer had opened a magical pocket in the cave, allowing it to

hold much more than it could have otherwise; and at present, nearly thirty thousand army troops occupied the facility that was currently shared with about four thousand members of the Weepers, a godly navy operating worldwide, much like the Underground Army.

Magsen waited outside while Zin, Jamie, and Alex entered the building to make their way to the basement where they ended up crossing paths with Chevy Longwood, a gifted combat and weapons expert from the twin plantations who, despite being a year younger than Trixie, happened to be her mentor. Chevy and Trixie were both on assignment in Argentina on this day, in order to steal a device of some sort from the den. In order to obtain information as to the sorcerer's whereabouts, Trixie was off visiting the Margaret Keane painting hung in a hallway on the third floor, where the sorcerer had his apartment.

"He's left the building and won't return for another hour," Trixie reported upon returning, after greeting the newcomers with some surprise. "But she'll watch for him possibly coming back early and let me know if he does."

Although magicians never had much trouble with locks, Zin ended up using a magic key (one she always carried with her) to unlock the door to the den. Inside, Jamie easily found the mother-of-pearl blessing box, which was oval, around the same size as a largish shaker box, and had a row of cameos, all feathery in motif, encircling its sides.

Chevy and Trixie, meanwhile, had obtained what they were after, which was a device recently stolen from the Underground Army that could track magical wind eddies, originally created by the angels for various uses such as travel assistance, the strengthening of trees, wind attacks against enemies, warming and cooling aid for people and animals, the drying up of floods, the spreading of seeds, etc. In order to keep the sorcerers from being able to track and use these winds, which were only intended for use by the angels and certain of God's children, the device needed to be recovered, and quickly, before it could be studied and duplicated by the sorcerers.

The den invaders had finished their tasks just in time because the sorcerer had returned early to the building and was on his way down to the den, Trixie easily hearing this warning whispered by the watchful spy in the third-floor painting.

Hastily leaving the building by a back way leading to a small field, the group had a run-in outside with six members of the ESS (the Enforcement Services Squads working for the sorcerers) who had noticed Magsen hiding behind the building, because it was hard to miss such a lovely golden creature as a gryphon when anywhere in the vicinity of one.

By the time the den raiders stumbled onto the scene, Magsen was already tangling with two nyregs summoned by the ESS using special whistles. These were demonic winged beasts used by the sorcerers and their cronies for combat, transportation, and to protect the Supes from the likes of thunderbirds, gryphons, and rookhs. Since the gryphon was not airborne, the nyregs had landed in order to attack her. Dodging acid spits from both beasts, Magsen was using great flaps of her wings to direct energy bursts at them. In addition to making their acid spray back onto the six ESS, the nyregs were briefly knocked off of their feet, allowing Magsen to advance with slashing beak and claws, the slashes serving the purpose of getting the creatures to back off, which the ESS were doing as well, in not being anxious to have any more acid directed at them. The men by this time were drawing guns, intent on shooting the gryphon, as well as the five young people they had just noticed that were surely, by the estimation of the ESS, connected to the gryphon and up to no good.

Barely a second later, by two precise strikes from a mirror Chevy had just retrieved from a clip on her belt, the nyregs were blasted, and dissipating, their forms simply melting away to leave merely small smears of greasy-looking sludge on the grass of the field.

Having drawn her blue rope, Trixie ended up disarming all six men in less than five seconds, by simple flicks of the sparking rope that she then calmly coiled and stowed on a belt clip, while advancing on foot toward the startled ESS, with Chevy striding beside her and Zin bringing up the rear.

Unwisely choosing to engage the girls, rather than flee, the six were on the ground and hogtied with sisal ropes in less than thirty seconds, the tying and knotting being accomplished super-speedily by Zin, because ropes (like mirrors, hats, locks, and rabbits) were firmly in a magician's domain.

The swiftness of the assault basically left Alex, who had just managed to unclip a flute from his belt, speechless; and Jamie as well, who would evidently have no need for the mirror he had just fished from his pack. With basically nothing left to do in the field, the group departed, Zin aboard Magsen, while Chevy and Trixie both rode in the glider with the boys.

Although the sorcerer and several other residents of the low-rise had been roused by the commotion in the field and had rushed to the scene, it was too late, as both glider and gryphon were but specks in the distant sky by this time. Immediately checking his den, the sorcerer noticed the two items missing. Sadly, there was nothing he could do about the theft, other than fume.

After dropping off the eddy tracker to an army captain in the nearby marble cave, the group decided to head together to Lion Mountain, by Trixie's invitation, to all have dinner with her family, after which, they roasted marshmallows together at a fire pit in the back yard.

The oval blessing box had remained in Jamie's pack since being found in the den; and he wasn't getting the idea that anyone needed to open it, or any of the other boxes, at this time, this being something Zin and Alex went along with, especially in knowing that magical items were not to be overused, or otherwise abused, by persons possessing them. And with Zin not getting any direction to the contrary, it was also decided that, for the time being, Jamie would hang onto the boxes, keeping them safe and all together in his pack.

Checking both her foreshard and the conch shell several times while the marshmallow roasting was going on, Zin was a little surprised not to receive any information regarding the final blessing box, the one made of leaves. She stopped checking when Trixie related a message she had just received on the Four Winds. "Wait," she told Zin. "That's it, just a one-word message, 'Wait.'"

"I assume that means we won't be looking for the last box tonight," Jamie said.

"Correct," Zin answered with a nod. "We'll wait until we're told to."

"I guess it was a little unrealistic to imagine that we would find all six boxes in one day," Alex offered

Chevy was smiling as she said, “We often just need to have patience. I think this is how God sometimes teaches us to be patient, by not putting everything in our grasp right away.”

“And this is how He teaches us to follow His commands,” Trixie input.

“And to be good listeners,” Jamie said with a smile.

A short while later, as the boys were making their way on foot toward Alex’s home, which was about half a mile from Trixie’s, Magsen and Zin departed to take Chevy home to the twin plantations before returning to Doyle Mansion. Tilg was already gone by this time, a thunderbird having taken him home a couple of hours previous. After checking in with her mother, Zin had a shower and got changed into her pajamas. She then took some time to pray, to thank God for the wonderful success of the day, and to ask Him to help her have patience, especially as pertaining to projects like tracking down the blessing boxes.

Reflecting on everything that had happened since the bright and early morning, Zin’s mind seemed to stick on Alex flying about, the glider soaring around as fast as Magsen, the magnificent newdu, and Kiana’s gift of running, which was so fast that she actually had to carry a shield sapphire to protect her from windburn. Reading in her bible a short while later, Isaiah 40:31 seemed to jump out at her as being completely pertinent to her thoughts of flying and running. “...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.”

And the quote even includes a message about being patient and waiting, Zin realized. That’s interesting. Plus, since magicians were masters of levitation, she decided that the part about “wings like eagles” could pertain to that skill, as well as to other types of flying, which she also thought was interesting.

At about the same time Zin was reading and pondering, Tanner’s mentor, a man named Vidas Farr, who was one of the two sorcerers in charge of Supercity Nine, was lost in contemplation over his protégé. Vidas had just heard about Tanner’s friendly duel with Zinnia Summerhaven, an incredible adversary to the sorcerers in general, in having thwarted them on numerous occasions. While a practice duel

between a magician and a sorcerer was not a thing completely unheard of, Vidas had to consider this incident on top of everything else Tanner had done lately, not the least of which had been protecting his younger brother during a recent skirmish the sorcerers had with a group of gifted individuals who were working alongside members of the Underground Army, which, according to reliable sources, Patrick Ellison hoped to join one day. *Being soft-hearted towards his family already makes Tanner a liability*, Vidas surmised, *so the brother joining the army might make things worse*. Adding this to the fact that Tanner hadn't accomplished much lately in his areas of expertise, conjuring and tech work, Vidas was leaning towards ordering a hit on Tanner, which would be fairly easy for a mimic to carry out. However, in being struck by a sudden headache, Vidas was wary of making a snap decision. *Perhaps this bears further consideration*, he decided, seeking aspirin and his pillow to soothe both the headache and his old bones from a rather tiring day.

At nearly the same instant Vidas' head was meeting his pillow, the leaf blessing box, perched in a tree, happened to be bestowing a blessing on an elderly woman passing on a path beneath the tree. The blessing was that of healing, and served to prevent the woman from getting both bronchitis and double pneumonia.

Chapter Three

Doors and Windows

Heading to the twin plantations on her airbike before dawn the next morning, Zin attended two classes, afterwards having breakfast in one of the cafeterias at Netherwind. While enjoying cantaloupe and an omelet, she got to thinking about the blessing boxes, and her mind seemed to stick on how exquisitely lovely they were. *Each like a little work of art*, she thought, also remembering that a spy painting had helped with the efforts in Argentina the previous day. Taking in the view from a cafeteria window of a couple of Netherwind's magical topiaries, a gazelle and a bear frolicking on lawns, it occurred to her how incredibly important art was to the world.

With art on the brain, Zin suddenly felt inspired to visit the Realm of Septessence, the doorway of which was located on Netherwind's mezzanine floor. Thus, a short while later, she found herself making her way up a set of side stairs in the manor to reach the magical hallway situated between the first and second floors.

As far as Zin knew, Septessence was simply one amazingly-long hall acting as an Art Gallery and displaying a copy of every work of art ever created in the world to include sculptures, paintings, pottery, drawings, tapestries, and so forth. Thus, it went on for hundreds upon hundreds of miles, with paintings and needlework on walls and easels, ceramics on shelves, bronze and marble statues on plinths, jewelry in cases, etc.

Stepping inside the Art Gallery, Zin retrieved a hand mirror from a bin just inside the door, the mirrors being used to view the art over the shoulder in order to see the works as they were intended to be viewed, because everything inside Septessence was displayed in reverse, as a reflection of what had been originally created. With the mirrors reminding her of the mirror in the Rubble Garden, and Sal's flasher, Zin thought, *I've been led here for some reason, to notice something*. And so she tried to remain alert as she began her stroll down the wide hall.

The long gallery started at the entrance doorway, and so visitors could only go one way to begin viewing the art. Zin smiled in thinking of how super art lovers over the years had taken pod packs with them in order to explore for weeks and weeks. Despite these long excursions, no one had ever managed to reach the end of the Art Gallery.

Zin tried to keep in mind when strolling that some of the paintings could act as doorways, if brought to life in their original settings by puck trolls. Pizzo, Heike, Kisi, and Pipac had once escaped the sorcerers' Torch Squads by entering a work of art, and had ended up in Septessence.

The art was not organized in any specific way, in more being something of a jumble. Thus, a long table of tramp art was displayed just underneath a row of impressionist paintings; and a cupboard of Native American pottery sat right next to a case of art nouveau jewelry. In another section of the gallery containing a collection of folk art, a large piece of string art on the ceiling actually made Zin dizzy looking up at it. Looking in the hand mirror to gaze at a modern art painting, and then turning back to just study the work on the wall, she felt she actually liked it better as a reverse of what had originally been made. *But who am I to judge?* her mind scolded her. While some of her magical creations might have been deemed artistic, this was not really her specialty.

In an area heavy in classicism, Zin viewed a lovely painting of a garden hanging right next to another painting whose subject was a regal-looking peacock. For some reason, these two works caught her eye more than anything else so far. Looking from the garden to the peacock, then from the peacock to the garden, and then repeating it all, her mind slowly narrated for her. *Garden...peacock; peacock...garden. Garden...peacock; peacock...garden. That's it!* she suddenly realized. *I'm supposed to visit the Peacock Garden. Well, that fits with the theme of the day, since gardens are basically works of art.*

She had thus far only made her way about a quarter of a mile down the hall, and so was able to return to the entrance/exit doorway fairly quickly, at a trot, where she deposited the hand mirror in the bin before leaving the gallery.

The doors on the mezzanine hallway were not in a straight line as far as the numbering of the realms (Unessence, Biessence, Triessence,

Quadressence, etc.), and so the Realm of Octessence, containing the Peacock Garden, was not right next to, nor directly across the hall from, the door to Septessence, instead being across the hall and down a short ways.

Excited as she was about being led precisely to this spot, Zin was a little hesitant when opening the door to Octessence, mainly from having been somewhat afraid in her younger years of the rainbow-colored peacock inhabiting the garden. In truth, many people found the shapeshifting creature foreboding, since when taking the form of a peacock, he was nearly as large as a small house. However, since not much in recent years could frighten or intimidate Zin, she eventually boldly entered; though in the back of her mind, she was sort of hoping that the peacock on this day would be in his preferred form—that of a turtle not much larger across than two feet.

As it turns out, she needn't have fretted, because the rainbow peacock, whatever form he might choose to take on any given day, was not visible when she made her way into the garden by passing through a short hedge corridor, behind which no doorway could be seen (but simply more hedge bushes), since the passage was completely magical. She had made sure to prop the door with a doorstep, as she had with the one to Septessence, because the doorways to the various realms very often couldn't be opened from the inside, if they could even be found since many turned invisible when closed. Over the years, visitors to the mezzanine had switched from remembering to carry a prop with them, to having doorstops stationed just inside each of the doors for handy use.

With the sun high overhead, the garden was very bright, and somewhat warm, though not overly hot; and so Zin did little more than unbutton her jacket to feel comfortable. Meandering about, she noticed that the garden had grown larger over the years, which was not surprising, considering that the Art Gallery in Septessence (and the Weapons Room in Quadressence) had the ability to expand. *To probably about eight acres in total now*, Zin surmised of the garden, correctly as it were, and in perfect keeping with the “eight” factor of Octessence, as was the fact that the garden was octagonal in shape.

The Peacock Garden was actually central to twelve other gardens surrounding it, with access to these additional spaces (some larger and

some smaller than the central garden) available via assorted gates, arbor entrances, cut-outs in hedges, and so forth, to basically equal twelve doorways.

Visitors over the years had determined the Peacock Garden to be a place of balance, designed much in line with the Chinese philosophy of the five elements—water, wood, fire, metal, and earth—with each of the elements represented in various sections of the garden according to traditional feng shui placement. Design features included such items as wind sculptures, fountains, mirrors, and various statues. Additionally, a moondial and a set of sunsteps were present, along with an abundance of trees, flowers, shrubs, ivies, and the like, as in many gardens.

What hadn't been determined over the years was if the Peacock Garden had any sort of real function, such as keeping balance in the world. Zin thought this was possible, since the Clock of the Universe (inside the Realm of Undecessence) was completely functional, as an Instrument of Providence, in helping to keep the actions of certain creatures (mostly human beings) in sync with God's Overall Plan.

Passing a feng shui bagua mirror hung on a tree, Zin got the inkling that there was still something about mirrors she was supposed to take note of, or learn. However, at this time, the many splendid sights and sounds of the garden, as she began meandering pathways, were drawing her focus away from figuring out anything of significance relating to mirrors.

As a gentle breeze played songs on various wind chimes, the sun glinting off of the spray from fountains turned water droplets into jewels. Colorful birds were flitting about, both large and small, some of which Zin had never seen the likes of before. As a super tiny one with purple and red feathers landed on a shoulder-height flower next to her, she thought, *He could easily fit into my thimble for measuring dragon tears.* (In fact, she had at first thought he was a bug.)

Magical critters and plants abounded in the Peacock Garden. Bending closely to examine a small knot garden, Zin discovered a flower seemingly made of water. As she gently touched the petals, the water held its shape and gave off the most wonderful fragrance, like the smell of rain mixed with roses mixed with lemon. The touch left no wetness on her fingers, though perhaps they were ever-so-slightly damp. The birds, while chirping, weren't at the moment singing. However,

several flowers of unusual shapes and hues in a nearby bed were; though the words of the songs weren't intelligible to Zin because she didn't speak flower language. On a flat mossy stone beside the singing flowers, a little lizard, bright blue in color, was being petted by a yellow and pink gerbil-like creature with extra fluffy ears and feet. After a couple of minutes, the friends switched positions so that the lizard was petting the gerbil. *You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours*, Zin happened to think.

The central garden contained three distinct sections, and Zin had obviously wandered into the most magical of the three, the other two still being exquisitely beautiful, but containing slightly less unusual plants and creatures than what she was presently observing. *Three sections*, her brain told her, as she pondered this in connection to the Holy Trinity. She then also wondered about a possible connection to the Time Trinity, the concept of which involved time being much more of a circle (spherical actually) than a straight line, and in which all things had already happened, were happening all at once, and had yet to happen, in keeping with what many people imagined to be the perspective of God, Who is outside of time. The presence of the moondial and sunsteps in particular made Zin wonder if the garden might in some way represent the Time Trinity. However, something about this didn't quite seem right. *It's like a little mystery*, she decided after considerable contemplation.

While pondering, she had wandered into another section of the garden, in which the sunsteps were a prominent feature, and definitely drawing her attention. More used to sundials in her own realm, Zin had always been fascinated by the sunsteps. *The sun goes up one side of the steps and down the other to measure the time by a shadow line*, she thought. With the sun currently so high overhead, both sides of the limestone structure were fairly fully illuminated.

And, there's the rainbow peacock, with his fan fully raised, her brain next told her, as she had just noticed the bird striding out from behind a cluster of tall trees in the third section of the garden. While there was no mistaking such a large and colorful creature, at such a distance, he didn't seem as foreboding as usual as he walked towards her. He didn't come much closer before suddenly taking flight to head into one of the outlying gardens. The flying peacock made Zin think of

Alex flying. *What a wonderful skill to have*, she decided, since her own levitation skills were, after all, not real flying.

Suddenly getting the idea that she had visited Octessence long enough for one day, Zin sought the doorway to the mezzanine.

Entering the hall, she noticed a young girl, probably about seven years old, at one of the windows. The girl didn't notice that she was being watched as she opened the window and then climbed through. Since an attempt at suicide seemed unlikely at a mere one-and-a-half stories up (the attic or roof being much better options), Zin considered that this might be a gifted child practicing a talent for climbing walls. *But then why didn't she just start outside; why come into the house and go out a window?* Hurrying to the window to look out, Zin saw no sign of the girl. *Huh...another little mystery.*

Zin's mind in recent weeks had occasionally been on the mezzanine windows, in considering that they might be just as magical as the doors in the hall. However, if they were, she couldn't begin to guess how they might operate, or what their purposes might be. *Only six of the fifteen open*, she reminded herself, having discovered this on another day when trying to open each of the windows in turn. This was slightly reminiscent of the mezzanine doors, as many had been un-openable in the past, until God decided it was time for people to be visiting certain realms. The door to Duodecessence remained inaccessible. In fact, in all of time, only one person had been allowed access to that realm, and then only briefly.

Zin might have asked questions of the sister portraits in the hall, of Lizzie and Edna Dwyer, except that the paintings were not presently occupied. *Off wandering*, Zin noted, which was not unusual. In truth, the sisters were downstairs watching a puppet show being put on by a group of third-graders in Netherwind's parlor. The girl who had disappeared through the window was also supposed to be watching the show, but had snuck off from the performance to visit the mezzanine.

With the day having something of a mystery theme so far, Zin again thought of Alex, specifically, his gift of solving mysteries; and she decided to ask for his help in solving at least the one involving the child disappearing through the window. However, getting on her walnut, she was unable to contact him. When the group was roasting marshmallows the previous evening, Alex had mentioned that he and Jamie were

planning to visit the Mystery Realm. *Something to do with the Myramids*, Zin remembered. Well, the doorway to that realm was handy, just down the hall.

If the boys were in there, she might have just waited a minute or two for them to appear through the doorway, since visits to the Mystery Realm only ever took exactly three minutes to complete, no matter how much time people spent inside. However, desiring to visit the lovely realm, and being slightly impatient, Zin decided to go in and look for her friends. Since airbikes (and other mechanicals) didn't work inside the Mystery Realm, Zin called by thought to Magsen, whom she knew to be visiting the Labyrinth Library at Laurelstone for the morning.

Using Reveal Powder to expose the invisible doorway, and unlocking it with her magic key, Zin was ready to go when Magsen entered the hall at only around fifteen seconds after her mistress called to her. However, Zin hadn't considered the logistics of the situation. While gryphons fit fairly well most places inside Netherwind Manor, which had wide halls and sizeable doorways (same as Doyle Mansion), the mezzanine doors were something of a tighter fit.

"Do you think you can make it through?" Zin asked

"I can try," Magsen replied.

"You might have to fold up some, like a pretzel," Zin joked.

"Like a contortionist?" her protector replied. "No thanks, but I suppose you could make me fit by using one of your put-something-big-into-a-small-box tricks."

There would be no need for magic because, to the delight of both Zin and her protector, as Magsen hunched down and began to try to squeeze through the door, the doorway suddenly stretched itself to allow her to slide through rather easily, the act reminding Zin of someone pulling on a comfortable sweater.

For all of the time she had spent on the mezzanine over the years, Zin had never imagined that the doors could stretch. *What an amazing discovery!* she decided, with a huge smile on her face as she followed Magsen through the doorway.

This was one door on the mezzanine that was never propped, because those having access were worried about ungodly visitors following them inside. (Indeed, three sorcerers had once infiltrated the Mystery Realm, with significant malicious intent. Blessedly, they were

dealt with, and their mischief fully thwarted.) The invisible door on the other side, situated in a boulder on a rocky plateau, was marked with a small cairn rock pile so that it could be easily located for return. Alex, by the way, also had a supply of Reveal Powder, along with a shapeshifting key; though his key wasn't metal like Zin's, instead being a dragon feather, which could be used for various purposes, including as a knife or a sword for as tough as it was.

Magsen with Zin aboard set off right away to the section of the Mystery Realm containing the Myramids, a term referring to many pyramids, twenty-four to be exact, of various sizes, with the smallest roughly the size of a standard barn with maybe about ten horse stalls and a single hayloft, and the largest nearly as big as a baseball park with a fair amount of seating. Spread over a wide valley and nestled into literally hundreds of lovely gardens, the Myramids, each unique in design, were made of slabs and chunks of fabulous gemstones. While two were composed entirely of one type of gemstone, most were combinations of the stones that formed interesting patterns.

The insides of the Myramids were as individual as the outsides. For instance, a largely amethyst pyramid contained incredible water features such as floating ponds and upside-down waterfalls. A pyramid made mainly of beryl and sapphire housed an elaborate rock garden planted with many types of succulents. Sand in the garden seemed to enjoy swirling about on its own without any breezes to help, forming long strings and other shapes. In truth, the sand was magical and actually served the purpose of tending to the garden.

Zin had never spent any time exploring the Myramids; few people had. But those taking an interest had found the twenty-four pyramids to be a complete mystery as to what they might be for, or represent; at least until now, because this was the reason Alex had come to the site on this day—to solve the mystery, which he had, with Jamie's help, in less than three hours actually.

On approach to the Myramids, Zin and Magsen observed Alex soaring about over a large pyramid made mainly of jacinth. Noticing the newcomers, he ended up landing beside them in a courtyard adjacent to an amazing garden filled with bushes sporting roses as large as basketballs, along with an assortment of what might be termed standard flowers—tulips, mums, azaleas, alyssum, and so on of normal sizes—

though all were incredibly lovely in coloring and astoundingly lush in growth. Jamie shortly joined his friends from a trek through this garden, just as Alex was explaining what the boys had discovered.

“The designs of the Myramids—outsides, insides, and including various contents—are pretty abstract; but they definitely represent distinct periods in human history, twenty-four in total, with each pyramid corresponding to a single period. But at this point, I’m not sure if the Myramids are more like museums, or if they have a function. I think they probably do have a function, maybe as a Clock of History, sort of like how the Clock of the Universe has to do with Providence.” Jamie happened to be a history buff, and Alex enjoyed studying history; and both of these factors had helped in solving this mystery.

Another clock, Zin’s mind told her. Mirrors...clocks...art...because the Myramids are certainly artistic.... But what does it all mean?

Once again, Zin would end up being too distracted by her amazing surroundings to do much constructive thinking on the matter, especially because Jamie and Alex were leading her and Magsen to a nearby pyramid, one comprised entirely of emerald, the inside of which held an elaborate aviary containing an assortment of lovely birds—some recognizable, some not—sitting on perches, flying about, bathing in bird bowls, feasting on fruit, singing, hopping, dancing, chittering....

Since many previous visits to the Mystery Realm had involved time travel, to various unknown time periods, no one had any clear idea as to how old the Myramids might be, or any of the other contents of this mysterious land for that matter, such as a dozen giant oysters and three additional pyramids called Zoe, Chronos, and Moira. Those pondering the subject also had no idea as to the rate time might be passing here in comparison to their own realm. So there was still quite a lot of mystery present. However, in recognizing that God often doesn’t want us to know everything, the ages of various elements in this amazing land wouldn’t be something folks would end up puzzling over all that fervently.

Passing through four gardens, with Magsen and Zin pretty much speechless the whole time at the splendor and wonder of everything, the group next ended up touring the pyramid Alex had earlier been soaring over—the jacinth one that was also part sapphire with a few topaz and chrysoprase accents. Inside, the pyramid contained only an incredibly

large and elaborate set of wooden drawers sporting metal pulls, with a few having magical zippers as well to open and close them. As complex as the wooden structure was, it might have been confused for a massive, twisting and spiraling staircase; except that it was definitely a set of drawers, of varying sizes, containing an assortment of items, both common and uncommon as far as types.

In opening two of the drawers, Magsen discovered a box of what looked like pale watermelon seeds in one, and several odd-looking masks in the other. “Maybe for a theatre performance?” she speculated.

Jamie found tools such as hammers, trowels, pliers, pruners, files, and tinsnips in several midsized drawers, and a pile of dark, orange-looking powder that smelled like allspice in a smaller compartment.

A fluffy bed pillow floated out of a large drawer Zin opened, afterwards escaping to the ceiling and prompting Alex to fly up to retrieve the pillow to return it to its drawer.

While it might have been fun to look in more of the drawers (especially the zippered ones) and even more of the Myramids, the friends decided they had had enough exploring for one day, particularly because Alex had wisely surmised that there must have been a reason Zin had come to track him down. And so, as they were heading outside, she explained that she wanted his help in solving a mystery relating to the windows on the mezzanine.

“No problem,” Alex replied. “We were pretty much ready to leave anyway.”

Jamie actually wouldn’t be coming along for the window mystery, as he was anxious to head home for a bit to get a few things done at the dugout. And he didn’t even choose to go with his friends to the boulder doorway, instead deciding to head home via a cliff doorway leading to a temple in China containing a hall very like Netherwind’s mezzanine floor. In choosing that route, he was looking forward to having a short visit with the two dragons and several foo dogs that helped to guard the temple.

Thus, they shortly parted company, with Jamie setting off for the cliff doorway in his glider (which worked in the Mystery Realm in being connected to the angels and not all that mechanical), while Magsen carried Alex and Zin to the boulder on the rocky plateau. When the door again stretched to fit Magsen, Alex seemed as surprised as Zin

had been. “Well, well, well...you learn something every day,” he stated.

Inside the mezzanine hall, Zin explained about the child going through the window, also telling Alex that only six of the fifteen windows could be opened, and finishing with the fact that she had for some time had a feeling about the windows—that they might be magical in some way—but so far she hadn’t been able to figure anything out. “Maybe they are somehow connected to the doors,” she stated. “I mean, there are actually fifteen doors in total, counting the original twelve, the one to the Mystery Realm, and the two to the side stairwells.” (She had been thinking about the numbers of windows and doors being equal in connection with her visit to the “balanced” Peacock Garden; and to a certain extent with regard to mirrors reflecting things, though certainly the doors were different than the windows in appearance.)

Alex had started smiling the minute he heard that only six windows could be opened, and the smile widened as he was led to the one the girl had disappeared through while Zin said, “I guess it might be easier to tell something if the doors were in a straight line in the hall, in order as far as their numbers, I mean.”

Alex was shaking his head as he replied, “The doors are not in a straight line because that’s not how God works in the world. And that’s not usually how magic works. Right, I mean, you don’t often work in straight lines, do you?”

“No, you’re absolutely right,” Zin answered, while wondering why she hadn’t thought of this herself.

She wouldn’t have time to wonder more because Alex right away began explaining about the windows; and the information pretty much left both Zin and Magsen dumbfounded as to how much he had been able to discern in such a short amount of time.

“The windows are actually doorways,” he began, “doorways to fifteen of the Sixteen Dimensions. Fifteen because of course there were only Fifteen Dimensions to begin with. The first three make up the Three-Dimensional World that we live in, the fourth is Time, the fifth is Comprehension, meaning what we as humans know about and can understand; the sixth is Mystery, comprised of what we don’t know. Then there are the pairings of Light and Darkness, Creation and

Destruction, Life and Death, Fixed and Transforming, with ‘fixed’ meaning things largely unchanging versus what’s constantly changing and ‘transforming’ all around us. Finally, there’s Heaven, which was supposed to be on its own, until God had to create the counterpart of Hell to hold Satan, the other fallen angels, and the unsaved of mankind. The reason only six of the windows open is because we only have access to six of the dimensions right now: the first three, plus Time, Comprehension, and Mystery. But, who knows, maybe we’ll be allowed more in the future. Access to the Dimension of Death might help us understand why at some point in the future dragon tears will cease working to heal serious injuries and raise the dead. (The godly had been forewarned of this.) Or maybe someone will be allowed a glimpse of Heaven someday. There are some crossovers within the dimensions; but that’s a whole other discussion, and it could get pretty complicated, so we probably ought not to get into that today.”

Zin and Magsen were still silent, and their mouths were hanging open, as Alex added, “There’s not going to be a doorway to hell here on the mezzanine. I mean, why would there be, unless God wants there to be for some strange reason. If there is one, I guess it might be super tiny and we just can’t see it, which could be possible since, according to some theories, all of hell might be able to fit into a thimble. So a door to it wouldn’t need to be very large.”

Zin was finally able to speak. “But then there wouldn’t be a balance of doors to windows, fifteen of each; and for some reason, I think there might need to be.”

Alex was inclined to agree, and was nodding as he offered, “If the fifteen doors are doorways to the Fifteen Realms, a sixteenth window and dimension wouldn’t equal a balance.”

“Wait, what do you mean Fifteen Realms?” Zin asked.

Magsen was likewise confused, until Alex explained, “The original twelve, plus the Mystery Realm, plus Ancora, plus our realm.”

Ancora was a realm very few people had been to; and, actually, its existence wasn’t even all that well known. (Alex only knew because of his ability to solve mysteries.) In fact, more magical creatures knew about it than humans, though Magsen had never been to Ancora. Zin only knew about it from Pizzo once telling her (by writing it out, since pucks never spoke) that he had been there before and that there was a

doorway to this realm somewhere inside of Doyle Mansion, installed by genies and evidently only available on Tuesdays and Fridays. However, he hadn't told her where the doorway was because it was his thought that if God meant for her to go to Ancora, He would lead her there; and Zin was inclined to agree. Magsen, likewise, didn't know where the doorway might be, even though she knew a lot of other secrets about the mansion, like the locations of concealed wall niches and how to access a hidden room in the attic.

As far as Zin, Alex, and Magsen knew, there was no doorway on the mezzanine to Ancora, so this put a small dent in their theory of the fifteen doors and fifteen windows respectively corresponding to the Fifteen Realms and Fifteen Dimensions. "So why isn't there a door to Ancora here," Alex ventured to say, "and why are there two leading to our realm?"

"Two doorways to our realm...I don't understand," Zin said.

"The doors to the side stairwells," Alex answered.

Zin thought herself a complete dunce for not realizing this before now. Of course those were doorways to our realm. Even if the mezzanine hallway was also part of our realm, a person would still have to leave the hall to get out into the rest of the world.

"No doorway to Ancora..." Magsen pondered, while looking around her in the hopes of suddenly discovering one.

"Unless one of the doors does double duty," Alex speculated.

Zin thought this might be possible, given the Tuesday/Friday factor of the mystery doorway inside of Doyle Mansion; except, at this point, she didn't have any idea which of the mezzanine doors might also work for Ancora. "So there might be a double-duty door here," she said, "but we would just have to figure out which one, how it works, and maybe when."

Lizzie and Edna had just returned from their time downstairs. When asked, neither knew of any doorway to Ancora on the mezzanine.

"Sorry," Edna offered.

"Unless it's invisible, like the one to the Mystery Realm," Lizzie said.

"If there is another invisible doorway, then that would make sixteen doors," Alex ventured, "which then doesn't balance with the fifteen windows."

Zin was still getting the strong idea that there was supposed to be a balance, especially because she didn't think it at all likely for a doorway to hell, tiny or otherwise, to be present on this magical floor. However, with her brain getting a little muddled over all of the speculation so far, she decided simply to say, "For now, I think it's enough to know that the fifteen windows lead to the Fifteen Dimensions."

This was news to Edna and Lizzie, who took a great interest when Magsen, Zin, and Alex proceeded to open the six windows that could be opened. However, in looking out of them, they saw nothing but the normal scenery they ordinarily observed when looking out the mezzanine windows—the gardens, trees, croquet lawns, pecan grove, topiaries, Laurelstone's chapel steeple....

"So the windows don't work exactly like the doors," Zin stated. Based on the magical design of the mezzanine, a person believing he or she would find a magical realm behind one of the doors generally would, while others would simply find themselves in a bedroom, bathroom, broom closet, and so forth.

"Probably because the dimensions are different than the realms," Alex replied. "Maybe we would need to have a reason to visit one of the dimensions for God to allow it."

This was as good of an idea as any, and one Zin decided fit with the earlier disappearance of the child. *God probably led her to visit whichever dimension that window leads to*, she reasoned.

It had never occurred to Zin before that there might be real doorways to the Fifteen Dimensions. She had once accessed the Dimension of Mystery through a doorway in her brain when working on an important magical project; thus, she had always assumed any pathways to the dimensions were just in people's minds. Now she realized that the connection would sometimes need to be physical; and again she felt like something of a dunce in not having figured this out before, particularly because the physical connection to our 3-D world was so well established.

Alex, too, had accessed the Dimension of Mystery through a doorway in his brain before, when solving certain mysteries; and he was thinking along the same lines as Zin, though he was seeing the window doorways as being both mental and physical. *Certainly, our brains don't shut off when we step through a door or a window*, he decided.

In having been surprised by the discovery of the dimension doorways, Zin and Alex were both realizing that they needed to broaden their thinking a bit. And this idea occurred to Edna and Lizzie as well, as they got settled back into their portraits. Magsen's brain, on the other hand, was still puzzling over where the mezzanine door to Ancora might be, mainly because she hoped one day to visit that lovely realm. According to Pizzo, Ancora held magical plants and flowers not found anywhere else, along with lots of magical creatures, many of which were not present in our own realm.

"So, no access right now to the dimensions through the windows," Alex remarked.

Drawn out of her ponderings about Ancora, Magsen said, "God's timing is always perfect. So it's probably just not the right time."

"But God brings things to our attention when we're ready for them," Zin offered. "So I'm guessing it might very soon be handy for us to know about these passageways."

On a whim, Zin suddenly suggested a short visit to the Peacock Garden to Alex and Magsen, who were both game. Not surprisingly, the doorway stretched to allow Magsen to easily enter. In the back of Zin's mind as she propped the door was the thought that if the rainbow peacock was present, having two friends along might make the creature seem less intense. The peacock was nowhere to be seen when they entered.

Although Alex had only visited the Peacock Garden once before, he had managed to figure out something that he now offered to Zin and Magsen. "The three sections correspond to the Mystery Realm, Ancora, and our realm of Earth."

Zin hadn't known this, and Magsen had never been to the garden (in not having known before today that the doorways could stretch). So here was another mystery solved, though one Zin hadn't actually been puzzling over. "Wow!" she stated. So now it made perfect sense for the one section, obviously representing Ancora, to hold such unusual plants and even a few unknown creatures.

Zin should have realized this about the sections before, since the one corresponding to the Mystery Realm held models of the Zoe, Chronos, and Moira pyramids. Though smaller versions, at each about

twice as tall as a person, the models were pretty much exact copies of the three pyramids.

The section pertaining to the Mystery Realm also held a model of the Myramids. When Alex mentioned this as they were heading that way, Zin was astounded because she had never noticed this before. There were definitely twenty-four representations of pyramids all in a large grouping, though these were not exact duplicates, but more stylized, quite a few being topiaries with leaf colors and patterns matching specific Myramids. Four of the bushes sported only rose blooms, with no greenery visible for as densely as the flowers were packed. Of the topiaries, Zin easily picked out a favorite that had leaves of lovely red and blue tones with a spiraling accent line of gold around the bottom and a bright green cap on top. About half a dozen of the pyramids were made of stone and covered with mosses whose growth patterns and colors coordinated with certain of the Myramids. Four of the pyramids were wire sculptures covered with ivies. Two other structures were metal waterfall monuments, the metal colors indicative of which two Myramids they were meant to represent. Ranging in height from about waist high to roughly twelve feet tall, Zin had passed many of these pyramids before on previous visits to the Peacock Garden, though she had never connected them with the Myramids. Now, it seemed perfectly obvious.

“It’s easier to see that it’s a model from the air,” Alex stated, lifting off to fly over the pyramids.

As Zin hopped aboard Magsen to do the same, they were able to see that the topiaries, monuments, and sculptures were situated exactly like the Myramids in the Mystery Realm. In fact, it was easier to see here in a smaller garden setting (rather than a sprawling park) that the twenty-four were arranged in three elongated circles, connected end-to-end with each other.

“Like an infinity symbol with an extra loop,” Magsen voiced.

History repeating itself...in cycles, Zin’s mind reasoned. *Like how time is a circle. And they kind of go together—circles of time and cycles of history.* Zin was distracted from her thoughts when the rainbow peacock flew by them going in the opposite direction.

Magsen and Alex decided to follow the creature (though at something of a distance) on a loop over all twelve of the outlying

gardens. When the peacock suddenly veered into the central garden, to land and perch on the sunsteps, Alex and Magsen headed back to the doorway to the mezzanine.

From taking the loop, Alex had been able to figure out something relating to the twelve surrounding gardens. However, he opted not to tell Zin at this time, in judging that she had probably had enough revelations for one day. *No sense in putting her brain into overload*, he decided. Plus, he felt she might like to discover a few things for herself, rather than have someone telling her.

As they departed the mezzanine hall, the three visitors waved goodbye to Lizzie and Edna.

After heading downstairs and outside, Alex by thought called a rookh to take him home to Lion Mountain. Planning to meet Zin at home later, Magsen set off to again visit the Labyrinth Library. Zin, on the other hand, doubled back into Netherwind, as she had just decided to pay a visit to her mentor, Marlon Hornbuckle, in the Magicians' Lab in the basement of the manor.

Having once taken a time-travel trip back to just after Netherwind was constructed, Marlon had actually helped several carpenters and genies create the magical doorways on the mezzanine. (While God Himself had created the realms, helpers had been involved in making the doors.) As expected, Zin found her mentor working in the lab. "I never knew the doorways could stretch," she said.

"Of course they can stretch," Marlon answered, "similar to how most of the realms can stretch inside. Like the Weapons Room can accommodate any number of people; and the Peacock Garden has grown over the years, especially since the gnomes have been working in it."

"I've never seen any gnomes there," Zin offered.

"Maybe you weren't looking for them," Marlon replied. "Very few gnomes are all bright and colorful like the statues found in English gardens."

Zin happened to be pondering the fact that she had actually helped to make the doorways in the temple in China, from having taken a time-travel trip back with Esther to do so. Based on this, she didn't think the doors in the temple could stretch.

When she mentioned this, Marlon responded, “Since they were made with help from a sorceress, rather than a genie, you’re probably right. Unless a genie came along afterwards and modified the doors.”

“That might have been the case, especially because Esther and I only made twelve in the temple. So someone would have needed to make the others, and maybe modify the ones we made,” Zin stated.

Marlon, on the other hand, had worked on all fifteen of the mezzanine doorways. At this time, however, he was choosing not to disclose the secret of how to access the doorway to Ancora, his thinking being along the same lines as Pizzo’s: If God were to want Zin to visit Ancora, He would lead her there. Although Marlon hadn’t made any of the windows, he wasn’t surprised to learn that they were passageways to fifteen of the Sixteen Dimensions.

Shortly leaving the lab, and after saying hello to her Aunt Vini and Uncle Ben who lived in a small cottage behind Netherwind, Zin headed home on her airbike, taking a somewhat leisurely pace because she had a lot on her mind. Unlike Marlon, who had seemed to take it all in stride, she was still incredibly surprised by the discovery of the mezzanine windows being connected to the dimensions. So too was she still marveling over learning what the three sections of the Peacock Garden pertained to; and over the model of the Myramids. *Plus, the actual Myramids are a Clock of History*, her brain reminded her. In truth, Zin felt she might have learned more new things on this day than on any other day in her life so far. *Life is like piecing the big Puzzle of Mystery*, she thought. *And I just got a bunch of pieces put together. With God’s help, of course*, her mind added, as a quote from Daniel 2:22 suddenly popped into her brain. “...he reveals deep and mysterious things....”

However, in considering what she had actually learned on her own on this day, versus what Alex had revealed to her, Zin definitely decided that she needed to somehow broaden her thinking. *Or maybe just stretch it*, her brain determined, *like how the doorways and realms are capable of stretching*.

At the same time Zin was flying home and pondering, Vidas was in his high-rise office in Supe-9; and he too was having a good think, specifically with regard to Tanner whom he had just decided to delay in taking any malevolent actions towards because Tanner had just

developed something kind of amazing—something that Vidas doubted he himself could have come up with, and that might be of great use to the sorcerers in the future.

So he is of some worth and use after all, Vidas decided. *And he obviously hasn't defected, despite his demeanor towards his family.* Plus, Vidas had considered that Tanner might possibly have been playing up to the magician at Doyle Mansion in order to get her to let her guard down. *That would actually be somewhat smart*, Vidas had to admit, though he hadn't before ever given Tanner much credit for being at all brainy.

Chapter Four

A Grapevine Errand and Stalking

No sooner had Zin set down in the back gardens of Doyle Mansion and pocketed her airbike, than one of the treehouse gnomes was signaling to her that a visitor had arrived on the front lawns. This happened to be Jamie who was just climbing out of his glider. After offering Zin the triangle hand symbol, which she returned, he stated, “I was listening to the conch shell and got the information to look inside the cloth blessing box and bring you this.”

The item happened to be a pair of scissors, and Zin was slightly baffled. They didn’t look like sewing scissors, so she didn’t think they could be for her mother, who loved to sew, especially puck clothing, though Em made a lot of her own clothing as well, and Zin’s.

Roughly seven inches long, the scissors were made of a lovely metal, unearthly in appearance and having both gold and silver hues with some rosy glints when the light hit the handle in certain ways. The blades were sheathed with a sleeve that Zin surmised was probably to protect people from being stuck by the pointy ends, as much as to guard the scissors themselves. The soft material of the sleeve was unusual in being not like leather, not like woven cloth, and not like any sort of plastic. *Maybe some kind of plant material*, Zin decided when removing the sheath to better examine the scissors, the blades of which held a soft glow that was bluish in color.

From a spot across the street from Doyle Mansion, Mee happened to be looking on. Disguised as an old rusty fireplug, he was craning his neck a little in order to see between bushes growing along the wrought iron fencing at the front of the property. Spotting the item the magician was holding, even from this distance, Mee recognized the scissors as being angel connected, the glow from them actually hurting his eyes, which he ended up shutting to block out the horrible sight.

“They look like hair-cutting shears to me,” Jamie said.

“We have some hair shears already,” Zin responded, “so I’m not sure why we would need another pair.” She was also trying to imagine what might be special about the scissors, having been produced by a blessing box.

“I’m sure God will eventually tell you what they’re for,” Jamie said optimistically as he was climbing back into his glider to leave.

“Of course,” Zin said, a little absentmindedly in still pondering. “I just need to be patient.”

Actually, patience wouldn’t need to be a factor with regard to the scissors because Zin got the answer less than an hour later when looking into her foreshard, which showed her a vision indicating exactly what the scissors were for. They were indeed for hair, and were very special because anyone whose hair was cut by them would end up developing in his or her skin a shielding quality equal to the toughness of the scissors’ metal, which was incredibly tough, even more so than Kevlar. *This would be good for people without dimes and shield sapphires*, Zin surmised. *And even people who have dimes and sapphires can lose them. Plus, the sorcerers and their cronies have been known to confiscate them.*

Sure enough, as Zin was able to discern from continuing to watch the vision, in the future, many dimes and sapphires would be taken by the sorcerers, ESS, and others. This would be during a time of great turmoil, when the sorcerers and those serving them would manage to take back some of the control they had lost in recent years. However, since God still intended certain people to be protected, items such as the shears would provide a way. Zin was also given the information that she needed to use the genie’s Magical Grapevine to travel into the future to deliver the scissors to a particular person, a barber, who would give literally hundreds of haircuts with these special shears. Plus, the shears would end up being duplicated into the thousands from being placed into share bins, a transporting-and-multiplying device Zin had recently developed in order to share things like food and tools with people in other parts of the world.

Although time travel by Magical Grapevine was relatively new, Zin had used this method before, to both past and future destinations. While the grapevine entrances, in the form of wreath-shaped magical windows, were constantly moving around, her enhanced foreshard

could act as a detector to locate these portals, which were invisible to the naked eye, but could be seen using rose-colored glasses developed by gifted technologists to spot things both invisible and camouflaged.

As excited as she was about making the trip, Zin didn't think of taking a friend along, or even her protector, as she immediately set off on her airbike—wearing rose-colored glasses and with her foreshard leading her—in search of a wreath grapevine entrance. As she flew, she was thinking about the hair shears being for the future. *Just like leviathan scales and dragon feathers*, she thought, of certain items currently being kept safe in quantities by the W'eeppers and Underground Army. The scales would end up being used for shelters and as shields in the future, while the dragon feathers would mostly serve as knives and swords.

Flying low over a section of Mississippi while scanning a valley for a wreath entrance, Zin's mind told her, *Rather than just being kept safe, the scissors need to be taken to the future for some reason. That's interesting.* And while it was also a little puzzling, her brain chalked up the answer to the mysterious ways in which God tends to work. Though, by way of speculation, she ended up reasoning that having some things already in the future would lessen the chance that they might get lost along the way as time was passing.

Not finding a grapevine entrance in the valley, Zin decided it must have moved, as these shimmering portals were prone to doing. Eventually, after roughly another hour of flying, her foreshard led her to a wreath in a wooded area of Arkansas, the glowing grapevine entrance seeming to beckon to her as she landed to stow her bike in her belt pack before stepping through the approximately five-foot diameter portal that was hovering about two feet above the ground.

With her foreshard able to act as a guide while inside the Magical Grapevine, Zin simply followed its leadings along the scrolling tendrils inside the light-filled tunnel. Walking was almost like floating as she moved along, for as light as her legs felt and as easily as her steps seemed to glide along.

After what seemed like about three minutes inside the grapevine, Zin's foreshard prompted her to exit through a wreath similar to the entrance one. Finding herself in a back alley of Supercity Six, she swiftly employed a shroud sapphire to remain hidden. Her foreshard

still guiding her, she was next led to enter a shed of pod design containing a market, library, clinic, chapel, and a small barber shop, which was to be the home of the magical scissors. No one was currently in the shop and the door was locked. This didn't stop Zin, of course, as she simply used her magic key to enter and leave the shears for the barber to discover upon his next return. She was as unobserved leaving the shop as she had been entering because her shroud sapphire was working perfectly. However, upon leaving the shed, she suddenly had an eerie feeling up her spine and across her shoulders, as though someone might be watching her.

Glancing around, she ended up shaking off the feeling. Although someone could have been watching her using something like rose-colored glasses, the fact that she was still wearing hers meant she would have been able to spot the person if they were nearby, even if they were using something like a shroud sapphire or mirror.

In not being in any particular hurry to leave, especially since time travel never took any time at all to complete (just a blink basically between the time leaving and the time arriving back home), out of curiosity, Zin decided to take short a stroll through this section of Super-6, which held mainly warehouses, manufacturing plants, and residential low-rise buildings. The city didn't look much different than it did in her own day; though perhaps a few more nyregs were flying about overhead, and Zin definitely saw more mimics wandering around than she would have liked to have seen. She ended up following a sorcerer for a short time, until he entered a den situated inside of a furniture warehouse.

Visiting a small park next, Zin sat on a bench to watch birds for a bit before deciding it was time to head home. Using her foreshard, she was led to a grapevine entrance in a field behind a nearby textile factory. Following the grapevine, she exited in Georgia, then flying on her airbike to home, which she reached in right around an hour, and just in time for dinner.

After dinner, Zin did a little homework, then reading the bible and praying for a time. In taking a peek into her foreshard just before bedtime, she received a vision pertaining to another trip she was meant to take through the Magical Grapevine. Deciding it might be nice to have some company, she got on her walnut to Luis to ask if he might be

free the next day, which he was; and so they arranged to meet early in the morning at Doyle Mansion.

At around the same time Zin was on her way to Luis, Mee was heading to his home base; and he was not in the best of moods. After abandoning his fireplug disguise earlier in the day, he had thought to track down Philip, whom he was planning to unofficially stalk since his real assignment was so frequently out of reach.

Not long after lunchtime, Mee located Philip as he was leaving school for the day and making his way to a community garden in which he liked to help out. (Philip's Grandma Gwen was a horticulturist, and she had from his early years instilled in him a great love for plants and trees and such.)

With the exception of a lone bigfoot, who was hoeing, the garden was deserted when Philip arrived. This wasn't surprising because not much was growing this time of year, other than inside of a good-sized greenhouse nearby. In the garden itself, this was mainly a time of clean up, and Philip right away began busying himself with gathering pumpkin and squash vines to put on the compost heap. Having spent the morning pruning the fruit trees planted along three edges of the garden, the bigfoot was mainly breaking up clods of soil in various furrows.

After gathering vines for a bit, Philip next found himself storing props for pear branches in the garden shed, beside a couple of trellises that looked as though they could use some mending. (Since Philip wasn't much of a carpenter, this chore would end up being on someone else's to-do list.)

Hiding near the greenhouse, Mee was too wary of the bigfoot to try to get close enough to Philip to commit any good mischief; and so the underling was merely observing at this point. When the gardening pair decided to take a break to sit on a bench and share some dried peaches that Philip produced from his pack, Mee made faces, along with the gesture of the finger down the throat, as though he might want to vomit at the thought of the nastiness of the treat.

The peaches actually reminded Mee of one of his classes. All underlings in their early years, of course, had to attend school, a peach being used as punishment by one teacher in that students who got answers wrong had to hold the dreaded fuzzy-skinned and sweet-

smelling fruit. At the end of the class, the underling who had gotten the most answers wrong was forced to eat the peach. While this had not been Mee, he had been very sympathetic at the time for his poor classmate, with peach juice running down his chin and a look of pure terror in his eyes.

Mee hadn't done well in his classes, but this was largely because he hadn't applied himself. For example, he had slept right through the workshop on Possession. Thus, he had it in his mind that possession of human beings had something to do with their possessions; and not in a way that meant the possessions should act possessed, like moving around on their own, but more that underlings were supposed to be involved somehow in helping humans get certain possessions. In his ineptness and misunderstanding, Mee even went so far as to provide blankets and beanies for people in a particular mothership community just before winter each year. In doing so, his brain told him something like this: *These foul humans need to cover themselves up with blankets and hats, so that I don't have to look at so much of them.* Mee had just paid a visit to the community in question, leaving a stack of blankets, all the while his mind suggesting to him, *Maybe I should get them some new plates and bowls too. That'll serve them right; they'll be forced to keep eating their yucky food.* With these types of thoughts dominating his reasoning, Mee hadn't the foggiest idea as to how to actually possess someone. And even though he had heard a few things over the years relating to both possessing and occupying people, he couldn't imagine any demon wanting to. *We'd have to touch the disgusting creatures to do that. No, I'll just stick to my own ideas about possessions, thank you very much.*

Mee had dozed off several times during a series of lectures on Nightmares. When he had managed to stay awake, he was doodling—pictures of squirming worms, spiders climbing thorny sticks, and wriggling centipedes mostly—while his mind wandered around with his scribbles as they were taking shape. Thus, he hadn't learned much. He definitely knew he was supposed to cause nightmares. However, he didn't really know what this meant in relation to human beings, other than putting bad things into their minds as they were sleeping. Well, some of the worst things Mee could think of were things like flower-filled meadows, rainbows, people roasting marshmallows, riding horses,

and so forth. So when stalking a few children to plant nightmares, these were some of the images he used. *Plus, two fluffy and yappy puppies scampering about in the flowery meadow under the rainbow in the sky,* Mee ended up directing at a particular child in an earthship settlement. *To have to dream about such things; serves the nasty child right.* Mee had been taught that all human beings were nasty, and especially children, who were often messy. *Chocolate on their mouths and banana goo on their hands, yuck-o!* (By contrast, demons were actually fairly tidy.) *And they don't even know how to tie their own shoes, but their mothers love them anyway. That's insane!*

Eventually, Mee did learn a little about what might frighten people. Thus, he did on occasion manage to plant a few images of attacking nyregs, fierce tornadoes, ESS raids, disease outbreaks, etc. into the minds of human beings. However, his technique was definitely a bit lacking. For instance, when giving a dreaming man the idea of being inside of a falling elevator, this merely prompted the man the next day to fix a rickety ladder and a set of broken steps, so that no one would have an accident. So too did a nightmare of being lost in the woods prompt a woman to start always carrying a compass with her, and thus she avoided ever getting lost in the woods.

After the treat of the dried peaches, Philip drew his dulcimer from his pack to begin strumming and singing a folk song, this prompting Mee to hurriedly direct a strong command into his own brain. *Stay awake!* He had by this time figured out that it was definitely the dulcimer that had put him to sleep before. Of course, in his mind, he wasn't calling the instrument a dulcimer, having never heard the word before. Instead, he thought of it as a vile-in, in being similar to a violin, but a really vicious and wicked one.

While demons didn't necessarily hate all musical instruments, they definitely hated magical ones; and to Mee's mind, this one was especially horrid, as evidenced by the almost angelic music issuing from it. In fact, it was so bad that he was seriously thinking he needed to track down some earplugs, and fast, and big ones. Earplugs were something Mee didn't have in the pack he liked to carry, of a style resembling a wide belt that was camouflaged to look just like a section of his hide.

Unknown to Mee, Philip, and the bigfoot, the dulcimer had just lulled to sleep five stealth hobs that had snuck into the garden a short while earlier, to park themselves next to the compost heap while waiting for a good opportunity to attack the bigfoot and human. Meandering off to retrieve his hoe, the bigfoot ended up tripping over one of the invisible beasts, this prompting Philip to set aside his dulcimer and don rose-colored glasses, after which, he and the bigfoot killed the vicious hobs, Philip with a gold rope retrieved from a jacket shoulder pocket, and the bigfoot using just his bare hands as Philip pointed out the locations of the creatures to him.

Using a monocle-like device to see the stealth hobs, Mee was cringing at the carnage of torn limbs flying about, and heads coming off from slicing rope strikes. Although two of the hobs had wakened, there wasn't much they could do against the wrath of the bigfoot, or Philip's skill with the rope.

While Mee felt a little sorry for the five victims, it was not his job to protect hobs, or gremlins, or nyregs, or any others of these types of creatures. In fact, in referring to his notes from a class on Demonic Beings, it was okay to kick hobs in their knees and hit them with rocks, in order to get them riled up enough to do their worst to human beings. Because underlings were generally fast enough to flee from hobs, this posed little danger. However, since these five were now dead, any kicking or hitting was neither here nor there on this day.

The bigfoot actually needed to get going to another garden; and so he shortly left, taking two apples with him that Philip offered from his pack. Philip himself needed to be heading home; though after stowing his dulcimer in his pack, he did sit back down on the bench for a minute to retie his left shoe lace that had loosened during the rope exertion. The fact that the gold rope hadn't yet been stowed and was still handy was keeping Mee from committing any sort of outright attack on Philip, which he might have wanted to do in being upset over earlier having to smell peaches, watch peach-eating, and from being forced to listen to godly music. While most underlings had learned that it was best to focus on attacking the minds of human beings, they certainly could commit physical acts of malice, even murder, especially when driven to such extremes.

Mee ended up calming himself, and reasoning that he should stay clam (mainly because of the possible danger from the shiny gold rope); and so he opted to plant a thought into Philip's mind, this being a good decision actually, since Philip wasn't carrying a shield sapphire. *Let's see, something to cause him to be in a really bad mood.* Because his prey was rising from the bench, and would be out of range at about ten strides, Mee needed to act quickly, and so he sent out a thought of merely two words—*dog poop!*

The voices of underlings tended to be somewhat wheezy and raspy, and their words often came out garbled. Since this applied to their thought voices as well, their messages were sometimes not clearly understood, as was the case on this day when Philip's mind heard "*dog food*" instead of "*dog poop.*" Thus, he was reminded that he needed to feed, brush, and play with his neighbors' poodle, since Mr. and Mrs. James were out of town for a week. Philip, of course, would have remembered anyway; but this served to make him go early to spend more time with Milton, who had been feeling somewhat lonely on this day, and therefore much appreciated the company, along with having his tennis ball thrown for him and getting to play tug-of-war with a knotted-up sock. "See you tomorrow," Philip said, after refreshing Milton's water bowl and filling a small tub with food.

Mee had left the garden by this time, but not entirely of his own accord in having been smacked hard by a tree limb, this propelling him about eighteen feet. The maple had attacked under the direction of a tree spirit who had come to the garden to visit a row of plum trees, the spirit being none too happy about the presence of the demon. Mee might have been strangled by a root next if he hadn't chosen to flee, and quickly. So this was what had mainly caused his bad mood on the way home, along with ruminating over the peaches and music, and to a certain extent at not being able to get in a better swipe at Philip's mind than the thought of *dog poop.*

While his home base was not the nicest of places, for Mee it was comforting being in the cavern in which he had been created, in a large lab full of sift-scales, sludge-flasks, blight-molds, hatch-vats, blast-ovens, and other such equipment. Of course, the lab was in the basement, while Mee's designated hole was on a higher level. The cavern was lit by torches giving off an odd greenish light that cast

writhing shadows of the demons moving about within the halls. In a particularly narrow passage, Mee was forced to shrink to one side to allow a Senior Demon to pass, and a then a page, before he made it to his hole, which contained merely a sleep mat, a small trunk for his belongings, a box of fiend candles, and couple of hooks on the wall.

After hanging his pack on one of the hooks and lighting a candle (which gave off a little fiendish scream as it was lit), Mee sat on his mat to sharpen his twiggy pencil with a pocket knife before scribbling an entry in his notebook on one of the detachable report pages. Underlings had to submit a report of their activities four times a year; though the reports were seldom read, so it didn't matter much what words he actually wrote. However, since the reports were required, Mee was definitely fastidious in writing and submitting them (largely because he wanted to avoid receiving any extra toe poundings). Finishing his scribbling, he then stowed his pencil and notebook in his pack before dousing the candle (which gave off another fiendish scream), and then lying on his mat to drift into sleep.

Chapter Five

Two Cloaks and a Donkey

At right around the same time Mee was going to sleep, Tanner was in his private den in his apartment; and he was gloating (at least in his mind) over certain events of the day. *Easy as pie*, he thought, with regard to how easily he had managed to tail Zin on her airbike, then into the grapevine, and even inside Supercity Six, which he had surmised was a future version of the city, though he hadn't figured out how far into the future he had followed his nemesis. While Zin hadn't bothered herself with trying to look for a calendar or seek out a news program (because God hadn't told her to do this), Tanner simply hadn't been observant about those types of things, in more being in a state of awe at being able to time travel. Plus, he was busy watching what Zin was doing, and then snooping around the sorcerers' den in the furniture warehouse.

Tanner had gone unnoticed by Zin not only from riding a stealth airbike, but also because of a device called a cloak he had recently developed (this being what Vidas had just learned about), which was simply worn on the belt and easily activated by the flip of a switch. The cloak was at least as good as Zin's shroud sapphire for hiding a person, and even better in not being detectible by rose-colored glasses. Tanner had also been wearing a pair of spy specs (another of his inventions from quite a while back) to allow him to see the entrance to the Magical Grapevine and the shrouded Zin. With regards to the cloak, he had had a working prototype for a couple of weeks, but hadn't managed a good test of the device until now. In fact, he had two originals, because he often worked on things in pairs in order to have a spare in case he messed one of them up. With the test being such a success, he didn't even think he would need to tweak his original design.

She's so incredibly stupid, Tanner thought of his rival. *No protector along, and no clue she was being followed—really stupid.* Despite what would have been an easy target, Tanner had decided not to

surprise attack Zin, mostly from being curious as to where she was going, but also in thinking about their “sort-of” truce. Also, for centuries, magicians and sorcerers had played fair with regard to dueling, which was their preferred method of combat, rather than simply ambushing one another. So Tanner had decided that he shouldn’t be the one to blow the tradition to pieces. Plus, in growing older, he was learning that patience could have some rewards, and that methods sometimes need to be re-examined. In the case of Zin Summerhaven, he was finding out that sneaking around was much more beneficial than attacks, particularly since he hadn’t had much success over the past couple of years in combat against Zin, or her friends. Now, with a little maturity under his belt, in addition to spying, he was planning to put his efforts into the much-better strategy of out-designing his enemies, and out-thinking them.

Before tailing Zin, Tanner hadn’t known anything about the Magical Grapevine; and at this point, he was not planning to tell anyone about this time-travel conduit. He didn’t fully trust his close friends, and he had never really gotten along well with other sorcerers. While he had let his mentor know about the cloak, he was keeping other things from Vidas, particularly as related to his family, whom Tanner was definitely trying to protect, despite not getting along well with them, and even with being incredibly angry that his brother was working against the sorcerers. However, as irked as Tanner often was with his family, he even more despised Vidas these days. In fact, in just the past year or so, Tanner had gone from trying to impress his mentor, to looking at him as something of a rival, and even a hindrance. Now, he was seeing the grapevine as something that could give him an advantage over all sorts of adversaries, including certain sorcerers.

Gazing at a sleek metal cube-shaped box, about six inches square, sitting on the lab table in front of him, Tanner pondered, *Maybe this can give me some idea as to how far into the future we went.* He had stolen the box while snooping around the Supe-6 sorcerers’ den. At this point, he was not planning to tell anyone about it, especially because he didn’t yet know what it was for. For sure it was complex, and would likely take some study to figure out its function. It was obviously something important, having been locked inside of a double safe, which Tanner

had easily cracked using another device he had invented in recent months. Yes, the box might take some study; but he was patient.

Tanner was now sort of regretting telling Vidas about the cloak. But he couldn't keep everything from his mentor, because that would be suspicious. He had to at least pretend to play along with his higher-ups and their various agendas. Plus, some of their goals were the same as his own; to name one, thwarting the "goody two-shoes" (as Tanner often liked to call the godly) as frequently as possible.

In addition to using the cloak to spy on Zin and her friends, Tanner was considering infiltrating the twin plantations, this being a better option than trying to get onto Lion Mountain, whose borders were guarded by nature spirits that could easily sense the presence of an unconverted sorcerer from some miles away. In addition to being smart enough to know that he'd never survive an encounter with a stone spirit, dryad, or fire frill, Tanner was also well aware that even the smallest bark burp could easily kill him. But even if the cloak couldn't get him onto Lion Mountain, it was fine for other purposes, like maybe acquiring a few more things from the future, if he could figure out how to find those wreath grapevine entrances.

Tanner went to bed a short while later, feeling pleased that the first test of the cloak had gone so well. He needed to test the spare one too, to make sure there were no glitches. *Maybe tomorrow*, he thought, as his head met the pillow.

Actually, testing the spare would not end up being possible for Tanner, not tomorrow or otherwise, because it ended up stolen from his den that very night. This was not by the hand of any sort of normal adversary, but by an underling demon, one who happened to be from the same batch as Mee and whose number was six thousand and fifty-seven. Like Mee, 6-0-5-7 had decided to give himself a name. He had heard the pronoun "him" used, and liked it because it was simple enough to remember and sounded pleasing to the ears. However, he hadn't any idea early on as to how to spell it; so what a stroke of luck for one of 6-0-5-7's early assignments to have been a church choir director that liked to carry a book of hymns with him. Thus, Hymn was able to learn exactly how to spell his lovely name.

Hymn had followed Tanner for a good part of the day, while often thinking, *Stupid sorcerer; can't even tell that he's being followed*. In

being super good at camouflage, and not any fonder of sorcerers than Mee, Hymn had no problem at all stealing from them once in a while, especially tech devices that he liked to try out. Hymn didn't have an assignment at this time, and was mainly just out these days on what was known as General Mischief Patrol. By his way of thinking, he didn't see why some of the mischief couldn't be directed at a few of the mean sorcerers. (In Hymn's case, punishment wasn't just in the form of toe pounders, whips, and flicklets, but fingernail benders as well.) And he might have thought he hit a gold mine with the cloak, except that demons always hated gold mines, because of the shiny gold, which served as a reminder of the King, the One soon coming back to the earth to reign forever. After swiping the spare cloak from the stupid sorcerer, who was too stupid to lock it up even, Hymn made his way back to his home base, which was the same as Mee's, though Hymn's designated hole was on a lower level, much nearer the basement.

Zin the next morning, after having a quick breakfast of fruit and oatmeal, met Luis as expected in the back gardens. As Luis changed to rookh form and Zin hopped aboard, they took off right away. Looking for grapevine wreaths would be much faster by rookh than by airbike, and safer. Remembering the feeling she had gotten the previous day that someone might be watching her, Zin was definitely wary, and so wanted to take better precautions on this day, in that anyone who might be trying to follow her would have difficulty keeping up with Westerwing. As they flew, Zin told her friend about the windows on the mezzanine, also relating a few details about her visits to the Peacock Garden. Luis had already heard about Alex's trip with Jamie to explore the Myramids, and what the pair had deduced. This had really interested Luis, as he too was a history buff. Plus, he thought it very interesting that all twenty-four periods of human history (as identified by experts over the years) seem to be accounted for in the Myramids, this leading him to surmise that the End of the Age might be very near.

With the foreshard leading, and Westerwing at high speed, they found a grapevine entrance in less than fifteen minutes, in Oklahoma. Traveling roughly twenty-five years into the past, Luis and Zin located a bagical made of cheesecloth, their task being simply to acquire the bag from flea market in Iowa and take it to a small mom-and-pop grocery in Wisconsin, where certain other persons would eventually find it. Only

six bagicals existed in the world, because that was the maximum number allowed at one time. Zin, on a time-travel trip, had actually helped to make the six currently in existence. She smiled in seeing the cheesecloth one again. Each bagical was made of a different material, and the cheesecloth had been somewhat difficult to work with. But Zin loved a challenge, and so had persisted, rather than opting for an easier medium.

Each bagical was marked with a symbol that also appeared on items produced by the magical bags. In noting the symbol on the cheesecloth bag, Zin was surprised that she hadn't remembered the mark as being the same as the layout of the Myramids—the infinity symbol with an extra loop. She also suddenly recalled once seeing a genie candle sporting three wicks made in this exact shape.

Symbols, shapes, numbers...these things can all be very important, Zin reminded herself. Though we don't always know what they mean, because of the mystery factor, which God sometimes intends to remain as such.

The time travelers simply left the bag on a counter inside the grocery, which was deserted in being “Closed for Lunch.”

After locating a grapevine entrance in North Dakota and stepping inside, Luis and Zin were right away led by the foreshard on another errand of the past to rescue a painting from a storeroom in Supercity Two, this being about a decade past from the present time of the magician and sorcerer. The painting was a miniature whose canvas surface was not even two inches square. Since they had only been directed by God to rescue the one work, along with its mini-easel that had been custom made for this tiny painting, Zin and Luis felt a little badly that they weren't going to be able to save about fifty other art pieces in the room, all slated to be burned by Torch Squads later in the day. However, they could take some comfort in knowing that a reflection of each work would still exist somewhere in the Realm of Septessence.

The mini painting had, some years back, been brought to life by a puck troll, the subject being the head of a donkey; and one that could talk because the artist had specifically decided to paint the donkey that Balaam in the bible had been riding, the one God had spoken through. However, while the donkey in the bible hadn't said all that much, this

one was incredibly verbose, so much so, in fact, that Zin and Luis were a little worried that they might be discovered, despite being well shrouded by sapphires.

“Hello, hello!” the donkey brayed. “It’s so nice to see you. No one else in here is awake right now, so I haven’t had anyone to talk to. I’ve been in here for over a week, you see; and since the door was locked, I haven’t been able to get out at all. And it’s just so nice to see and talk with folks again.”

“Yes, yes,” Luis said, finally managing to get a couple of words in edgeways. “But right now we need to be really quiet so that the mimic and the two ESS personnel in the hallway don’t hear us.”

“Oh, of course,” the donkey replied in a quieter tone. “Thank you for coming to get me,” he added with a happy and enthusiastic nod just as Zin was slipping him, and his little easel, into a vest pocket.

Well, it was a very good thing that Zin and Luis were shrouded, because the donkey evidently couldn’t keep from talking, even inside the pocket; though his words were muffled rather than intelligible, and even more so when Zin stuffed a handkerchief into the pocket to further dampen the noise, which the ESS and mimic definitely heard, but blessedly couldn’t locate.

“Sorry, sorry,” the donkey said when they reached the outside where Zin removed the handkerchief and pulled the painting up higher in her pocket so that the donkey would be able to see out. “I thought we were already clear, you see,” he added. “But I’m not much good at gauging the distance of footsteps I guess.”

“Obviously,” Luis said somewhat shortly, in being slightly perturbed that the creature had almost given them away.

Zin, on the other hand, was smiling, particularly when the donkey left his canvas behind him to scramble from her pocket. With her helping hand, he made it up to sit on her shoulder to get a better look at things as they were heading out of the city, on foot at first because of the bustle of pedestrians, which would have made it difficult for Luis to shift to rookh form.

The camouflage of Zin’s shroud extended to the donkey, and she was careful to speak quietly when saying to him, “So you’re not just a head, but a whole donkey.”

“Of course I’m whole, because the artist who painted me was envisioning a whole donkey, even though only my head was put on the canvas.” While the donkey had said this as quietly as he knew how, a couple of people nearby had heard him and were looking around for the mysterious voice.

In considering portraits like those of Edna, Lizzie, and others—done only from the waist up, and sometimes just from the shoulders up—Zin should have realized that art brought to life wouldn’t be that limited. *Of course they can move about as whole persons. Again, I need to broaden my thinking*, she chided herself.

In addition to being whole, the donkey was a godly creature that liked to recite bible verses. Upon reaching a secluded alleyway in which they unshrouded and Luis shifted form to Westerwing, in being kind of amazed that a human could turn himself into a rookh, the donkey ended up quoting Hebrews 2:4. “...while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his own will.”

“Yes, it is truly a wonderful gift that Luis can change forms,” Zin agreed, as she was just hopping aboard Westerwing.

With Zin checking her foreshard as they were flying out of the city, in peering at some of the images being displayed in the crystal, the again-amazed donkey was prompted to recite Ephesians 3:9. “...and to make all men see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things....”

This prompted Zin to reply with Colossians 1:26. “...the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now made manifest to his saints.”

I think those quotes are about Christ, and Salvation, Westerwing projected telepathically to both Zin and the donkey.

“Yes, but they sort of fit with the foreshard,” Zin replied. “God is revealing mysteries to me. But only certain things that He wants me to see, so that I can do His work properly.”

To this, the donkey ended up quoting Ecclesiastes 3:11 “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.”

The donkey knew nursery rhymes too, from having once lived in a house with small children. With the painting slated to be dropped off in

an earthship community in Canada, which was taking some time for Westerwing to find, Zin and Luis were treated to recitations of “Simple Simon” and “Old Mother Hubbard” as they flew. The donkey also delivered the “Gettysburg Address” to his new friends (having memorized it from being fan of history), finishing up just as they were landing in the earthship community where the painting was to be kept safe for a time, before once again taking up residence in a Supercity. But this would not be in a storeroom waiting to be burned; instead, the little donkey would be engaged in important work, very much along the same lines as the Margaret Keane paintings.

The painting on its easel was secretly placed on a windowsill of a woman’s home, for her to find later in the day. As Zin and Luis were saying goodbye to their new friend, the donkey ended up pointing out a daytime shooting star streaking across the heavens in view of the moon which was also visible in the bright blue sky. With the magician and sorcerer marveling at the sight, the donkey was prompted to recite 1 Corinthians 15:41. “There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for star differs from star in glory.”

The quote reminded Zin of something she had learned only recently—that human beings each have a unique star connected to his or her soul, very like how unicorns are connected to individual humans as Soul Shadows. As they were flying away a minute later, she also thought of the sun and moon being like the Father and Son, with the stars representing God’s children. *The moon reflects the sun like a mirror; plus, Jesus is both sun and moon in the bible. And then we’re supposed to reflect His light.* So too was she suddenly struck by the thought of how high the sun had been overhead in the Peacock Garden; and Zin was given to wonder if God might been speaking to her through the donkey, the same way He did to Balaam. Except, if this was some sort of message, she didn’t exactly know what it might mean, other than possibly as a prompt to visit the Realm of Octessence again. *And look more closely at both the moondial and the sunsteps while I’m there,* her brain told her.

Luis soon found a grapevine entrance in Minnesota. Inside the time conduit, the foreshard led them to exit a wreath in their own time in Ohio, from which they made their way back to Doyle Mansion. While

not much time had passed (it was nowhere near lunchtime), Zin and Luis were a little hungry, and so snagged a couple of apples from the kitchen, before Luis headed to the subbasement library to peruse books, while Zin checked in with her mother who was writing in the parlor. As two of the parlor wall portraits (of Em's adoptive parents) smiled and waved at her, Zin couldn't help but think of the little donkey. *He'd love it here, lots of folks to talk to.*

On the subject of art, as Zin was just heading up to her room to do a little homework, a spy painting (by an unknown artist) of a woman named Madison, hung in a hallway of an office building in Supercity Nine, was in the process of observing something. While Madison didn't have large eyes, she did still have eyes good enough to be a keen observer. However, while what she was noting was interesting, it wasn't worth reporting to anyone. In fact, she ended up thinking, *Underling demons are pretty commonplace. And what do I care if one is snooping around a sorcerer's office.*

After a yummy lunch of tomato soup and grilled cheese sandwiches, Luis and Zin ended up on another grapevine errand, this time about six years into the past, where the foreshard helped the pair locate a missing child, a young girl who had wandered off from a mothership community in Connecticut. While bloodhounds were still sometimes used in this regard, and a tamed orc in the region specialized in finding lost children, this was evidently a situation God wanted Zin and Luis to take care of, which they did, returning the girl to her grateful family in roughly forty minutes, before once more heading home.

The magician and sorcerer ended up on one additional grapevine errand shortly before dinner, traveling into the future about ten years by Zin's reckoning, from seeing one of her teachers as she and Luis were secretly visiting the twin plantations to deliver a magical birdcage, picked up from an aviary in Norway, to Netherwind's Magicians' Lab. The cage was evidently able to sing on its own, though the time travelers surmised that this probably wasn't its only function. However, they would have no time to linger today to figure out more of its secrets because they needed to get going.

When out looking for a grapevine entrance to return to home, the pair caught a couple of glimpses of a future version of Kiana, who

looked to be about ten years older than her present self (so Zin's initial guess had been correct). These were barely glimpses for as fast as Kiana was running in zipping along old highways and byways in Oklahoma, and then in Missouri, delivering mail. While mostly running, she did at one point hop a newdu, which headed west in a blue and gold streak as soon as its rider boarded. Thanks to several rows of tall trees and a few hills to duck behind, and because Westerwing was so fast, Kiana hadn't noticed that she was being observed.

As they were heading east by the foreshard's directions, Zin remarked, "She looked really happy."

Yes, enjoying her work, obviously, Luis offered telepathically.

And, indeed, Kiana was enjoying her work with the Post Runners, which had at one time been called Post Riders, when its members mainly rode horses and sometimes hopped rails to deliver the post. The title had changed when the rail system fell into such disrepair and foot delivery became more common, though those delivering were getting a lot of help from creatures like gryphons, rookhs, and wind horses. In case we might be wondering, no planes had been in operation for decades by this time, due to the activities of gremlins and because of leviathan-produced EMPs.

The time travelers made it back to Doyle Mansion in plenty of time to help prepare dinner, which Luis stayed for, afterwards heading home to Lion Mountain, while Zin did dishes with the pucks and her mother before heading upstairs to read and pray until bedtime.

Chapter Six

The House of Thimbles

After attending a history class super early the next morning, Zin decided to have breakfast in her favorite cafeteria at Netherwind, where she met up with Sal who was writing while having scrambled eggs, toast, and a fruit salad.

While out on his airbike the previous day, Sal had seen two horses running around in the woods. This had inspired him to write about the pair in a poem that he was just putting the finishing touches on and which he shared with Zin.

Horse Sense: The Gnomes' Perspective

Two horses took a trot through the woods one day
In search of carrots, grain, apples, and sweet hay.
Looking for these treats, they found a troop of gnomes,
All traveling a fair distance from their homes.
Seeing forest horses, but infrequently,
The gnomes did wonder if lost the pair might be.
“Not at all,” neighed one, with a shake of his mane.
“We’re after apples, sweet hay, carrots, and grain.”
The eldest gnome was also shaking his head.
“I’m afraid,” he said, “you’ve been very misled.
No grain, hay, or carrots are grown around here;
And I know of no apple trees that are near.”
With the apple claim being true, and the rest,
The troop did wonder about the horses’ quest.
And so the eldest said, with a playful wink,
“Do horses really have sense, as people think?”
Being brilliantly smart, as well as astute,
This lack-of-sense view, the horses did refute.
However, instead of taking great offense,
The horses decided to apply good sense.
Of the gnomes in full gear and fancy attire,
The lead horse, winking to his friend, did inquire,

“While we discuss this further, let’s have some snacks;
What are you all carrying inside your packs?”
From their fat rucksacks, the gnomes did produce
A crock full of milk and a jug of grape juice;
Twelve breakfast apples and a large cabbage head;
Carrots for a stew and wheat for baking bread.
Next came out plump pillows, stuffed with hay most sweet,
A pile being made for the horses to eat,
Along with apples and platters of wheat grain,
And un-stewed carrots, since horses like them plain.
Finishing their treats, the horses left the group,
Whinnying “Goodbye!” to the generous troop.
Watching the pair leave, as truth began to dawn,
The gnomes simply laughed when the light bulb came on.
And while they were laughing, they had to admit,
Their notion had been wrong, by more than a bit.
For even when horses stray far from their homes,
They have enough brains to outwit even gnomes.
Thus, the troop concluded, at least on this day,
That horses do have sense, as legends do say.

Zin loved the poem and was smiling as she finished reading it, while polishing off her pancakes topped with banana slices and pineapple chunks. With the gnomes in the story reminding her of what Marlon had said about gnomes in the Peacock Garden, after clearing her tray and bidding Sal farewell with the triangle hand symbol, Zin was inspired to pay another visit to the Peacock Garden.

Edna and Lizzie were both napping in their portraits when she arrived on the mezzanine, and so Zin tread lightly and was also quiet when opening the door to Octessence.

Inside, the sun was high overhead with few clouds in the sky. Due to the brightness that was in stark contrast to the soft early-morning light she had just left in her own realm, Zin ended up performing a shade spell on her head to produce a temporary hat, slightly translucent but nonetheless effective in protecting her face, and in part her shoulders, from the sun’s intensity. Although starting off as a floppy red beach hat, her head covering would end up periodically changing in shape and color during her time in the garden.

Heading to the area of the moondial first, Zin came upon the rainbow peacock in turtle form, just sitting alongside one of the paths

next to a clump of rose bushes sporting blooms of green, gold, and purple. Passing the turtle, she noted that he had kind eyes and a soft gaze. In reasoning that he would probably have the same eyes when in peacock form, this served to make her feel more at ease around the creature, who was staring at her in slight curiosity as her beach hat shifted to become an enormous newspaper hat folded to resemble an upside-down child's toy boat. Losing the curious look, the turtle now seemed to have a welcoming expression; plus, his head was tilting to one side, to the right...two, three times...as though he was gesturing for her to notice something.

Peering in that direction, Zin smiled when she spotted a gnome. "Thank you," she said to the turtle, as she zipped off to meet the gnome who was pruning a bush with tiny multi-colored roses growing in clusters resembling the dangling shapes of hot peppers.

The gnome responded to her initial greeting with a nod, while curiously peering at her hat that had just shifted to look like a ladies' derby hat, pale blue in color and adorned with a fancy yellow ribbon. The bush the gnome had been pruning on was actually sitting right next to the moondial, which Zin was gazing at with interest, this prompting the gnome to state, "It hasn't worked for many years. Well, it hasn't been needed."

"I don't understand," Zin answered.

"You don't need a moondial in place that's never in nighttime," the gnome replied.

"You mean it's always daytime here?!" Zin stated in surprise, as she truly hadn't known this about the Peacock Garden.

The gnome was nodding as he offered, "It has been for many years. Sometimes, when it's about to rain, it gets really dark and cloudy, and can look a bit like nighttime; but it's still daytime when that happens."

Zin was speechless as the gnome, after cutting three tiny orange roses for her to pop into a buttonhole on her jacket, went on. "Before the sunshine, the garden was always just in moonlight. But that was way, way back—many, many years ago. I think my great-great-great-great-great grandfather might have seen it in moonlight. But, as story has it, no one has since. No people have, certainly, because they only started coming in recent years, since the human doorway was installed.

Before that, God only allowed magical creatures like genies and gnomes to occasionally visit here.”

“And the rainbow peacock,” Zin input.

“Oh, I don’t count him,” the gnome replied. “He’s not a visitor or even an inhabitant; I think he’s part of the garden.”

“Of course,” Zin said with a short nod, as if she understood, though she actually didn’t.

Glancing up at the sun, the gnome added, “It used to be different times of day in here—afternoon, midmorning, early evening. But since the garden reached full size and stopped growing—oh, a couple of years back now—it’s been almost noon, according to the sunsteps, and has stayed that way.”

“Creeping up on noon?” Zin asked.

“Well, more like the sun is stuck that way,” the gnome responded, in a speculating manner, as though his brain was trying to work something out. “It’s almost like time is taking a pause and is reluctant to move forward. Or the garden is taking a deep breath and is waiting to exhale.”

“Sort of like the calm before a storm,” Zin voiced, as this thought suddenly occurred to her.

To this, the gnome shrugged as he offered, “It still rains in here on occasion, even thunder and lightning.”

“Maybe it’s not going to be that kind of a storm when the sun finally hits noon,” Zin suggested.

Shrugging again, the gnome next said, “Well, I have to be going.” After gathering his pruning tools, he gave a short wave as he was trotting off.

Zin soon meandered in the opposite direction, toward the sunsteps, her mind telling her, *So the sun never sets in Octessence; at least, not any more. And it’s almost noon, but the garden seems reluctant to get there...that’s interesting.*

The turtle had made it to the sunsteps just before Zin, shifting to peacock form to fly up and perch on the very top of the steps, where he looked much like a huge pot of colorful, feathery flowers.

As her hat changed into a sombrero, orange to match her buttonhole roses, Zin took a seat on one of the lower steps to simply gaze about her and think, mainly about Octessence as a whole, with its twelve unique

gardens surrounding the central one. In addition to having flown over the outlying gardens, she had over the years taken peeks into each of the twelve; and it suddenly struck her that one of those was very like the central garden, in being heavily feng shui in design. *It's like a mini-Octessence*, she thought.

After a bit more thinking, Zin's mind told her, *There's a sculpture representing the Tree of Life in one of the gardens, so that's like Duodecessence. And another garden has masses of hummingbirds flying around in pairs like they are in the Realm of Biessence. And there's a super-artsy garden.... Oh wow, there's a garden for each of the Twelve Realms!* (This was what Alex had earlier figured out, but hadn't told Zin.)

While feeling pretty good that she hadn't even needed Alex's help to figure this out, Zin's brain also hit on the realization that, with representations of the other three realms in the central garden, Octessence as a whole actually embodied all Fifteen Realms. *That's amazing!*

While Zin hadn't been expecting any visitors, she somehow wasn't surprised to see Esther suddenly appearing from under a rose arbor on a walkway headed directly for the sunsteps. In fact, in being more surprised by what she had just worked out, in lieu of a greeting, Zin was prompted to say, "I just realized that the twelve surrounding gardens represent the Twelve Realms, and then the three in the center make all Fifteen Realms in total."

Esther was nodding as she sat down beside Zin on the steps while saying, "And the three in the center are the Trinity Realms of Ancora, Iridis, and Providentia."

As Zin's mouth fell open in surprise at this new information, Esther retrieved a tiny staff, no larger than an average pencil but made of some lightweight metal, from her robes. After tapping Zin's sombrero with the instrument, the sorceress next touched the staff to her own head, upon which an exact copy of the hat appeared. "A duplication charm," Esther stated at her young friend's widening smile. "I was paying a visit to Septessence for a little soul inspiration, and I thought I'd step in here for a bit of fresh air and sunshine." She then took the opportunity to recite John 3:20-21, which she felt was in perfect keeping with the brightness of the garden. "For every one who does evil hates the light,

and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does what is true comes to the light, that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been wrought in God.”

Her mouth no longer gaping, and finding her voice, Zin said, “Wait, go back a couple of steps, please, to what you said about the Trinity Realms, and the names of them.” Zin was totally confused, from never having heard of the Trinity Realms before, and in not having known the official name of the Mystery Realm. Plus, she had never even considered that her own realm of Earth might have another name.

Esther was smiling slightly as she said, “Earth, whose more-correct name is Providentia, is connected to Ancora and Iridis, which is better known as the Mystery Realm, it seems.” As their hats suddenly shifted form to become super-sized berets, pink in color, she added, “The Trinity Realms are all connected to the Covenant, the main one of the bible, having to do with Jesus coming to the earth to save us, both the first and the second times.”

“I can’t believe there’s so much I don’t know,” Zin stated, “especially about this garden.”

“Don’t feel badly,” Esther advised. “I’m still learning, even at my age. And the Peacock Garden is basically full of Mystery. Actually, it was very observant of you to work out about the Twelve Realms, especially since some of the gardens are a little hard to identify in being fairly abstract, like how the Clock of the Universe inside the Undecessence Garden is all sprawling hedges, bridges, water features, topiaries, and so forth; whereas, the clock model here in the central garden is sculptural metal, and a lot more compact.”

As the peacock suddenly flew down from his perch to approach Esther and nuzzle her shoulder, the shade hats again shifted to become British Navy bicorn hats, like those from probably over two hundred years ago in history. While bicorn hats were already pretty big, these were probably twice as large as any others had ever been. Giving a somewhat scornful look at the oversized hats, the peacock ended up dashing off to another part of the garden. Thus, he missed the bicorns turning into wide straw gardening hats a few moments later.

Watching the colorful creature race away, Zin thought about what the gnome had said about the peacock. She had always assumed the peacock was something like a caretaker, but now it was sort of making

sense for the garden to be some sort of an extension of the creature. *Then that would mean the peacock is not just in the garden, but that the garden is in the peacock.* With this thought, her mind also turned to Lion Mountain for some reason, most specifically, the shapeshifting white lion living there, who often liked to stay in mouse form. *If the peacock is part of the garden, is the lion part of Lion Mountain?* she wondered. *Or maybe it's the other way around,* her mind suggested, in suddenly thinking about mirrors and reversals. Perhaps Lion Mountain was part of the white lion, who really wasn't all that white, only having been named such from appearing pale and ghostly in early sightings. In fact, the creature was actually fairly colorful, even having a bright rainbow element to him when engaging in some of his magical tricks like dissipating demons or breathing life into corpses. Many people, including Zin, had figured out that Lion Mountain represented Jesus, in being a place of refuge with room for all, particularly because the land was able to expand. In fact, the Mountain was still growing. *But what is it really, as far as its magic?* It wasn't much like a pocket, because once pockets were made, they didn't continue to expand. *Lion Mountain and the Peacock Garden might have a lot in common,* she decided, in remembering that the garden had grown over the years. This would end up being a mystery Zin would continue to ponder for some time.

Esther's mind, meanwhile, had still been on the Trinity Realms. As their hats became stylish blue felt, fringed with long feathers, the sorceress, in a somewhat mysterious manner, quoted Romans 15:13 to Zin. "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope."

"Hope, Joy, Peace," Zin stated, after a short think as to what Esther might be trying to get across. "They form a sort of Trinity of their own."

Esther was nodding and smiling as she said, "If we assign one each of Hope, Joy, and Peace to the Trinity Realms, Ancora is Hope, Iridis is Joy, and Providentia is Peace, because we will eventually have peace on earth."

"But not until Jesus comes again," Zin answered.

"Correct," Esther replied. "We have to wait until He comes to set up His Kingdom. Then He will rule as the Prince of Peace."

“And with a rod of iron,” Zin ended up murmuring.

“I need to run an errand,” Esther rather unexpectedly said next. “I wonder if you would care to come with me.”

Without even knowing what the errand might be, Zin eagerly replied, “Okay.”

As the pair was leaving Octessence, in order to end Zin’s shade spell, Esther used her small staff to lightly tap their hats, which had just shifted to chef hats with extra-billowy tops; though these disappeared pretty much instantly with the taps.

With Lizzie and Edna still sleeping, Esther and Zin were quiet when leaving the hall to make their way downstairs and outside where they met Magsen, from Zin having called to her by thought as they were leaving the Mezzanine. Magsen was planning to carry them both on the errand; and so, in short order, the magician and sorceress boarded, to be whisked away to Lithuania, evidently, from Esther giving directions to the gryphon as they flew.

Just before they landed, Zin related to Esther what Alex had worked out about the Myramids being a Clock of History. “So do you think the twenty-four pyramids are functional,” Zin asked, in being eager to pick her wise friend’s brain, “or are they maybe just a record of historical events?”

“Well, because most clocks have some sort of active purpose,” Esther answered, “I would be inclined to think that the Myramids are functional in making certain things happen. But, of course, I’d have to spend some time there to figure out details.”

“And time is short these days,” Zin stated, in thinking of how much she often had to squeeze into her busy schedule.

“It can be,” Esther replied. “But it can also be very long.”

Magsen ended up departing to visit a secret library in the area after dropping off her riders in a clearing in a mountainous wooded area very near the ruins of an old aqueduct. One of the base pillars of the aqueduct held a hidden doorway to what Esther was calling the House of Thimbles.

“I’ve never heard of it,” Zin stated as they slipped inside the door and made their way down a long entrance hall.

“We’re heading into a pocket,” Esther related, as they descended a winding stairwell to find themselves in an enormous room, well lit by candles, lamps, and skylights.

“Wow!” Zin declared, taking in the sight of literally millions of thimbles lining shelves along the walls, many with placards giving descriptions of the thimbles.

“It’s kind of a museum and a store,” Esther added, leading Zin farther into the room, which held hallways leading to other places. “And there’s a café, plus a metallurgy lab, and a huge forge.”

“Why would they need a blacksmith shop just to make thimbles?” Zin wondered.

“Because they don’t just make thimbles here,” Esther replied. “You’ll see, have patience.”

“They’re forging weapons here too, like swords and armor,” Zin said, this thought having suddenly popped into her brain from thinking about metallurgy, and things that might be needed for the future.

“Very clever, and very correct,” Esther answered. “The human race might need more ancient-style weapons as it progresses, since complex weapons aren’t expected to work during the Endtimes.”

“Which we’re probably already in, at least in some stage, because the weapons factor is already starting to play out,” Zin replied.

“Again, correct,” Esther said, in agreement because, for sure, nothing heavily electronic worked well these days due to EMPs, with other machinery proving incredibly susceptible to the mischief of gremlins. Plus, she had considered for many years that the End of the Age was probably close at hand, based on what she had gleaned from living so long, and from studying bible prophecy; though she didn’t think human beings were capable of fully understanding, much less being able to work out, anything all that correct as far as God’s perfect and mysterious timeline.

Esther was evidently in need of a couple of new thimbles; and the store had quite a selection, many of which were magical including thimbles that could shapeshift into things like buckets, bowls, cups, and bins. While most were made of metal, there were a few porcelain, cloth, straw, wood, etc. The straw ones could evidently turn into baskets and hats.

“This one can become a chair for a traveling seamstress,” said the store clerk, a young man not much older than Zin. “And this thimble likes to sing, folk music best, for some reason.”

Zin smiled in being reminded of the magical birdcage; and she ended up deciding to purchase the singing thimble for her mother for a Christmas present, particularly because she knew her mother loved folk music. The clerk was happy to accept in trade Zin’s offer of a package of Veggie Specks, a product she had developed recently in her private magician’s lab. Although they were tiny, each not much larger than the head of a pin, the specks could evidently turn into whole vegetables. “You just add one drop of water each to the specks, and one drop only,” Zin explained. “Then the red ones become tomatoes, the dark green turn into zucchini, the white ones are potatoes, and the pale orange ones become squash. Oh, and the bright orange and bright green are bell peppers.”

Esther ended up bartering a woven blanket for two thimbles that could turn into bowls.

After finishing their shopping, the pair headed to the metallurgy lab because Esther wanted to introduce Zin to a friend of hers who happened to be a twelf, a twelfth elf born to a family and given special magical powers because of this twelfth-born status.

Though she hadn’t ever been introduced to him, Zin had informally met Levegõ before. Now, she was happy to officially meet him, in an exchange of names and handshakes.

One of Levegõ’s twelf skills happened to be metallurgy; and he was working on a thimble in the lab, one that Zin surmised was probably magical, but that she didn’t feel comfortable asking about in thinking that this would almost be like snooping, prying into someone’s secrets. However, she did feel comfortable asking the twelf, “What do you think about the idea that all of hell might be able to fit into a thimble, and that there might actually be a Hell Thimble somewhere, just waiting to be filled?”

While Levegõ was familiar with the concept of hell in a thimble, he hadn’t made any such creation; nor did he know of anyone who might have, despite knowing many magical metalsmiths. However, he did offer Zin something of a guess in answer. “If this thimble exists, if it’s not just a fairy tale, then I would be inclined to think it might be genie

made, or maybe made by angel metalsmiths, or perhaps by God Himself.”

“What do you think, just a fairy tale?” Zin asked Esther, who simply smiled and shrugged.

However, a few moments later, the sorceress did offer, “I much prefer the idea of a mere thimbleful of hope being powerful enough to conquer all evil in the world.”

“And it is,” Levegō agreed, also quoting Job 5:16. ““So the poor have hope, and injustice shuts her mouth.””

This prompted Zin to follow with Proverbs 13:12. “Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a desire fulfilled is a tree of life.”

Nodding, Levegō ended up adding Hebrews 6:19 and 10:23. “We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner shrine behind the curtain.... Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful....”

Finally, Esther quoted from 1 Peter 3:15 “...in your hearts reverence Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you....”

After bidding Levegō farewell, as a treat, Esther and Zin decided to visit the House of Thimble’s café, whose special for the day was a thick slice of quiche with cheese soup on the side and a frosted vanilla cookie for dessert.

As they ate, Zin mentioned, “Even if the legend of a Hell Thimble is true, that doesn’t mean the horrors of hell are small.”

“Indeed they are not,” Esther responded. “In fact, even just the amount of fiery pain is incomprehensible, let alone the darkness, isolation, and insanity. No, the thimble size probably just symbolizes the insignificance of the decrepit souls that will end up residing there in torment, as compared to the immense joy and wonders of having Eternal Life with Christ.”

“Then, if symbolism is involved, the thimble probably is just a legend,” Zin remarked.

“Perhaps, perhaps not,” Esther answered. “We can’t know exactly how God works, or His whole plan. That’s why we can’t rely on how we think of things like space, or even time, because our assumptions might not be correct.”

Zin was nodding, particularly with regard to space, since magicians often manipulated spaces, as well as the sizes of things inside of spaces.

Upon finishing their yummy meal, the pair took a stroll down the hallway containing the door to the forge. Peeking inside, where several blacksmiths were at work, including two genie smiths, they saw sparks flying and steam billowing about.

A storeroom was located a little farther down the hall, outside of which Zin and Esther were surprised to meet Trixie and Chevy, who were on special assignment to obtain weapons to take back to the Underground Army Headquarters (UAHQ for short). The girls had just finished filling two pod backpacks with dozens of spears, swords, maces, and so forth.

All four heading outside together, Zin called to Magsen, who arrived in less than a minute and who would be taking Esther home to her cave in the Himalayas, while Zin was planning to head back to Alabama by airbike with Trixie and Chevy, who had come on airbikes while using eddies that could in some instances more than quadruple top airbike speeds.

“See you at home later,” Magsen said to Zin as she was taking off with Esther aboard.

Chevy was really getting the knack of using the eddy tracking device. By her calculation, one of these magical air currents was very nearby, at only about a three-mile jaunt from their present location. However, no sooner had the girls lifted off, than they were very suddenly blasted off of their bikes by an enormous gust of wind. Blessedly, the drop was only about ten feet, allowing them to land unharmed; and the airbikes automatically folded themselves and so were undamaged as they fell.

At first thinking that she must have read the device wrong and that they had somehow hit an eddy sideways, Chevy, after swiftly donning rose-colored glasses, soon realized that something quite different was going on, in that Penelope, on a stealth airbike nearby, had just attacked. With her was another member of Tanner’s little clique, sixteen-year-old Devin Helm (also from Supe-8, like Penelope and Kemp), who was gifted with extraordinary water abilities. With Penelope’s wind gift helping their stealth bikes along, the pair had followed Chevy and Trixie all the way from the twin plantations to Lithuania. Tanner was

also on the scene, having followed Devin and Penelope; though his friends were unaware that he had been spying on them while cloaked. (By the way, Tanner at this time hadn't yet noticed that his spare cloak was missing from his den.) He had been able to keep up with Devin and Penelope from being pulled along on his own stealth airbike in their slipstream. Oddly enough, a cloaked Hymn had followed Tanner, the underling also being able to keep up from being in the tailwind of the three airbikes in front of him. So, basically, this little group of four had formed something of a miscreant train in pursuit of Trixie and Chevy.

Zin and Trixie had just put on rose-colored glasses, enabling them to see Penelope and Devin, though Tanner and Hymn were not visible. However, this didn't particularly matter safety-wise because Tanner wasn't anxious to give himself away by attacking, being keener on spying these days than on fighting. Hymn also didn't want to be seen, in being more fearful for his life than anything else. All four miscreants had actually waited outside of the House of Thimbles when Trixie and Chevy had entered, from having seen two genies go in just before the girls and in knowing they wouldn't stand a chance against such godly creatures, cloaked or not. And, indeed, genies were able to see through shrouds, including any devised by sorcerers; plus, genies were rarely hindered by human gifts, no matter how powerful.

While Tanner and Hymn were on the ground, Devin and Penelope were on their airbikes hovering about twenty feet up. From a small lake nearby, Devin had just raised a water tornado, which Penelope was helping to guide, to attack their three adversaries.

Although Zin, Trixie, and Chevy were getting somewhat drenched by the water, they were not swept away by the funnel because they had taken cover amongst a large grouping of trees. Using a flute and a mirror respectively, Chevy and Trixie began targeting the two airbike riders who were dodging strikes while backing off a short distance. Zin, meanwhile, had enacted a super-powered drought spell which, in roughly ninety seconds, served to dry up about two-thirds of the water tornado; and the rest ended up broken up in splashes by branches of the trees the twister was snaking through.

In danger while in the air from the flute and mirror wielders, Devin and Penelope ended up landing. On the ground, Penelope directed sharp blasts of wind at those in the trees, while Devin sent moisture—

gleaned from the air and made into highly-concentrated stinging water knives—at the three girls. However, with Penelope’s wind drying up about half of the water knives, the pair was forced to take turns when attacking, while still dodging energy blasts from flute and mirror strikes, plus an attack by two of Zin’s origami creations, a crane and a bear that had grown to enormous sizes as she tossed them out from her sleeve at her adversaries.

While it was stupid enough for Penelope and Devin to engage Zin, Trixie, and Chevy as a group, the duo was even more inept for discounting that anyone else might be nearby. Not Tanner and Hymn, of course, but Cecelia, who was very much The Sparrow on this day in that even the sorcerer and underling hadn’t noticed her as she soared in on a rookh to land, slip from the creature’s back, and calmly approach Devin and Penelope to a spot close enough to use a slingshot device to deliver two Snooze Pellets (one of Marlon’s creations actually) designed specifically for use by the Underground Army to put enemies to sleep for six hours. Pinging on the arm of Penelope and the shoulder of Devin, the pellets worked instantly, causing the pair to collapse into little heaps on the ground, each in a deep sleep,

Chevy, Zin, and Trixie were still wearing their rose-colored glasses and were able to see The Sparrow. (Plus, they were used to being around their friend and so were often able to spot her.)

Cecelia was actually there to pick up Trixie for a new assignment. The Sparrow and The Ear (which some people were starting to call Trixie) needed to follow up on something in a report from a spy painting in Russia. After handing Zin her weapons-filled backpack to take back to the twin plantations, Trixie called a rookh; and the pair soon set off to Russia, bidding Chevy and Zin farewell with triangle hand symbols.

Zin and Chevy set off directly after their friends, with Chevy using the eddy tracker as their bikes rose into the air.

Hymn was glad he hadn’t acted during the skirmish, or after. Not only would he not have wanted to give himself away to Tanner, he was terribly afraid of The Sneaky Girl (his name for The Sparrow). *If you can’t even notice a person most of the time, how can you fight that person?* he thought. In fact, Hymn hadn’t noticed The Sparrow until she had spoken to tell her friend about going to Russia.

Tanner hadn't acted quickly enough to tail Chevy and Zin for a quick ride back to the U.S. by eddy slipstream, and he wouldn't have been able to keep up with the rookhs Trixie and Cecelia were riding on. Thus, he opted to wake Penelope and Tanner, whom he felt a little sorry for at this point; though he also thought them kind of silly to have engaged an enemy outnumbering them. He wouldn't have to let them know about the cloak; he could just say he was out and about, and had noticed the fight. He knew they'd be basically too trusting and too stupid not to buy it.

"Get up," Tanner said, after delivering a shot of bluish-green waking energy light from his staff to each of his friends.

Devin and Penelope did buy Tanner just being "out and about" as he explained while traveling home with them, Penelope helping their speed along using her gift, and Hymn tagging along unnoticed in their slipstream.

At home later, just before dinnertime, Zin got to thinking about the events of the day, and she actually started to worry a bit about Devin and Penelope. She had felt somewhat uncomfortable leaving them lie sleeping out in the open, where they could have been killed by a megahob or gremlins, or even a wild animal, especially because nighttime had been creeping up on Lithuania when they were there.

One of the tricks of Zin's newly-enhanced foreshard was the ability to show her people in the present time simply as she asked to see them. While this basically made the crystal a handy spy device, she was using this feature only sparingly, so as not to invade anyone's privacy, and just as a tool to do God's work as He intended for her to do.

"Show me Penelope Coyle and Devin Helm," Zin spoke, afterwards peering into the crystal.

Since it hadn't yet been six hours since she left them, Zin was surprised to see the pair on airbikes, until she spotted Tanner in the scene behind them. *So he found them and woke them up*, she surmised. However, while this made sense, Zin was somewhat uneasy about how the whole ambush thing had come about in the first place, because it was too much of a coincidence to think that Devin and Penelope had simply stumbled upon her and her friends in Lithuania. *Probably the only way they could have found the House of Thimbles was by following us*, she reasoned. Since Penelope's gift could make airbike travel really

fast, this was probably what had happened. Either the pair had followed Magsen; or maybe they slipped into the eddy Chevy and Trixie were using to enhance their speed.

Whatever, Zin ended up deciding. Since they were all safe, including the miscreants, there was no reason to ruminate over the matter now, other than noting that she and her friends probably weren't being as observant and careful as they ought to be when traveling. *We need to do better*, she thought.

Suddenly remembering that she still needed to track down the last blessing box, Zin again checked her foreshard, which showed her nothing at this time. *Just have patience*, her mind advised.

At right around the same time Zin was reminding herself to be patient, Jarna was visiting Esther's cave in the Himalayas to pick up a special box from the sorceress, one Esther had just acquired. For now, the box simply needed to be kept safe by the dragon, which Jarna would do by storing it in her secret treehouse located in a secluded rainforest setting. Although she liked to hang out with Trixie sometimes, Jarna wasn't currently officially assigned as a protector for anyone, and so she was perfect for special assignments such as this.

After seeing Jarna off outside her cave, Esther made her way inside to her kitchen, where she opened the jar that the bone blessing box had made just for her. Upon returning home that day, Esther had actually cried tears of joy to discover the trick of the jar to be that of producing a never-ending supply of blueberries, which she had loved her whole life—in jams, pies, muffins, candy, salads—you name it, she loved it, when it had to do with blueberries. So this was truly an amazing blessing. As she had several times already on this day, Esther bowed her head in prayer to give thanks to God for the blueberry jar, along with all of the many other blessings in her life.

Chapter Seven

Penumbras Waking

Zin had spent some time the previous evening reading parts of the Revelation and other prophetic books of the bible. Early the next morning over breakfast, she got to talking with Magsen about how some events leading up to the return of Jesus might be kind of subtle. “Because He said He will come like a ‘thief in the night,’” Zin stated.

Nodding, Magsen quoted Mark 13:35-36. “‘Watch therefore—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning—lest he come suddenly and find you asleep.’” As Zin was looking this up in her pocket bible to read it for herself, Magsen added, “I think certain things described in the Revelation might have been happening all around us for centuries now. Then the rapture will happen; then, bang, all of the heavy stuff at the End—the Great Tribulation, and Jesus coming with His angels to really take care of business.”

Zin had also been considering how certain things in the bible might be both literal and symbolic. In her reading the previous night, she had come across Joel 2:10, which she read aloud to her protector. “The earth quakes before them, the heavens tremble. The sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining.”

“There are lots of prophetic bible quotes about earthquakes, thunder, and loss of light from the sun, moon and stars,” Magsen responded.

“Loss of literal light, very probably, but what if it’s also symbolic?” Zin suggested. “The stars gone—these could be God’s children, taken at the rapture, if we are like lights in the dark world, reflecting the Light of Jesus. Then the sun and moon being darkened—that might be the wrath of the Father and Son about to come upon all of mankind left on earth.” (The mention in the quote of the earth quaking and the heavens trembling had specifically made her think of the wrath of God.)

As Magsen was nodding, Zin added, “But I guess I was mostly thinking about people being like the stars. We each have a star connected to the soul, and Abraham’s descendants are numbered like the stars. Plus, according to Daniel 12:3, we’ll eventually shine like stars: “““And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.”””

Magsen definitely thought Zin’s ideas were interesting. “Lots of bible scholars think that bible prophecy is largely symbolic,” she stated. “Though, certainly, many of the events described are completely literal; I think they have to be. I don’t believe a sane person could read the Revelation to John and ascribe everything to symbolism, because that just wouldn’t make sense.”

Zin fully agreed. Sadly, she also believed that the most horrendous parts of the Revelation, like the Seven Bowls (of wrath), were the ones that were going to come about exactly as described.

“But you know,” Magsen offered, “the angels are represented as stars in some places in the bible. So maybe the loss of starlight will be from the angels withdrawing their help from the earth during the Great Tribulation, like how the Holy Spirit will no longer be restraining evil.”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” Zin said, shaking her head and giving somewhat of an exasperated sigh over how much she still didn’t know, or understand, about both symbolism and prophecy. “Each time I read the Revelation—or Daniel, Ezekiel, Joel, Isaiah, Amos—I end up deciding certain things mean something different than they did when I read them before.”

“I don’t think God means for us to understand everything,” Magsen said, in a consoling sort of way. “We’re just to be prepared.”

After breakfast, Zin decided to head to Lion Mountain on her airbike to visit a couple of friends, her best friends actually, Quin Brinker and Chase Linn (most often called Linn), who were both seventeen; and girlfriend and boyfriend, by the way. In addition to being the Protector of Dragons, Quin’s special gifts involved healing by touch, prophetic visions, and auto-writing. Although she lived at the twin plantations, Quin spent much of her free time on Lion Mountain with Linn, who was not only a brilliant technologist, but also had the

gift of over-producing the human goodness needed to feed the magical creatures in the world.

By the time Zin set down on her airbike outside of Linn's Technology Lab, he was already hard at work inside; and Quin was just arriving on her protector, a white dragon named Cuoré, with breakfast fare consisting of freshly-baked vanilla scones, bananas, and a container of homemade applesauce. There was enough extra to share with Zin, who had merely had cereal earlier, and so didn't mind partaking when it was offered.

After visiting for about a half hour, Zin decided to drop in on Luis, who wasn't in his cabin. Being told by a neighbor that he was working in the community greenhouse, in not wanting to bother him, she decided to head back to Alabama.

At a certain spot over Georgia, when she was not quite halfway home, Zin got the feeling she was being followed. She was just passing over a poultry work camp that had once been under the rule of Supercity Twelve, but that was now liberated and working in connection with several mothership communities in the area. Putting on her rose-colored glasses and discreetly glancing about her, she couldn't see anyone. However, unable to shake the uneasy feeling, she decided to land in a treed area a couple of miles from the western border of the poultry farm.

Still feeling some sort of presence, she folded and pocketed her bike, after which, she decided to sit with her back up against a short cliff. *Just have patience, her mind told her, and keep watch for whomever or whatever might be tailing and watching you.*

The unseen presence was Tanner, who was cloaked and wearing spy specs, and who had spotted Zin on her stealth airbike just after she left Lion Mountain. Landing his own bike, which he folded and slipped into a pocket of his robes, Tanner simply switched off his cloaking device before emerging from a clump of trees to approach and confront Zin, who would have little time to ponder how her adversary could have been hidden from her rose-colored glasses (*unless maybe he was behind a tree*) because Tanner immediately challenged her to a duel, which Zin accepted.

There would be no flip of a coin this time because Tanner immediately took the initiative of going first (in fact, they barely had

time for their customary bows) by swiftly inserting a red-colored crystal into the end of his staff.

Going second was fine with Zin, who readied herself by quickly trotting backwards about twenty paces, where she planted her feet and cleared her mind just in time to create a-dozen-and-one icy shield mirrors to deflect the thirteen red-hot energy daggers that Tanner had just shot at her from his staff.

Next, as Tanner hurled a striking-snake spear at her, Zin performed a split-image mirror trick, multiplied by three, to create six versions of herself. As intended, the multiples confused the snake, whose targeting system was in his glowing green eyes and who couldn't tell which Zin to strike at. Unintended, however, was the action of the snake turning around and targeting Tanner, who then had to use magic to shield himself from getting speared by the four-inch fangs of his creation, which still had three minutes left to go as far as its time limit, and which he managed to direct into the trees so as to avoid a second attack.

Now on the offensive, Zin decided on two Bubble Beans, super-special ones, in fact, that formed huge bubble creatures, a fierce ape and a charging boar, to attack. However, Tanner, using his staff, had managed to gain control of his snake spear, which he directed to strike the ape and boar. Thus, the creatures were easily popped by the snake's fangs, just before the spear itself vanished in a glowing green puff.

Zin had just enacted a mist spell to hinder visibility and hopefully slow the duel slightly, to give her more time to think of better moves. This didn't particularly work, though, because Tanner managed to clear a large section of the mist in mere seconds using a Dry-Breath Hex.

And speaking of breath, the air was cold enough on this day for Zin to see hers, which gave her the idea to raise a Breath Beast, in the form of a giant bison, to attack her opponent. However, as large as the bison was, he wasn't all that nimble, and Tanner easily sidestepped the first charge of the creature who was going too fast to slow himself. Thus, by the time the bison managed to slow down and turn himself around to charge again, the forty-second time limit on Zin's spell was already running out, and the beast dissipated before even getting close to the sorcerer again.

While keeping an eye on the slowing, turning, and dissipating bison, Tanner had been morphing a toothpick into a fighting stick,

which he now used to attack Zin who, instead of employing a rope or a flute to defend, decided to swallow a dose of Quicksilver Elixir, which served to make her body movements superfast, thus allowing her to dodge every strike for a full two-and-a-half minutes before Tanner's fighting stick reverted back to being a toothpick.

In the process of creating a boomerang blaster, while backing up to put some space between himself and Zin, Tanner ended up slipping on a patch of soap residue from the popped bubble ape. As he landed on his back, the glowing orange boomerang blaster ended up flying straight upwards into the air; then, as the weapon made its swift return, Tanner barely managed to roll out of the way to avoid being killed by the energy strike.

Being a good sport, Zin allowed her opponent to get to his feet and catch his breath from the near miss before she made her next move, which ended up being in the form of a box trick, specifically visual in nature and designed to distort the appearance of her body, the parts of which ended up displayed flying around in various boxes—an elbow here, a leg there, waving fingers in another, her head popping out of one box that was swirling about in circles. The spell served the purpose of severely disorienting Tanner to the point of making him dizzy, because it was all just too much to look at and make sense of. Actually, he felt rather nauseas, like seasick, this forcing him to shut his eyes and take deep breaths to try to get his bearings and keep from hurling. He ended up using his staff to give himself a Nausea Inoc, which was magical medicine and thus counted as a move.

While Tanner was injecting himself, Zin's mind was on another box trick she had up her sleeve, literally, in that she had two foot-trapping boxes in her left jacket sleeve, all prepared and ready to toss out to immobilize Tanner by first capturing his feet, and then acting like strong magnets firmly attached to the earth. However, she wouldn't end up using this trick because the duel was about to end. She was just reaching into her sleeve for the boxes when both she and Tanner (who was now feeling better) were distracted by the sound of a tree branch breaking nearby, seemingly on its own, which made both magician and sorcerer very suspicious. Neither would end up investigating, though, because another distraction had just presented itself, in the form of clouds gathering and wind kicking up, as if a storm might be brewing.

Backing up a few paces, Tanner issued Zin a short bow, which she returned, this serving as an unspoken agreement to call it quits for the day, the duel ending much like the previous one, in a draw.

When unfolding his airbike, Tanner had a kind of cocky look on his face—as though he knew something his adversary didn't and was feeling superior about it—and he gave Zin a small salute.

Hymn, cloaked and nearby, had accidentally broken the tree limb, his weight being too much for the rotting and storm-weakened branch. Then, he had started to raise a storm as a distraction to keep the magician and sorcerer from discovering him.

Westerwing arrived just as Tanner was zipping away on his bike and turning on the stealth feature to disappear, basically in a blink. Oddly enough, the wind was dying down and the clouds were dispersing. *Strange little storm, Zin thought, and an even stranger look from Tanner, along with that odd little salute.*

Not only had Luis heard from his neighbor that Zin had dropped by his cabin, but Philip had been visiting Lion Mountain for the day and had gotten a tree message from his dulcimer that Tanner and Zin were dueling.

“So when Philip told me, I definitely wanted to follow up, in case things got ugly,” Luis stated.

“Not ugly, but definitely a little strange,” Zin remarked, with a glance at the tree whose limb had mysteriously broken and beside which Hymn, still cloaked, was squatting.

Luis was about to say something, but then stopped short and suddenly crouched, pulling Zin down with him, as they heard a sound very like that of a large swarm of bees, along with sharp whooshing noises, like winds zipping about very fast. Thinking quickly, Luis performed a powerful hiding hex on both himself and Zin; and just in the nick of time, it seems, because what he had hidden them from soon arrived at their location.

Actually, there were two somethings that looked on the approach to be like swirling strings of angry black insects. However, upon landing, the strings formed the shapes of two human figures, though ones still buzzing with a kind of energy that made them look as though they might be made of masses of dark and angry bees.

What are they? Zin directed telepathically at Luis.

Penumbras, maybe? Luis replied, almost unbelievably. *But there haven't been any on earth for centuries.*

Zin had heard mention of these creatures before, in a class on Demonic Menaces she had taken a couple of years back. Since penumbras were thought to be entirely creatures of history, the curriculum had only briefly touched on the subject. The two standing mere feet from the hidden magician and sorcerer were looking around, while sniffing and listening. Blessedly, in addition to rendering them invisible, Luis' hex was masking their human scents and breathing sounds.

Though they cast no shadows, the penumbras made Zin very much think of shadows; and, indeed, they were very like shades, shadowy ghosts, though ultra-deadly ones in being designed mainly to kill various godly beings. Since penumbras were shapeshifting, they could easily hide in the shadows, while waiting to ambush people. By Zin's reckoning, the two here seemed bolder than that, like hungry for a kill and not in any sort of mood to wait and ambush anyone.

After about two minutes of nosing around, the penumbras suddenly took off flying, in long buzzing streaks, toward the nearby poultry farm.

Hymn had tucked himself tightly into a tree cavity (in the very tree that had sent the message to Philip) to even further hide because he felt frightened. Having slept through a workshop on Shades and Other Useful Spirits, he didn't exactly know what these two creatures were. However, able to sense their powerful and almost ruthless energy, he decided they were probably nondiscriminatory, in that they likely wouldn't care that an underling might be on their side, and so might just as well tear him to pieces as someone else. Although Zin and Luis were about to leave, it would actually be some time before Hymn would feel inclined to stir from his safe little spot in the tree cavity.

"I think I can figure something out about this," Zin said, as Luis ended his hiding hex. "But I need to get home, and then it might take me a while." Zin hadn't even needed to consult her foreshard to know that she could do something about the penumbras, and that God meant for her to. By Providence, she had been in this exact place on this day to learn of this problem. *God's hand is always guiding His children; we just have to be astute to His leadings*, she thought, as Luis shifted to rookh form so that she could hop aboard.

Westerwing had gotten his name from a special skill he possessed—the ability to fly forty times faster than a normal rookh when traveling in a westerly direction. With Doyle Mansion being on a mostly-westward trajectory, he reached the back gardens in less than five seconds.

As they were landing, Luis relayed to Zin telepathically, *I'm heading back to the poultry camp to see if I can help*. He had it in his mind that even if he couldn't stop the penumbras, he could at least carry people to safety. Plus, he could round up certain others to help battle this menace.

Westerwing was almost instantly gone in a black streak, which Zin didn't see because she was sprinting towards the house, to enter and head downstairs to the subbasement library where she raced through rows of shelves to grab a handful of books and head to an empty table to flip pages, hurriedly looking for information on penumbras.

From one book, Zin gleaned the information that ancient necromancer sorcerers had made penumbras from the dead, to do the bidding of sorcerers only, non-converted ones that is, which meant Luis and other believing sorcerers would not be able to command them. And penumbras were even more deadly than other demonic creatures such as megahobs and nyregs because they couldn't be killed. *Because they're dead already*, Zin's mind told her. Another book stated that the necromancers had used unsaved people on the brink of death, somehow trapping their departing spirits to create these shadowy assassins that were incredibly fast. By some unknown means, the penumbras of the past had been conquered, put down somehow, possibly put to sleep. The opinions of various researchers weren't exactly clear on this. *So, a mystery*, Zin thought, also racking her brains for some way that she might stop the penumbras.

Glancing in the direction of her lab, set up in one section of the library, Zin got the strong idea that her normal magician skills wouldn't avail her much in this case, which led her to worry. While she and Luis could hide magically, other people would have trouble hiding from the penumbras, unless magicians and sorcerers were around to help. *But we can't be everywhere at once*, she reminded herself. And although hiding-magic could be enhanced to cover large areas and groups of people, these types of spells almost always had a time limit attached,

and so wouldn't be good options for the long term. Also, even though Westerwing could outrun penumbras, Zin was getting the idea from what she was reading that creatures like gryphons, wind horses, and newdus would have trouble doing so over long distances. *Dragons maybe could, she reasoned, but slower creatures, no.*

"How did the penumbras come back?" Zin suddenly thought to ask her foreshard, which showed her more than she could have ever imagined in what amounted to a little movie playing out within the crystal.

As she watched, her mouth fell open in surprise to see Tanner using a device on his belt to follow her into the grapevine, and into the future to steal a device of some sort from the sorcerers' den in the furniture warehouse. Then, using the device, he had managed to raise the penumbras, thirteen at first to be exact.

So Tanner stole something that can somehow raise penumbras, she noted. And he has a shroud that can hide from rose-colored glasses. Plus, he knows about the genies' grapevine. Absolutely livid, Zin was fully planning to do something about the latter two of these issues; but first she needed to deal with the penumbras. *No wonder he looked so smug earlier...and that stupid little salute.*

It actually hadn't taken Tanner very long to figure out what the device he snagged from the future was, and how to use it. After arriving home from Lithuania, he had discovered his spare cloak to be missing. However, after fuming for a short time, he decided to put his angry energy into studying the mysterious box. Within a couple of hours, he had worked it out. The device was actually easy to unlock, and activate using a short incantation. Once activated, the box issued thirteen seeking stimulant-energy darts, which found and raised the penumbras who had indeed been put to sleep in the past and simply now needed to be wakened from where they had lain dormant for centuries, in Death Pockets—a version of Demon Pockets but specifically designed to hold shades.

Tanner was thrilled, particularly in knowing that the penumbras couldn't die, this making them even more useful to the sorcerers than stealth hobs and other demonic creatures, including flash dragons. So this was some consolation over the loss of his spare cloak that he was still angry and puzzling over; and he suddenly had a sort of funny and

crazy thought: *Maybe the cloak somehow turned itself on, and I just can't see it.* However, using his staff to try to detect his sorcerer imprint, which was left on anything made by him, Tanner was unable to find the cloak anywhere in his den. So it was definitely stolen; and he didn't particularly know whom to suspect, who might have been able to gain access to his den.

Vidas, maybe, Tanner considered, *or possibly Penelope.* She had been acting a little more independently these days, and somewhat superior, as though she was better than others. She had recently said privately to Tanner that she didn't think Kemp's fire-producing power was all that great unless she was around to fan the flames he was producing. *Like his gift is puny and needs her help; that's ridiculous,* Tanner had thought. However, the idea of Penelope stealing the cloak was a little flimsy because Tanner knew she was afraid of sorcerers, and likely wouldn't dare try to steal from one. *Maybe Luis took it,* his mind hit on next. Tanner had gotten the idea that the converted sorcerer had been in his den before, at a time when he had stolen Zin's foreshard. When it was stolen back right away, he suspected Luis. *But maybe Patrick snuck in and took the cloak,* Tanner pondered. There were just too many possibilities at this point as far as the culprit. Since he didn't know, he'd just have to let it go. But he would definitely add extra security to his den, especially to keep the penumbra device safe.

The box was limited to waking thirteen penumbras per day. After raising the first batch, Tanner had let Vidas know about the device, mainly because the impact on the world was going to be too great to be kept secret. Plus, the penumbras needed to be given their instructions. Other than saying he had come across the box in his travels, Tanner hadn't given his mentor any other details.

Vidas was a member of the Council of Twos, the governing body of the sorcerers. Hurriedly consulting with a few other members, the first targets were established as being a mothership community, a self-sustaining ranch, and three work camps that had been lost to the Supercities. The penumbras were to attack these locations in twos and threes, killing as many godly humans and magical creatures as possible. Vidas had given Tanner the hearty go-ahead to continue using the penumbra device, while the Council of Twos continued to meet to establish additional priority targets. For now, they would stay clear of

Lion Mountain, because there were simply too many nature spirits protecting that refuge territory. However, once more were awakened, the penumbras would be pretty much unstoppable no matter what protection certain targets might have.

Meanwhile, back in the subbasement library, Kiana had just breathlessly arrived, somewhat startling Zin who was still poring over books while trying to brainstorm possible answers to the problem.

Kiana had just returned from a time-travel trip. While unpacking, she suddenly felt the urge to engage in auto-writing, which had given her some information on the penumbras that Zin didn't yet have, such as that only thirteen could be raised per day. Kiana had also gotten the answer as to how to counter this menace. Reading from the scribbles in her notebook, she said, "Tell Zin to look up zephyrs."

So here was the exact confirmation that God intended Zin to be the one to take care of this problem.

After relaying her message, Kiana was off to help deal with the penumbras. Since she couldn't run as fast as most magical creatures could fly, a newdu was waiting for her in the garden. Already, messages were getting around pretty fast (by dawn pigeons, walnuts, kites, etc.) as to the places being targeted, which included the Georgia poultry farm, a bamboo plantation in Arkansas, a coal camp in West Virginia, a mothership community in Indiana, and a self-sustaining ranch in Kansas.

Magsen had just come downstairs, passing Kiana as she was leaving. With Zin giving her a brief explanation, Magsen helped yank books from shelves to look for anything on the subject of zephyrs, which were not much related to the gentle west winds that were also called zephyrs. Instead, these were powerful magical creatures, specialized wind horses to be exact, capable of dividing the penumbras each into a thousand pieces. And not only that, but zephyrs could summon the Four Winds to carry the pieces off to distant locations of the world. In parts, the penumbras would have little power, but would end up simply drifting about in search of their other pieces, unable to communicate with one another, also frequently needing to rest from these endeavors to just lie about in isolated caves, shadowy ravines, and other secluded spots. Thus, hundreds of years would pass before any of

the penumbras would manage to find all of their missing parts in order to reassemble themselves.

While Zin had heard of zephyrs, she didn't think there were any in the world of today. The books she and Magsen were studying confirmed this, as the last sightings of zephyrs seemed to go back even farther in time than any references to penumbras. However, until recently, gryphixes and sunbirds hadn't had a noticeable presence in the world. When Zin mentioned this to her protector, Magsen said, "So we can hope that there are zephyrs somewhere around these days."

Magsen's mention of "hope" made Zin recall her conversation with Esther about the Trinity Realms. Of Hope, Joy, and Peace, Ancora was connected to Hope. Also, at the café in the House of Thimbles, Esther had mentioned that there was definitely a doorway to Ancora on the mezzanine, though she didn't know exactly where it was or how to access it. The sorceress had also reaffirmed what Pizzo had told Zin—that Ancora held many magical creatures not in our world. "I think it's like a waiting spot for them before coming here," Esther had stated.

After sharing this information with Magsen, as they were racing upstairs to head to the twin plantations, Zin said, "They're waiting for God's perfect timing; and this probably is the right time for zephyrs to come here, if there are any in Ancora."

They were just landing on the front lawns of Netherwind when Zin got a walnut call from Jamie to inform her of some information he had just gotten from the conch shell. "The door to Ancora on the mezzanine works exactly at noon on Wednesdays, and only for one minute," he said. Jamie was in his glider with Alex, and they were helping with the penumbra problem at the ranch in Kansas, which was home to over five hundred people.

Disconnecting with Jamie, Zin gave a brief wave to Magsen, who was heading off in a golden streak to the coal camp in West Virginia to see if she could do anything to help.

Racing across the lawns and into the house, Zin was thinking, *Of course it's Wednesday, because of God's perfect timing.* However, it was almost noon, two minutes 'til, in fact, according to her wristwatch, this prompting her to run faster, and retrieve her foreshard from her pack because she still didn't know where the door to Ancora was or

what it looked like. “Show me the door to Ancora on the mezzanine,” she said.

She was just bursting onto the magical hallway when her crystal showed her a vision that looked like the door she had just come through from the stairwell. All of the doorways on the mezzanine needed to be entered from inside the hall in order to reach other realms. With the door having swung itself shut behind her, she opened it in order to walk through. Upon finding herself simply in the stairwell again, Zin was briefly confused, especially when looking at her watch, which showed the time to be just eighteen seconds after noon.

It's the door to the other stairwell! Her mind fairly screamed this at her a moment later, as she re-entered the hall to sprint to the door at the other end, which she entered with just four seconds to spare of the one-minute time window running out.

She had entered the correct doorway this time, and not another stairwell, as evidenced by her surroundings of a beautiful garden with lush greenery, tall trees, and flowering shrubs. Glancing behind her, she noticed that the door, set into a stone garden wall, had swung itself shut. Rather cautiously opening it again, she viewed merely the familiar sight of the mezzanine hall. This led her to believe that the doorway to home would work at any time, which would turn out to be correct.

Since she had made it safely inside, Zin could now relax a little, and take a few moments to think because, according to Esther, Ancora was like Iridis in that only three minutes would end up passing at home, no matter how much time a person ended up spending inside.

So, how to find zephyrs, if they are indeed here, her mind mulled, as she was admiring a flower that looked just like a little shoe, complete with frilly laces tied in a bow.

“No, no zephyrs here,” a voice said behind her.

Spinning around, Zin was surprised to see a genie, who introduced himself as Breccan, hovering at about chest high to her. Zin quickly realized she had been projecting her thoughts, which Breccan had picked up on, having telepathic abilities, like all genies. (How else could they grant our unspoken wishes once in a while, when they feel those wishes are worthy of granting, like the unselfish ones, mainly.) Breccan was evidently the caretaker and manager of Ancora, a task he

was more than capable of, despite being only around six inches in height.

After briefly introducing herself, Zin related that she was looking for zephyrs because penumbras had just shown up in her own realm. “Well, a sorcerer found a way to wake them, evidently,” she clarified.

“Yikes!” Breccan responded. “Then, yes, you will definitely need zephyrs to deal with them. And, as far as I know, there are none in Providentia right now. The zephyrs in your realm in the past somehow went into the future, maybe by unicorn travel or possibly using the genie grapevine. I don’t think they were ever in the past for long,” Breccan went on to say. “There wouldn’t have been enough food for them to eat. You know how much regular horses eat.” (Zin nodded.) “Well, magical ones eat a lot too; and before Chase Linn was born, human goodness was in much shorter supply in your realm.”

“Could the genies somehow help?” Zin suddenly thought to ask, in knowing how powerful the genies’ brand of magic was.

“Genie magic can only disperse demonic energy for short periods of time,” Breccan answered. “So this wouldn’t be much of a help in the long run, especially if the sorcerer keeps raising penumbras; and I imagine he will. Eventually, there will be too many. No, the answer is definitely zephyrs.”

“And there aren’t any here...” Zin mused, as her brain tried to work out what to do next.

“No, but they are in your world in the future,” Breccan said in a leading sort of way, in order to give Zin’s thoughts a little nudge. (He knew this information from having communication with his future self via the Magical Grapevine.)

“Then that’s the answer!” she said, quickly catching on. “I can travel the genie grapevine to the future, and ask the zephyrs to come back with me to the present time.”

Zin was all set to head back through the doorway to her own realm (she even had hold of the door handle), when she was stopped by Breccan saying, “Wait, wait, wait—there’s a catch!”

“What catch?” Zin asked, letting go of the handle.

“The zephyrs might be willing to help, but you won’t be able to talk to them,” Breccan answered. To Zin’s questioning look, he explained, “They only communicate with people capable of walking on water; in

this case, clouds, since zephyrs live amongst the clouds. Clouds are made of water, of course, tons and tons of it.”

“The Secret of Rainbows,” Zin stated, as her brain suddenly hit on this.

“Exactly,” Breccan said, actually impressed that she knew something about this.

In trying to work out how she was going to learn to walk on clouds quickly enough to solve this problem, Zin suddenly thought of cloudbirds. She had met one recently, named Golli; though he had told her during their conversation that he didn’t know the Secret of Rainbows, so she doubted that a cloudbird would be able to teach her the skill of walking on clouds.

“Quite right, a cloudbird won’t be able to teach you,” Breccan stated to Zin, who had again been unconsciously projecting her thoughts.

“But could a cloudbird speak to the zephyrs for me?” Zin asked.

Breccan was shaking his head. “Zephyrs are pretty aloof. And you know how smart horses are.” (Though she didn’t quite understand what he was getting at, Zin nodded because she did indeed know how smart all creatures within the horse family were, even donkeys.) “Well,” Breccan went on, “zephyrs are a super-superior variety of horse, and they know it, so they’re not going to want to talk to any other creatures—not gryphons, not me, not even regular wind horses—just people who can walk on water, or clouds.”

As Zin gave a small sigh, as though she might be just about out of ideas, Breccan added, “So, it’s kind of a mystery, as to how you’re going to solve this.”

Giving another sigh and smiling slightly, Zin offered, “Even the person I know who can solve great mysteries, and who knows about the Secret of Rainbows, doesn’t yet know how to walk on water.”

“If you’re meant to learn, the answer will come to you,” Breccan replied. “Just keep the doorways in your mind open.”

As she was considering his words, barely two seconds later, Zin’s mind hit on the answer. “That’s it!” she declared. “Thank you, Breccan!”

“You’re welcome,” he answered, before returning Zin’s hastily-offered triangle hand symbol as he watched her fairly fly through the

doorway in the stone wall to enter the mezzanine hall. Though slightly perplexed at the abruptness of her departure, he wasn't particularly surprised, in knowing matters to be pressing in her own realm.

And, matters definitely were pressing, because even though Zin now had some definite direction, and even though only three minutes had passed while she was gone, it was still going to take her some time to learn how to walk on clouds. As the door swung shut behind her, she was already on her way to Alex, to ask him to come to Netherwind as quickly as possible.

Chapter Eight

Walking on Clouds

While waiting for Alex, Zin noted that Lizzie and Edna were absent from their portraits as she sat down on a bench in the hall to take a deep breath and have a little think.

God had definitely been speaking to her through Breccan, with his mention of “a mystery” and “doorways.” In this case, however, the doorway would end up being a window. *So the penumbras are the reason I just learned about the windows to the dimensions*, her mind told her, *because the one to the Dimension of Mystery probably holds the answer to the Secret of Rainbows*. As if confirming her thoughts, when Zin fished her foreshard from her pack, the crystal showed her exactly which window led to the Dimension of Mystery.

Although she could levitate, which meant she could basically fake walking on clouds, Zin somehow knew that the zephyrs would be too smart to be fooled by any sort of trick; so she definitely needed to learn the Secret of Rainbows. *No shortcuts here*, her mind told her.

Alex, dropped off on Netherwind’s front lawns by a rookh, arrived shortly in the hall.

After briefly explaining about zephyrs and what she had learned from Breccan, Zin asked, “Will you go with me into the Dimension of Mystery to help me learn the Secret of Rainbows, and how to walk on clouds?”

“Yes, of course,” Alex replied, though in somewhat of a distracted manner.

With a lot on her mind, Zin had barely noticed that Alex was looking somewhat frazzled, and his face held a worried expression. “What’s wrong?” she asked.

Although not a lot of time had passed since the thirteen penumbras had begun their onslaught, the damage was already turning out to be extreme. While Alex was reluctant to share specifics (so as not to put too much pressure on Zin to solve the problem quickly), he did end up

telling her, “The penumbras don’t seem to need weapons, because they are a weapon. Their energy can evidently easily form the shapes of swords, spears, knives.... And they’re super-fast.”

Zippering about in the glider over the self-sustaining ranch in Kansas, Jamie and Alex had been picking people up to whisk them to safety. But the task had proven difficult, even with Alex helping to defend with a flute, while listening to the conch shell to get directions as to whom to pick up and where to take them. Wind horses and rooks were also helping, but the penumbras were often fast enough to snatch riders from their backs to then stab, strangle, tear to pieces, dash against rocks, and so forth. The vicious shades had no qualms about targeting even the smallest of children, this having been particularly difficult for Alex and Jamie to witness. As busy as they had been at the ranch, Alex had no idea what might be happening at other places being hit by penumbras; but he could imagine the carnage to be at least as great as what he had seen so far.

In order to spare her friend having to share any more details, Zin simply said, “Then we’d better hurry.”

Alex was nodding as they proceeded to the window to the Dimension of Mystery, in one corner of the hall, not too far from the bench Zin had been seated on.

Beyond the closed window lay simply a view of the side lawns of Netherwind Manor. However, once opened, Alex and Zin were met by a thick mist, very difficult to see through. Even though she couldn’t see any ground from this vantage point, Zin trustingly climbed through the window, followed by Alex, where their feet met solid ground, though somewhat soft like the earth in a forest setting. Except, as the mist cleared slightly, they discovered that they weren’t in a forest setting because all of the trees once growing in the area had been cut down, leaving only stumps. The window behind them, that was still open, appeared to be simply hanging in midair; and through it they could see a faint view of the mezzanine hall. The season felt a lot like the early winter they had left at home, but perhaps a little milder; and gravity felt much the same as it had before they stepped through the window.

As the mist continued to clear, finding a footpath nearby, the pair followed it to an enormous tree stump upon which about fifty pieces of a jigsaw puzzle were spread out. Somehow knowing they were meant

to piece the puzzle, Alex and Zin dropped to their knees to first find the corners and edges to form a square frame before working on the inside. While piecing the puzzle, they noticed that the rings in the tree stump were very oddly shaped, forming mostly squiggles and swirls, even though the exterior of the trunk was nearly perfectly circular. Even odder than the tree rings was the wildlife they were observing, including a huge (knee high actually) bluish-colored earthworm inching by, a tiny goat (less than knee high) nibbling mosses and weeds, and a smallish (about half normal size) scampering red squirrel with white-tufted ears and a short ringed tail.

The puzzle picture turned out to be a stone staircase, which Alex and Zin surmised they were to find, and climb. “Probably to reach the clouds that I’m meant to learn to walk on,” Zin suggested.

Alex agreed with this. However, finding the staircase would end up being another puzzle because, directly beyond the enormous stump, the footpath split off in two directions, one heading into what appeared to be a desert setting and the other meandering through a lush meadow. In the direction of the meadow, Zin and Alex observed a bird about the size and shape of a cardinal, but greenish in color, flying backwards. Since in the normal Three-Dimensional World they were familiar with only hummingbirds were known to fly backwards, this was something of a mystery.

A small patch of woods bordering one side of the meadow featured an autumn setting in which leaves, instead of falling, were floating upwards from the ground to attach themselves to the trees, many of which were resplendent in colors of flashing red, gleaming gold, and fiery orange. Oddly enough, several trees with more subdued colors seemed to stand out more than the flashy ones. *It’s like dull stands out more than bright here*, Zin thought. *That’s interesting.*

In noticing the same thing and guessing what Zin was thinking, Alex stated, “Maybe related to the way God created colors, and how He designed human eyes to perceive colors.”

The desert region was actually dull in comparison to the meadow. However, in studying both paths for a short time, Alex deduced that they were to head into the desert. “Because of the clouds,” he stated, pointing out to Zin that none lay over the meadow, whereas, the skies over the desert held huge expanses of puffy gray-and-white clouds.

Heading off into the desert, Alex explained what he knew about the Secret of Rainbows, which he had pretty well figured out, even though he hadn't yet been able to apply it to his own body. Because the secret was more about brain-thinking than about communicating, he had some difficulty explaining it to Zin, though he did his best.

Having a first-rate brain, Zin was able to absorb most of what Alex was telling her. At about fifteen minutes along on the desert path, she reiterated some of what he had explained so far, mostly to keep it all straight in her mind, but also to let him know that she was getting what he was saying, which basically all boiled down to seven things: colors, water, blood, doves, promises, light, and human eyes.

"Colors are prominent in the bible and have meaning," she began, "and they obviously hold great energy and power, like the magical color weapons. And the original seven dragons, created by a magical peacock—which I met once, by the way—were made to correspond to the seven colors of the rainbow."

"But even though the colors are important," Alex interjected, "it's more important to focus on the water of a rainbow, because we're trying to walk on water here."

"Right," Zin replied. "The human body is largely made of water. Water purifies and actually saves us because of how it's connected to the blood of Jesus. The water is the Word of God and the blood is the Covenant, by which we're saved, given Eternal Life." With this, Zin quoted 1 John 5:6. "This is he who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and the blood."

Alex was nodding, as Zin added, "We're supposed to become like Jesus. Jesus walked on water. And to learn the Secret of Rainbows, we need to tap into how our blood circulates through our bodies."

"Then promises," Alex said, by way of a prompt, though the seven factors of the Secret of Rainbows weren't in any particular order. The seven were, however, all interconnected. In fact, if diagrammed on paper, they would have been shown as circles in motion (not flat circles, but ones more spherical) all crossing, connecting, and flowing into one another.

"As a reminder of promises," Zin stated, "God speaks to us through rainbows. The Lord keeps His promises—we will have Eternal Life, rise above, and go to heaven. Rainbows are prominent in the bible.

Ezekiel in his vision describes a rainbow emanating from God, or being part of Him. And the white rider in the Revelation carries a bow that might be a rainbow, and not a weapon; though a rainbow is powerful, so it might be a sort of weapon. God's promises have certainly conquered Satan and Eternal Death."

"Then doves," Alex said.

"Jesus is the Dove, which connects to the seven dragons being burnished doves, the burnishing being a transformation, like polishing; and in some cases trials and testing so we can change and grow, like how the dragons change and grow when they shapeshift from doves to dragons. And, of course, doves and dragons can fly, which I'll need to learn, along with how to walk on water."

"Correct," Alex confirmed.

"Rainbows are water affected by light," Zin went on. "Light and water both make the rainbow possible, and can work inside our own bodies. The Water is the Word, as we said before. The Light is the Son. Jesus is Sun and Moon. In our future home, New Jerusalem, we'll have no need of sun or moon because Jesus will be our Light." (Zin happened to be referencing a quote from the bible that was also known to Alex, Revelation 21:23. "And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine upon it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb.")

"Next is human eyes," Alex prompted, "and this has to do with much more than being able to see beautiful rainbows."

Zin nodded as she said, "Human eyes are incredibly specialized, so much so that scientists have proven that they couldn't have evolved—they had to have been designed. And yet, we're to see with more than just our eyes, having faith." With this, she quoted Hebrews 11:3. "By faith we understand that the world was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was made out of things which do not appear."

"And here we can connect back to promises since we have faith in God's promises," Alex stated.

"But rainbows are not just a reminder of God's promises," Zin responded, "they are a reminder to look up. The rainbow draws our gaze upward, where it belongs, so that we focus more on things above, and less on things of the earth."

“Also,” Alex said, “the secret has to do with rainbows being as individual as human beings.”

“And to some degree we have to be able to use at least a small part of the unused part of our brain too, right?” Zin asked.

“Exactly,” Alex replied.

“We can do it if we expand our thinking,” Zin mused. “Clouds are made of tons of water, floating. We’re made of less water, so we should be able to walk on them, if our brains can rethink things.” Her mind was also contemplating the number seven being so important in the bible, as a number of completeness. *And the seven factors of the Secret of Rainbows are all interconnected, not in any sort of exact order, but more like moving in circles, like cycles, and like time.*

Though a lot of details were still missing about the Secret of Rainbows, Zin felt she was on the path to understanding.

And speaking of paths, they had just reached a spot on the desert path where they could see the huge stone staircase in the distance, set against the backdrop of a long stretch of tall cliffs. “There are no switchbacks,” Alex declared, in surprise. “It’s just one long diagonal.”

As they continued on in their trek, they could also see that the stairs were not attached to the cliff in any way. Rather, they were standing on their own, without any sort of visible support system, at a position about twenty-five feet in front of the cliff face.

As they continued to make their approach, they came upon a deep gorge, through which the path extended along a rocky ridge, with steep drop offs on either side, leading to what they imagined to be the bottom of the stairs. However, upon reaching the site, they discovered that the staircase actually led down into the gorge, continuing on the same diagonal as the part extending up into the clouds.

“We’re supposed to go down, not up, to reach the clouds,” Zin surmised, though she was gazing up at the clouds that would have been fairly easily reachable by climbing the stairs because many seemed to be perched directly on top of the cliff.

“Correct,” Alex said, smiling, “because some things in this land are inverted.”

Zin was smiling too as she said, “We were supposed to take note of that while we traveled all the way from the window, to then apply it to this staircase.”

“God’s ways are mysterious,” Alex said as they began their descent with Zin in the lead.

As they headed downward, they drank some water from their packs, along with having a snack of granola bars with raisins and pecans.

After about twenty minutes of descending, they reached a landing at the bottom of the staircase where they stayed put because stepping off would have meant about an eight-foot drop to the ground.

Alex and Zin barely had time to admire a nearby pile of sand that was somehow sculpting itself into the shape of a castle with tall towers, when the whole staircase began to move like a giant seesaw, with the center pivot point being high above them at the ridge path (though the staircase wasn’t attached to the ridge in any way).

Although they were rising, the staircase was moving slowly enough so that they didn’t feel in danger (plus Alex could fly and Zin could levitate if they needed to); however, they did have to scramble over the edge of the landing they were on as it began to slant like a slide. The scramble left them standing on the section that had previously formed the eight-foot drop, but that was now their new landing, rising slowly into the air to stop exactly at a point at the top of the cliff that jutted out to allow them to step right out onto solid grassy ground, amidst lovely flowers and trees, birds flitting about, various critters scampering around, and so forth. The air didn’t seem thinner—they could breathe easily—despite the fact that they were fairly dizzyingly high.

Following a trail along the edge of the cliff, they admired their surroundings, marveling over such oddities as a stretch of landscape in which light and dark seemed to be alternating in sections approximately one hundred feet wide, the dark resembling twilight and the light reminding Zin and Alex of a bright midmorning. Large candles set on plinths in each section seemed to mimic the darkness and the light, burning dimly in the twilight settings, but with full and fiery flames in those in full daylight. Strewn about the ground were rocks that appeared hard and stony, but that were actually soft and spongy to the touch. Pausing for a few moments beside a tree, they watched as a butterfly turned into a caterpillar on one limb. In truth, a few things they had seen so far in the Dimension of Mystery were somewhat familiar to both Alex and Zin, from having been here before through a

doorway in their minds. However, seeing these things in the physical, made them seem much different, and look different as well.

As they walked on, Zin suddenly realized why they had gone down the stairs, instead of up. “Because it’s easier to walk down than up,” she said. “And when we trust in God, He always leads us in the way we should go, often on a path of least resistance, effort, and strain.”

They had just come upon a flower very like a sunflower in shape and coloring, but about three times larger than any normal sunflower. Exactly in the center, where the seeds might have been, was a smooth mirror. As the flower slowly turned to face them, Alex and Zin could see the reflection of their faces in the mirror.

“Sunflowers like to face the sun,” Alex remarked.

“We have the Light of Jesus in us,” Zin replied. “Well, the Holy Spirit anyway, which is the same thing.”

The object of their destination along the path turned out to be a treehouse in an enormous tree leaning out over the cliff side. On the second level of the treehouse, a large deck extended out into the clouds, almost like a huge gangplank or diving platform. The tops of many of the clouds were set level with this platform, leading Zin to believe this to be the exact spot from which she would learn to walk on clouds; and Alex agreed.

A lot of things were running through Zin’s mind as she made her first attempt. In addition to what she and Alex had discussed earlier, she was thinking about the colors in roses. *Rose colors are based on light absorption, not on something more concrete that can be touched. It’s absorption first, then how we see what the light has touched. Animals, birds, and such see things differently than we do because their eyes are different, so it’s like they don’t even know that a rose is red, or pink. But they don’t need to know, just like I don’t need to know. I just need to believe*, her brain told her, as she took a deep breath and focused on the water in her body, the blood circulating through her, the promises of God, the Dove, colorful dragons transforming and flying, the light surrounding her, and Jesus walking on water.

Stepping off of the platform and onto a cloud for the first time ended up being a dismal failure for Zin. And the second time was not much better. Blessedly, Alex was standing by to catch her; well,

actually hovering, a little below and to one side of the platform so that he could easily swoop in and under her as she fell.

Zin was avoiding using levitation skills because she somehow knew they would be a hindrance here and not a help. (This was correct, largely because magician skills were based on sixes, not on sevens.) In fact, she was basically going to need to turn off the magician in her in order to learn the Secret of Rainbows. Although magicians throughout the centuries had been able to harness the energy in colors to make things like the magical weapons, these skills could not be applied here because of how the seven factors of the Secret of Rainbows were interconnected with one another. Also, the skills needed to walk on clouds were practically a complete invert of anything Zin had ever used before with regard to levitation. But it's often not bad for us to experience a bit of a shake-up in our lives, to get us out of our normal groove and onto a different path, often a more productive one and in much closer step to our walk with Jesus.

Taking a short break after about her fortieth attempt, Zin noticed a nearby tree whose roots were entirely exposed, with none at all sunk into the earth, as though it might be about to break into dancing on its thick toes, or maybe set off skipping through forests and meadows. In the back of Zin's mind, she was thinking that it might be nice to come back here to explore someday, when she had more time. Speaking of which, Alex and Zin would come to discover that time passes at the same rate within all of the six dimensions human beings have access to (which makes sense since we're used to the way things work in the common three dimensions). So it was a good thing for Zin to be a quick learner, at least compared to other folks her age. But quick learner or not, when Zin resumed her attempts to walk on clouds, the going was difficult.

Watching his friend, Alex was thinking that he might like to come back some time to learn to walk on water. He couldn't really focus on that right now because it was more important for Zin to learn, so that she could talk to the zephyrs. However, there wasn't much to hinder his thinking about walking on water while he was standing by to catch Zin.

When frozen, water is easy to walk on, his mind told him. So it's not much of a stretch to believe that we can walk on water in liquid form, or as steam, or in clouds. Just like it's not a stretch, after we're

immersed in the Word of God, to start the process of transforming to become more like Christ. Then when we start to change, we're lighter, not just freed from sin, but we actually feel lighter, not burdened or hindered anymore.

Along with the idea of transforming came thoughts of the dragons, and their colors. *Colors equal power and are filled with energy. But it's the effect of colors on us that produces the energy, not that they are energy. So it's only how we see or perceive walking on water, not whether we can actually walk on water.*

Perceptions were certainly a factor here, and Alex got to thinking about peafowl. For as large as most peacocks and peahens were, they might have been flightless birds, like ostriches. *Yet, they can fly. But even the bumblebee isn't supposed to be able to fly, scientifically, with such tiny wings and such a large body. Yet, the bumblebee does fly.*

Zin, on about her two-hundredth try, reminded herself to be patient. As she was doing this, the concept of mirrors flashed through her brain. *What I know has to be reversed, and can be as simple as looking in mirror. Plus, having the power of the Holy Spirit inside me means nothing is too hard.* At the very moment this thought entered her mind, as she stepped out onto the cloud, she managed to take three steps before she once again sank through and Alex had to catch her.

Back on the platform, Zin was practically giddy with excitement; and as she prepared to step out again, she saw colors within the clouds that she hadn't noticed before, like rainbow colors, which she felt surely meant that her mind was starting to wrap itself around the Secret of Rainbows.

On her next attempt, Zin took seven steps, with Alex cheering her on. He was smiling as he once more set her on her feet on the deck. She was now getting it! And eventually, he wouldn't need to catch her because, as she learned to walk on clouds, she would also learn to fly, because the two pretty much went hand in hand with learning the Secret of Rainbows.

However, getting it or not, Zin still needed practice, because she knew she wouldn't be able to approach a zephyr on shaky legs or with stumbling steps.

While Zin was practicing, and Alex cheering her on, it might be a good time to look in on a few things happening back in our normal three dimensions.

Mee had just managed to catch up to Sal, who had just returned from the same time-travel trip Kiana had been on, and who was now helping Kiana with the efforts to combat the penumbras at the bamboo plantation in Arkansas. The population of the plantation and a close neighboring community was well over twenty thousand, which absolutely thrilled the penumbras, who were slashing about with near lightning speed, killing as many as possible by stabbing, strangling, even using bullets of their buzzing energy to execute people. Mee was as afraid of the penumbras as Hymn had been, and so was hiding near a barn in an indent in the ground, looking much like a rock.

People were trying to flee and hide, but were not having much success at this. As far as defenses, the shadows were simply too fast for magical weapons to be of much use. Only people possessing the highest skills with ropes, flutes, and mirrors were able to have any impact at all; and even then, only the most precise strikes on the penumbras were giving the shadows any pause at all because they couldn't be killed and their energy was very quickly reassembled when dispersed.

Kiana, sailing about on a newdu and occasionally picking people up to whisk them to safety, had called a unicorn, the light of which could generally instantly dissipate demonic energy. However, again because of the no-death factor, the unicorns were only having a small effect on the shades when lighting up, like the equivalent of a stall, which was slightly longer than a pause, but still wasn't of much good against such a powerful force as the penumbras. Plus, the unicorn had to be careful because his light could blind human beings.

Sal, in the meantime, had found out fairly quickly that wordsmith tricks wouldn't work on the penumbras. Swooping in on a wind horse with a flasher designed to induce sleep had no effect. Nor did a message of "HALT" scrawled in leaves on the ground slow the speed of the evil shadows at all. Thus, Sal resorted to taking a dose of Zin's Quicksilver Elixir so that his flute strikes on one of the penumbras would have some effect; though he was forced to flee on the wind horse when the two-and-a-half minute time limit of the elixir wore off. Two

other wind horses happened to be in the area, and were intermittently attacking the penumbras. However, they had to be careful not to hit human beings. Also, their directed wind blasts didn't very often hit home because of the sheer speed of the shadows. So, all in all, it was a pretty desperate situation at the bamboo plantation.

Sadly, the poultry farm wasn't faring much better, even with Luis in rookh form bashing into the penumbras by flying into them on a westward trajectory. While this did serve to temporarily break them up, again, their energy was quickly reassembled. However, his efforts did allow many people to flee to underground shelters, which were fine as a temporary means of safety, but wouldn't provide a long-term solution to the problem.

Meanwhile, Vidas was doing a little investigating. He had been wondering about the penumbra device. *So Tanner said he came across it in his travels...mmm...he mused.* Visiting the young sorcerer's den while he was out of his apartment, Vidas had easily broken through his protégé's security defenses. Now examining the box, he was able to use a temporal scanning device, which registered Tanner's find as being "out of time" and "probably from the future." *As I suspected,* Vidas thought, almost smugly. *So he's found a way to time travel. That's very interesting.* And, indeed, it was, since no other sorcerers that Vidas knew of had ever managed to find a way to time travel. Snooping around the den further yielded no answers as to how Tanner might have accomplished this. *So this bears more investigating,* Vidas thought, as he was leaving. This wouldn't necessarily be a problem, because he was patient.

Although Vidas was happy about the situation with the penumbras—largely because the shadows were designed to do the sorcerers' bidding—he was still not a fan of Tanner. In fact, his mind was still contemplating getting rid of him. *But I would want to first find out how he time traveled,* he considered. If he could figure this out, he could then use the means himself to further the agenda of the sorcerers, which Vidas was still not convinced Tanner was committed to.

So the cloak might not have been Tanner's own creation, Vidas further thought. *He probably acquired that from the future too.* This made sense in his mind because Tanner was originally a conjurer by

specialty; and even though he had proven himself to be tech gifted, it was almost too much of a stretch to think the boy could be this clever.

Well, Tanner definitely was that clever, having created many useful devices over the years for both himself and his friends, like enhancers for Kemp, Devin, and Penelope to make their gifts stronger. But Vidas had always been reluctant to give his protégé any kind of real credit for his accomplishments, this being the cause of a lot of friction between them over the years.

At the same time Vidas was contemplating, Zin was still practicing, though she was not quite there yet. While she had the skills firmly down, her confidence needed to take root. In thinking of this, and in glancing in the direction of the tree with exposed roots, she was sure it had moved a few feet since she last looked at it.

“So it can walk,” she stated.

“And if a tree can walk on the ground, you can walk on clouds,” Alex responded with a smile.

“So true,” Zin said, getting back to practicing right away.

Chapter Nine

Poetry of the Past

While Zin was still practicing, we might take a moment to look back at the aforementioned time-travel trip taken by Kiana and Sal that also included Chevy and Cecelia and that took place just before the penumbras began wreaking havoc. They went into the past by unicorn, rather than using the Time Key, which other time-travel teams were busy with. Although the four were home again basically in a blink, they had spent nearly a month on the trip.

Cecelia was their leader and easily presented as old enough (with no questions asked) to rent a little bungalow in a small town in Alabama for a month. Since the house had only two bedrooms, the girls all squeezed into one, while Sal had his own room.

The mission was basically to rescue banned books from being destroyed, including the *Holy Bible*, which had been banned from many college campuses and other public places, and which was well on its way to being declared as hate speech and outlawed entirely in the U.S. and most other countries around the world. In addition to the bible, the team was there to rescue a lot of classic literature; and Sal was particularly pleased that a lot of poetry books were on the list of “To Be Saved” that Kiana was getting through auto-writing as their mission progressed, both title names and where the books could be found, such as libraries, homes, rec center basements, churches, senior centers, and so forth. A few of their trips involved breaking into Confiscation Centers recently set up to house books that had been banned and were waiting to be burned.

They used shrouds to acquire the books; though, of course, The Sparrow didn’t need a shroud because people simply didn’t notice her as she went about her business. The trip might have been quicker except for the fact that they were tracking down a lot of yet-to-be-banned books set to be put on the lists in the next decade or so.

With the exception of a couple of times at garage sales where they made actual purchases (unshrouded of course), they simply took the books, which was fine and not really theft because they were doing so on God's command in order to save something important to the world. Once acquired, the books were clandestinely delivered to the shelves of many secret libraries such as the Magnolia Archive in Mississippi, a huge book depository in New Hampshire, and the Labyrinth Library beneath Laurelstone, which had been collecting books such as these for many decades by this point, since the owners of the plantation, in addition to having good insight, were following God's commands, very like the members of this time-travel team who were working mostly in the U.S., but who also made a few jaunts to Europe, South Africa, and Russia. In case we might be wondering, a couple of friendly wind horses of this time were toting the humans around, along with the loads of books.

Nearing the end of their month mission, Sal took the opportunity to look in on his future mentor. Em was in college at this time, and was already on her way to becoming a fabulous wordsmith.

With a great passion for literature, she was incredibly concerned over the issue of books being banned. Plus, there was a definite lack of free speech at this time, even to the extent of laws being passed designed to persecute (even imprison) people with conservative viewpoints who dared to speak out.

What was going on in government at this time was absolutely appalling, and had been for years, with political corruption running rampant at all levels, from the local ranks on up to the state and federal levels. While many people were absolutely fed up with their representatives lying to get elected, following personal agendas, squandering tax dollars, promoting lawlessness, being hypocrites, etc., there wasn't much the average person could do about it. Em was so enraged over the issue that she decided to write a poem, which ended up being published in her college paper, as well as two magazines.

Concerning Our Politicians
By E.R. Tremaine

Let's tell a little story of the pampered few,
Those who lord over us and tell us what to do,

Such as a young new elect, each day in the news.
 She's so worn out from cameras, giving interviews,
 And from delivering social justice speeches,
 She must take time off to visit a few beaches,
 See a play, and dine on salmon and wild rice.
 "I must care for self to go on giving advice."
 Then I'll come back and tell you what we should all do
 About the issues that plague us, both old and new,
 Such as the working poor, the hungry, and homeless
 (About whose lives I actually could not care less).
 I'm just here to verbalize problems of this kind,
 And make sure to convince you to be of like mind
 About tax raising to throw at them more money
 (While I enjoy my herbal tea, scones, and honey),
 So that the wealth can be siphoned away to feed
 Our corruption, rather than those truly in need.
 "Any by the way, you're racist if you disagree
 With anything at all that's ever said by me."
 These folks, in threats, do tend to highly specialize,
 Along with brainwashing, looking with critics' eyes,
 Giving speeches on how to get more on welfare.
 "Don't you disagree with me; don't you even dare!"
 We must imprison all (but us) in this system.
 To your elected, as we hypnotize, listen.
 We've found that lying is the best way to win votes,
 Along with getting people to slit their own throats,
 From oppression that creates squalor and despair.
 Forget all of that; we're calling it just and fair.
 We'll stifle your prospects and creativity,
 And scare with speech centered on negativity.
 We're very good at giving an impactful talk,
 But we don't at all feel the need to walk the walk.
 Because you see we are enlightened, as we sit
 On our moral high ground; such an excellent fit
 For ones like us. All we need do is look below
 To see the masses upon which we will bestow
 Our wisdom as we dictate to you what is right,
 And create laws that govern morning, noon, and night.
 We don't need to descend to anything below,
 To give anyone plain a goodbye or hello
 (Unless, of course, we are in an election year;
 Then we will have to briefly pretend to revere).
 We are better than descending. You will soon see.

But only if you wholly and fully agree
Will you get any crumbs from your work and your sweat.
We are feeding ourselves and we are not full yet!
You must acquiesce or we will single you out,
To have great mobs follow you about with a shout,
To deny you peace, bring your spirits to the ground.
Don't think Big Government can't always track you down.
We can and we must always usurp your free will.
If we have to, we will force you with a new bill.
For you see, your Government has become your god.
(We got rid of the True One with just a sly nod.)
No more Life, Liberty, no Happiness Pursuit;
We've gotten rid of them like we would an old suit.
They're no more allowed, just endless litigation
To bring down everyone in this once strong nation
That is set in its present ugly state to fall,
In a very enormous way, not at all small,
Unless we turn our country back to its grass roots.
All of us here should be wearing the older suits.
They are a much better fit for our melting pot
That's growing weaker by the day, colder not hot.
Our elected might be better called the Elite,
For what they spend and the common sense they defeat.
They're good at dictating, dancing around the truth.
(All the while they're lying through each and every tooth.)
In making no progress, they tend to specialize.
We're peons to them. Plus, they're fixed on their own prize,
So much so that many are willing to promote
Hatred, violence, fake news, a fraudulent vote.
We should all hold our politicians to account,
Especially as our debt continues to mount.
We should not let them shame the ones who try to rein
In whims and folly, who bravely dare to complain
That our elected have gone crazy with the ball.
"Help a few but hurt many" makes no sense at all.
Yet this is what politicians tend to promote,
It surely does seem, with each and every new vote.
They throw good sense out the window many a day,
As each strives to have everything his or her way.
More interested in making a name for self
Than putting good laws on our nation's now-frail shelf,
Our politicians are not only often wrong,
They're with ease corrupted when set above the throng.

Both sides are at fault as they play their vicious game,
Though of being moral and righteous they make claim.
They have ignored God, Who is left, right, and center.
For some reason, they don't allow Him to enter
Into any of their planning—the equation
As to how to again strengthen our breaking nation.
However, we shouldn't despair. All is not lost.
If we choose, we might recover some of the cost.
We must elect the godly among us to lead,
The ones filled with less anger, less pride, and less greed.
When faced with poor candidates—west, east, south, and north;
We must pray to God for better ones to step forth.
We've been given blessings, but now we're set to fall,
As bible prophecy proves does happen to all
Who ignore Our Heavenly Father's perfect will,
His plan for each person and nation to fulfill.
There is a right answer: God alone holds the key
To what makes true Life, Happiness, and Liberty.

With regard to the one who has composed this lengthy verse,
That many may call a rant written mainly for the worse,
I never asked to get caught up in political strife;
I just wanted to write fairy tales, lead a quiet life.
But this route was absolutely firmly forced upon me,
In this time of utter political insanity.
It is completely impossible to remain quiet,
When fed constant ruthlessness and hatred as a diet.
Yes, that's exactly what is out there, all over the place;
No matter where we look, it simply stares us in the face.
So until this problem somehow decides to fix itself
(Since politicians can't do it putting laws on a shelf),
I will have to speak out each time my Father tells me to.
I will always obey because it's the right thing to do.
I resolve to do this, no matter the personal cost,
Until He calls me home, or until no souls are still lost.

Sal absolutely loved the poem, and was very proud of Em for not being afraid to speak out at a time when conservative voices were being silenced (even on occasion by violence). However, he was somewhat sad in knowing how history had turned out. Godly men and women hadn't stepped forth; thus, the political corruption continued, and even

worsened, to eventually cause the fall of the U.S., along with the rest of the world.

Christmas was on the approach in this time, as it was at home for the time travelers, who had noticed most people in this past time to be in an absolute frenzy over shopping and decorating, as well as engaging in a lot of drunkenness and gluttony while celebrating. Some had actually started their “holiday” activities the minute Halloween ended. The greed and spending was particularly troubling to Sal, since it had nothing at all to do with the birth of Jesus. *And the tree is supposed to represent the Cross, he thought, not be about how many presents can fit around it. And the lights are supposed to represent the Light of Jesus, not something to drape a snowman, or be put on a house to make it glitzy. It's all so overdone, with no meaning at all.*

Motivated by Em’s political poem, and her outspokenness, Sal decided to write a poem about Christmas, which he submitted to twelve college newspapers, doing so anonymously in thinking it the best way for a time traveler to go about this. He was actually somewhat surprised when five of the papers decided to publish it.

The Outstretched Hand at Christmas

By Anonymous

While lost in a great sea of wrapping paper and bags,
Piles of boxes sporting colorful ribbons and tags;
When stringing miles of lights and having snowball fights,
Or sampling eggnog, gingerbread, canes of peppermint,
We might take a moment, or two, to truly lament
The seasonal flurry and all of the hurry,
And consider why He needed to come here at all,
The reason, of course, being because of the Great Fall.

We might note that He never asked us to celebrate
Anything about this particular chosen date
That now lacks the true Light in the splendor and bright
Of the hollies, garlands, and even good ole Saint Nick,
Plus the standard sentiments often spread on too thick.
With regards to the Day, we might best kneel and pray
To give respect to our Savior, Lord, and King of kings
Instead of focusing on so many other things.

The frenzied travel, shopping, eating food by the crate,
And other reveling we do in the decrepit state
That all of us are in, full of enormous sin;
These things do nothing to help fix the terrible plight
Of the human family, the good-versus-evil fight
For the lost souls on earth who are of such great worth
To God that He sent us His only begotten Son
With the offer of Eternal Life to everyone.

The decorative tree no longer represents the Cross
But rather greed and envy, and the tremendous loss
Of many empty souls that seek to fill the holes
In lives devoid of meaning, since many cannot see
The Truth, not even by tall candles or a lit tree.
We still choose to ignore what He came to earth for,
Though many symbols remind us of the Father's Love—
The poinsettia, the sand dollar, the turtle dove.

Though Jesus has been rejected by much of mankind,
As we gather at Christmastime, we might keep in mind
That at this time of year, He sheds many a tear,
While still sending us blessings such as abundant wealth,
Enough provision, warmth, companionship, and good health.
So when playing in snow, or dodging mistletoe,
Or seeking other delights of which we take our fill,
We might all remember that "His hand is stretched out still."

The quote in the last line was from Isaiah 9:17 and 10:4, which was partly why Sal was surprised the poem was published. *So it seems some people in this time still value free speech and even bible quotes*, he thought.

Sal actually felt the outstretched hand had to do with both wrath and an offering. The wrath to come was the Great Tribulation; and for sure, it was coming, and even hurrying, by Sal's estimation. And the offer, right to the End, was for people to be saved from the wrath. Sal was certainly glad he wasn't destined to go through the Great Tribulation (because he, like all believers alive at that time, would be raptured), if it happened to come during his lifetime

Just before returning home, the time travelers made one last trip to the Labyrinth Library to drop off nearly two hundred books. The library was pretty fabulous even in this time, already housing miles of

corridors and millions of books, though the labyrinth was not nearly as gigantic as it would be. Also, no genie bookwrights were yet flitting about to repair books; and no oodus and zipakola water lizards were whisking people about, shuttling books, or helping anyone lost get found again. Plus, with few patrons of the library at this time, it was completely deserted, eerie almost; though the time travelers could imagine it eventually bustling with users as it was in their day.

In reading the bible before bedtime on the last night of their trip, Sal ended up considering how much poetry was in it, written by the Holy Spirit through people. *God is certainly the most fabulous Wordsmith of all time*, he decided.

The team returned home the next morning, just in time, it seems, to help deal with the problem of the penumbras.

Chapter Ten

Eastern Light and Western Winds

Zin and Alex returned through the window on the mezzanine about an hour before dawn the next morning.

In realizing that time had passed at its normal rate while they were inside the Dimension of Mystery, Zin was a little dismayed at the thought of more penumbras having been raised, which was indeed the case (her foreshard confirming this) because Tanner had been on the ball in using the waking device just after midnight—the new start time for each day based on how the box was designed.

“So there are twenty-six now,” Zin said, while at the same time bidding Alex a hasty farewell with the triangle hand symbol as she was dashing downstairs and outside to hop aboard her airbike to begin searching for a grapevine wreath.

As Zin was just zooming off, Alex asked a gryphon at Netherwind to take him to meet up with Jamie at the ranch, where things overnight had definitely not gone well, with over two thousand people slain so far by the vicious penumbras, who hadn’t at all been affected by the nighttime; in fact, they might have gained more energy, fueled by the darkness.

Trixie, riding Jarna, was on the scene. While more dragons were being called for, it would be some time before any would arrive because dragons like to sleep and are often difficult to rouse. For the most part, Jarna was able to outrun the penumbras; however, doing so was limiting how much good Trixie was able to do with the mirror she was using against the shadows in an effort to slow the assault of the fierce projectiles of dark energy whizzing through the air like unstoppable knives. Trixie actually had gashes on her face and shoulders from a couple of attacks. While Jarna was fast, her lightning-swift foes were difficult to evade. Dragon fire didn’t seem to affect the penumbras much, only dispersing their energy for a few seconds when Jarna was

able to make a direct hit, which wasn't often due to the speed of the shadows.

People were being brought back to life by dragon tears. But the kills were mounting much more swiftly than the medical teams were able to work, especially since they were vulnerable to attack, despite using shrouds, because the penumbras could easily sniff out people hidden by sapphires and mirrors.

Cecelia and Quin were on hand at the mothership community in Indiana. With help from a magical white hummingbird, Quin was using her pin-on watch, a device produced by a bagical, to stop time for five seconds at a stretch, this serving to freeze the penumbras for that length of time so that rookhs and gryphons could swoop in and whisk people to safety. However, in addition to the time limit, the distance range of the watch was limited to one hundred and twenty square feet; and the penumbras were quickly catching on as to exactly how far away to stay from the girl with the watch. Plus, it was wise to keep their distance anyway, since she was aboard her protector. Sadly, Cuoré's fire wasn't having much better effect than Jarna's.

While the penumbras could use their energy to form bullet-like projections and spears, the three attacking the mothership community seemed more to delight in smothering, clawing, strangling, and other forms of close-contact slaughter.

The Sparrow was shielding two children from attack. However, a nearby penumbra, sniffing around, was sure to catch their scent fairly quickly.

Blessedly, help had just arrived from the skies in the form of the cloth blessing box. Jamie had gotten a message from the conch shell to deliver the box to the mothership community. As it was dropped from the skies onto the scene, the blessing box not only grew wings to soar to the ground, but also transformed very swiftly into a house that the penumbras couldn't enter, but that people could.

Quickly discerning that the house was a place of refuge, Cecelia led the two kids to it, where they would definitely stay safe because the angelic shield energy surrounding the transformed blessing box could definitely withstand any assault by the shades. The cloth house was evidently somewhat like pod architecture in that masses could fit into

what appeared to be a smallish structure, not much larger than a two-bedroom farmhouse.

Magsen had some help at the coal camp in West Virginia in that Chevy was on the scene, along with Philip, and Astrid, the leader of Lion Mountain.

In addition to fighting with ropes and flutes, Chevy had been tracking wind eddies in the area; though she had some difficulty coaxing them to engage the penumbras, largely because she didn't yet know enough about eddies to be able to communicate with them effectively.

However, speaking of communication, Astrid was one of only two people in the world capable of communicating with nature spirits, several of which in the area she had managed to corral. Thus, a fire flux, two sylphs, and a water nymph were all getting in on the action of battling the shadows. And they all seemed to be greatly enjoying themselves—the flux crackling with laughter at each flaming strike, the sylphs whooshing and gleefully screeching like piercing winds when spinning the penumbras about in tornadic fashion, and the nymph giving triumphant gurgling war cries each time she managed to dunk one of the shadows in a local river. Also, a tree spirit nearby that Astrid wasn't even aware of was commanding oaks and sycamores to lash their branches out at passing penumbras, this serving to slightly slow the buzzing attacks.

Astrid, though elderly, was one of the few people on the planet who could make some sort of difference using mirrors and ropes against such a foe as the penumbras; and she seemed almost as gleeful as the nature spirits in her assaults, not even tiring after over two straight hours of exertion.

Philip, though not nearly as skilled a fighter as Chevy or Astrid, was doing his best with a flute, while his dulcimer relayed tree messages to him to warn of the positions of the darting shadows.

Sal and Kiana at the bamboo plantation had taken to riding unicorns in order to stay a step ahead of the penumbras, while using mirrors as best they could to keep the shades occupied so that more people could seek refuge. However, both were tiring from such a long battle so far, and were desperately praying for help to arrive soon.

Luis at the poultry camp was likewise worn out; so what a blessing it was when Jamie showed up to deliver the metal blessing box to the scene before whizzing away in his glider. As it was dropped from the skies, the box first formed wings to fly to the ground where it further transformed into a large creature made entirely of swords. Watching the dropping of the box and the transformation, Luis was reminded of James 1:17 in the bible. “Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.”

The best way Luis might have been able to describe the sword creature would have been “metal ninja puma made of swords, about the size of a gryphon.” Upon shapeshifting, the puma first stood upright, like a man, to gaze about and take in the scene, before crouching in order to leap in bounding pursuit after one of the penumbras, which the metal puma easily caught, then slicing the shadow into about a hundred pieces using swords extending from paws, chest, and neck. While the penumbra was reassembling itself, which took some time because there were so many pieces, the puma sought out and began assaulting the second shadow.

As Westerwing took a breather to simply watch, the sword cat seemed to gain some extra fancy skills, even more ninja-like in Luis’ estimation, based on observing handstands, aerial cartwheels, and the sheer speed of the assault, which resulted in the second penumbra ending up in nearly two hundred pieces. After finishing this task, the puma once again turned his attentions to the first penumbra. However, even with the help of the metal blessing box, the situation was still dire, because two more penumbras had just shown up, from the newly-raised batch of thirteen. While the sorcerers had set a couple of new targets, they had decided to also send reinforcements to the original five.

Zin, meanwhile, had managed to find a grapevine entrance in Mississippi fairly quickly, mainly from being wise enough to call a rookh to help her travel, rather than rely on her much-slower bike.

Inside the grapevine, her foreshard led her to an exit in a mountainous region of Spain at some unknown time in the future where she swiftly mounted her airbike to rise into the clouds to begin searching for zephyrs, her foreshard again leading her.

After only about twenty minutes of searching, Zin found a small herd of these specialized wind horses. Although the zephyrs mostly resembled regular wind horses, Zin noted a few exceptions. They were a bit wilder looking—having longer, more-disheveled manes and woolier feet—all-in-all bearing a furrier and more wind-blown appearance. So too were they a bit larger than any wind horses Zin was familiar with, and their eyes flashed with a golden-orange light reminiscent of a few western sunsets she had seen.

Having stowed her bike in a pocket, Zin approached on foot from a good distance, in order to fully demonstrate that she was able to walk on clouds. While this definitely got the attention of the herd, most of the horses seemed only mildly amused and rather disinterested, with only two, both male, being willing to slowly approach her as she neared their position.

She decided to speak to the pair telepathically, since this was how she was used to communicating with wind horses at home. *I am from the past, where penumbras are being raised and where we have no zephyrs to deal with them.*

Zin didn't need to go into details because the lead of the pair (who was slightly larger than his companion) immediately laid a thought onto her brain. *Then we will come back in time with you to deal with the shadows.*

The second zephyr was nodding as he too sent a thought to her. *Yes, we two will come with you.*

While Zin was absolutely elated, she was slightly skeptical. *Just the two of you*, she inquired, with a slight doubtful note to her thought voice.

Both horses took offense at this, tossing their heads contemptuously (the smaller also rearing), while nickering at her in a scolding tone. And the larger might have been tempted to give her a nip, if he hadn't stopped himself in realizing that she probably had no idea as to the true power of zephyrs.

Realizing her mistake, Zin backed off a bit, her face holding a regretful and apologetic expression; and the only thing she could think of to do was offer the triangle hand symbol to the pair.

The horses calmed down fairly quickly, the lead saying to her, *Let's just go. You can ride on my back, but don't pull on my mane.*

Hopping aboard, Zin was careful not to touch the mane, even holding her hands together and against her chest in a prayer-like manner so as not to forget that she needed to avoid doing any grabbing.

The zephyrs seemed to know somehow that she had come by genie grapevine because, as they dove beneath the clouds and dashed over the landscape, in about five seconds in total (and before Zin had time to even mention anything), they found a wreath entrance in France. While her foreshard hadn't been needed to find the wreath, it did end up telling them exactly when to exit the vine, at a spot near the California coast where it was still fully dark. The exit point and time were both by divine design because the zephyrs needed to approach from the west, heading into the eastern light, not only because this was how they gained their most power, but also because they needed to pick up a couple of sunbirds along the way, one in Arizona and the other in Texas.

Zin was absolutely astounded. Her research hadn't yielded that zephyrs sometimes worked in conjunction with sunbirds; nor had Breccan mentioned this, though he was aware. The aura of the lead horse protected Zin from being scorched by the nearness of the sunbirds who were actually leading the horses while gathering their own strength from heading into a sunrise.

Jesus will come from the east when He comes back, Zin suddenly thought, as she was dropped off on a cloud over Louisiana so that the zephyrs could begin their work without being hindered by having to take care not to hurt her in the frenzy of what was about to happen. Blessedly, the sunbirds were far enough ahead of the horses by this time for her not to be scorched from losing the protective aura.

The sunbirds could do their job from great distances, and so would not be descending with the zephyrs, which meant the people at the locations being attacked by penumbras wouldn't be in danger of getting singed. The function of the sunbirds in this situation was mainly to expose and flush out the shadows using beams of magical illumination, to help the zephyrs find the exact locations more swiftly.

Dawn was just breaking as Zin headed to the poultry farm to meet up with Luis, who was speechless as she arrived because the sunbirds and zephyrs had already been there and were gone, in a flash basically, well, maybe two. In fact, with the search help from the sunbirds, the

horses managed to deal with all twenty-six penumbras in less than thirty minutes in total; and this included the time needed to summon the Four Winds to scatter the divided pieces of the shadows over the planet.

The zephyrs ended up returning to the poultry camp, where Zin and Luis were helping with the efforts to raise people using dragon tears. After landing, the lead horse informed Zin that they would be staying in her time for a while, to deal with any additional waked penumbras. In truth, the horses had actually been a little more impressed with Zin than they had let on because, in all of time, they had met only one other human being capable of walking on water; and so these two had decided they might like to see this young magician again, on occasion. The zephyrs had also been somewhat impressed by Luis, because of his Westerwing skills, though they weren't planning talk to him because he couldn't walk on clouds.

Actually, even though the horses planned to stay, there wouldn't end up being any more waked penumbras, at least not in the near future, because Cecelia had decided to steal Tanner's device. With help from Patrick, who was often able to guess his brother's passcodes, she broke into Tanner's den less than an hour after the twenty-six penumbras were dealt with, and actually while Tanner was in his apartment having breakfast. He never noticed her, of course, because her gift was working perfectly. After stealing the box, she gave it to Jarna, who ended up destroying it by dropping it into an active volcano. Thus, the penumbra problem ended up well and fully dealt with.

By this time, Sal and Kiana had already returned to their homes to get some rest. (Mee was still hiding in the indent, from having been as terrified of the zephyrs as he had been the penumbras; and from being fearful as to what might show up next.) Jamie had just taken Alex and Trixie home and was in the process of picking up the cloth and metal blessing boxes, which had reverted to their normal forms when they were no longer needed. He would then be taking Chevy home before returning to his own little snug dugout to get some rest. Quin was staying at the mothership community for a time, to use her gift of healing by touch to mend cuts, broken bones, and such. Astrid and Philip were on their way home by rookh. And Magsen was heading to the poultry farm to meet up with Zin and take her home as soon as she was ready.

In truth, as tired as she was, Zin was ready to go pretty much the moment her protector arrived. Luis was ready for home too, for that matter, and he set off only moments after Zin and Magsen departed.

No sooner had they arrived at Doyle Mansion than Zin immediately went up to her room to wash her face, change into pajamas, and collapse onto her bed. She would end up missing a morning class on this day; but she had a good excuse, and it would be no trouble to make up later.

As she was dozing off to sleep a few minutes later, a thought occurred to Zin. *Just like how rainbows are a reminder of God's promises, zephyrs and sunbirds are a reminder to keep looking east, for that Blessed Hope.*

Chapter Eleven

Garden Interludes

The sorcerers were, of course, absolutely furious over the loss of the penumbras; and this left Vidas trying to find a way to blame Tanner, particularly upon discovering that the device had been stolen. While Tanner hadn't been responsible for the zephyrs showing up, he had been careless with his den security.

Sitting on a bench in his personal rooftop garden, adjacent to his office, Vidas was actually fuming over more than just the loss of the penumbras. The sorcerers in general were incredibly angry over many recent setbacks caused by their opposition. However, they had to press forward. In fact, another plan was already in the works, and very shortly to be enacted, the thought of this calming Vidas' fuming, and even leaving a smile on his face.

However, there would end up being a slight delay in the plan going forward because Vidas, as he arose from the bench, ended up tripping on a garden hose. Breaking his elbow on a stone planter as he fell, and yowling with pain, it was some time before he could manage to stand up, let alone take himself off to get medical treatment.

When Vidas, cursing, finally did leave, a large flower pot in the rear of the garden started practically laughing its head off as it shapeshifted to be revealed as an underling named Yu, who had been stalking Vidas for some time, and who had been the one to move the hose a short time before the sorcerer entered the garden. Yu hadn't meant to leave the hose right in the middle of a walkway; he had simply been studying it, so that he could practice taking the shape of it. However, while he hadn't meant to cause the accident, Yu was actually glad it had happened, since he wasn't any bigger of a fan of Vidas than Vidas was of Tanner.

Yu, like Mee and Hymn, had decided he wanted a name because he didn't like simply being 1-2-5-2 of the same batch of thirteen thousand that Mee and Hymn were a part of. "Filth" and "Scab" weren't much

better than the number being hurled at him when the higher-ups bothered to call him anything at all. However, “You” didn’t sound too bad, and thus was taken as a name by the underling whose early spelling skills weren’t any better than those of his batch brothers.

And speaking of underlings, Mee had finally left the safety of the indent to seek out Sal, who had only needed about seven hours of sleep in order to feel rested; though he was somewhat sore from the battle with the shadows being a little more exertion than what he was used to. After having a combination breakfast and lunch, Sal asked a rookh to take him to his favorite Rubble Garden, where he came across a surprise in the form of a poem written on a piece of bamboo paper and weighted down by a stone on the exact picnic table where he preferred to write.

Mee had written the poem in his spare time over the past couple of days, after contemplating being assigned to a wordsmith. Since planted thoughts seemed to have little effect on Sal, Mee had decided to try a different approach, one actually inspired by the gifted boy. *Use words on him, like he uses words on people*, Mee thought, while congratulating himself on being clever enough to have come up with this idea, along with his first poem. And while Mee recognized that those possessing wordsmith skills had to practice their craft in order to truly get anywhere, he had to start somewhere. Putting “To Sal” at the top of the page, Mee had also decided not to be anonymous, especially because he liked his name; and he felt he should take credit for his work, which he was proud of, particularly the spelling. The poem was spelled well because Mee had actually used a dictionary to make sure everything was correct.

Tell the World
A poem by Mee

Tell the world what I like...

Catching pike on a dike
Spokes snapping on a bike
Poison oak on a hike.

Thorns that stab and can jab
Really nab and hair grab.
Pinching crab in a lab
All that’s drab, nothing fab.

Books to burn and then churn
In giant sooty piles
That go on for ten miles.

Rocks to throw in a row
Weeds to grow, cold and snow.
This I know—hitting low
Crushing blow, breaking tow.

Lots of ice would be nice,
And knives to mince and dice
Old man like meat and rice.

Evil queen, really mean
Food is lean, early wean.
From bad bean jam unclean
Spewing green in bright sheen.

Slaps to face at fast pace
Being first in a race
Tearing up all the lace.

Crashing carts, giving starts
Tearing hearts, losing parts
Throwing darts, causing smarts
Smelly farts, Mee departs.

Small in wing but with sting,
Life as an underling
Can be an okay thing...

Especially in spring.

So somebody left me a poem, Sal thought after reading it, somebody with an unusual name. And a person with optimism, who's looking forward to spring, even though winter has just barely started. As cold as it had been throughout the fall, Sal couldn't blame anyone for longing for springtime.

In again speculating, Sal figured this was probably someone wanting to share, as a new writer. *Perhaps even a grade-schooler, he decided. Maybe someone who knows I'm a wordsmith and knows that I come here to write, and who maybe wants a little input.*

Rereading the poem led Sal into further contemplation: *Good form; rhyme not too bad; perfect use of syllables; good expression of personal thoughts.* The punctuation was a little odd, but was not problematic enough to take away from the poem, which Sal felt told a little story. And despite the coarseness of some of the language, he decided that the writer must be trying to get across something good. *Mee probably likes to save banned books from the piles of the Torch Squad. And it's not that he or she likes smelly farts, but is departing because of the farts. So the poem is a nice one,* Sal decided, *but the writer just wasn't quite able to get that intent across the finish line.*

Because Sal was brain-trained to look for the good in things, he didn't realize that Mee actually had gotten his intent across, about liking such ugly things as broken bicycle spokes and evil queens starving people. Mee had, of course, intended to unsettle Sal with frightful mental images inspired by the poem. But while vomiting, stabbing, poison oak, and such were part of the story, Sal didn't much notice these things. Instead, he focused on the season that was mentioned. *Even though it's only mentioned in the end, the poem is a lot about spring. The writer is looking forward to winter ending, so the setting of the poem is spring,*

Sal ended up deciding to do more than just give input. *Collaboration would be better,* he thought, *because that's a good way to learn, by working with someone on a project.*

Of course Sal would keep a copy of the original, but would expand the story somewhat. He spent the rest of the afternoon working on a new version of the poem, with Mee nearby watching the whole time. Just before heading home for the day, Sal left the collaboration poem, written on two sheets of bamboo paper, on the picnic table weighted with a rock.

The Wonders of Spring (What's not to like?)
A poem by Mee and Sal

Tell all the world of the wonders of spring,
The magnificent joy the days can bring...

Above the soft sound of bike spokes spinning,
Birdsong ushers in a day most winning.

As we set off to hike the forest vale,
Past perils such poison oak we sail;
Also missing slick rocks and thorns most sharp,
While lilting music like that of a harp
Whistles through trees, made by the wind with ease.

Our afternoon involves garden hoeing
To prepare hills and furrows for sowing.
We shortly break to skip stones on a pond
Next to the plot of future leaf and frond
That will in a few short weeks be awash
With green peppers, cucumbers, acorn squash,
Red tomatoes, and plump sweet potatoes.

We meet for dinner an elderly friend,
Food and great conversation without end.
Dessert with our after-dinner coffee
Consists of cookies topped with warm toffee.
Making our way home in the late hours,
We stop to pick up some hothouse flowers.
They're trimmed up nice, which will more than suffice.

A warm night wind makes dripping icicles
Sound as nice as the wheels of bicycles,
And we rejoice that winter has now past.
(We knew that it couldn't forever last.)
Outside the next day we toss hoops, throw darts;
Afterwards we ride in horse-drawn hay carts,
And play on swings while a meadowlark sings.

Reading a favorite fairy tale later,
Of a queen with a pet alligator,
Who treats her starving subjects with disdain,
Imprisoning all who dare to complain.
The queen's heart is changed one winter's morning
As she heeds a prophet's dire warning:
"Feed and set free, or face calamity."

As the queen found within her a warm heart,
From her evil ways she chose to depart,
Providing freedom, care, and food for all,
Winter and spring, likewise summer and fall.
She also changed her own way of living;

Excess and greed became selfless giving,
No frills or lace, a simple life of grace.

In being like her subjects, down to earth,
The queen was able to find her true worth.
With this knowledge, she gained both wings and love
To navigate life's large maze from above.
As her wings strengthened, she finished the race,
Approval gained from On High, not disgrace.
Mystery solved from knowing what's involved.

We might all be very like this changed queen
(Even if we haven't been all that mean),
Because it's human nature to be proud,
Full of envy, strife, greed, and often loud.
But we too can gain wings with which to fly
To escape life's large burdens, by and by,
Eventually for all eternity.

We close the book on the queen having flown,
Because the real tale is that of our own.
Giving the day a good look, our fresh eyes
See clouds and birds sailing in the vast skies;
Not looking upon us as creatures small,
But of being important, one and all.
Has a nice ring, being an underling.

The change of season can serve to remind
That we're part of the world's treasures we find.
Our gardens do not sprout flowers from seeds
That aren't planted, and protected from weeds.
Sunset is beautiful on the wide seas
Because we notice; same with blooms on trees.
Beauties surround, and certainly abound...

When we note all that each of us can bring
To the wonders found in the days of spring.

Reading the poem right after his assignment left the garden, Mee was just about smart enough to understand that Sal had taken his poem and expanded on it. He was also able to figure out some of the

meaning, though he was confused by quite a few lines of the poem; and so he read it through three times, after which, he did a spell of thinking.

After a good deal of thought, Mee decided, *I have wings, so I can escape, rise above. I'm part of what's around me, but I can rise up to be something better.* When he thought of it this way, being an underling really did have a nice ring, as Sal had pointed out.

And he left my name on it; that means he liked my poem, I think. At this point, having received what he deemed to be high praise from a gifted writer, Mee didn't care one bit if the original poem hadn't fulfilled the intent of being unsettling. And although some of what Sal had written was still a mystery to him, in reading it again and again over the years, more and more of the meaning would eventually sink in, and end up having a great impact on him.

The collaboration left Mee determined to spend his time studying Sal, rather than trying to cause him problems. The boy was certainly more complicated than any of his other assignments over the years, and thus was worthy of some serious study. In thinking back to his class on The Complexities of Humans, Mee remembered one of the main complexities to be individuality. *No two humans are alike*, he reminded himself. However, in remembering this, he also considered that probably no two underlings were alike. And so, he could be an individual too. He certainly already felt like one, having given himself a name, and because he didn't fall all over himself in worshiping the higher-ups like many pages and junior demons did.

Sal had, of course, kept a copy of the collaboration poem, having written it out twice in its final version. "The Wonders of Spring" ended up printed in a chapbook published quarterly by the genies at the twin plantations for distribution to libraries worldwide. Thus, many more folks than just Mee and Sal were able to enjoy the poem.

Although Mee might have been on his way to becoming a better underling, he was still a demon, which meant he needed to do his job at least some of the time. En route to his home base in the late evening, Mee stopped by a ranch to plant a nightmare into a man's mind to make him believe he was drowning in a river. While this was scary for the man, it ended up being quite fortuitous because, as he awoke with a jolt, he became aware of a hobgoblin that had broken into his home and that

was about to enter his children's bedroom. Thus, the family was saved from tragedy.

If we take a moment to look back to the time Sal was working on the poem in the Rubble Garden, we find Zin paying another visit to Octessence. Although she hadn't slept more than about eight hours, she felt incredibly refreshed when waking midafternoon; and so she decided on an outing to the twin plantations on her airbike.

As she was trotting down the mezzanine hall, she said hello to the sister portraits just before slipping into the Peacock Garden, which was as sunny as ever, though there were numerous puffy low-hanging clouds dotting the skies. Full of colors, the clouds were enticing, and so Zin decided that she might like to walk on them. Since Magsen wasn't with her this time, Zin flew herself up to the clouds. While she would probably never be as fast as Alex when flying, she was managing this new skill well. In fact, flying was starting to feel nearly as natural as walking, a skill human beings aren't born with, but have to learn, and then must practice in order to become proficient. Zin was looking forward to getting better at both flying and walking on water, with practice.

Setting down on one of the clouds, she took a few steps to perch herself right on the edge of the cloud, so that she could have an unobstructed view of the lush and colorful gardens below, the main features of which—such as the sunsteps, various fountains, the Clock of the Universe model, and so forth---though tiny from this height, were still visible to her.

In the Iridis Section, the representations of the Zoe, Chronos, and Moira pyramids were very noticeable, all glinting spectacularly in the sunshine, and thus standing out like jewels basically. So too were many of the structures in the Myramids model all shiny and eye-catching.

Two mini gardens nestled into the central garden also caught Zin's eye. These represented the productive and destructive cycles of the five elements. *Maybe they keep the whole garden in balance*, she speculated.

Or maybe the whole world, a little voice in the back of her head answered her. Considering the fact that the Clock of the Universe had such an important function, it wasn't too much of a stretch to think that

two specialized gardens might be controlling something as important as the balance of the elements in the universe.

From this height, Zin could see all of the outlying gardens. The Nonessence Garden was noticeably shadier than the other eleven gardens. This was understandable, given that Nonessence represented the heavens in their full and starry splendor. In the Sextessence Garden, clouds floating about (looking much like cotton balls to Zin) were obscuring many of the features she knew to be present, such as a ladder maze and a zoo of hats.

Nonessence is nine...Sextessence is six....she mused. Wait a minute! Zin's brain had just hit on something—the something being that the numbered gardens were positioned in order from one to twelve around the central garden in clockwise fashion. *Of course! The whole thing is a clock!*

This was completely correct, as the gardens surrounding the center one were all arranged to form a clock; and Zin couldn't believe she hadn't noticed this before.

Both midnight and noon are Duodecessence, her mind added. *So the clock comes full circle, the Beginning and the End. Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega. And Eternity is circular, with the Time Trinity running inside it in circles.* This made perfect sense to Zin since Duodecessence held the Tree of Life and the River of Life. *I have been saved; I am being saved; I will be saved,* her brain further told her, in keeping with the concept of the Time Trinity, as she also contemplated how incredibly important gardens were in the bible, namely two, the Garden of Eden and the Garden of Gethsemane. *Plus, the whole of New Jerusalem will be like a fabulous garden.*

It seemed every time she visited the Peacock Garden she learned more and more. *This is sort of like how people have to read the bible over and over again in order to understand what God is truly saying. Plus, certain things can mean different things to us at different times in our lives.*

Exactly as this thought occurred to Zin, she spotted the peacock flying very fast over the Duodecessence garden, looking much like a streaking rainbow. Directly underneath the peacock, a mist rising from a fountain was forming another rainbow. *Promises upon promises; God always keeps His promises.* In addition to rainbows representing

promises, she was also thinking of the eyes in the feathers of peacocks being symbolic of the eyes of God, ever watching and able to see everywhere.

While she might have wanted to stay longer in Octessence on this day, to perhaps continue learning and noticing rainbows, Zin needed to be getting home to help with making dinner. As she was just leaving the brightness of the garden, a quote from Jesus in John 11:9 suddenly came into her mind. ““Are there not twelve hours in the day? If any one walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world.””

Chapter Twelve Concerning Septessence

Zin attended two morning classes the next day, and then did chores at home in the afternoon.

The following morning she was up very early. With only a few days left until Christmas, she needed to help her mother get some baking done. While they tended to do a lot of baking anyway (mainly because of the appetites of the pucks), there was always more to do around any holidays.

Vidas' elbow had mended quickly, from treatment by a sorcerer specializing in healing whammies; and so the new plan, involving art, was good to go on this day. Although the sorcerers and their Torch Squads had been very effective at destroying great quantities of art over the years, they hadn't managed to hit certain targets protected by such creatures as gargoyles, thunderbirds, and gryphons. While some of the largest museums had been destroyed—including the State Hermitage Museum, the Louvre, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art—others still existed throughout the world. Many artistic religious monuments, like the Christ the Redeemer statue in Rio, were also still standing, along with the architectural wonders of certain chapels and cathedrals.

In addition to planning to attack Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Arkansas, Vidas had coordinated with several of his foreign counterparts to hit a few other targets around the globe such as the National Museum of Korea and Gaudi's La Sagrada Familia Cathedral in Barcelona.

But aside from these attacks, the sorcerers had something else up their sleeves. They had for many months been gathering hundreds of tapestries and paintings into a large warehouse in Supercity Seven. The art was not being stored up for destruction, but rather because the sorcerers had discovered that these pieces could be used as doorways into the Realm of Septessence. (The sorcerers had spies of their own, you see, and therefore were sometimes able to gain useful information

such as this.) So the main plan on this day was to get into Septessence, in order to destroy the art there, the other targets being the distraction to keep the opposition busy and away from the more important task at hand. In finding out a few details about Septessence, the sorcerers had been particularly irked to learn that the literally millions of art pieces they had destroyed over the years were held in reflection in this mysterious realm, which they had never been able to gain access to before because Netherwind and its mezzanine were too well protected. So too was the Septessence doorway in the temple in China inaccessible, thanks to the foo dogs and dragons; plus, the temple monks were all highly skilled with magical weapons.

It had been a simple task for a couple of tech sorcerers to develop a device capable of unlocking the doorways in the tapestries and paintings, which then allowed them to enter Septessence. With these doorways being well spread out along the miles and miles of corridor, the sorcerers had access to pretty much all of the Art Gallery. At about the same time Zin and her mom started baking, a hundred sorcerers were entering Septessence to set over a thousand explosive charges on timers set to go off exactly two hours later. At that time, the assault on the other targets would be in full swing, thus dominating the attentions of the godly to minimize any possible interference with the main goal. While it was unlikely that anyone could stop a thousand magical bombs from going off, from experience, Vidas knew that the opposition often seemed to specialize in “The Unlikely.” And so the sorcerers needed to be as prepared and proactive as possible.

Vidas had involved Tanner in this scheme, not because he needed his help, but more to gain the skills of Devin, Kemp, and Penelope to help with providing a distraction. The four were already stationed hovering on airbikes around Crystal Bridges, keeping watch as twenty sorcerers closed in, with staffs blazing and sparking, to set explosive charges to destroy the Arkansas museum that was sited deep in a lovely ravine. Also on hand to help were many demons and megahobs, along with the nyregs and flash dragons that had brought the sorcerers to the scene.

Zin was just washing some bits of pie dough from her hands when she received a walnut message from Trixie that Crystal Bridges was under attack. Trixie hadn't gotten a message from anyone, but had

learned of the attack simply from hearing the subjects of numerous artworks crying out loudly for assistance.

However, while the situation was pretty serious and definitely needed help, the sorcerers were having some difficulty advancing far enough to plant their charges due to the defenses already present at the museum. In addition to an area thunderbird and several wind horses, much of the art in the museum, having been brought to life by puck trolls over the years, was more than capable of mounting a defense. This included wood carvings, paintings, glass art, and metal sculptures; plus, a few abstract installations involving paper, string, and cloth managed to get in on the action, along with several works designed by wordsmiths. Even the water features of Crystal Bridges became animated, and were fully capable of shooting thick streams of water at Kemp, to help keep his fire under control. Plus, Devin quickly discovered that the water wouldn't do his bidding. The wind horses were keeping Penelope occupied (and scared because she wasn't much of a match for them in numbers). In addition to creating cloudbursts to help counter the flash dragons, the thunderbird pretty much instantly stilled all storms the demons were trying to produce. Acid spit by nyregs couldn't hurt either a bronze bear scampering around and crashing into demons, or an iron horse galloping about to kick sorcerers off of their feet. Nor could the fire of the flash dragons harm an enormous metal spider sculpture that was traipsing about and spearing megahobs with its sharp metal feet. Painting subjects armed with muskets (that evidently never needed reloading) were bringing down flying demons and nyregs. A marble sculpture of a woman with a bow managed to shoot Tanner's staff from his hand. After retrieving his staff, an assault by a wind horse caused the young sorcerer to retreat. Penelope was also on the run, in being attacked by a wind sculpture in the form of a peacock who was greatly upset with this girl for misusing the wind.

Lista was the only puck up yet on this morning at Doyle Mansion. In wanting to help defend the art at Crystal Bridges, she eagerly mimed that she wanted to go with Zin, who grabbed up the little troll on her way out to hop aboard Magsen, who, despite giving a yawn and rubbing her eyes to wake herself properly, was pretty much as ready to go as ever.

Zin was not at all dismayed at Lista being the youngest and smallest member of the puck family because her magical powers were already exceeding those of her elder siblings, and nearly matching those of her parents. Nor was Zin upset at having only one puck along, this often being preferable since one was pretty much enough in most situations (in keeping with the concept that using too much “dynamite” isn’t wise).

Trixie was not on the scene at Crystal Bridges, as she had headed on Jarna to the National Museum of Korea, while Luis had taken off as Westerwing to the Gaudi Cathedral. As the sorcerers had hoped, word was starting to spread of the attacks.

As Magsen approached the site of the sprawling Arkansas museum, Zin leaned her head sideways a bit because Lista, on her shoulder, was just starting to act, the little troll grunting slightly, while making scrunched-up faces and wrinkling her nose. A mere moment later, colorful sparks flew from her chubby fingertips in scrolling loops that reached out like long arms over the whole of Crystal Bridges, thus serving to bring to life the entire museum, which rose like a giant guard made of glass, concrete, and copper. Somewhat resembling a centurion, the building then proceeded to tromp around the ravine, kicking sorcerers and demons about a mile with each foot swing, while stomping on megahobs and also grabbing low-swooping nyregs and flash dragons out of the sky to fling them about five miles.

Zin merely watched in fascination as the enormous museum-guard did his work, while also being careful not to damage the pristine garden being carried around on one shoulder (or other gardens on the ground). Two wood carvings wielding spears were positioned on the other shoulder, and were managing to hit their marks, the spears somehow magically returning to their wielders after making various strikes.

With not much to do, Zin simply continued to watch as Tanner and his crew fled, along with most of the sorcerers, this coinciding with an unexpected visitor arriving on a rookh. This was none other than the little donkey that Zin had met before, being brought here to help from Supercity Seven where the donkey, an unofficial member of the Underground Army, was stationed in a sorcerer’s high-rise office as a spy; and a very good one, apparently, because the donkey evidently could be quiet when he needed to be, as long as he could still get out

once in a while to talk to people, which was easy, especially in being so small, at not quite four inches high at the shoulder.

“Oh, hi; I remember you,” the donkey said, before giving Zin some news that he had already relayed to his army contacts at the twin plantations. From hearing a couple of sorcerers gloating, the tiny spy had become aware of the attack on Septessence. Sadly, as Zin was soon to discover, he learned the news too late to prevent the explosions inside the magical realm.

Just before the donkey arrived, Zin had gotten word by walnut that the Christ Statue and Thorncrown Chapel, both in nearby Eureka Springs, were under attack. As Zin and Magsen set off for the twin plantations, eager to help defend the Eureka Springs’ targets, Lista hopped aboard the donkey (who was still aboard the rookh), to head in that direction. Lista would end up bringing the statue and the chapel to life, both of which were perfectly capable of defending themselves.

Meanwhile, Trixie and Jarna hadn’t found much to do in Korea, as the art in the National Museum, with help from a few gryphons, seemed as capable of defending itself as that of Crystal Bridges. At the cathedral in Barcelona where Westerwing had gone, about two dozen newdus were on the scene. Thus, he was mainly just trying to stay out of their way as they soared and slashed about slaying demons and knocking sorcerers off their feet and onto their butts.

The White Heron Castle in Japan had also come under attack. However, having been awakened once before by a puck troll, the beautiful structure had come to life again by Memory Magic, and was defending itself entirely on its own, leaving the twenty sorcerers that had initially attacked basically too terrified of the enormous heron to continue their assault. In fact, the sharp, glistening-white wing feathers whizzing through the air had nearly lopped the heads off of two sorcerers, actually giving them flattop haircuts. With the heron having decided that the next time he wouldn’t miss their necks, it was wise for the sorcerers to flee, on the nyregs and flash dragons that had brought them. The demonic beasts hadn’t been much other help to the sorcerers because the white heron had easily batted many from the air, to then squash them with huge feet, while also dousing the flames of any remaining false dragons by scooping up great quantities of water from the nearby sea with his large white wings.

Meanwhile, Zin and Magsen had reached Netherwind, where Zin arrived breathless on the mezzanine (along with several members of the Underground Army), just as the sorcerers' charges exploded. The simultaneous blasts destroyed pretty much all of the Art Gallery, leaving only a few small sections untouched that the charges hadn't quite been able to reach as far as their range.

The explosions actually didn't damage anything on the mezzanine hall, or in the hallway in the Chinese temple, because all of the realms were totally separate from these entry points, having existed long before any magical doorways to and from Providentia were created.

However, despite not even rocking Netherwind or the temple, the loss of Septessence definitely had an effect on our world, which felt strangely empty after the Art Gallery was destroyed. Plus, an odd silence seemed to permeate just about everywhere, from the voices of so many artworks being completely stilled when their reflections disappeared. In fact, Trixie was the only one capable of hearing anything for a couple of minutes right after the explosions; and then she only faintly heard a few bird tweets, dogs barking, snatches of conversation, and so forth.

Blessedly, the silence and emptiness wouldn't persist for long because Zin, upon opening the door to Septessence and briefly staring into the nothingness that now lay beyond, had just performed her Reversion Hex, which she had recently developed specifically to thwart the sorcerers. Within three minutes, the hex completely reversed not only the explosions, to restore both the gallery and all of its art; but also, the charges completely vanished, melting away into oblivion as though they had never been created or set.

Thus, Septessence was completely and wholly restored. The final touch of the mirror bin coming back into being occurred just as the rookh was taking the donkey home to Supercity Seven, before returning Lista to Doyle Mansion where she ended up having a huge breakfast before heading out into the back gardens to play in her sandbox.

At home in the afternoon, as she was waiting for a tray of cookies to come out of the oven, Zin again got to thinking about mirrors; and she suddenly remembered a bible quote, which she looked up right away, 1 Corinthians 13:12. "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have

been fully understood.” In pondering this, it occurred to her that, while everything in the Art Gallery was lovely, it was just a reflection, and probably not anything like the wonders God’s children would experience when eventually inheriting Eternal Life and living in New Jerusalem. *The art there is probably much more amazing, her brain told her, better than anything we can possibly imagine.* She (along with all other believers) would come to discover this to be correct because, no matter how well our brains work, we can’t imagine the wonders God has in store for us, that are beyond anything. *So Septessence is just a record of what happens here, artistically, she decided. It doesn’t have another function, even though art here is obviously important—food for the soul, as the old saying goes.* With regard to what we might expect in the future, Zin ended up looking up one of her favorite bible quotes, 1 Corinthians 2:9. “But, as it is written, ‘What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him...’”

Zin’s Reversion Hex rendered the devices the sorcerers had used to open the doorways to Septessence permanently inert, to include any new ones made because of the power of her reversal magic.

Just as she was taking the tray of cookies out of the oven, a hundred members of the Underground Army were raiding the warehouse in Supercity Seven to rescue the art there, so it couldn’t again be misused, or destroyed.

As the raid was getting underway, several painted cow statues that had come to life in Barcelona were chasing five of the sorcerers that had attacked the Gaudi Cathedral. Thanks to the activities of the newdus in the area, no nyregs or flash dragons were around to carry off the sorcerers who ended up having to run into the sea to escape the charge of the cows.

Chapter Thirteen

Mee, Hymn, and Yu

At about the same time the Underground Army was raiding the Supe-7 warehouse, Yu was impersonating a small barrel in a pantry of a cabin in a mothership community in Kentucky, while staring at a clock on the wall and grimacing. He hated clocks because they brought back painful memories of how he had had trouble learning to tell time in his younger years, the pain mostly coming from his teachers using flicklets on him because he was a slow learner.

Yu hadn't been able to enact any mischief against the family of four living in the cabin because they were all out for the day. *But I can break that stupid clock*, he decided, following up by slinging a crack curse at the device, this taking the physical form of a large red spark flying through the air to smack the face of the clock. While the curse didn't serve to "crack" the whole clock, it did damage two cogs severely enough to cause the timepiece to stop. This ended up serving the purpose later of causing the father of the family to be late for an appointment, which actually saved him from having a run-in with a stealth hob.

After hiding in the pantry for roughly an hour (he couldn't be sure of the time because he had broken the clock), Yu got tired of waiting for the family to return and left the cabin. Outside and wandering away through a small plum orchard, he ended up getting chased by a neighbor's golden retriever. Flinging an immobilization hex at the beast caused the dog to freeze in place for a full ten minutes, which was plenty of time for Yu to escape the area without getting dog-chewed. Plus, the retriever ended up avoiding an encounter with a rabid raccoon.

Hymn was doing a bit of hiding on this day as well, though in plain sight. While cloaked, he was simply sitting in a crowded village market, tucked tightly into one corner of a large vegetable stand, slightly under a bin of spaghetti squash so that no one would trip over him. He was mainly just watching the people, in disgust (mixed with a

small bit of morbid fascination) at the nasty food they were buying to consume. *Parsnips, hothouse tomatoes, okra, sweet corn...yuck!* While his stomach was fairly turning at the idea of anyone eating these things, he took some consolation in causing a middle-aged woman to trip on a stone in her path. As she fell, the woman lost her grip on the small wooden crate of onions she was carrying. When the bin hit the ground, it dislodged a black widow spider that had been tucked into one of the slats of the crate, causing the spider to fall to the ground. Thus, when the woman picked both herself and her crate up, she was able to continue on her way without a poisonous hitchhiker.

A little while later, watching an elderly man trade a dozen apples for four pounds of carrots and a mango, Hymn delighted in making acorns from a tree fall onto the man's head. In looking up, the old gentleman, who was an avid bird watcher, spotted a migrating warbler rarely seen in the area; and he managed to get a picture of the bird, which thoroughly made his day.

At about the same time the man was snapping his picture, Mee was in the woods just outside the borders of Lion Mountain. Impersonating a fallen tree branch, the underling was watching Luis, who was hunting for walnuts, and finding a good many to stow in his pack, as well as snack on.

Mee decided to use a fling spell to shoot masses of fallen walnuts at the sorcerer in rapid succession, in a long string basically.

Luis ended up catching the nuts with his pack by simply holding it up and widening the opening slightly so the string of walnuts could neatly enter. "Thank you," he called to the thin air, in assuming that perhaps a wind wisp was nearby had decided to help him gather the nuts, all of which fit nicely into the pod pack, despite being nearly equal to two bushels. What a treat to share with family and friends; plus, he would have extra to use as barter when next going to the local trading post.

Mee was, of course, thoroughly irritated, not only because Luis seemed to like having walnuts flung at him; but also because he didn't know what to do against a false sorcerer, which was what most demons called converted sorcerers. In addition to having slept through a class on Conversion Menaces, Mee was afraid of the magic of the sorcerers,

which could pretty much trump anything an underling might be capable of.

Shortly after Luis shifted form to Westerwing to fly home, Mee also left to head to his home base, seething as he flew.

He managed to cool down some in the air, and was in a slightly better mood when he arrived at the cavern, though he was still distracted as he hastened down a corridor. Also having just arrived home, Yu and Hymn were likewise distracted while hurrying down two other corridors that were destined to intersect both with each other and with the one Mee was on.

The three underlings ended up colliding at the intersection. In doing so, they all dropped their notebooks, which they scrambled to pick up because they had each put their names on the outsides of the notebooks, and were not anxious to have anyone discover the great secret of their having names. Except, as each retrieved what was supposed to be his notebook, the three ended up thoroughly confused because the names didn't match up. Mee had Yu's notebook, Hymn had Mee's, and Yu had Hymn's.

Well, as the workings of the brains of underling go, it took about a minute for what this meant to finally sink in: They all shared the same great secret! After gasping loudly with mouths wide open, the three began pointing accusatory fingers at one another.

Thank goodness no one else was in the intersection, or nearby in the corridors, because short squalling screams were soon added to the finger pointing, along with a good deal of jumping up and down.

After a bit more yelling and finger pointing, the jumping up and down lessened, and then finally ceased, along with the screaming and pointing, as the brains of Hymn, Mee, and Yu started to work things out. *Maybe we could all...still share the same secret...and no one would know...if we don't tell on each other.*

While the three were still somewhat suspicious of one another, they were able to recognize that they might be thinking the same thing, and that they might be able to trust each other.

They ended up ducking together into Mee's designated hole because it happened to be the closest. And they all just managed to squeeze in to sit cross-legged on the floor as Mee lit a candle, after which, the three proceeded to discuss the situation, and fully agree not to tell on one

another. In doing so, they could avoid whips and toe pounders, and still keep the names they had given themselves. They were also smart enough to recognize that the names on the notebooks had only given them away because they shared the same secret. If the sorcerers were to discover the notebooks, they wouldn't particularly know what the words on the covers meant. The three had only known in being of like mind. So they could still keep their names on their notebooks.

Being in such full agreement of things discussed, the underling trio decided they might also like to hang out together some. In doing so, they would end up becoming fast friends, and feeling a good deal less alone in the universe than they had previously.

In hanging out together the next morning, Hymn was feeling very generous; and so he shared the secret of the cloak with his new friends. They could all use it, as far as he was concerned; and in testing it out, they were pleased to discover that the device worked to cover all three of them at once, provided they stayed close together, shoulder to shoulder, or following one another without much space in between.

They decided to track down Sal, who was easy to find early morning in the Rubble Garden. As they kept their distance from the boy, in rasping whispers, Mee explained to his friends that he had decided more to study his assignment than anything else, citing the poem as the reason and even sharing it with Yu and Hymn, who were very impressed at the poetic talent of their fellow underling.

The trio looked in on Vidas too, who was simply sitting in his office while thinking of Tanner, who had promised to make a cloak for his mentor, but who had yet to deliver, which reinforced the idea in Vidas' mind that Tanner probably hadn't made the cloak himself, but had acquired it in a similar manner as to how he had gotten the penumbra waking device.

Yet another reason to probably get rid of him, thought Vidas, who had just about made up his mind to do exactly that, though he hadn't yet made the firm plan.

After leaving Vidas' office, Yu explained to his friends that he had resorted to stalking Vidas after basically giving up on his assignment, a twelve-year-old girl whom Yu was never able to make any mental impact on because she was a lot like Sal, in being brain-trained to push away ugly thoughts and see the good even in bad situations. Plus, she

read the bible a lot, and had done so for years, which made her brain nearly impenetrable to any thoughts demons might be trying to plant.

Since demons almost never hung out in threes (because the number three represented the Trinity), the friendship of Mee, Hymn, and Yu was a little odd. However, they didn't care what their threesome might represent. And, in fact, they soon found a benefit in keeping close to one another, in that that certain underling bullies didn't try to boss or shove folks traveling around in threes. Yu, Mee, and Hymn in private started calling themselves the Three Muskemeers, a title they wouldn't know wasn't quite correct until a future time when they all started reading classic literature, and enjoying it.

Chapter Fourteen

Window Glimpses

Conditions in the Rubble Garden had turned really chilly and windy; and so Sal went home for the rest of the day to write at his bedroom desk, which had a good window view of several trees and stretches of shrubs in the family's back yard. Staring out the window at one point, Sal saw a goldfinch perched on a barren tree limb, the sight inspiring him to write a poem.

The Winter Goldfinch

The goldfinch sings out in the frozen cold,
By himself on a barren maple branch.
His lilting twitter no one need enhance;
Nor does the melody at all grow old.
Even when the flurries and winds increase,
The finch's enchanting voice does not cease.

The same air he uses to form his song
Can be seen amidst the late winter chill,
Rising like small clouds from his opened bill
As he tweets, whistles, and warbles along.
With his breath like cottony puffs of smoke,
He giggles as though he's just heard a joke.

As his playful and sharp voice he does raise,
Singing for hours, the finch doesn't tire.
Neither does he to fame at all aspire
Because he's not out for awards or praise,
Instead relishing the chance just to share,
To send a blessed sound into the air.

On this seemingly lonely winter morn
When all else is quiet, asleep, and still,
From the nearby pond to the distant hill,
The song is not at all sad or forlorn,

But instead is a sound of joy most pure,
To lift spirits and help our souls endure.

If we are out and about, walking by,
With our eyes engaged in but a short search
Of the maple limb of the finch's perch,
We might see his form against the gray sky,
Standing out against the utter starkness,
Suggesting warmth while dispelling darkness.

Though spring's a ways off, no buds yet in view,
And winter's cold blasts are still fully bent
On stalling flowers' silkiness and scent,
The greenery and blooms are surely due,
Along with waking beasts and thawing stones,
And warmth coming back into our old bones.

The finch knows the change will soon come along,
Even though the waters are still in freeze
From the icy crispness of the north breeze.
Perhaps this is the meaning of the song
That we listen to with fascination.
We might wish for such anticipation.

As in the poem he had written in collaboration with Mee, Sal was choosing to see springtime as just around the corner; when, in fact, it actually wasn't. But there wasn't any harm in looking forward, as far as Sal could discern, in the same way that many of us look forward to the return of Jesus.

While Sal was writing at his desk, Zin was once again visiting Octessence. Entering the dazzling brightness of the central garden prompted her to look up a familiar bible passage, 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 True Light is Jesus*, Zin's mind told her. *He is risen and He is coming again.*

Deciding to practice flying for a bit, Zin lifted off. Since she wasn't planning to walk on clouds, she stayed somewhat near to the ground, which provided her a close-up view of many enchanting flower beds, shrubs, fountains, and whatnot. In a hedged area that was somewhat out

of the way in the Providentia section, Zin spotted a feature she had never noticed before—a circular reflection pool with lovely stonework edges that she surmised might be the work of genie masons, or maybe gnomes. Surrounding the pool were rose bushes of many colors in full and lush bloom, the flowers definitely catching Zin’s eye in reminding her of a rainbow.

Dipping low to do a slow flyover, Zin was surprised to see what looked like an octagonal window set flat on top of the water (appearing to be floating) directly in the center of the reflection pool. The sectioned panes of the window reminded Zin of a turtle shell as she dropped lower to get a better look. However, even directly above the window, at a distance of only about six feet high, she wasn’t able to see through the glass clearly. Pondering as she flew to the edge of the pool to set down on the ground between a patch of yellow rose bushes on one side and several orange ones on the other, Zin suddenly remembered the zephyrs; and she came to the conclusion that probably the only people who could see through the window were those capable of walking on water, the idea of the Secret of Rainbows coming to her as the flowers on either side of her seemed to nudge at her shoulders.

Her assumption turned out to be correct because, as she climbed onto the edge of the pool to then walk on the surface of the water toward the center, the angle from the side was just right to allow her to see through the window clearly; and what she ended up observing fairly astounded her. As she watched a series of scenes playing out, like they might in a movie, Zin’s mind didn’t even have time to conclude (as it would later) that the window was a device very similar to her foreshard, in being capable of displaying future events.

At first the images looked very dark; but then her eyes adjusted as they would if she had entered a darkened room, and she was able to see more clearly. In addition to her eyes adjusting, flashing explosions from what appeared to be a tremendous battle provided some illumination amidst murky clouds and gloom surrounding swarms of people who seemed to be fleeing on foot from a huge city having mainly sleek and modern-style buildings; though a few older stone and wood dwellings were mixed in.

It was a city by a sea, Zin observed, in watching lava produced by a long string of leviathans melt rocks along the shore, the glowing rocks

also providing light to see by. Above, streams of dragon fire lit the skies as literally hundreds of sky serpents (as dragons were sometimes called) fought nyregs, demons, false dragons, and fiery winged beings that Zin surmised might be fallen angels, given their brightness, beauty, speed, ferocity, and flashing swords.

The people were fleeing to a stretch of arid mountains outlying the city in order to hide in rocky caves and tunnels. Zin ended up squinting and shielding her eyes as glints of intense light bounced off the wings of newdus who were swooping in to pick people up to fly them to safety. So too were gryphons and rookhs helping to carry people off, mainly to places other than the tunnels and caves, since taking refuge in the rocks wasn't particularly safe, largely because of area earthquakes caused not only by several thunderbirds zooming about overhead, but also by the voices of puck trolls who were stationed on boulders at various places outside the city. In fact, a single word spoken by a puck could cause a tremendous earthquake. Zin's mouth actually fell open as she watched the ground split into a long gash forty feet wide and nearly thirty miles long from an elderly lady puck simply saying, "Break!" in not even all that loud of a voice.

So that's why they never speak, Zin thought, in surprise at this revelation. And concerning revelations, she was wise enough to recognize that what she was observing very much fit with events described in the Revelation to John in the bible. In addition to the earthquakes, the heat produced by the leviathans was killing sea life.

And here comes some scorching, she noted as another event described in the Revelation, as a sunbird soared in to scorch huge sections of earth, along with many people, the sight of which caused Zin to briefly look away from the scene, since she definitely wasn't keen on witnessing certain horrors sure to come about during the Endtimes.

The newdus seemed not at all affected by the blazing heat of the sunbird, and the wings of these giant butterflies provided shade to protect some people from the scorch. Others were using leviathan scales as sun shields, as well as to protect from nyreg acid, fire from flash dragons, and falling rocks from both explosions and earthquakes. The scales were able to shapeshift to cover whole groups of people who were also protecting themselves using dragon feathers that easily

transformed into knives, spears, and swords, depending on the needs of the moment.

Folks who had managed earlier to flee and hide in caves and tunnels were being protected from cave-ins by behemoths, who had entered these spaces in their smaller forms (resembling cottontail rabbits) precisely so they could shapeshift to their larger forms to help hold up ceilings and walls when needed.

Unicorns were dashing to and fro in intense flashes of gold amidst the battle, their horns piercing areas of great and oppressive darkness to provide light for those trying to escape.

Horned lions, Zin thought, in watching the golden creatures charge about, and in remembering this as being another name for unicorns, which certainly fit on this day given the ferocity and boldness being displayed.

In addition to piercing darkness, the horns of the unicorns were creating vortexes that could evidently carry people to distant places of safety, mainly the magical pockets of refuge and resources that God had over the years provided for His children. While these pockets were largely emptied of people (who had been taken when the rapture occurred sometime earlier to the events Zin was witnessing), these were still places that could be used during the Great Tribulation (and the Great Battle following) by those willing to be saved, namely, those resisting taking the Mark of the Beast.

As she watched people being whisked away, the idea suddenly came into Zin's mind that the horns of the unicorns could also pierce the darkened brains of some human beings who had stubbornly rejected Christ all their lives. With the horns of light drilling into these dark minds, some of the evil was draining out, to allow these people to finally see reason and save themselves.

Zin next caught a glimpse of several snow gryphons creating buzz blizzards to counter the fire of flash dragons.

Very near the activities of the gryphons, a twelf in a sleek airship that looked like a smooth cloud swooped in over a great river, whose water was drying up under the water manipulation powers of the twelf. *The Euphrates River will be dried up*, Zin remembered as being another event described in the Revelation.

Next, as she watched a series of scenes in noticeably different geographical locations, Zin got the idea that similar battles were taking place across the globe. *This involves the whole world, all of Providentia*, her mind told her, as she also caught her first glimpse of sorcerers in a city surrounded by forests in which many of the trees appeared to have recently died.

The sorcerers, by means of their staffs, seemed to be the ones causing most of the explosions, along with groups of demons using directed energy blasts. *Whoa! Those are some huge demons!* Zin thought of several that were over twenty feet tall. These were high-ranking Senior Demons, finally getting off their lazy butts to do something, under the direction of one of the fiery winged sword-wielding beings that Zin again surmised might be a fallen angel.

On a large island that looked a lot like Greece, a spreesprite had evidently stopped time for an extended stretch (an entire hour, in fact) so that wind horses and rookhs could carry people to safety. And not a moment too soon, it seems, because cloudbirds had just begun producing great hailstones, some the size of small buildings, to drop onto the earth, both in cities and in rural areas, just about everywhere, including what appeared to be the Desert Southwest of the U.S., dotted with canyons and earthship settlements. Catching sight of several sorcerers attacking one of these communities, Zin cringed to see one of the sorcerers squashed by a hailstone the size of a garden shed. In another scene, the setting of which looked like Tokyo, she witnessed three more squashes that turned her stomach.

Zin next noticed a pause in the activity—where battles seemed to cease, or at least die down—as the clouds in the scenes she was watching began moving very rapidly, as though time were progressing faster than normal.

The pause didn't last long as sunbirds, firebirds, and dragons swooped in over huge cities to melt buildings that looked like some of the tallest skyscrapers that had ever been built in certain wealthy and glittering cities of the Middle East. Though the construction of these buildings had been pretty fabulous by human standards, the magical creatures, under God's command, were having no difficulty at all basically dissolving the glass, metal, and concrete.

Everything mankind has ever built will be destroyed at some time in the future, Zin thought. And the earth will be remade by fire.

As the clouds again moved very rapidly, and smoke and fires seemed to cease, Zin saw great ice bears moving in on the melted buildings, to use their freezing powers on the molten piles of rubble, which then shattered into nothingness, dust basically. The bears, which Zin had never seen before (and didn't even know existed), were nearly as large as behemoths; and she could only guess that many of these creatures might, in her own time, have been sleeping somewhere in the arctic, in the same way most of the dragons of the world were sleeping inside of volcanoes. Greenland would have been a good guess, as far as specifics, because that's exactly where the ice bears had been hibernating.

The bears had arrived riding on leviathans who weren't just in the business of melting rocks and giving rides to ice bears. No indeed, because these enormous sea dragons were now using their fiery powers to dry up the oceans, the waters of which were rising in great steamy clouds above the earth to form rainbow waterfalls, and pools to hold the falling waters. The leviathans had shrunk to their smaller shapes (resembling rainbow clownfish) to do the drying up of the seas because their powers were actually stronger in their more compact forms.

No seas in the Next Age, but there will still be water, Zin thought in observing the lovely sky waterfalls and pools that were staying airborne somehow; probably, she reasoned, because they knew the Secret of Rainbows. There will be earth too, and evidently fire...and wind, this occurring to her as several wind horses sailed in to scatter the dust from the ice bears' shattered rubble piles. What also suddenly sprung to mind were the elemental angels mentioned in the Revelation—one with power over fire, another over earth; and also air, and water. With so many flashes of light—from unicorns, dragons, newdu wings, and more—Zin couldn't tell if any of the light she had seen might belong to some of the angelic host that were set to return with Jesus at His Second Coming.

The movie Zin was watching was about to end. However, just before the window went dark, she caught one final glimpse of what appeared to be masses of glistening jewels filling the skies and the earth, both of which were connected somehow to the rainbow waterfalls

and colorful clouds gliding about. And she imagined that, amongst the clouds, she might have even seen houses, inside of which the staircases, cabinets, furniture, and so forth were all made of beautiful crystals, brilliant and glistening, and almost too bright to look at.

Walking slowly away from the flat window, Zin sat on the stone ledge at the edge of the reflection pool for a time to contemplate. However, as her mind went over what she had just seen, it almost seemed as if a few scenes were being added, as though she might be having a vision of future events even aside from what she had just observed through the octagonal window.

Unless I caught little glimpses of these things between seeing other things, her mind speculated of events such as regular horses carrying people to safety, peacocks flying about, bigfoots striking down demons, gargoyles using their mental energy to hurl huge stones at demons, leviathans and merpeople battling krakens, sylphs enacting tornados to thwart nyregs, and stone creatures like those carved and brought to life by Lista flooding out of a quarry to help battle flash dragons.

As she closed her eyes, Zin was able to see even more visions of the future, such as a flock of sandhill cranes trumpeting the message that the return of the Lord was imminent. The message was understood by many people in the future who had the gift of being able to understand and communicate with animals, birds, etc. Also, trees were fairly shouting at people, to accept Christ before it was too late. *God speaks to us in different ways*, Zin thought.

The visions ended shortly, and she was left simply sitting by the pool. As she let the fingers of her left hand dangle into the water, which felt very warm, Zin's mind told her, *The Word of God is water—nourishing, life-giving, cleansing. The Word is a sword too—dividing soul and spirit, and conquering Death. Oh, and the Word is a mirror*, she suddenly realized in staring at her reflection in the pool. *We're supposed to become like Jesus, mirroring His goodness and light. But a mirror also exposes our shortcomings, so that we can work on them*, she decided, as she thought to look up James 1:22-25 in her pocket bible. "But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if any one is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who observes his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But he who

looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer that forgets but a doer that acts, he shall be blessed in his doing.”

At the same time Zin was sitting and reflecting, a Keane painting of a woman with red hair in Supercity Seven was observing something through a window. This happened to be Vidas visiting a mimic demon who specialized in assassinations. From reading the sorcerer’s lips, the observing woman discovered that Vidas had just ordered a hit on Tanner.

Having found out that Tanner had just paid a friendly visit to his parents and brother at the ranch where they lived, Vidas had decided he was fairly fed up with his protégé. Plus, he was ready to acquire Tanner’s cloak for himself, along with anything else in the young sorcerer’s private den that might be of use to him.

While a sorcerer plotting to kill another sorcerer might not have been of much concern to a lot of folks (especially godly spies), the information was of interest to the red-haired woman, who not only had good intuition, but who had been working with the Underground Army for many years by this time. Thus, she had good discernment with regard to such matters. Plus, she knew Patrick personally. But even aside from these things, a little voice in the back of her head was telling her to relay the information to her designated contact, who happened to be The Sparrow. The voice happened to be that of God, Who had an interest in protecting Tanner in knowing that he would be saved in the future, this happening not only as a result of influence from his family, but from coming into contact with a blessed diamond.

Vidas was feeling very smug after ordering the hit, which he felt certain would be a success. Tanner’s guard would be down because demons never attacked sorcerers, unless a sorcerer was working for the Enemy, which Tanner wasn’t at this point, being still unsaved.

Upon learning of the planned hit, and in thinking that a magician would be the best person to deal with both a sorcerer and a mimic, Cecelia immediately sent Zin a kite message (The Sparrow’s preferred method of communication).

The kite intercepted Zin on her airbike on her way home from Netherwind. Upon reading the message, Zin immediately called for Magsen, who arrived in less than ten seconds to whisk Zin to Supe-9 to land on the rooftop deck of Tanner’s apartment building. Dashing

down the stairs, Zin entered Tanner's apartment (using her magic key) just in time to kill the assassin with a rope. Tanner himself had let in the mimic, who had used the pretext of delivering a message from the Council of Twos to gain entry.

Just after the kill (and after stowing her rope), Zin used her foreshard to show Tanner that Vidas had ordered the mimic to kill him.

Departing quickly after this to meet Magsen on the roof, Zin left Tanner a little stunned. He hadn't thanked her for saving his life, but she didn't want any thanks. She had just been doing what God was leading her to do and what she knew to be right.

Oddly enough, Tanner would never again have to worry about his mentor posing any kind of a threat towards him because Vidas ended up dead less than two hours later. He had, very unwisely, challenged Marlon to a duel. Then, even more unwisely, he had cheated during the duel by using a pair of flash dragons set to attack during one of his opponent's moves, in the hopes of distracting and possibly killing the magician. This forced Marlon to react with deadly magic, which killed not only the flash dragons, but also the sorcerer.

Shortly after Zin and Magsen arrived home, Zin sought out Pizzo, who was reading in the parlor.

After she told him part of what she had seen through the reflection-pool window, he wrote a few things out for her on a little sketchpad, basically to confirm to her that pucks never speak because their words definitely cause earthquakes; though other puck sounds—such as coughs, grunts, giggles, sneezes, snorts, and so forth—do not cause earthquakes.

"So just words," Zin said in amazement, with Pizzo nodding as he wrote out a few more lines for her to read:

"Right now we don't use aloud words because we're not allowed to, not even to kill a bunch of evil sorcerers. That will happen later. I think God is giving people a chance, lots of chances, to repent and come to Him. But eventually His patience will run out; and then He will call on us to act."

You, and a lot of other magical creatures too, Zin ended up thinking, because God keeps all of His promises, including those involving His wrath.

Of course, it wouldn't be just magical creatures getting involved, but God Himself, this being clearly described not only in the Revelation, but in many other prophetic books of the bible such as Isaiah, Amos, and Jeremiah.

Leaving Pizzo to his reading, Zin made her way upstairs to her bedroom to change clothes.

She was sitting on her bed a short while later when an Endtimes vision suddenly came into her mind, one she was certain she hadn't seen in the octagonal window. In the vision, the water in a large sea was turning to blood. Alongside the shore of the sea, huge rocks were producing choking gases and then exploding.

Brimstone, Zin decided, of the rocks, as she also surmised both the blood and the gaseous-incendiary rocks to be evidence of God's wrath, specifically, the winepress of wrath mentioned any number of places in the bible.

Blessedly, as the vision continued, she saw the mother-of-pearl blessing box take the form of a huge boat to save people from the sea of blood, namely, those who had refused to take the Mark of the Beast, while others were whisked away from the choking gasses and explosions in twelf airships.

So I don't even have to look through the window, or into my foreshard, to see these things, Zin marveled, as she also realized that this had all come about as a result of learning the Secret of Rainbows.

Chapter Fifteen

The End of the Matter

Just after breakfast the next morning, Zin went down to her lab to start working on a cloak detector based on how her Reveal Powder worked. Except the detector would end up being a device, not a powder, and it would be automatic, less manual, in not having to be tossed out. *Just something to wear and be switched on to reveal someone cloaked*, she decided.

She might not have needed to make the detector at all because her enhanced foreshard was perfectly capable of showing her specific people, including cloaked sorcerers. Even though they would appear invisible, she could pinpoint locations by examining the surroundings displayed in the crystal. But since foreshards were scarce, and other people, such as members of the Underground Army, would need to be able detect cloaked sorcerers, she decided to make the device, which, when finished, would be duplicated for use by many.

While working, she was thinking about what she had seen through the octagonal window, as her mind tried to put more of those events together with ones described in the Revelation. In her most recent read-through of the book, she had considered that the Seven Seals and Seven Trumpets might not be on any sort of timeline, other than maybe that of all of human history, especially with time itself being so mysterious. *God can stretch time, like how Abraham and Sarah conceived very late*, she thought. *And He doesn't want anyone to be lost, so He's waiting to bring His wrath so that more people can be saved.* As she was considering this, her mind added, *But God can quicken time too, like how the days at the End of the Age will be shortened.* Taking a break from working on the detector, she looked up Matthew 24:22. ““And if those days had not been shortened, no human being would be saved; but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened.””

Zin actually finished her project well before lunchtime. The device was simply a small rectangle box (about the size of a matchbox)

designed to be worn on a belt or clipped to the strap of a pack. As she had hoped, it was fully automatic, acting like a scanner to expose anyone cloaked within two hundred meters, the exposure being based on light, rather than powder, because light was needed to overcome the invisibility factor.

She would perform some tests of the device after Christmas, which was only two days away, and maybe make some tweaks. In the meantime, she could continue to use her foreshard to determine if Tanner might again be following her. *And he might have made additional cloaks for his friends*, her mind suggested.

In thinking of this, Zin decided to check up on her adversaries, first asking her foreshard to show her Penelope, who was simply sitting in an armchair in her family's living room and reading. Devin was napping in his bedroom while holding a teddy bear, the sight of which made Zin smile. Kemp was preening in front of his dresser mirror. Last of all, she looked in on Tanner, who was out on an airbike meeting up with his brother for a jaunt about the countryside.

Zin might have felt a little guilty about spying on people, except for the fact that God had given her the foreshard exactly for this and other purposes. And she wasn't by any means abusing the crystal, just as she wasn't other God-given tools, like the mini Mind Keys, one of which she had used on Tanner the previous day. As she was leaving his apartment, just outside the door, she used the mini sphere to make Tanner forget all about the Magical Grapevine, so that he wouldn't be out looking for wreath entrances with which to again commit time-travel mischief.

Actually, Tanner had decided to cool his mischief slightly, especially with regards to Zin, not only because she had saved his life, but also because her mentor had killed his mentor. With Tanner feeling grateful, this would end up resulting in an extended truce between them, a stronger one this time, instead of just a "sort-of" one.

Zin next tidied up her lab before going upstairs to read in her bedroom until lunchtime.

At the same time Zin was tidying up and reading, Kiana was making important Post-Runner deliveries to resupply dragon tears to the places hit by the penumbras.

And speaking of deliveries, Jamie had just received one from Jarna who had just brought him the final blessing box, which was flat and around the size of a standard document box that might hold old photos, cards, and letters. Made of golden leaves, fernlike in shape, the box had hinges and corner protectors that looked like alabaster carved with a feather design. This was the item Jarna had been keeping safe in her secret treehouse.

Upon receiving the blessing box, Jamie made a walnut call to Zin to let her know that he now had all seven of the boxes. “Well, almost all,” he added. “The bone box is gone right this minute. It flew off to do something, but I’m sure it will be back soon.” Jamie also let Zin know that he and Alex were heading back into the Mystery Realm to further explore the twenty-four Myramids.

After lunch, Zin bundled up in a thick sweater and jacket to sit on the back porch under a lap blanket to watch Lista playing hide and seek in the gardens with the little donkey, who was visiting the residents of Doyle Mansion for the afternoon. Em was on the back lawns practicing stick fighting, her sparring partner being an octopus sand sculpture who was wielding three sticks against Em’s one. This was not too troubling, even at her age, because she happened to be one of the greatest stick fighters to ever live. In fact, she still taught classes on occasion in the Weapons Room on the mezzanine.

While watching the sparring and hide-and-seek playing, out of curiosity, Zin asked her foreshard to show her the bone blessing box, which had taken the form of an enormous bony creature resembling a bear, displayed in the crystal as charging after packs of demons to rip wings, heads, and limbs from the creatures who were fleeing from a large Demon Pocket that the two zephyrs had evidently just cleaned out using the ferocity of their wind power. *So the zephyrs are keeping busy here, even though there are no penumbras to deal with*, Zin thought. *Wow! That’s pretty nifty.*

The Demon Pocket happened to be the home base of Mee, Hymn, and Yu, who weren’t at home when the cleaning-out happened. In fact, they were at Doyle Mansion, actually in the house. Using the cloak, the Muskemeers had snuck in, just to snoop around. However, in fearing being caught by the gryphons, pucks, gnomes, people, living paintings, and whatnot, the three had resorted to hiding inside the mansion’s

dumbwaiter, having entered the contraption from the servants' stairwell on the third floor. The doorway to Ancora happened to be inside the dumbwaiter, and on the third floor level. Since this happened to be a Tuesday, the doorway was available; thus, the underlings easily discovered the passage, which they entered to emerge from a door in the trunk of a large oak tree in Ancora.

Meandering down a country lane in what seemed to be an early-summer setting, the three might ordinarily have wanted to stomp flowers along the edges of the woody path. However, today for some reason, they didn't feel like stomping flowers. So too might they have normally thrown rocks at a tiny horse-like creature they passed in a meadow. Instead, as they passed the little knee-high horse, they decided to feed him handfuls of grasses. Because this was sort of fun, while nodding, Mee rasped, "Feed instead of throw things."

Yu, Mee, and Hymn were soon met by Breccan, who wasn't particularly troubled to be faced with the underlings, which he knew weren't capable of doing him any harm. Nor would they have even tried. Despite having doodled through their workshop on Genies, the three had enough common sense by this time in their lives to know not to even try to counter such a powerful magical creature.

Also deciding to feed rather than throw things, after introducing himself, Breccan proceeded to offer his guests a snack of what looked like large raisins, produced from a rucksack that appeared out of thin air.

Since this was a day for discoveries, and going about things in new ways, the underlings decided to try the raisins, which, despite being saturated with goodness, as nearly everything in Ancora was, tasted very good to them.

Breccan next invited the three on a little tour of the area, which the underlings agreed to, and enjoyed, particularly in getting to take shelter from the sun under a long avenue of willow trees that extended their tendrils like umbrellas over the demons as they walked along. At one point, the water spray from a fountain bothered the demons, until they realized that the droplets, warmed by the sun, actually felt kind of nice on their hides.

In a garden setting, while feeling slightly in a bad mood from looking at the huge and shiny vegetables on their lush stalks and vines,

Yu suddenly felt inclined to stab at the earth with a sharp stick. Noting this, Breccan simply drew a variety of seeds out of thin air for the underlings to drop into the stab holes. Hymn and Mee ended up covering the holes with soft earth, after which, Breccan used a little spell to water in the seeds, this prompting Yu to produce a small cloudburst to give a nice refreshing shower to the whole garden.

Breccan soon issued another invitation to the three. “There’s a nice little Darkling Village here where I think you might be very comfortable, if you’d like to stay. Four fire slugs moved out last week, and I haven’t had any orclings living there for several years, so there’s plenty of room.”

Well, this was certainly an interesting proposal; and one the underlings decided to accept, especially since they no longer had a home base, the cavern pocket having been absolutely torn to pieces by the zephyrs. Although they hadn’t been at home when it happened, the Muskemeers had (if you’ll pardon the pun) gotten wind of the destruction.

In addition to wanting to give shelter to these visitors, Breccan thought he might like to try to tame the underlings. He had tamed orclings for decades, and warcsies, so why not try his hand at demons.

Mee, Hymn, and Yu quickly decided they liked the village. It was nice and quiet, and shady, and even a little muddy, which they very much liked.

However, if we take a little peek into their future, we find the underlings having moved out of the Darkling Village and into a nearby Brightling Village, where there were wonderful things to look at and learn about, and many new friends to make.

Yu decided to change the spelling of his name to Yew when he absolutely fell in love with three yew trees on the outskirts of the Brightling Village. Hymn never changed his name, especially in deciding he liked hymns, which were sung each evening in the village. And even though Mee could spell much better than in his earlier years, he never changed the spelling of his name either, deciding to keep the extra “e” because he felt it suited him, as an individual.

Yew became a fabulous gardener over the years, while Hymn took up playing the accordion and xylophone. Mee mostly enjoyed writing poetry, inspired both by Sal and his new surroundings. While some

things Breccan ended up teaching them seemed quite odd—like about politeness and repentance—the underlings learned very quickly. With regard to food, they ended up enjoying much of what was provided for them, even developing a liking for peaches, mostly small ones that could be eaten in a single bite, thus avoiding a lot of juice running down the chin. Plus, they could chew on the pits for a bit before spitting them out onto a compost heap, or planting them.

Meanwhile, back at Doyle Mansion, Zin was in the attic getting out boxes of Christmas ornaments, along with the family's artificial tree. While she would set up the tree today, they wouldn't decorate it until tomorrow, as it was most often their tradition to wait until Christmas Eve.

Zin was up early the next morning to help her mother with more baking. Taking a break midmorning, she decided to practice walking on clouds, also practicing her flying skills in order to reach the clouds. The zephyrs ended up paying her a visit while she was walking around in the skies; and they told Zin their names, which were supposed to be kept secret. So she would, of course, honor this.

As she was out practicing, Zin saw the leaf blessing box, having taken the form of the flying pig, zoom by on his way to deliver an important message to someone. Giving a wave to the pig, which he returned, Zin smiled in thinking of the blessing boxes keeping busy in the here and now, though she was still pretty sure that they were more for the future than they were for the present.

Whether or not they were more for the future, the boxes were definitely keeping active. In fact, the one made of mother of pearl had just produced a special sextant for the W'eeper, not only for navigation purposes, but also to channel the energy from starlight to be used as a weapon. The wooden blessing box was also out and about. Having turned into the book capable of answering difficult questions, the box was on its way to visit a man in Pakistan to answer a specific question. At about the same time the answer was being given, Jamie's boxical gave him a set of bath towels that would always stay dry, no matter how much water ended up getting soaked into them.

While Jamie was marveling over his new towels, Esther was returning from a time-travel trip to put the penumbras of the ancient past to sleep. So she had been the one to do this; though it had taken

some effort, not necessarily in the past, but in the here and now, where the complex sleep incantation had taken her nearly sixty years to develop. Patience had been a key factor, of course.

Upon returning from the trip through the tapestry portal situated in the rear of her cave, Esther smiled in thinking that one of the reasons the spell had taken so long to formulate was because she needed to borrow a couple of wordsmith tricks, from Sal actually, who hadn't even been born yet when she first started work on the spell.

Esther next took a trip by rookh to Lion Mountain to have a quick word with Astrid, after which, the sorceress made a point of stopping to pick up some veggies from the greenhouse in the community garden where Philip was fond of helping out.

Philip was actually in the garden on this day, again working with his bigfoot friend; and the two were laughing at jokes that Philip's dulcimer was telling them relayed by trees across several states. Esther also laughed at several jokes while loading a pack with zucchini, potatoes, carrots, and cabbages. Taking off on the rookh a short while later, Esther offered the triangle hand symbol to Philip and the bigfoot, while also wishing them, "Merry Christmas!"

Zin might not have taken a grapevine time-travel trip on the afternoon of Christmas Eve, except for God telling her to. She went back in time in order to help a group of genies and a gnome carpenter make the dimension windows on the mezzanine, a task which took two days to complete as far as her part.

While enacting a spell on the six windows that were meant to open, she overheard the gnome carpenter remark, "I think people might puzzle over why the windows on this hall don't match up with what they'll see from outside the house."

"They won't notice," one of the genies hurried to assure the gnome. "People aren't that observant. They don't even notice things when they read the bible. If they did, they'd have all of the answers to life."

"It's their limited brain functions," another genie chimed in. "That's why people don't notice things like they should."

Zin might have taken offense at the conversation, except for the truth in the words. In truth, she had never particularly observed that the windows as seen from the outside of Netherwind didn't match up with those inside. Nor had she ever really thought about how the mezzanine

was worked into the house in unusual ways that didn't match up with the floors above and beneath the magical hall. In fact, if the construction had been based on traditional engineering and carpentry, she would have been standing in the middle of a bedroom on the floor above the mezzanine.

Arriving back home with plenty of time before dinner, Zin wrapped presents, with help from Heike, the clever little troll having a knack for making ribbons and bows out of just about anything, such as old shoe laces, candy wrappers, shredded cracker boxes, strips of material from worn clothing, etc. Zin watched in awe as Heike fashioned a butterfly bow out of a hunk of tissue paper twisted up with several feathers, followed by an elaborate star made from an old sandwich bag and a couple of bread-wrapper twist ties. The butterfly topped the package containing a scarf Zin had knitted for her Uncle Otto, while the star went on top of the box holding the musical thimble for her mother.

After dinner, the family had great fun decorating the tree while enjoying eggnog and playing charades.

Christmas morning was a merry time of unwrapping gifts and having a big brunchfest, after which, Zin decided to head to Netherwind by airbike to make a visit to the Peacock Garden. She had enough time before needing to help in the kitchen in preparation for Christmas dinner, especially because her mom had plenty of assistance from Halli and Magsen who were making most of the side dishes, while Pipac and Kisi were taking charge of the desserts, and Otto was working on breads and salads.

Lizzie and Edna were off making Christmas visits when Zin arrived on the mezzanine to slip inside Octessence.

She didn't visit the garden long, in more just wanting to take a peek at the sunsteps, which still registered the time as being almost noon. In contemplating exactly what this might mean, Zin's brain was filled with a lot of ideas.

So the whole of Octessence is a clock—a Clock of Balance and a Clock of Time. But time is mysterious...circles, fast, slow...the Time Trinity...days stretched, days shortened. In the bible, weeks sometimes equaling years...or days equaling years. And vice versa, she thought, in remembering 2 Peter 3:8. “But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that

with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.”

Twenty-four hours in the day...twenty-four Myramids. But the Myramids are a Clock of History. And the Clock of the Universe is a Clock of Providence.

The whole “noontime” thing was definitely a puzzle to work out, much as the Secret of Rainbows had been.

On her way back to the door to the mezzanine, the bagua mirror caught Zin’s eye. *Mirrors and eyes...*, her mind added to the puzzle, which then seemed to take on a whole new dimension in her thoughts, one of mirror aspects, and contrasts.

The Great Tribulation will be dark, but Jesus’ return will be bright. Even though the wrath is dark, He is fully Light. The Clock of the Universe has been counting down instead of up for many years now. The moon dial no longer works, but the sunsteps do, which is something of a reversal. Evil can be reverted to good; Jesus has the power to do this—to change human hearts and lighten darkened minds. There will be no peace until Jesus comes again; though this will be a realm of peace someday, ruled by the Prince of Peace.

Given the brightness of the garden, Zin got the idea that the sunsteps reaching noon might coincide with the Second Coming of Jesus. *He is coming soon, in all His brightness and glory, and we’d better be prepared for it,* she decided.

When leaving the Peacock Garden and entering the mezzanine, Zin’s eye was drawn to a wall clock she had never noticed before, hanging directly across the hall from the door to Octessence. The clock was round in shape and somewhat old, in being rusty and fairly worn looking.

Edna and Lizzie had just returned to the hall.

“That’s a new clock, isn’t it?” Zin asked the sisters.

“Yes,” Lizzie confirmed. “There’s another one down the hall that’s been there for ages, but this one is new.”

“Esther put it there, along with the mirror; oh...about a month ago now,” Edna said.

Zin also hadn’t noticed the new mirror, which was hanging right across the hall from the clock, directly next to the door to Octessence.

“We’re not even dusting them,” Edna added, in a slightly dramatic fashion, her eyes widening. While the sisters often dusted on the mezzanine, they were both somewhat afraid of Esther. Or at least they were incredibly wary of her, as many people would be a sorceress, so they weren’t planning to touch anything she had installed on the mezzanine.

“The clock doesn’t keep time,” Lizzie offered. “It just stays in that position.” (In her opinion, this was another reason to be wary of touching the device.)

Zin hadn’t noticed at first glance that the hands of the clock stood almost at noon. While her mind was putting this together with the sunsteps in the Peacock Garden, she also noted that the face of the clock was a mirror image of what a clock should be, as though it might have been one of the artworks displayed in the Art Gallery. In the mirror across hall, the clock’s reflection looked perfectly normal. Since the sisters hadn’t mentioned this oddity, Zin didn’t either, particularly since her mind was already turning in another direction—to the shape of the clock being circular, which made her think of the Time Trinity.

Zin was just getting ready to leave, while offering Lizzie and Edna the triangle hand symbol, when another visitor entered the hall. This happened to be the child Zin had seen going through the window. Her name was Alma Dorn, and she was on her way to again visit what turned out to be the Dimension of Comprehension. Alma was evidently destined to be a physicist, and she was using the window, on God’s command, in order to get a little jump on her education.

Just in brief conversation, Zin learned that Alma’s last visit to the Dimension of Comprehension had simply involved filling cups with water. “They were upside down,” Alma further said. “But they weren’t hard to fill upside down.”

Another reversal, Zin noted, while watching Alma disappear through the window.

Leaving the hall a few moments later, Zin happened to notice that the face of the round clock now appeared to be perfectly normal, no longer looking like a mirror image; though the mirror across from the clock now displayed it as such.

I’m broadening my thinking; that’s why it reversed itself, Zin chose to believe, instead of trying to convince herself that her eyes had earlier

been playing tricks on her. *So, I'm making progress*, she further decided. This was obviously true, as a few short months ago she never would have been able to work out the Secret of Rainbows.

Zin made it home about thirty minutes later to head upstairs. After washing her face, as she stood brushing her hair in front of her dresser mirror, her brain tried to work out exactly what God might be trying to tell her with regard to mirrors. Even with all of her magician's expertise, and with having broadened thinking, she was still puzzled, particularly because of the complexities involved with mirrors.

In certain cultures, small pieces of mirror were sewn into the hems of shirts and skirts, as a reminder throughout the day to look at self, to examine one's own behavior. The mirror pieces also served as a reminder to sometimes look at things from a reverse perspective. With regard to "looking" at things, Zin was starting to realize that although human eyes are capable of seeing things no other creatures can see, what we are accustomed to seeing actually limits us. *Which is why there are seven factors to the Secret of Rainbows, instead of just one*, her mind told her.

I just need to have patience, she ultimately decided about the issue of mirrors.

As she was giving her hair a final few brushstrokes, an odd vision came to Zin, in which she was having a conversation in the mirror with a younger version of herself, younger by about a year, she guessed.

"He's coming soon," Zin told the girl in the mirror.

"Who's coming?" her younger self asked.

"Jesus." the older Zin replied. "In fact, He even says several times in the Revelation that He's coming soon."

"So what do we do while we're waiting?"

To this, the older version quoted Deuteronomy 13:4. "You shall walk after the LORD your God and fear him, and keep his commandments and obey his voice, and you shall serve him and cleave to him."

As the vision suddenly ended, Zin was left simply staring in the mirror at her normal self who was slowly putting down the hairbrush.

Heading downstairs a few moments later, another relevant bible quote popped into her head, from Revelation 14:7. "Fear God and give

him glory, for the hour of his judgment has come; and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the fountains of water.”

Luis was coming for dinner, and arrived just in time to help Zin and Heike set the table in the dining room.

As she watched Heike fold napkins into poinsettias, in thinking of what Christmas was supposed to represent, and what the sunsteps in the Peacock Garden probably meant, and the round clock, what struck Zin the most was what she had just told to her younger self. *He's coming soon.*

The thing is, her mind responded, He's already here, inside of believers, in the form of the Holy Spirit. Just like the Time Trinity is all One Time, so too are the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all One.

While Zin was setting out glasses, Esther happened to be paying the two zephyrs a visit by walking on clouds to bring them a Christmas treat of a pail of mist petals she had gathered from patches of enchanted chinook flowers she had discovered floating about the Himalayas.

Esther returned to her cave just in time to greet a lady twelf named Bellas who was bringing her a special object. This happened to be the Hell Thimble for which Bellas had just made a lid that would eventually act as a permanent seal. The twelf already knew what Esther had suspected for some time: The fires of hell were being quickened, in readiness to receive the fallen angels and the lost of mankind.

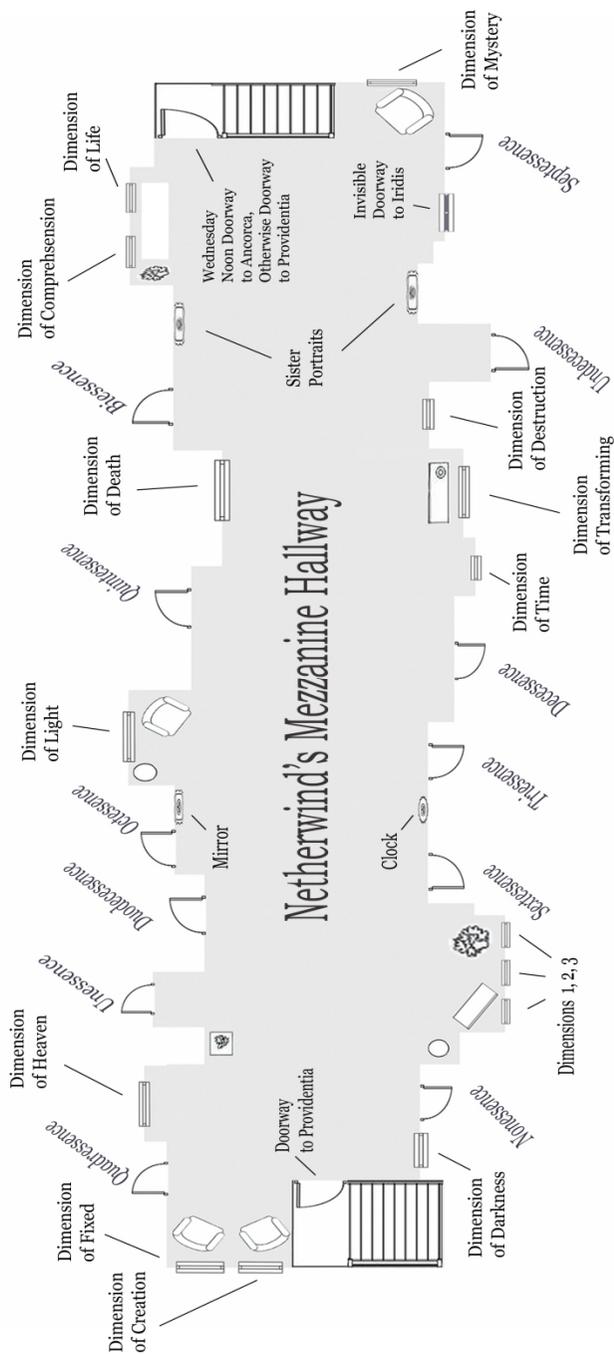
Esther was being charged with the safekeeping of the thimble, which angel metalsmiths had made and which dragons had been keeping watch on for ages, to keep hellfire from brimming over. Now, with the lid having been made, Esther felt it likely that the End of the Age was very near. As the twelf left, the sorceress simply placed the thimble on a small shelf in the rear of her cave before heading to her kitchen to have a cup of blueberry tea.

Unlike Zin, who was still working a few things out, Esther knew exactly what to do while waiting for the return of Jesus, the answer being found in three of her favorite passages in the bible.

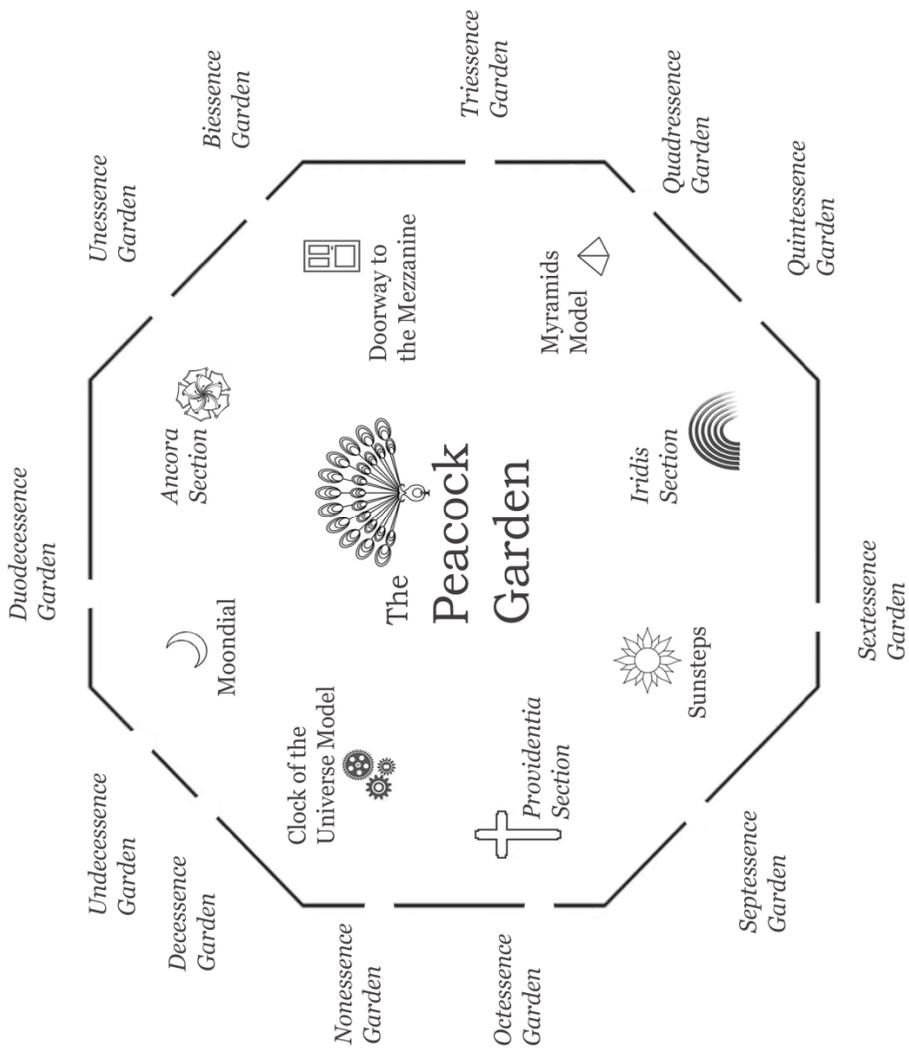
“The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.

Besides this you know what hour it is, how it is full time now for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed; the night is far gone, the day is at hand. Let us then cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. For once you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to learn what is pleasing to the Lord.”

—Ecclesiastes 12:13-14, Romans 13:11-12, Ephesians 5:8-10



Doorways to the Fifteen Realms and Windows to the Fifteen Dimensions



Clock Winders Chronology

Part I

Wind Horses and Horned Lions: June 2015 to May 2016
Burnished Doves and Sky Serpents: June 2016 to May 2017
Netherwind and Laurelstone: June to August 2017
The Clock of the Universe: December 2041 to May 2042
The Once and Forever Mountain: June 2065 to July 2066

Part II

The Protector of Dragons: August to September 2066
Time Key Travelers: August to December 2066
The Promise of the Snow Gryphon: January to August 2067
The Lost Genie Diaries: Diaries found August 2067
Spreesprites and Soul Shadows: August to September 2067
The Bloodstone Miracles: October to December 2067
Noontime in the Peacock Garden: December 2067

Although the main events take place within the dates listed for each book (spanning 52½ years), we flashback and flashforward many times to have a look at both past and future happenings. While no one can ever know for sure when the events of the Endtimes will occur, the Clock Winders Series puts the Second Coming of Jesus at no sooner than one hundred and twelve years from the date of our first adventure, but probably not much longer than that. The series is designed so that Part II can be read before Part I, which might be preferable to younger readers as the latter adventures are somewhat shorter and quicker reads than the earlier ones.



Works by J.H. Sweet

The Fairy Chronicles
Clock Winders Series
The Wishbone Miracle
The White Sparrow
Juan Noel's Crystal Airship
The Heaviest Things
Foo and Friends
The Time Entity Trilogy
Cassie Kingston Mysteries
The Gypsy Fiddle

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