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WITH THE LIGHT CAUGHT BETWEEN

By

Albert Michael Jacoby

THESIS

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Title of Thesis: With the Light Caught Between

This thesis by Albert Michael Jacoby is recommended for approval by the student's Thesis Committee and Department Head in the Department of English and by the Assistant Provost of Graduate Education and Research.

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ABSTRACT

WITH THE LIGHT CAUGHT BETWEEN

By

Albert Michael Jacoby

Although Henry and Claire Lumens are twins, their high school lives couldn't be more opposite. Henry enjoys sketching, looking at handsome boys, and reading about fantastical places, but his shy and pensive nature means he battles demons of his own every day in the gym locker room. Claire, however, loves the world she lives in, which is easy because she's bossy, clever, and stunning. On their seventeenth birthday, their grandmother gives them a gift that will take them to a fantastical world. Despite their ignorance of the world's existence, their grandmother insists it's their birthplace, and the only way they can travel there is by going together. As Henry pushes to recreate himself in this world, Claire clings to the hope that she can still be successful and independent back at home. Their adventures challenge the identities they've created and test what they're willing to make the other endure in an effort to obtain their own wishes. This story seeks to combine the genre of young adult literature with fantastical elements in hopes of expanding conversations on self-perception and identity acceptance.

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The work of many authors and artists has inspired countless elements of this project. I'm grateful to those imaginative people who have captured my attention for so many years. My project and identity are also indebted to the courageous individuals who have opened up the way for narratives of queer identity.

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INTRODUCTION

“Some day you will be old enough to start reading fairy tales again.” —C.S. Lewis

Toni Morrison is credited with saying, “If there's a book that you want to read, but it hasn't been written yet, then you must write it.” This quote is simple, and I feel cheesy using it to describe my thesis, but I find myself unable to better explain why I've written this first part of a novel. When hunting for a new book to read, I'm on the look out for a number of topics, themes, and tones. I'm captivated by stories about worlds and people that push beyond the realms of reality, which has drawn me for years toward fantasy, and most recently toward magical realism. This interest began with stories written by authors such as C. S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, but as I've matured as a reader I've discovered authors such as Karen Russel and Kate Bernheimer.

Novels with characters who are uncovering their own identity also take up a significant portion of my bookshelf. Commonly, stories of this nature are in the young adult genre. Because I did not understand my sexual identity as a homosexual until the age of twenty two, I believe I stepped away from young adult literature at a slower rate than many others. But as I've come to understand myself and my identity, I've realized there are elements missing from these stories that I've read and reread.

Many fantastical stories, the more traditional ones at least, omit the human element in favor of focusing their lens on the phenomenal world building taking place. Lewis, for example, created the entrancing and comfortable, Narnia. His stories are given life by their narrators who often reminds the reader of a wise old man, sitting by the

fireside and telling an audience a fascinating tale over a cup of tea. The characters in the Narnia series, however, are flat and typically one dimensional. If a young adult struggling to find a voice came to me and asked for a book recommendation in the hopes of finding a way to accept their identity (and sexuality) I obviously wouldn't recommend Lewis. Nor would I recommend Tolkien, although suggesting Rowling's *Harry Potter* series would hit closer to the mark.

There are also many flaws in contemporary young adult writing. Often, popular authors such as Stephenie Meyers and Suzanne Collins, write stores that overindulge in saccharine romances where protagonists spend their time debating which hunky man they should date (usually there are more than one jumping at the bit). With my current piece entering into the young adult genre, I wanted to take the issues of identity and bullying that teens face seriously. Yes, there will be dragons and magic involved, but fantasy works to expand the imagination and make the choices written teens more exciting to read about than the decision I, as an actual teenager, made.

In my own writing, I wanted to expand and push these elements of fantasy and adolescence. I sought to create characters with drives that exceeded the missions given to them by elders or righteous lions. Henry, one of my novel's protagonists, is a character who ticks because of his interest in handsome men and his desire to feel important. Claire is motivated because she has felt like a nanny to her brother and grandmother, and she seeks to expand her identity beyond the bounds of her family, a struggle common amongst young adults.

One of the reasons I'm excited about this project is that it serves as a way to explore and demonstrate the writing I've practiced during my Master's here at NMU. At

the conclusion of this project, I realized that during my time at Northern, the primary focus of my writing has been on identity and how one comes to acknowledge, understand, and accept themselves.

Matt Bell's novel writing workshop was the first opportunity I had to work on a novel length project. That class was a sink-or-swim experience for me; I had written little fiction before I stepped into that classroom but had the skeleton of this project in my mind. Through that semester, I learned firsthand about the discipline needed to sit at the desk and put thousands of words down on the page. By writing those first horrible 40,000 words, I was able to strengthen my writing muscles; I may not have moved up in weight very much, but at least I became acquainted with the equipment.

The following semester, I took a critical literary theory course with Dr. Lesley Larkin, where I wrote a seminar essay on the intersection of identity and queer theory present in the films, *Brokeback Mountain*, and Disney's *Frozen*. In that paper, I analyzed the perceived audience of *Brokeback Mountain*, and how it is likely not a film directed toward gay men—in a sense. The film shows the danger of internalized homophobia, especially for men with bisexual urges. The inability of the characters in that film to accept their own identity costs one of them their happiness and the other his life.

After I began to suspect that I was gay, I searched for books and movies with homosexual character in hopes of finding someone I could model my behavior after. Because of its renown, I thought *Brokeback Mountain* would be a good choice; however the tragedy of the ending just left me feeling more depressed than I was when I began the movie. At that moment I became aware of the necessity of well known narratives that people forming their identities could access. For gay youths looking for instruction on

how to confidently accept their identity, *Brokeback Mountain* holds no answers.

However, I internalized that lesson and became interested in creating a narrative that could become well known and would act as a sounding board for teens to consider their identities.

While analyzing *Brokeback Mountain* in that essay, I compared the film to the children's movie *Frozen*. I was interested in how both films showed characters negotiating with shame in their identities. *Frozen* has no prominent homosexual characters, but the plot pivots around the concept of feeling ashamed of one's identity. The main character, Elsa, has the beautiful but dangerous ability to create and manipulate ice. Her own inability to accept this part of her identity physically manifests itself by hurting others. The character is only at peace with her identity after she accepts that part of herself and realizes that she can be open to the love of others.

The semester after I considered popular queer narratives through theoretical concepts, I took a nonfiction course with Jen's Howard where I created a portfolio of flash pieces revolving around my gay identity. My pieces ranged from incidents that occurred days prior to the class all the way back to developing a fear of vampires in second grade. By exploring my own narratives as teen who didn't know he was homosexual, I prepared myself to write the character of Henry. Unlike me, Henry knows he likes boys as a teen, but his shyness prevents him from figuring out how to express this identity. When Henry is given everything he's ever wished for, he slowly realizes that experience will be a hollow one if he still fails develop an understanding of his identity.

To make my story a story that young adults could buy into, throughout the work I make light of common tropes in both young adult literature and fantasy. My goal is that this self awareness and willingness to poke fun at itself will make the work more accessible to young adult readers. This is one of the benefits of the fantasy genre on a whole; stories that may be boring are allowed to play out on a more dramatic scale and are more entertaining to read.

Ironically, I've wrestled with my own identity as a writer during the process of completing this thesis. Many educated and wonderful people look down on the genre of fantasy. I've had to dismiss the shame I occasionally feel for loving the genre in order to create this project. Similarly, many readers look down on the genre of young adult literature. But how can we better communicate positive messages regarding self-acceptance for teens than by writing in a mode that interested them? Through exciting stories of adventure and self-realization that speak directly to teens' lives, we are able to offer up what we've learned from our own struggles. We are then able to keep the lines of communication open across generations and share the pains and joys of growing up.

Chapter 1

There was a boy, once upon a time. But the time wasn't that long ago, and unlike many other boys in fairy tales, this boy had a normal name, which was Henry, and what sucked for Henry was that a bully named Christian was punching him in the stomach. Henry was used to this kind of thing, so although he was kind of scared, he wasn't too upset about the punch. Or punching, because there was more than one. He was frustrated, though, that he still thought Christian looked perfect as he almost punched the lunch, a bagel sandwich, out of Henry's stomach. Christian's varsity jacket hugged his body in all of the right places, his shoulders, under his arms, and sitting just a hint more narrow at the waist, and his hair was smoothed back, held in place during his exertion with some kind of magic. Henry's only hope at the moment was that one of the punches would transfer over some part of Christian's DNA, making Henry into someone who stood up tall like Christian, or else maybe make him capable of throwing a football instead of only being able to draw one.

But that's not really how bullying works, and that afternoon wasn't one for exceptions. Christian and his friend, Adam, stopped pushing Henry around and left him sitting on the tile floor to raid his gym locker. After tossing Henry's sneakers and deodorant over his shoulder, Christian pulled out a Henry's boxer briefs, holding them between two fingers at the waist strap and acting as if they were tainted and carrying some disease. Many risky sidelong glances had taught Henry that these were the kind of underwear the other guys were wearing, but Christian still found a way to rip on them.

“You could barely shove straws through these leg holes,” Christian said, laughing at his own joke with Adam. He threw the briefs at Henry’s face and continued digging through the locker. Then he paused. Henry’s stomach, which was aching from Christian’s fists, made room for even more dread, because he had a solid idea of what Christian had found.

“Adam, check this out. I found the queer’s diary—the one that he’s always doodling in.” Adam guffawed with approval, and Henry didn’t try to take it from them, nor did he try to run out of the locker room. He just let his face fall into his hands as he sat on the cold tile, waiting for the whipping to come.

* * *

Claire used the rear-view mirror to make sure she’d applied the right amount of eye liner. She tore a tissue and dabbed away some shadow that dusted her brow. Perfect, she thought, but those lips. From her purse she pulled out three different glosses: plum, berry, and dark fruit. After a moment she chose plum, but before she could apply it, she had to force her teeth to unclench.

“I’m going to kill that minion,” she said aloud, despite being alone in the car. She dug her nails into the soft leather of the Cadillac’s wheel. The last of the students were driving out of the parking lot, and the soccer team was starting laps. She watched the clock on her cell phone turn from 3:44 to 3:45, and she cursed.

“Screw this,” she said, and got out of the car. The interview, for which she’d put on high heels and a skirt, was for an internship through the University of Michigan’s law school. With it, her college applications would stand out that much more. The added benefit of the internship was that it would take her to Seattle for five weeks over the

summer, thousands of miles away from Henry and their grandmother. She cursed his name as she walked into the school to hunt for him.

“Most important interview, I told him.” “Can NOT be late. I knew that turd wasn’t even listening.” She realized she was muttering under her breath and became more annoyed. She swiped at her phone. 3:47.

The first place she checked was one of the art rooms, furthest away from the car, but also the place Henry was most likely to be. Mr. Harbor encouraged Henry with his sketches. He had a lot of theories about safe spaces and always let Henry use the classroom to sketch after school. But when she looked in, Mr. Harbor was bobbing his head to what sounded like some ‘80s music that Claire couldn’t name. But Henry wasn’t there. Nor was he at his locker. As she put in his locker combination, her painted nails clicked on the plastic of the dial. His coat was still there which meant he hadn’t gotten it after gym class.

A clock at the end of the hall read “3:50” as Claire strode toward the gym locker rooms. As she turned the corner into the athletic hall, she collided with something tall, and that something turned out to be a boy. Her nose hurt from smashing into the boy’s neck, and she heard laughter. Hands gently gripped her arms and guided her away from the body she’d just hit.

“Hey, I’m sor—” started the boy, but then they both recognized who the other was and he stopped apologizing.

“Christian,” Claire said, nodding her head to her ex-boyfriend. She walked on.

When she burst into the locker room she didn’t even bother to knock. She just declared her presence. “Girl walking in—hide your junk!” If she ran into a teacher or a

coach, she already knew she'd be safe. "I'm just really concerned for my brother, sir. He can be a bit, you know, fragile, but he's never done anything like this. Have you seen him?" They would eat up her concern like sugar.

But she didn't need to use the defense because there was no one around. "Henry!" she shouted. "Are you in here? It's—" she looked at her phone "it's 3:56 and I have to be across town at my interview in nineteen minutes." She heard someone shuffling at the end of the room and walked past several rows of lockers to get there. Henry was sitting on the floor, elbows on his knees and hiding his head. A piece of paper was crumpled and clutched in one of his hands.

"Henry, I've been waiting for you." Claire was about to start the rant she'd been working on but heard that he was crying. You pick the worst time to have a breakdowns, Henry. Ugh, she thought, why was that my first reaction? She remained standing over him for a moment, swaying. Checking the time on her phone, she found a text from her friend, Amy, that said "have a great interview :) and happy birthday! can't wait to celebrate!!!!!!" Claire looked down at Henry and made her decision. She didn't have time to be the nice girl.

"Henry, get up. I told you I have an interview. We'll talk in the car. Come on, now." She wasn't sure he was going to move, but she walked out of the locker room. A minute later he came out behind her. Standing, she could now see his black eye. She could see a man's face on the scrap of paper he was still holding.

"Here, I grabbed your coat from your locker. Are you okay?" she asked as she led the way to the car. "How bad does that hurt?" Henry touched the bruise. His fingers barely grazed his skin, but he winced anyway.

“Can you use some make-up and hide it? Would that work so Gran doesn’t see it?” he asked.

“Yeah, we’ll see what we can do before we get home.” They got in the car, and Claire bolted out of the parking lot.

Chapter 2

“Here they are, Dusty!” Gran said when the twins walked into the apartment a few hours later. With pink oven mitts over her hands and a tray of burnt cookies between them, Gran walked out of the kitchen. The light of the lamp made Dusty’s green feathers look warm, and from Gran’s shoulder he half hopped, half flew onto Henry’s wrist. “Where were you two?” Gran asked. “Out celebrating your birthday without me?”

The smile Claire flashed Gran was genuine. Her interviewers for the internship had said “you’re clearly one of our most enthusiastic applicants,” and “how could we say no to that face?” Claire was boiling with excitement, and if Gran mistook this because she didn’t know about the internship or the interview, that was fine by her.

“Sorry we forgot to call,” Claire told Gran. “We went ice skating at The Cube with some of the girls and lost track of time. So is that batch number four or five?”

“Claire Ann, you’ll get none with that kind of snark,” Gran snapped. “I could’ve handled some ice skating you know. Maybe I have a tough exterior, but the two of you’ve bruised an old woman’s heart.” She walked back into the kitchen, but called over her shoulder, “And this is my third batch!” The twins pulled off their shoes and jackets as they heard the sound of burnt cookies pummeling the bottom of the trash bin.

“I’m psyched we won’t have to come up with an excuse to get out of eating those,” Claire whispered. “And she didn’t notice the black eye or she would’ve said something. Just try to keep out of the light.” She’d been hoping Henry would warm up with her now that they were home and forget about how she’d insensitively rushed him

away from his cry in the locker room, but he didn't laugh or smile or give her anything to work with. He just glared at her over Dusty's head.

"Listen, Henry, don't—" she began but then Gran yelled over her.

"Get on in here you two snails. You've kept this dinner on the burners for long enough."

Claire tried to finish her thought, but Dusty reached a wing over and swatted at her. "Keep out of the light!" he said, in a spot on imitation of Claire's whisper. "Out of the light!"

"Dusty, don't" Henry said, moving the parrot over to his other arm. "She didn't do anything to you. Let's go see what Gran's got cooking that we can sneak you."

"She didn't do anything!" Dusty repeated as Henry walked to the kitchen and Claire wasn't sure if she had seen properly, but it looked like Dusty winked, not blinked, at her from over Henry's shoulder.

"Damn bird," she said, under her breath so he wouldn't hear her and make her regret it.

Condensation clung to the window in the small kitchen, which blocked the view of the street and made the room feel even more busy and cluttered than usual. Sprawling out from the sink, Gran had left a pile of pans and bowls which made Claire groan, because she knew she'd be the one who'd have to do them. The smell of the tomato sauce bubbling on the stove mixed with the sugary burn wafting from the trash and made Claire lose the small appetite she had.

"Don't worry about making another batch of cookies" Claire said. "We'll be fine without. Amy and the other girls surprised us with a cake at the rink, and I couldn't eat

any more sugar tonight.” She told this lie not to save Gran time, but to save herself from having to wash more dishes.

“Okay, fine,” Gran said. “I ran out of fresh eggs on that last batch anyway and had to resort to the questionable ones we’ve had for I don’t know how long.”

As Gran plated each of them some spaghetti, Henry absently played with Dusty in front of the small T.V. she kept stacked on top of the microwave between the sink and the stove.

“How’s the world of big muscles and bigger egos?” Henry asked, pointing to the T.V. which was tuned to Gran’s favorite channel, SportsCenter.

“We’ve had a disappointing few days. Verlander has had too many bad days in a row but Leland refuses to cash in on his relief pitcher. And this weekend U of M is playing Ohio State, and you know how we’ve done the past few years.”

Henry took a stalk of uncooked spaghetti from the box and broke it into bits, feeding them to Dusty. As the bird clicked his beak, Henry stared at the T.V., fixated on the men in their fancy suits with slicked back hair talking at each other about someone’s RBI. Claire reached over and turned off the T.V.

“That was rude,” Henry said. Claire laid down the remote and picked up some silverware. “Why do you care? You don’t even like sports. Get the milk out and grab the napkins.” Claire winced at her own tone, which was harsher than it should’ve been. Henry needed to be coaxed away from his current hatred toward her. She needed to be conscious of how she was talking to him, but her buzz from the interview was still dominating her focus.

“What’s your hurry?” he asked. “Gotta go call Andrea and tell her how much fun we had ice skating?” At this, Claire dropped the forks she hadn’t yet set down. Sure he was mad, but he wouldn’t squeal. She knew this, but was annoyed he was playing it so close and holding it over her.

“No,” Claire said. “I can talk to her tomorrow, but I do have some homework to get to.”

“Ha, you think you’re ditching us early?” Gran said with a laugh. “You’ll stay up late if you have to, but you’re going to park it with us for a while. And then we can open your presents as a family. Can’t we just have a fun evening on your birthday?”

“If you have to ask someone to have fun, it’s usually because they’re not in the mood to.” Claire said as she sat down at the table.

“She’s not worried about fun anymore, Gran.” Henry said. “She’s a grown up now and has concerns we could never fathom.”

“Ah, I see it now. There was a fight today. What about, Henry?”

Claire didn’t risk making eye contact with Henry, but she mentally willed him not to tell, her eyes narrowing and lips getting tight as she toyed with the spaghetti in front of her.

“There was a fight! There was a fight!” Dusty said.

“Let’s not talk about it,” Claire said. “You worked hard to make us a nice dinner, can we just eat and celebrate?”

“If you have to ask someone to celebrate, usually it’s because they’re not in the mood to celebrate,” Henry said.

“Start eating you two and enough bickering.” Henry quit fidgeting in front of the T.V. and sat down. Dusty flapped off Henry’s shoulder and onto a small stack of presents that Claire hadn’t noticed until then.

“Well, to change the subject,” Claire said, “Gran, you didn’t have to get us anything.”

“All right, I’ll fall for the easy topic change tonight. I’ll get the story later anyway. And of course I got you something! But if you’re worried about money, don’t be. None of these cost me any cash. Plus, you don’t have a plethora of aunts or uncles lining up to buy you presents! If I’m the only representative from the Castanea clan, I’m not going to let your birthday go unmarked. Why don’t we just eat and then we can talk more about those presents?”

As they ate in the room, they were relatively silent. Claire was grossed out by the sound of chewing and the cracking of Gran’s crunchy meatballs. But this was periodically drowned out as Dusty watched the pasta being devoured from his perch on Henry’s shoulder and repeated his favorite lines from SportsCenter.

Sitting in that quiet, Claire was growing more angry with Henry because she had realized how nasty she’d been to him. But couldn’t he see how important that interview had been? He hadn’t even faked excitement for her when she got back in the car and told him how well things had gone.

She finished her dinner first and got up to start washing Gran’s stack of dishes. Seconds after she left the table, Henry and Gran started talking about their most recent sketches, a conversation Claire was glad they’d saved until she could drown it with the sound of the faucet. By the time she’d cleared the sink, Henry was almost done eating.

Long ago she'd gotten used to his habit of eating slowly, but tonight she wondered if he was using it as a passive aggressive means of getting back at her.

“Thanks for doing those, Claire. I shouldn't have let you on your birthday but burning three batches of cookies really takes it out of a woman my age. Why don't you sit down and we can talk about this present business.”

Claire sat and Gran pulled the small pile of presents, three in total, toward herself. The presents were neatly wrapped with, Claire guessed, the interior of paper grocery bags. The brown paper, though, was ornately inked with sketched designs that Gran had obviously done herself.

“Henry, I think you've had the tougher day so why don't you open your present first.” She slid the longer and flatter present, around a splash of spaghetti sauce.

Henry broke the tape at the paper's edges, preserving the wrapping, and pulled out a box. Inside the box lay a mirror which made Clair gasp. The glass was an oval shape and set with a gritty silver back and handle. Swirls like wind were carved and curling in the silver, with small scraps of leaves and feathers moving in the current. Claire had seen this mirror a hundred times, had sneaked into Gran's room to use it or play with it in the light while Gran was out. Claire had always assumed the mirror would be her's one day; Henry wouldn't stop her from taking it after Gran died, but now?

“Gran, I'm a boy, why do you want me to have a mirror? Not that I don't want it,” Henry added quickly, “It's beautiful.”

“Henry, maybe Gran gave you the wrong present on accident.” Claire said, holding herself together until Gran either confirmed or squashed this final hope. Gran noisily sipped her cup of tea.

“Boys, Henry, need mirrors just as much as girls. Especially boys who haven’t figured themselves out quite yet. Which is fine, of course! There’s no rush. But I see that mirror being very useful for you in the future. That glass was spun before you were born. It was the first thing your parents ever created together.” She turned to Claire, “this is for you, Birdie.”

Claire didn’t like losing control. She always maintained her appearance, her voice, her hair, her expressions. She knew who she wanted the world to perceive when they looked at her, and that person was a result of every choice she made. But sometimes her temper killed those choices for her, broke that image, which was what happened at that moment.

“Gran, he doesn’t even want that mirror, and I love it. Why are you giving it to him? Are you punishing me for something?”

Neither Henry nor Gran said anything. Henry wouldn’t take his eyes off the final meatball he was rolling around on his plate but Gran’s met and matched Claire’s gaze. Dusty broke the silence by chirping “Three strikes! Three strikes!”

In the silence that Dusty broke, Claire could hear what she had said and realized she had forgotten herself. Another quick fury filled her. Why was she so rash? She thought about that question, which she’d asked herself many times before, as she took a deep breath.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “That was nasty. I just really love that mirror. But I was awful and that wasn’t fair.”

“All right then,” Gran said. “Let’s not say anything else about it. Go ahead and open this.”

Claire ripped the paper off her gift, and into her hand plopped something small and rectangular. She had to fiddle with it for a moment before she could figure out what it was, recognizing a tiny tube and small, metal circle sitting next to each other at the top of the object. It was a lighter. Carved into the silver sides of the lighter were swirls and what looked like small pieces of glass or crystal. Also cut into the silver was a woman, well, something that looked like a woman. Claire couldn't tell if she was part fish, part bird, or part cat. But her eyes were studded with small stones that gleamed green in the warm kitchen light.

“Gran, where did you get this?”

“Your parents were quite the craftsmen in their days together. These gifts are the most valuable things I own. And that bird there” she said, pointing at Dusty. “Nothing else means anything to me except you two and those gifts. Take care of them and yourselves.”

The twins looked at each other nervously. Claire knew her brother well enough to guess he was wondering the same things she was: Is Gran sick or something?

“Are you okay, Gran?” Henry asked. “What made you decide to give these to us today?”

Gran gave a loud laugh that was half a bark, and Dusty joined in. “I'm not dying if that's what you're asking. I saw that dreamy Dr. McGill the other day and am healthier than any other 90 year old he knows. He was actually quite confounded by me, I think.” She snickered. “I've waited 17 years to give these to you. Wanted to be sure you could guard them properly. If anyone ever saw either of these gifts, I'd bet Dusty that they'd try

to trick you into giving them away. Don't ever relinquish these to anyone. Can the two of you promise me that?"

The twins nodded in agreement, both looking at the mirror and lighter with a degree of uncertainty. They're pretty, Claire thought, but why would anyone be so obsessed with having them? Maybe Gran's just overprotective of her stuff.

"So what about that one, Gran?" Henry asked, pointing at the last present on the table, which was round and wrapped with clumsy corners sticking out from several angles.

"Promise me that!" Dusty squeaked.

"This is better than either of those gifts I just gave you. Claire, I want you to open it."

Claire plucked the gift off the table. The present felt dense as she peeled the paper off, which she did quickly. She couldn't imagine anything more desirable than the mirror that was now Henry's and not hers. Peeling the paper back, she saw what was in the wrapping and could do nothing but stare.

"What is it?" Henry asked, sitting up in his chair to see over the paper blocking his view.

"I think," Claire said, her voice lingering with hesitation, not wanting to insult Gran, "it's a rock."

"Huh?" Henry asked.

"And now it's your rock!" Gran nearly shouted. She was smiling at them like they'd just brought home two straight A report cards. Gran touched her finger under her eye as if to wipe a tear away. But the rock was astoundingly average. It was pale grey,

and one side was rough and even, whereas the opposite side was jagged, clearly broken off from a larger mass.

“Thanks, Gran, it’s great.” Henry said, trying to mask his confusion with enthusiasm. Claire decided to follow a more blunt approach, still stinging from losing the mirror which was supposedly second rate compared to this thing.

“Where did you get it? And what makes it so special?” Claire asked, twisting the rock in her hand to see if there was some secret to it.

“It was given to me for safe keeping a long time ago.” Gran said. “I got it...”

“It’s a key!” Dusty squawked, flapping onto the table to peck at it. In her surprise Claire dropped the rock and it tumbled across the table toward Henry who picked it up to inspect it.

“Huh,” Claire said, looking at Dusty. “Gran, did you teach him that phrase?”

Gran didn’t answer immediately. For a second, she looked as if she could give a million different answers. She breathed in slowly, her chest steadily rising, and then she held the air in like she was about to dive underwater. For a second, Claire imagined Gran never letting go of that air. But then of course she did, slowly, letting each bit of air slip out.

And then she smiled. “Yes, he most certainly learned the phrase from me. I rarely dream of anything but that stone, and I imagine I talk about it during every nap and snooze I take. Also, he knew the answer and was just trying to show off.” She held out her hand and he fluttered off of Henry’s chair and onto her arm, and Claire swore she winked at him again.

“Uh,” Claire said, not sure how to proceed, but Henry picked up the slack.

“Gran, you’re telling us that every night you dream about this?” he asked, twisting his wrist and showing her the stone, as if there were a chance she hadn’t yet recognized what it was. But Gran nodded, looking uncertain of his ability to listen?

“Why?” he asked.

“Because this rock is the literal key to crossing into the place I come from.” She paused here, as if for dramatic effect, and Claire begrudgingly felt like Gran was doing a nice job of piquing their curiosity. “The place where the two of you come from.”

“Oh God,” Claire said, “Are you having an episode or something. Do we need to take you to the hospital?” She got up and started as if to check Gran’s pupils, but Gran swatted her away.

“Oh just sit down and stop acting so obstinate.”

“Did you see anything?” Henry asked Claire.

Claire leaned toward him. “I didn’t really know what I was looking for.” Henry laughed quietly and Claire joined him, feeling smug. Henry had slipped up, relinquishing his anger for a second, and even if he was still mad, this was the first step toward making him forget.

“I’m glad you two think this is funny,” Gran said. “I’m trying to tell you something kind of important here. I’ve been waiting your whole lives to tell you this stuff—I’ll reveal knowledge you’ve never had about your about your birthplace and your destiny, all that kind of business. And this is how you want to treat me?”

“Sorry Gran,” Henry said. “I am intrigued. Where are we from? You said crossed, does that mean we weren’t born here in Michigan?”

“No, you were not. You were born in America, but not this America.”

“So...South America?” Claire asked. Henry cracked a grin, but suppressed his laugh which won Claire a glare from Gran.

“Henry, you’ve read books where kids use things like knives and rings to cross into different worlds that are still kind of the same, right?” Henry nodded. His room was full to bursting with books like that. “That’s the kind of thing I’m talking about. The three of us,” Gran said, pointing at herself and the twins, “don’t come from this world.”

Neither twin said a word. This is dumb, Claire thought.

“Gran, do you really mean this? How would that even be possible?” Henry asked.

“Well, you should have some good guesses. Why do you think I’ve supported your interest in fantasy novels for all these years? I knew when this day came you’d be better prepped than your sister. Lipstick and curling irons won’t get you very far in where,” Gran said, using that tone that always made Claire want to scream.

But she kept her cool. Taking a breath, she said, “Gran, this is nonsense. Other worlds don’t exist so stop messing with Henry. Also,” Claire added as if Gran had dared her, “lipstick and curling irons can get you far anywhere.”

“What did you call the place?” Henry asked quietly. “Where?”

“It’s spelled W-A-Y-R,” Gran said, pronouncing each letter.

“You couldn’t think of a better name than the word where?” Claire asked.

“Claire, you’re frustrating me because we need to move this along, and your disbelief is boring and slowing us down. I haven’t even gotten to the good stuff yet, so I need you to accept that what I’m saying is true, and then we can move on. You’ll have all the proof you could want and more shortly.”

“All the proof!” Dusty said from Gran’s wrist. “Won’t get you very far.”

“So, Gran go on.” Henry sat up in his chair and leaned forward. “I want to know what you’re talking about.”

“Okay, so this stone here is the key. And the two of you can use it to cross into our world and out of this one. Just like in all the stories. What do you think they’re based on?”

“Do you mean other people in this world know about the Wayr?” Henry asked, stumbling over that final word as he got familiar with it. Claire sat back in her chair with her arms crossed looking at the condensation filled window which showed a blurry image of herself.

“They’ve likely heard whispers. I know little ripples of the idea have made their way around, but people who actually try to propose it to any community at large are always considered psychos.” She leaned in toward the twins. “Which is better for us. These humans would work themselves into early graves if they thought they actually had a chance of crossing over.”

“But you said Claire and I could, you know, cross over?” Henry asked. In his voice Claire could hear his skepticism fading, his pitch sounding less guarded and betraying a drop of hope.

“You will go. Soon. Because I need you to...”

Claire felt mutinous and wanted to make Henry hear how insane Gran was sounding. “Why did you wait until now to tell us about all this?” Claire asked, interrupting Gran. Henry looked to Gran, obviously wanting to know the answer as well.

“Oh, what does that matter? The story had to start sometime and your seventeenth birthday felt like a reasonable time.” She paused and seemed finished, but neither of the

twins appeared to be satisfied by this answer. “Gah, all right,” Gran said. “I made a vow not to tell you until you were of a certain age. Now that sounds good, doesn’t it? Or would you like me to say that you couldn’t be trusted with this knowledge until you were old enough? There are plenty of reasons not to tell teenagers things. I picked this date when we moved here and I’m a woman who sticks to her decisions.”

“They’re ready, send them in! Send them in!” Dusty said. The twins stared at Dusty. He’d used a voice they didn’t recognize. Whenever he spoke, he usually perfectly imitated one of them or someone from T.V., or the microwave ding, or Claire’s cell phone tone, but he’d never used this voice, which was high and squeaky.

“How did you do that?” Claire asked him.

“Your grandmother told you I could talk! Let this be your warning. Pay attention!”

“But how did you learn to talk? For yourself I mean?” Henry asked. He childishly bounced up and down in his seat. “Can you actually, talk? Like, for real?”

“He can speak because he’s not one of the silly birds from this world.” Gran said. “He was sent here with this stone eighteen years ago. From our world, where all parrots and other birds talk. Well, where they can actually talk...you know.”

“She’s true! She’s true! And I’ll guide you when we go!”

“You’ll guide us?” Henry nearly shouted. “We actually get to go into another world, Gran? Let’s do it!”

“Yes, he’ll go with you, but I won’t be joining, Henry,” said Gran.

“Of course you won’t,” Henry said. He looked like he was calculating the answer to an algebra equation. If the wise old person who sets the quest actually goes on it, they

pretty much always die. I agree that you should stay here, Gran. And if there are two of us, and we have a talking creature as our guide, the only other thing we need is a mission. Well a mission and maybe some magical tools to help us.” As he said this his eyes fell on the mirror. Then he looked up at Gran, eyes wide.

“You’ve guessed it Henry,” Gran said with a chuckle, “your mirror does have some qualities a standard mirror doesn’t.”

Henry held up the mirror to appraise it and asked “so what kind of mission do you have for us? Can we get out of school! Summer is getting close too, can we spend the summer in Wayr.” That was about all Claire could stand.

“Okay, joke’s over.” Claire said as she pushed her chair back from the table and prepared to stand. The force shook the table so hard that the leftover meatball on Henry’s plate rolled off, trailing sauce over the grain of the wood.

“Claire, why don’t you just listen to Gran for once? She can prove what she’s talking about is real! Dusty already proved some of it!”

“I don’t care!” Claire shouted. “This is all crap! I’m not going anywhere I don’t want to go. I already have plans for the summer and some of us, Henry, have GPA’s that matter, which keep us from just wanting to run away from school. There isn’t another world out there and that’s my mirror,” she said pointing at the mirror in Henry’s hand, “and this is the worst birthday I’ve ever had.” She stood up, threw her lighter onto the table, and strode from the room.

* * *

“What will it take to cool that girl’s hot head?” Gran asked, a second after they heard the slam of Claire’s bedroom door. Henry shrugged, so used to Claire’s outbursts at

home that he didn't even bother to feel embarrassed for her as he used to. Her flare up did, for the briefest of moments, make him wonder if he was being too gullible. But then he caught a part of his reflection in the mirror he still held, and before angling it away from his face, he decided he wasn't being immature. He wasn't the one pouting and slamming doors.

“So, what else can you tell me about Wayr?”

“I haven't been home in many years. I'm not even sure what it will be like when you get there. But the first part of the matter is that I need you to go and get me seeds.”

Henry looked at Gran blankly for a moment. “You want seeds? Like, magic seeds? How will I get them? Why do you want them? What will you—”

“Pumpkin seeds,” Gran said, interrupting Henry's line of questioning. The seeds are important to me, and I don't want to say much else. They'll be close enough when you go through, I shouldn't doubt that. And, if things haven't changed much in the past few years, people will be relatively happy to send you on with some. But I don't just crack open any random pumpkin! I want them to come from one of the fattest, oldest pumpkins in the fields.”

“Wow,” Henry said. He was having trouble accepting that this was all real, but not in the way Claire was. He was scared that the carpet was going to be swept out from under him. “Another world with its own people. I've always hoped for something like this. What are the people like there? Do you miss them?”

“Oh, the people,” Gran said wistfully, eyes gazing off into nowhere. “Of course I miss them, that ache goes deeper than my bones. They're more giving, in Wayr. At least the people were where I lived. The people of that world are more connected with their

surroundings, with each other. But, Henry, I'd rather not tell you about any of those things, because I don't want to spoil your fun. That sounds immature, I know, but the sense of wonder is going to keep you wanting to go back, and that's what I want for you."

"Well usually, in the stories, people only go into another world as the world is about to undergo some kind of danger." Henry said. "Do you know if this other world has something going on in it?" Gran smoothed a finger down the back of Dusty's neck and looked thoughtful.

At that moment they paused their conversation, because they heard the sound of Claire's door creaking open and then shutting. They saw a flip of red ponytail as she strode to the front door and slipped out, grabbing a jacket off the wall as she went.

"Tell him, Lynn!" Dusty said in his high, ringing voice. "We've had dreams."

"He's right," Gran said. "Something is going on. Understand this, I've been dying since the day I got here for the two of you to go back to where we are from. Every second spent experiencing this gravity, this planet's decay, has been a second of torture and mockery for all of us. There is so much out there for you to explore. But I have caught strange signs and such, but I can't let you wait another day before going back."

"What kind of signs?" Henry asked.

"There have been small things, quite a few small things, that are slipping through the cracks. My dreams are darker and wilder than they should be."

"Mine too!" interrupted Dusty.

"It's true." Gran said. "Echoes of something dark have been reaching our ears. Despite that, and the fact that I can't join you, I don't think a visit will be dangerous. You'll just be acting as scouts, almost like tourists. I just want you to keep a low profile

and gather a little information for me as you feel the world out. You needn't even be gone long. And with that stone you can pop back here at any moment, with a little help from your mirror."

"Okay, tell me how do these things work." Henry held the stone in one hand and the mirror in the other.

"So that mirror, when used properly, becomes more like a window," Gran said, "through which you can see what's happening in the other world. But the limitation is you can only see the other side in the exact corresponding location you're standing. You could go stand in the street and use that mirror, and you might be at the top of a mountain in Wayr. You won't be, because I've checked, but that's just an example. So that stone, with the right ritual, will take you to Wayr. But when you're going and coming back, you'll need to use the mirror to make sure you won't pop back in the middle of a wall, or someone else's house!"

"Okay, but what are the stipulations?" Henry asked. "You know, the things we CANNOT do under any circumstances?"

Gran laughed a little. "We're in the real world, Henry. I don't think the rules are quite as firm as they are in one of your books. There are a million things that could go wrong at any second once you've gone to the other world. But that's not any different than if you took an airplane to France and ran around Paris! You could do anything or say anything wrong, which may not be wrong here. But in Wayr they will be gentle, for the most part."

Henry couldn't think of which question to ask next, he had so many flitting around his head so he quietly scrutinized the mirror, trying to find the other world beyond the reflection of the kitchen lamp and his own face.

Chapter 3

Claire was rushing too much to bother checking whether or not her socks clashed with, what the sales girl had described as, jupiter orange running shoes. She unplugged her iPhone, opened her music, and accidentally used too much force to shove her headphones into her ears, making her wince. She rushed out of the bedroom, snagged her running fleece, and, ignoring Gran and Henry sitting at the kitchen table whispering, left the house.

In her frenzy to get out, Claire had forgotten to tie her shoes, so she sat down on the porch stairs. Her fingers were already numbing from the March chill and the streetlamp overhead flickered, which drew out the shoe tying process. As she sat, muttering a stream of curses, the worn wood of the porch sapped the warmth from her legs. When she was done, she stood up and her shoes were so tight her feet throbbed a little. She jumped from one leg to the other to get her blood moving again.

“Huh,” she said, looking at her left hand. Her fingers and palm were throbbing too. Must be the cold, she thought, dismissing the feeling. She rubbed her hands vigorously over her arms, and then started running.

As she ran down the street, the lights from the kitchens and family rooms bled out onto lawns and sidewalk. The sky was a dim and deeper blue on her right than on her left, and despite the light pollution of the city, she could make out a few stars. Her breath made little puffs as she went, and she counted the number of steps she took in between each exhalation.

“One two three four” she counted. Puff. “One two three four.” Puff. She kept her pace even, practiced enough now that she didn’t accidentally slow down or speed up, but her heartbeat spiked when she heard a cat call from a porch. She was entering into the part of the neighborhood that reeked of the university’s frat bros, and she knew some of them watched her by the sound of muffled voices, occasional laughs, and the tiny glowing tips of cigarettes that followed her like so many eyes in the dark. She ran on and, once she left the frat guys behind, started to relax, falling into her rhythm.

Running was the time Claire allowed her body to mull things over. The steady beating of her sneakers on the concrete, the mechanisms of her body all churning in synchronization—these were the minutes when she could quell the frantic buzz of her brain. She’d turn down the scheming, the calculating, the planning. Her fear that she wouldn’t get accepted into any pre-law programs was muffled in a glass jar for a while. Generally, her irritations with her friends, with Henry, with Gran, with herself, would be left back at home, laying on the cold wood of the apartment porch. But today, the chaos in her head wasn’t beaten out by the rhythm of her breath or the sound of the rubber smacking against cracked sidewalks.

Gran’s finally lost it she thought. How can we afford to put her in a home if she does something crazy? Claire took a tight right onto Liberty Street. And Henry’s just encouraging her! Why is he dumb enough to buy into it? What did I do to deserve this crap? She hit a traffic light on 5th and had to stop, so she jogged in place to keep her muscles from cooling down. As she did, she kept her distance from a young man and woman holding hands and giggling.

I just want to live my own life, and instead I'm stuck babysitting these two, she thought. The orange STOP blinked into the little walking man and she bolted, trying to leave behind, in addition to her stresses, the annoying cooing of the couple.

She ran and made a few lights, repeating the same thoughts to herself in different combinations and orders. She turned right and started making her way toward the park, continuing to count. Two three four breath. Step step step breath. two three four breath. "God damn it," she said quietly as she missed a walking light and had to jog in place again. Her failure to make her usual harmony of body, breathing, cement, and city work was making her try to force it. If she could do it right, she would be able to channel her fury into her movement. And now more than ever she craved that sensation of converting her feelings into power. The light turned and she moved into the road, stuttering as she did.

When she reached the end of the street she turned right and jogged into the park. Two girls wearing fancier running gear than Claire jogged by her. Their pace was slow, most likely because of how much they were chattering, and Claire was instantly irritated. They were spitting on her philosophy, which she considered very sophisticated for her age, that running was a time for yourself. You could always giggle and gossip at school or text before bed to get what these two girls were getting from each other. Her annoyance made her pick up the pace, and she was about to leave the cover of the trees when she heard a scream.

She stopped so quickly her hamstrings stung in protest. Claire jerked her head around to see if the scream had come from one of the two girls. But they were fine. They had stopped next to a water fountain and were both on their phones. Did they hear that?

“What the hell?” she said aloud as she lifted her leg off the ground. Something had brushed past her leg. She thought it might have been a cat because whatever it was was soft and cool, but looking around she didn’t see anything. The skin of her calf though, where the soft thing had brushed her, felt irritated, almost tickled.

Claire looked back at the girls to see if they had noticed anything yet, or they’d seen her talking to herself and spinning around, but they were still engrossed in their phones and conversation. Should I look around to see if someone is in trouble? Scanning around the darkness between the trees, she didn’t see anyone moving.

After waiting a minute, standing still in the middle of the path, she figured whatever it was must be gone now. Maybe one of the girls just had an annoying scream-laugh, she thought. I hate when they do that. She started running again but froze at the sound of another scream. It was long and so piercing that she covered her ears, her hair flying everywhere and catching on her eyelashes and getting in her mouth. The shrill scream was steady and didn’t seem like it would ever stop, even after what felt like an hour of waiting, although it couldn’t have been longer than a minute. Although its sound was agonizing, it seemed as if whatever its source was found something amusing too because the scream twanging with touches of laughter. Claire started running toward the light, toward the girls, still hunched over and covering her ears. She couldn’t keep herself from screaming along out of terror.

Then it stopped. The silence poured over her like water, almost suffocating her. Claire looked up. There were the girls, staring at her like she was deranged.

“Are you okay?” one of them, the taller one, asked.

“No, of course not!” She yelled. “Where is that screaming coming from?” The girls looked at each other, and Claire couldn’t tell if they were scared or just surprised.

“Hurry!” Claire shouted. “Someone has to be hurt! Didn’t you hear them? Call 911!”

“Are you messing with us?” The shorter one, wearing a purple zip-up asked. “No one was screaming but you.”

“Are you okay?” the taller girl asked again. “Did someone attack you?”

“What?” Claire asked them, bewildered. “You heard that scream. You had to have. All of the city must have heard it.”

The two girls just stared and Claire felt her eyes go wild.

“Hon, the only one screaming was you, and if you’re not hurt or anything, and you haven’t seen any creepy guy, I think we’re going to go.” She turned and tugged at the other girl’s sleeve. “Come on.”

The two girls ran away, their pony tails swishing back in forth in perfect synchrony. Claire heard them say “psycho” as they left and saw them shoot glances back at her. She stood at the water fountain, paralyzed. She wanted to get out of the park and back home, but was scared whatever had made that sound would start up again the second she was moving. So she stood there watching the traffic light switch from red to green to yellow.

There’s a chance she would have stood there all night, trying to stifle her breathing while straining to hear approaching footsteps, but a cop drove by once, and then apparently circled the block and came around a second time. A girl standing petrified in the park, clearly alone and doing nothing must look suspicious, she thought.

So, feeling safer with the car in view, she jogged out of the park, and ran the last mile back to her house. And it wasn't until she was on the porch, back under the dim illumination of the street lamp, that she scratched her ankle and felt something warm. Above her heel, sitting over her bloody sock was a puncture mark, like a pin prick. The skin was puffy and brushing the mark, despite her confusion and panic, made Claire giggle.

Chapter 4

The next morning passed like any other, on the surface. Claire wasn't talkative but yelled at Henry for falling asleep in the shower and using up all the hot water. Gran made lunches for them and Dusty nipped at the plastic (Gran used the bags from the grocery store) because he liked the sound. All was normal, except Henry, once he had enough time to wake up, felt like he might explode. Every burnt birthday candle, every time he saw the clock say 11:11, he'd wished for something like this to happen. And it finally had happened, but he was getting ready for school like it was any other day, reviewing his routes to avoid bullies and borrowing Claire's makeup to cover up his black eye.

"I have to take the car today." Gran told the twins as Henry poured himself coffee and Claire spread peanut butter over her bagel.

"Fine," they said in unison. They were being rude but no one in the house, aside from Dusty, was polite before 8 a.m.

"Please pass me the butter," he asked Gran for the sixth time. Instead of getting the bird butter, she turned up the volume on SportsCenter.

The drive to school, Henry decided, was particularly un-fantastical. Henry had tried to coax Dusty into saying something unusual at breakfast, but he didn't diverge from saying any of his usual lines. And Gran hadn't mentioned anything about Wayr either. He was beginning to get a sinking feeling in his stomach that he'd dreamed the whole thing. Gran wasn't talking in the car because, while trying to delay the inevitable, Henry had made them late by fiddling with his shoelaces for longer than he needed to.

The unintended but beneficial consequence of that delay was that they hit traffic. It was a particularly grey and nasty day. Despite it being March, wet snow thumped against the windows.

The heat from the car melted the snow clinging to their shoes, so their socks quickly became damp as the windows fogged up. Neither twin spoke and Gran was concentrating on the roads. She was a great driver, despite being ninety, and was determined to never give anyone a reason to doubt her, so she usually refused to speak or listen to music while at the wheel. The silence felt menacing though, since Claire had barely spoken to either of them since her outburst last night.

* * *

Claire's ankle was doing that tickle itching thing still. When she had gotten inside and wiped the blood off her leg she found that, next to the puncture mark, was a long scratch. The edges of the mark were raised and they'd only grown more prominent over night. Oh my God, I'm going to scream, Claire thought. Just keep your your hands off that damn scratch. To resist giving in and itching it and the puffy puncture mark took all of the self control she possessed.

They got out of the car and Gran wished them a "happy, boring day of school." Claire didn't get the distance she needed from Henry immediately though since their lockers were side by side. Walking down the halls, neither spoke. They put their coats and bags away, and Henry shut his locker. Is he going to say something?

But he didn't, and he slouched off to class. Claire was about to do the same when she heard her name pierce the drone of the students from down the hall.

“You have been the worst friend in the past 24 hours,” the girl, said after she pushed her way through a group of freshmen boys.

“Hey Andrea!” Claire said, feeling bright for the first time since last night. She had been looking forward to seeing Andrea and the rest of her friends, and the shallow conversation she knew she was in store for was just what she needed to take her mind off all the weirdness of the past day. But caught up in her own thoughts, she’d forgotten to acknowledge anyone else by calling or texting since yesterday. “Don’t be too mad at me,” Claire added.

“Of course I’m going to be too mad at you!” Andrea said, pushing the textbook Claire was holding onto the floor. Claire, half annoyed but also half amused, rolled eyes over dramatically and picked up the book. “First, you don’t tell me how your interview went with those law dudes,” Andrea said, holding up a finger, “then, you ditch out on your birthday dinner,” she added a second finger to her count, “and then I’m late because I stopped by your house to pick you up and you’d already left!”

“No listen,” Claire said, batting Andrea’s three wagging fingers out of her face, “only some of that was my fault! Gran made me stay in for our birthday, which I did warn you might happen! And then Henry and Gran went nuts on me!”

“So what? That doesn’t mean you forgot how to text!” Andrea nearly shouted. They walked into chemistry and sat in their assigned seats, Andrea at the lab table ahead of Claire’s. Sitting down and scooting in, Claire’s ankle brushed the leg of the desk. Sirens went off behind her eyes. The cut on her legs felt like it was exploding. The itching pain was so overwhelming she gasped and without any coherent thought she scratched the hell out of the cut. She used the fabric of her jeans because it was rough on

the inside and kept her nails away from the cut. Andrea had been talking but when Claire ignored her she gave Claire a look, complete with high eyebrows. Then Mr. Haynes started class and she had to turn around.

As Claire scratched the cut the furious pain subsided. The relief was so great she actually laughed out loud.

“Claire do you have your phone out?” Mr. Haynes asked. “Or is something about molecular conversion exceptionally funny to you?” Everyone turned to look at Claire, both interested to see if she had had her phone out and also out of appreciation that they could focus on something other than the board. Mr. Haynes’ droning lecture was already mind numbingly horrible even though he was less than a minute in.

Claire stammered. “Uh, sorry,” she said. Her brain was absolutely blank. “I don’t have my phone out,” she added, buying time to think of something to say. “I—um—just remembered something funny my Gran said to me the other night when she saw me doing my chemistry homework. She said when she was younger and studied molecular conversion she wished her teacher would convert...”

But she was interrupted by Mr. Haynes. “That’s enough. Don’t let memories of your Gran’s glory days disrupt my lesson again.” He turned back toward the chalk board and resumed pointing at something he’d just written.

In an effort to keep her mind off her itchy cut, Claire watched Haynes write equations on the board. It wasn’t long before her eyes glazed over. As was her habit, she had read ahead and easily understood everything he was explaining. This is a waste of time, she thought. But as she let her mind wander, the itch came back to her attention. The annoying persistence of it, its desire of her attention, made her think of Henry. He’d

be in English right now. She took time to wonder how he was doing. She had left her concealer out in the bathroom with him in mind. Hmmm, she thought. Well I need to keep busy anyway, what if I...her thought trailed off and she began to put her new idea into action by rummaging a purple, glittering pen from her table mate's pencil case. The girl's name was Rachel; she looked up to Claire, but didn't try to speak to her often. Claire knew Rachel wouldn't mind if she borrowed the pen for a bit.

Claire flipped to a fresh page in her notebook with her pen in hand. She drew a girly flower on the top right-hand corner of the page and then, ink glistening, she wrote the name "Christian" at the top of the page, turning the "o" into a little fat and curly heart that was almost too convincing. But that was exactly what she needed. As she filled the page, she focused on the individual letters, forcing them to look like a handwriting other than hers. She slipped up a few times on the letters "s" and "g," but on a whole, the handwriting was convincingly not hers.

When the love note was done, she signed "Natalie," at the bottom, making the "N" obnoxiously larger, and dated it a week ago. She then folded it up into a minute triangle and put the note in her pocket,. She replaced the purple pen for a glittering green one, and started again.

* * *

As one would expect, Henry was struggling through the day. Neither he nor Claire were morning people, but between the two of them he was the worse. He fell asleep in his first hour, which was English and his second favorite subject, taught by his second favorite teacher. So he felt like an ass when the teacher was passing back quizzes and gave Henry's desk a jerk by kicking its leg, attempting to wake him up without

embarrassing him. The guilt he felt for falling asleep was amplified because she'd been so nice about it, turning down a perfect opportunity to embarrass him in front of the whole class. Her name was Mrs. Sprigg and she walked back to the front of the room to begin a review of Latin roots.

Henry's general survival strategy to get through the school day was to draw as little attention as possible. This tactic did have its drawbacks, however, the main one being that because he spoke so little, he won himself few friends. One of the things that made English more bearable lately, though, was that he now sat next to one of the only people in the school he'd call a friend. In elementary school, he and Shadi had been close friends. Her family moved to America from Iran when she was 6, and Shadi didn't like to speak English in front of many people because they bullied her about her accent. But Henry, who had a slight lisp until he was ten, didn't like speaking in front of many people either, which meant they got along quite well.

They hadn't, however, had any classes together in middle school and so they had fallen into an awkward distance until just this past year. Thanks to Mrs. Sprigg's "stand up and switch it up," day, they'd been assigned to sit next to each other.

After the review of Latin roots, Mrs. Sprigg asked them to pair and discuss the answers they'd gotten to her reading questions. The ones they should to have done the night before.

"I didn't get anything done last night," Henry said in a hushed voice, turning to Shadi.

“Tell me you did the reading at least,” she said. “This book is the worst” She pointed at the school’s copy of “Huckleberry Finn” sitting on her desk. “It’s so boring I’d fall asleep trying to tell you what happened.”

“Ugh, I know it’s horrible. No, I did read it, well, all except for the last 50 pages. But you gotta help me—keep a look out while I get something thrown down—I’ll write as we talk.”

“Why didn’t you get them done last night?” Shadi said, keeping an eye on Mrs. Sprigg, who was sorting papers at her desk with her back turned toward them.

“Oh, well.” Henry used the excuse of writing to figure out how he was going to answer that question. He’d been dying to talk to someone about anything from last night. But how much would Gran mind him telling?

“I had a pretty busy night,” he said. “Claire kidnapped me and took me to some stupid interview she had, even though her idiot ex-boyfriend had just punched me in the face and stomach a few dozen times. And after that our gran wanted us to have a long dinner and open presents together and stuff.”

“Presents?” Shadi asked, now doodling little seahorses and coral in her notebook while checking periodically to make sure Mrs. Sprigg wasn’t going to turn around. “Why did she want to give you presents? It wasn’t your...” Shadi trailed off as she was struck by a realization.

“It was your birthday—and you didn’t even tell me!” she said, pretending to be hurt, which she didn’t do very well because she couldn’t conceal her smile. “I would’ve gotten you something if I’d known! Happy birthday, Henrietta!”

Henry grimaced. “The last thing I would want is for you to get me anything.” Oof, he thought, that sounded harsher. “You know, it’s not like there’s anything I need anyway,” he added to cover up. Truthfully, he had seen some texts Shadi was sending her mother one day in class, and knew that their family had a lot of money. But Shadi had met a boy who liked her and she’d gone out and blown a lot of money, buying him clothes at the mall, paying for dinners. And after all that, the boy and his family had moved away, leaving Shadi to lectures from her mother on spending money wisely.

To Henry’s secret satisfaction, Shadi shortly turned the conversation toward boys, filling Henry in on her latest crushes and their actions as he filled the worksheet with his rushed but still meticulous handwriting. He didn’t have much to add except to question her judgement from time to time, but listening to Shadi describe why she thought certain guys in their school were more or less handsome than another was one of the greatest pleasures in his day. He loved it, in part, because her descriptions were so vivid. The other half of his glee stemmed from the fact that he didn’t know anyone else who would talk about the merit of Trevor Vick’s hairstyle.

All good things come to an end, however, and Shadi hadn’t finished describing everything she loved about Trevor’s cheekbones before Mrs. Sprigg was collecting their homework and they were filing out of the classroom.

“You go ahead, Shadi, I want to talk with Mrs. Sprigg for a sec.” Henry said.

“Oh do you?” the teacher asked.

“Yes” Henry said, moving out of the way of the rest of the students who were filing out of the room. “Sorry I took that nap earlier. I could barely sleep last night. Really, this class is one of my favorites, but first hour is dangerous for me.”

“But how in the world could you fall asleep during our lively discussion of Latin roots? Mrs. Sprigg said with a grin. “So how have things been going with you lately?”

Henry narrowly avoided brushing his eye, which would have ruined the makeup he had over it and made things ten times worse. “I’m pretty good,” he said. “My gran gave my sister and I some cool news last night. Also, I wanted to let you know that I finished *The Bloody Chamber*, and it was the coolest! Do you have another recommendation?”

“Of course I do, but tell me why you liked Carter so much.”

“I’m not sure, exactly,” Henry said. “I don’t usually go for short stories, and they were more fairy tale than fantasy, but they were still awesome. I liked the mysterious elements and the characters were so simple even while they conveyed really dark themes.”

“Good! I knew that she wouldn’t be an author you’d pick on your own.” She leaned toward Henry with a conspiratorial air and put the back of her hand to the side of her mouth. In a lower voice she said “and if you wanted to make that your independent read for the semester and write your essay on that collection, I don’t think your teacher would object.” She leaned back with a grin. “So what are you in the mood to read now? Something serious? More fantastical?”

“Actually, I have a question about that. I’ve been thinking a lot about the genre of fantasy lately. I can never quite figure out why I’m so obsessed with it. And a lot of the time, the books that I read all have some similar quality. Like they’re connected in some way. Why do you think people write fantasy? Could there be some connection? Something they’re tapping into?”

Mrs. Sprigg looked at Henry with some surprise. “That’s a very interesting question,” she said. “Hmm. I’ve never really thought about that before. I mean, a lot of fantasy stems from the same tradition and folklore. Stories get repeated and recycled, tropes and motifs reappear and authors are influenced by each other’s work. But I don’t know what other kind of connections there could be.” By this point in the conversation students for Mrs. Sprigg’s next class were beginning to wander in. “Whoops! I didn’t realize it was so late, Henry, I better write you a pass for your next class.” She got out an orange pad of paper and began filling it out. “And you know fantasy isn’t really my specialty, but I could recommend you to someone who may have a better answer than me. Have you been over to the Purple Pages bookstore? My friend Paul and his partner Keith own it, and Paul is the biggest fantasy nut I know. You should go over there sometime and pick his brain! Tell him what I’ve had you reading and see if he has any other recommendations.” The one minute bell rang and Mrs. Sprigg jumped in her seat. “Okay, you get going and have a good day. I’ve got some freshmen to bore.”

Mrs. Sprigg wrote Henry a pass so he wouldn’t be marked late for his next class. On his way to class he debated her recommendation to check out Purple Pages. He knew immediately which bookstore she’d been talking about, because he’d been on their website dozens of times, deleting the search history after each foray into the website, because everyone in town, including Claire and Gran, knew that shop was a gay literature bookstore. Guys in the locker room had even made fun of each other because of it before.

“Guys,” one of them had said, “yesterday Stan went into that Pussy Pages bookstore to get you-know-whated by those pervy, wrinkled dudes.”

“Not cool man!” Their buddy, Stan said. My sister made me go! She likes their calendars!”

Henry shivered at the thought of what one of those guys would say if they saw him walking into or out of that store. Maybe I could email the guy? How would I start, though?

When he got back to his locker he saw that the door was cracked open. That’s weird he thought. But then his bemused confusion turned into horror as he realized what that open door could mean. He flung the door open and it slammed against the next locker, but he didn’t notice the sound. His backpack was dangling where he had left it but was zipped opened further than it had been. He plummeted his hand into the bag. “Where is it where is it where is it,” he chanted. He pushed aside crumpled pieces of paper and old drawings, his hand finding old books and even an old lunch he’d forgotten to get rid of. Why do I have so much crap?

His fingers felt the smooth side of the stone, noticeably cooler than anything else at the bottom of his bag, and his stomach flipped with relief. His shoulders relaxed and he closed his eyes for a second, allowing himself to imagine the devastation that would have followed if the stone had gone missing after he’d had it for only one day.

But why was my locker open? Did I forget to close it all the way? He checked to see if anything was obstructing the door from closing, but his mess was at least neatly contained in his locker. He kicked himself for bringing the stone, but wasn’t sure if it was safer sitting in his bedroom or in his locker, where at least he could check on it throughout the day. He picked up the stuff that he’d thrown from his bag in his search and shoved it into the locker.

Not caring that he'd look dumb for doing so, (because most cool kids only took the bare minimum to class) Henry put his backpack on, shut his locker, and made his way to class. I'm not letting this stone out of my sight again.

Chapter 5

The countdown had begun. Henry was now sitting in history, which passed uneventfully after he gave the teacher his late pass. He'd spent the time ignoring the lecture and sketching his new mirror in his notebook. How does it work he kept asking himself. But he had to abandon those brighter thoughts as the clock kept ticking, because now began the worst minutes of Henry's day. The clock hanging about the dry erase board blared 1:08 in red lights. Forty five Mississippi, forty six Mississippi, and then the bell rang. The bell rang every time he got to forty six, which, although his timing was off, at least he was consistent. Woo, what a victory.

I only have seven minutes. Chair legs pushed back and students chattered excitedly because it was the final class of the day, but all Henry could think about was the gym locker room he was going to have to brave. What if I sweat off this stupid make-up? God, they'll skewer me. They probably still have my sketch book too.

"Move it, retard," a girl said as she and her friends pushed past Henry. He'd been walking slow to shorten the time he'd spend in the locker room waiting for class to start. Screw this. Instead of walking to his locker to drop off his bag and books, he ducked into a bathroom and stood in a stall, holding his head in his hands and playing out the past week of being bullied by glorious, horrific Christian. He made Henry wish he was taller and that his muscles didn't leave so much of his T-shirt sleeves flapping in the wind. Christian's hair was a painfully sweet shade of brown and was wavy yet short, looking like it was professionally combed and blow dried. Henry ran his fingers through his buzzed blonde hair. He'd wanted it to look styled and cool, but he was too intimidated to

go to the salon and ask, so Claire had tried her best. It didn't look bad, but it didn't look anything like Christian's.

I've only been tardy once this quarter, can I afford to use another one? What if I actually need it later? His debate, though, was interrupted by the sound of two guys walking into the bathroom. Henry, even though he was wearing his backpack and had just been standing in the stall, shoved his pants around his ankles and sat down on the toilet, not even pausing to put toilet paper on the seat. Ugh, he thought. And it's cold too.

"Did you hear what Christian did with that kid's sketchbook?" a voice asked. Is that Jason Felix? He was a senior whom Shadi had crushed on for a while, a crush Henry quietly shared. Oh God, he knows who I am? Henry felt faint.

"What kid?" asked the other voice.

"I forget his name, but his sister is that hot, red-headed junior. I think her name's Claire."

"Dude, she's so hot. "What did he do?"

"So he beat the kid up," Jason said, "and took his sketch book and found all of these pictures. Like, fairies, horse people, dragons, and naked dudes. So he photo copied like a million copies and he taped them up all over the locker room."

"Eh," the second voice said. "That's pretty effed up. Christian always takes it too far. And didn't he date Claire? What an idiot."

By this time, the two of them had finished peeing and walked out of the bathroom. Henry gave them enough time to get some distance from the bathroom and then left quickly in order to avoid being caught in the stall again.

Like there's a shot in hell I'm going to gym class now. I'll go to the office and say I just threw up. He made his way to the front office walking slow so he could plan how much pity he would try to evoke in the nurse. He turned the corner. Should I say I have a migraine?

He turned into a side hallway that broke off from the senior's wing. This was the spot all of the jocks requested to have their lockers and he only risked taking this route because he figured everyone would be in class. He was wrong, however, but it wasn't a jock who might bully Henry at one of the lockers. Bent over, slipping something into the lower part of a locker, was Claire. At that moment she heard his footsteps and jumped.

"Henry?" she said, her voice mingled with disbelief, annoyance, and mostly, relief. "You turd. What are you doing here?" She straightened up and fixed her braid.

"I was heading to the office..." he trailed off. It's not worth telling her. "Besides, shouldn't you be in class too? Or are you busy leaving love notes for some lucky guy?" He had been joking when he said it, but she didn't respond immediately and the idea reverberated awkwardly between them. A weird stab of jealousy knifed his stomach.

She hesitated for a long moment before answering. "Don't go fake being sick, just go to class." And then she turned and started walking away.

"Stop!"

Claire whirled back, her braid flipping dramatically. "Shut up you idiot." Her voice was a forceful half whisper. She looked up and down the hall, horrified that someone might have heard. Luckily for her, this hallway didn't have any classrooms off of it, just the wall of lockers on one and some huge windows showing the courtyard. But Henry didn't care if anyone heard. He wasn't sure what pissed him off more—that she

accurately guessed his plan and how she tried to correct him, or that she was just going to blow him off and walk away again.

“I said stop, Claire! God! I’m so sick of you telling me what to do. Quit walking away from me, and quit blowing me off. You did it last night, you did it this morning, and you were just trying to do it now. I’m not some boyfriend who you dumped on the street or some friend who didn’t invite you to a shitty party!”

She just stared. Didn’t move or say anything. Her mouth hung open a little bit and Henry glared back. And then he got what he expected. Claire, he could tell, was too tightly wound today to resist.

“When do you think my life started revolving around you, Henry?” Her tone was seething and hardly controlled. “I don’t owe you anything. I’ve been looking after you since I could crawl. And now Gran’s going insane, and I’m going to have to look after her, too. So if I want to use my rare opportunity during school to get a few precious hours of escape, I will! Figure out how to take care of yourself. Go eat lunch like a loser in a classroom. Skip gym because you’re scared of some guy. Do whatever you want, just leave me alone.”

“Gran’s not insane. You’re just too dense and conceited to believe anything in this world can happen that you don’t understand,” Henry fired back, ignoring the comment about lunch and gym class. She knew they were both true and he hated her for saying it.

“Henry, are you blind? She is going nuts! You heard her last night. She thinks there are other worlds out there! She thinks we’re aliens or something! And she thinks our parrot can talk? Ugh, well actually talk, you know what I mean. And even if she was sane and that stuff was all real, she would send us to some other world and for what?”

“She told me, and you would’ve heard if you hadn’t stormed out. She wants us to get seeds!”

“What the f—” Claire started to say, but Henry interrupted her.

“And we need to use this rock to get there!” At this, Henry reached around his back and fumbled awkwardly in his backpack, losing the power he had generated as Claire waited, silence thickening between them.

“You know what Henry? This isn’t the time or the place for us to be arguing about our grandmother’s mental health. Why don’t you just…” but she stopped talking because Henry had finally extricated the stone from his backpack. And it was glowing.

The twins stared at the stone. When Gran had said it was special, Henry believed her, but he was still stunned to see the rock was emanating light. Here was the proof Claire had wanted. The stone was still strangely cool and light shot faintly from random point on the smooth portion of the stone like dozens of stars. While the stone had been a plain color before, now underneath the light, the surface was iridescent, shifting between a thousand shades of yellow and blue.

“You are seeing this, aren’t you?” Henry asked Claire. He looked away from the stone for the first time since it had started glowing. Claire was frozen and partially turned away from him. She must have been starting to walk away when I pulled out the stone, Henry realized. Her legs seemed to be pulling her in one direction, away, but she had a look on her face, not of frustration or determination for once, but a look of curiosity. Her eyes didn’t stray away from the wavering points of light.

“How are you doing that? Is that some trick you and Gran plotted out?”

Henry laughed knowing it must have sounded insane. “What do you think I did? Hid lightbulbs inside it?” Now let’s get this thing to do some work, he thought. Last night, while Gran and Claire were sleeping, Henry had snuck out of his room and pulled the blanket off Dusty’s cage. He’d wanted to know how he would make the stone work. There wouldn’t have been a chance of him going to sleep before he knew that much.

“Wake me up, Henry,” Dusty had said. It didn’t take much pressing to get the secret out of the bird. Gran had wanted to wait, it seemed, until they were in the right place and the timing was just right. But Henry didn’t care now, and he wasn’t going to take the mirror out of his bag to check either. What if the stone stopped glowing and their chance was gone? He didn’t even know how the mirror worked, and he wasn’t going to waste Claire’s curiosity while he tried to figure it out. So he began putting his plan into motion, calculating his pauses and choosing his words carefully. “Do you think it would actually take us somewhere?”

Claire shrugged and he was disappointed, but tried again. He just needed her to say four little words. “Don’t you want to go if it does work?”

“Henry, I…” she paused, seeming like she didn’t even know what she wanted to say.

He pushed his advantage. “Claire, this could take us into another world. Think about what that could mean.” He didn’t raise his voice, but paused to let the concept sink. “Imagine what we could become. We could be different. Don’t you want to matter, Claire? Don’t you want to go somewhere where that’s possible?”

“Of course I want to matter, you idiot. I don’t know exactly how or when, but I do want to go somewhere, but I—”

“Good!” Henry cut her off. She didn’t know it, but she had said the words he needed her too and the stone. The stone was growing colder in his hand. “Because I want to go to some Wayr too.”

Chapter 6

Claire couldn't feel which way was up and which way was down. For a second, her ankles hung over nothing, and the sounds she'd been unknowingly hearing in the school spread out like spilled water, over miles, and all sound became so thin soon there was nothing to hear. Not even her own breathing. She open and closed her eyes but it made no difference. The world was curtained with darkness, or was it whiteness? She couldn't see her arms either way, which she tried waving in front of her face. She touched her hands together and felt her skin, her hair and her face to make sure she was still whole. Goosebumps raised on her arms and she pulled her sleeves snug around her wrists to keep out the chill that was setting in. Thinking about the cold reminded her of the lighter she had in her pocket, the one Gran had given her last night. She pulled it out and fumbled with the switch, failing to light it on the first few attempts. On the third try, however, a spark or two broke through, and then, a flame formed in front of her, burning her eyes with its brightness.

When the flame burst into life, many things began to slowly happen at once. Firstly, her ankles took back to holding the weight of her body and she faltered, having to step forward to catch back her balance. At the same time, sound rushed over her. Voices, laughter, the creaking of wheels and the sound of wind through fabric. As sound returned, so did light and color. The world rippled outward, from the flame itself. Bright sun, which felt warm on her neck. Rich colors on clothing and trees and earthen buildings. Hundreds of people, their shapes moving along a busy lane. All of these things shimmered into being. A cobbled road spread forward from under her shoes. And then,

the world seemingly rebuilt from the single flame, the lighter sputtered and the flame died.

Instead of standing in an isolated school hallway, Claire was now in the center of a city street, with people swarming around her. But the shape of the city was unlike any she'd ever seen before. The ranges of color, thousands of shades of brown and the violent greens overwhelmed her. From what I can tell, Claire thought, all of these buildings are made of earth and stone, but its difficult to be sure because they're fricking coated by thousands of plants. I've never seen so many plants! Vines, trees, flowers poking out and hanging at random.

In Claire's understanding of a city, buildings were closely packed, either sharing walls or else spread apart with narrow alleys. But these buildings, which rose several stories, were spaced apart by huge streets and alleys. These weren't like the alleys Claire had known, either. Those were grey and hid garbage cans and dumpsters and Claire never ventured in them to find what else they stored. These alleys, though, were paved with greenery of all kinds. And then again there are all these plants, she thought. There's no order here at all! There were gardens spouting, not just from the alleys, but everywhere she looked. She saw stalks of fat grapes growing thick near an orange tree, which was sprouted out from the side of a building.

"None of it makes sense," she said aloud. Upon hearing her own voice, however, Claire remembered herself. She remembered, mainly that she was a person in a real place, and this made her pay attention to the people that were surrounding her. She saw Henry, staring around next to her as she had been doing moments ago, and then she saw the people surrounding them. The people themselves looked just like humans. What had I

been expecting? Walking around the streets and browsing clothes and trinkets in outside shops and stalls, almost all the people had dark skin. They were also on the shorter side; Claire's eyes were level with the heads of the tallest men walking through the crowded streets. There were a lot of people, but they, unlike the buildings above and around them, were not cramped up next to one another. The streets were wide and the people spread out. The various stands dotted around, paired with the smells of something roasted, made Claire guess that they were in a market of some kind.

Jeez, my height and red hair made must make me stick out like a match in a bowl of brown rice. Not fully understanding why she did it, she grabbed Henry by the scuff of his sweatshirt and pulled him out of the street and into one of the alleyway gardens.

"This place is like paradise," Henry said, smiling. His eyes darted constantly, trying to devour the new world in front of him.

"Paradise? We have no idea where we are or how to get back? This is like a prison!" Henry looked at her for the first time, his expression shocked. She didn't typically share her feelings, especially such embarrassing ones, but they just jumped from one world into another, she was going to have to admit, and so she wasn't going to waste time pretending.

"We need to go back. Take us back," she said.

Henry gaped, looking like he was a cartoon. "No," he said. Anger flared in her throat and gut, and it must have showed on her face because Henry hurried to say, "I mean no, I don't think we can go back just like that. I think we need to do what Gran asked us to do before the stone will let us go home." He was still holding the stone and Claire grabbed at it, but he reacted quickly and pulled it out of her reach.

“I want to go home,” she said. “I want to go back to Earth.” But the stone, which had been so vibrant and mystical in the school hallway, didn’t respond or light up or hum or do anything. Claire’s panic became real and it moved from her stomach into her lungs. It was like her chest was being pressed, and it was hard to get enough air. Seeing this, Henry rushed and put the stone away and then knelt down to where she had slumped against a miniature lemon tree.

“Claire, you’re going to be fine. I promise.” He sat down and crossed his legs and grabbed her hand. “Here. Let’s count to five and take a big breath while we do.” Claire stopped breathing so quickly and did what he said, him counting to five and her breathing in slowly. “Good,” he said. “Now hold it until I count to three.” She did and then she released it slowly as he counted to five again. They did this for a short time and the weight in her chest became lighter. She squeezed her eyes shut and didn’t try to accept what had happened, but tried to at least acknowledge it.

Henry’s hand were becoming sweaty in hers and she started to feel stupid. She pulled her hand away, dried her eyes, and stood up.

“While you were on your run last night Gran told me a lot about this place. Everything has worked like she said it would. We’re not in anymore danger than if we were flying to another country, or something. We just have to be smart and careful.” Here he paused. “Claire, this is an entire new world and we have a chance to start fresh and explore. We’ll be able to go home soon, but you’re going to have to trust me.” She listened to her brother, sweat still clinging to her hand.

* * *

“The first thing we’re going to have to do,” Henry said “is get some clothes that will let us fit in. And we should probably get a hood or something for your hair.”

“How are we going to get home? What is it that Gran thinks we can do for her?”

“I think the stone will take us home once we’ve gotten what Gran wants us to get.”

“What is it that she wants?” Claire raised her voice as she asked this, and Henry was surprised to realize that they’d been whispering. The whispering had made Henry feel secretive, and now he desired to remain unnoticed so he shushed Claire and waved his hands at her. He was about to whisper something back about stealing clothes when he was interrupted.

By the sound of singing. Next to the twins was a butterfly bush that rose to their shoulders, and at the same time both of them darted to crouch behind it. It appeared that the sun was starting to set, something Henry didn’t notice until just then, because he was wishing it was darker so there were better odds of them not being seen. Why am I scared of some guy singing?

He gripped the stone which he had put in the pocket of his sweatshirt. Don’t panic, he told himself. But I wish my heart would stop pounding so hard. But he noticed, despite this irrational fear, that the singing was pretty. The voice was light and obviously male, but higher than average. None of the words were very clear, and the song was actually pretty gorgeous, but it was also getting closer, and then Henry realized the compromising position that he and Claire were in. Whoever he is might feel like we’re attacking him or something if we stay here and he finds us. So, trying to block that parts of his body that were telling him he should be scared, he stood up.

“Claire,” he said, “I can’t find your earring anywhere. Are you sure you lost it here?” The boy’s singing stopped immediately, and Henry turned and found the source.

He was devastatingly handsome. Henry’s first thought was that he wanted to cut himself on the guy’s cheekbones. He knew it wasn’t a helpful thought but he didn’t care. The boy was clearly startled by Henry’s sudden appearance from behind the bush, but that only made his blue eyes look more round and charming. Henry wanted to keep staring at him, but knew the already awkward silence was getting weirder.

“Hi,” Henry said. Claire was still crouched, looking like she might try to slink further under the bush. “We didn’t mean to surprise you. My sister here dropped her earring and we were trying to find it.” Claire must have finally seen the point of Henry’s cover because she squared her shoulder, straightened her back, and stood up.

“Nope, I can’t find it anywhere” she said, adding a giggle that served as a testament to her acting skills. “Hi,” she said to the boy, “I’m Claire.” She held out her hand to shake, but the boy looked at her hand like it was made of pizza.

“Oh, right, Claire said pulling her hand back. “Do you understand what we’re saying? Do you speak English?”

“Of course I speak English,” His voice was a bit lighter, even sweeter, than Henry had been expecting, but his tone was offended. He was tall and had light skin, making him stand out from the crowd of people the twins had seen. His eyebrows were dark and straight and made Henry’s stomach churn.

“Sorry,” Henry said, not wanting the boy to be frustrated with them, “as you probably can tell, we’re not from here. We just didn’t know if we spoke the same

language.” He logged it in his mind to ask Gran how on earth they did speak the same language.

“We’re actually kind of lost.” Claire flipped her hair in a way that made Henry want to vomit. “We got separated from our friend who was giving us a tour. She was going to show us where we could get some clothes so we don’t stick out so badly. You wouldn’t be able to help us with that, would you?”

“Do you have something in your eye?” Henry asked her. “Why are you blinking so much?” Henry flushed with wicked glee when he saw her lips tighten.

Ignoring this, the boy said “You’re...not from here,” repeating Henry’s phrasing. His pitch raised, inviting them to reaffirm or deny this.

“Right,” Henry said, not wanting to be left out of the conversation, “but our family is from here. Our grandmother actually, but we were brought up really far away.”

The boy looked suspicious, like Henry was lying or something. “What’s your grandmother’s family name?” The question startled Henry. Why does he want to know that? Had he and Claire already done something that made them seem dangerous? The boy observed every movement the two of them made with fixed concentration, like he was cataloging their words and movements to recall later. His eyes were critical, and kept Henry on edge.

“Before she was married her last name was Castanea,” Henry said. “But she left a long time ago. “Would you know her?”

When Henry said Gran’s last name, the boy’s suspicion appeared to cool and he became, if not relaxed, curious. “Sorry to be so rude, but things have been tense in the city lately. I’m one of the few people here who aren’t native in the city. Foreigners are

rare, you see. And you're grandmother must have been a remarkable woman to leave here, few do and even fewer thrive if they do."

Henry had nothing to say to this, and he judged by Claire's silence that she didn't either.

"What are you doing in garden?" the boy continued. Henry looked around at the plants that surrounded them; I wouldn't have called this a garden, he thought.

"Oh, we were just passing through to get, um, to the market. You know, looking for those clothes that would help us...feel more comfortable." He'd been about to say "blend in," but had a feeling that would raise the guy's suspicions again. I wish I knew how to be like Claire, Henry thought. His long standing envy of Claire, and her witty and charming nature flared up. How did she always trick boys into paying attention to her?

But, miraculously, the boy laughed. "These weeds?" the boy said, looking around at the plants in the alley. His tone was a bit haughty. Henry was achingly aware of how nice the boy's lips were shaped, how they thinned out in striking lines at their ends. Upon thinking this, though, he shook his head, hoping the physical jolt would clear his mind and make room for more useful thoughts.

"These aren't even an attempt at a true garden. The people of this city fill their alleys with these to spruce things up. That or else the kids come out here to practice. And, since you don't seem to know this, the city we're currently standing in is called Garden."

Claire jumped in, "Oh, see, we just got in last night and we've barely seen anything of the city itself because it was so dark."

Henry, who was watching the boy's face very closely, saw a look of surprise and confusion flicker there. "How did you get—" but then he stopped asking the question

before he could finish it. “Never mind, we’ll figure it out later. Do you need help finding your friend’s house? I can do at least that much.”

“Oh, you know what?” Claire asked. “I don’t think she’ll be heading back home for a while. And tomorrow we’ll be too busy. Would you mind showing us around yourself?” Henry was impressed and annoyed that his sister was proving so quick on her feet, and he wasn’t entirely sure of her motives. Did she need to push so hard to have this guy help them?

“What we’re really looking for are some seeds. My Gran wanted us to bring them to her as a souvenir,” Henry added.

The boy opened his mouth to ask another question, but then closed it. Aside from a look of clear curiosity, his expressions were hard to read, and Henry wished he knew what the boy was thinking.

“What kind of seeds is she looking for? There are enough seeds in this city to fill the Drowned Thumb twice over,” the boy said. Henry didn’t know what that meant, but took the boy’s optimism as a good sign.

“She wants seeds from the pumpkin fields.” Henry said. “I think she said from one of the fattest, oldest pumpkins we could find.

“Could you take us there?” Claire asked quickly. Henry had been debating asking the same question, but wasn’t ready to find the seeds so quickly; it meant they’d be leaving when they’d only just arrived. The boy’s face finally betrayed that he was troubled by this request.

“Um, that might not actually be possible right now. Because—”

But the boy didn't have a chance to tell them why not. At that moment a cry, louder than anything Henry had ever heard, filled the streets and the sky of the city. The sound was between a cry and a roar and was so heavy Henry felt the ground shake beneath his feet. After the sound loomed for several seconds, it faded away. Henry looked around, but nothing seemed to have changed. There was hardly a second of silence when the streets on both sides of the alley resumed their noisy business, and the boy look unfazed.

"You're most likely going to have to wait until tomorrow morning to get your seeds," the boy said, "I'm guessing by your faces that neither of you know what that was." He seemed to be bemused by them, or was it condescension?

"No," they said slowly. Both were obviously shaken and looking at the dimming sky as if lions or something might start raining down on them.

"That's Fiona calling for everyone to get back into the city. I would have thought your friend would have told you about the city's state of emergency. And," he continued, beginning to sound suspicious again, "why didn't you hear it last night? Unless you got here after Fiona had already made the cry, which would be impossible because the city would've been sealed."

Neither twin said anything. Henry ran his fingers over the cool stone in his pocket. He wished it would help him understand more about this place or how to convince this boy to help them. When it was evident Henry wasn't going to come up with an answer for them, Claire spoke up.

"Look—", she said, "I just realized we haven't gotten your name."

After hesitating for a breath, he answered. "Gavit."

“Okay, Gavit, we told you we aren’t from around here, and you’re obviously a smart dude. But we’re stranded and don’t know how we’ll survive unless you help us.” Henry wasn’t used to Claire giving into the direct approach so quickly when trying to manipulate someone, and this time the tactic didn’t seem to accomplish what she had intended.

“You’re clearly from some unknown tribe and could even be spies for the Rakweaves. I don’t think you’re from Flint or the Saltless Shores, which means I don’t know where you’re from or what you’re after. And I don’t buy this seed garbage either. Why would I help you?”

“I know why you’d want to help us!” Henry said. “Because we’ll show you something you’ve never seen before! We have technology where we are from that I you don’t have in this city. We’ll share it with to you if you promise to help us.

Gavit’s jaw clenched and he looked visibly torn for the first time. Henry had been watching and listening closely enough to realize that this guy liked answers and information. The gamble he’d taken was that maybe his curiosity would get the better of him.

“If you think about it, we’re not asking much. We’re not spies, but even if we were, all we want are some seeds, and clothes to blend in.” And a place to rest if it comes to that, he thought, but didn’t say aloud.

“What kind of technology?”

“Claire, show him your lighter.” She shot him a scandalized look which was good, because it most likely made Gavit even more curious. Despite her desire to resist, Claire apparently had no better ideas, because she took out her lighter and held it up for

Gavit to see. The sky was turning a darker blue—the sun must have been truly setting now. This meant that Gavit had to lean in. When he stepped closer he was so close Henry imagined he could feel Gavit’s body heat and he thought he caught the scent of fruit and a bit of smoke. Then, Lucy clicked back the circle thingy and a small flame leapt to life.

When Gavit said “and?” Henry deflated.

“What do you mean and? You guys have lighters here?”

“Not exactly,” Gavit said, and then he held up his fingers and snapped them. From the tip of his thumb blew a flame identical in size and shape to the one from Claire’s lighter. Henry and Claire reacted much the same as Henry had imagined Gavit would react to the lighter.

“Doesn’t that hurt?” Henry asked?

Gavit’s gorgeous eyebrows raised. “When you said you weren’t from around here...that was an understatement, wasn’t it?”

By now the sky was turning deep navy and Claire shuffled with impatience. “Yes, it was definitely an understatement, but what do you say? Maybe you can do that with your fingers, but we don’t have that kind of power, we have this.” She held the lighter forward before putting it back in her pocket. “And if you help us, we’ll owe you. In our home this little flame is nothing compared to the other technology we have available to us.”

“Follow me,” Gavit said, and without waiting for another word, he was walking out of the alley. Neither twin was expecting this, and he was a little ways off before they realized they should follow. In the brief moment that he was out of ear shot, though, Claire rounded on Henry.

“I’m being nice and flirtatious because this isn’t a game. If this kid can get us out of here than that’s all the reason I need to blink a little extra. Plus how helpful were you just now aside from being able act like Dusty and repeat exactly Gran had told you.”

“Do people know how to walk where you're from?” Gavit called back. Claire turned and gave him a cheery wave before Henry could think of anything to say, and then he followed them out of the alley.

Chapter 7

During their conversation the city streets had changed dramatically. The towers that had been so beautiful before seemed somber and mysterious now that the sun was down. When walking around downtown Ann Arbor, Henry took for granted all of the light. There were streetlights and hundreds of stores, all pouring illumination into the streets. Here, though, the buildings were oppressive and looming, and the streets were barely lit. While the city itself was dark, the people were eerily visible, because each person carried some sort of small torch.

Through that dim lighting, Henry absorbed as much of the city and the people as he could. What the people spoke sounded like English, although Gavit was leading them through the crowd quickly and it was hard to grasp onto any one conversation.

One thing Henry could sense, even with the poor lighting, was the pervasive and intense smell of fruit and flowers. With this much fruit though, Henry thought, some of it has to be falling off and rotting, so why can't I smell it? And I've read enough about medieval cities to know it should smell like shit and sweat, but these people all smell clean. This made him pluck at his own sweat shirt, which was becoming sticky and sweaty from all the movement.

He wondered how these people dealt with it. Being less overwhelmed than he had been immediately following their arrival, Henry could now see with more clarity that the people wore wraps and shawls that ran anywhere from forest greens to lemony yellows. Looking at the wraps, Henry saw something that most other boys would have noticed immediately, and he blushed and tried to look down as best he could while moving

through a crowd. This was because, while many of the men had wraps that revealed much of their chests, so did most of the women.

Henry tried a few tactics to make this not seem like such a big deal. First, he did what he could to avert his eyes. But this, obviously, made it hard for him to watch where Gavit and Claire were going. Then he was jostled by a woman and her one exposed breast actually pushed into him. It wasn't for any awkward sexual reason that this made him uncomfortable, but with a sudden feeling of horror, he wondered if Gavit was going to give Claire one of these shawls that left one of her—

He couldn't even finish the thought he was so repulsed. Think about something else, he told himself. Anything. Luckily, something happened that made clothes the last thing he was thinking about. They had come to a place where there was a large empty space in the center of the road, or lane, because Henry hadn't seen a single car in this world. The space was marked off by bushes planted in the shape of a large U. The ground in the space looked like just normal dirt, but then, in the dim light of the people's torches, Henry saw the dirt in the center of the clearing shake and push toward the sky.

He almost screamed. From where the dirt was trembling, emerged a snout, followed by the thickest, most enormous claws Henry had ever seen. Each was about a foot long and caked in dirt. Following the claws was a head, a massive one, and then from the dirt erupted the body of a dragon. The dragon itself was different than any European or Chinese dragon Henry had seen, and Henry was a boy who had seen a lot of pictures of dragons, many of which were his own. This one was uglier than most, and looked more like a crocodile who could swallow a small house in its massive jaws. Lastly, the dragon's tail, which was shaped like a giant spade, emerged and with a

sweeping, circular motion, caved in the hole. The dragon reared up, and stood on hind legs, taller than a building, and it was then that Henry saw the giant tusks, dirt stained, protruding from its chin. And then the dragon shook, shaking soil and small rock off its hide like a dog getting the water off itself.

* * *

What upset Claire most was that no one seemed shocked. Apparently in this world the appearance of monstrous giant lizards is perfectly normal, great! she thought. Gavit barely even stopped to take a look at the towering creature.

“We’re almost there he said,” as he kept walking his brisk pace. Claire peered behind to make sure Henry hadn’t trailed off, but there he was, at her heels, looking giddy. They’d quickly left the place behind where the monster had surfaced, and looking back she also saw that the creature had vanished. Again, no one seemed surprised by this, and Claire was stuck by an overwhelming sense of loneliness among those hordes of people.

The foreignness of everything, coupled with the crowd and all the walking, was wearing Claire out. The cut on her ankle itched insanely as it continually got brushed by the people milling about, and her irritation was compounded because of the weird, unceasing pulsing that was going on in her hand. She was starting to list the complaints of the various ways in which she was uncomfortable in her head when they turned a corner and Gavit stopped.

The street they’d been walking opened up and met many others, all joining in a large circular space. There were no buildings in this circle but at the center blazed a bonfire that looked like it was constructed with, instead of fire wood, entire trees. Next to

this fire, illuminated in its vicious glow, was another monster nearly twice the size of the other. It sat upright, large claws resting on massive lower legs. The tusks on its chin were stained with dirt like the other creature's, but these were more massive, and they curled back toward the dragon's head. Gavit led them in a little closer toward this fire, but he kept them at a distance from the center, out of the light. Hundreds of moths flecked among the embers.

“What is that dragon?” Henry asked, whispering so only the three of them could hear.

“That's Fiona!” Gavit said, shocked. “The leader of the Garden clan? Surely even where you're from you've heard of her. Just a few minutes ago you heard her call!”

“Oh,” said Henry lamely. This time, Claire understood his impulse to not want to talk too much in front of Gavit. Every question they asked only worked to show more of their ignorance, and Claire couldn't guess as to how dangerous that was.

“So,” she ventured tentatively. “Why did you bring us to this place?”

“We're here because she's going to announce whether or not the night ban is up. If there have been sightings of more Rakweaves then the ban will still be in place, and getting those seeds tonight will be impossible.”

Claire wasn't sure if she should feel panicked by this or not. Cool it girl, she told herself. He didn't say it would be impossible to get the seeds, just that we couldn't get them tonight. Would waiting overnight be that bad? We would need to find a place to sleep. The thought of sleep made her think of her own bed, and home. What's happening there? Is Gran worried? Is time standing still? Or are all of my friends at home in their sweats, texting each other instead of doing their homework?

This train of thought was interrupted by the dragon, though. Rearing back on her hind legs, spreading her arms, which were webbed underneath with wings, she gave a brief roar, and began to shrink. Nothing in Claire's life could have prepared her for watching a dragon melt. The teeth, tusks, and claws rushed inward and the enormous head became smaller and rounded. Within seconds, the dragon was the roughly the size of a small elephant, then the size of an alligator. And then, where the dragon had towered, stood a hunched over old woman, with dark skin that was wrinkled beyond belief, standing naked next to the soaring flames.

From the crowd, several people walked out carrying wraps which the woman draped around herself, covering up her legs, stomach, and one of her shoulders. Now that the woman wasn't a dragon as tall as school bus is long, Claire could see that there was a large boulder behind her. It wasn't very tall; Claire could've raised her hand and touched the top of it. The texture looked rough but even and the top was rounded like a dome. In the light of the bonfire, the rock's color was hard to make out, but flecks in the boulder sparkled occasionally. Ivy wound around the rock, and between the vines Claire thought she could make out carvings.

While she was analyzing the boulder, someone brought out a strange structure. It was clearly made of wood, with a bending pillar on each side and a cap on the top, like a mushroom with two stems instead of one. Once it was set in place a small distance away from the fire, the old dragon woman stepped underneath it and began to yell.

Her voice was grainy but melodic, and it resounded over the heads of the large crowd. Oh, Claire realized, that's why she's standing under that wooden thing. Do they not have megaphones here? She snorted to herself. That's a stupid question; the only light

sources in sight are fires. Claire's attention returned to the woman, who was chanting. The people of the crowd hummed in rhythm with the chant, and stomped their feet. No instruments were playing, but after a few minutes, that chanting and the humming formed a kind of melody. Slowly, voices joined the woman in her chant while the humming and the stomping continued, but amid all the noise, no one drowned out the woman.

The words were slippery, though. Claire thought she could almost grasp what the woman was saying. The air was alive with both what sounded like prayer, but the music then turned into something more aggressive, a challenge. Claire was afraid because the moment felt so intimate, and she and Henry were so clumsily intruding. This ritual was so clearly a moment for all of these people to move beyond just themselves, and to connect as a whole, that she felt selfish for thinking of her presence, and then further embarrassed for thinking about herself at all.

She was actually debating whether she should try to join the hum when, without any note of finality, the crowd fell silent, and the woman lapsed into words Claire understood.

"Nothing," she sang out. "Today we went into the forests bordering our fields and our hills and our city, and even in the shadows we couldn't sense any trace of the demons." The crowd yelled and cheered at this news, but the woman held up her hand, and they fell silent.

"This means they hide well, because their poison decimated half of our rice fields last night. Tonight there are clouds blinding our stars, yellow is asleep, and blue is too slim for us to rely on. So we will hold to the ban for another night." The crowd

murmured. The people nearest to the three of them sounded scared and deflated more than angry.

“I hope no one here needs reminding that if they are caught outside of the city, they risk bringing back with them the Rakweave’s stench. We will shun any breakers of the ban, and turn them out to fraternize with the beasts they’ve sought. You elected this punishment, and I will see it through.”

Chapter 8

To this, Henry saw Gavit respond with disgusted sigh. Maneuvering himself, Henry took advantage of Gavit's fixation on the speaking woman. He stepped so he could easily flick his eyes between the woman and Gavit's face, and thus was able to carefully dissect Gavit's features.

He'd long known he preferred to look at the boys in his school than at the girls. He also knew he wasn't totally terrible looking; he'd made friends with a girl from time to time who then ruined things by asking him out. But he'd rarely ever understood how to talk to a boy, much less one as striking as Gavit. The whole thing, fantastical world, dragons, and handsome boy, made his fingers tremble and turned his tongue into a dried sponge.

But then there was Claire. She looked terrified as she watched the woman speak, and Henry knew her singular thought was fixated on how to get home. Why did Gran have to send us to this world together? he asked himself in frustration. Taken up as he was in his own thoughts, Henry was surprised to see the huge crowd start dispersing quickly and quietly. Gavit then took hold of both Henry and Claire's hands (I'm dreaming Henry thought. I hope my hand's not sweaty) and led them away from the central hill, the fire, the woman, and the giant rock.

As he led them into another alleyway garden Claire said, "We need to get out of here tonight." Her words rushed like she was having trouble breathing.

"You just heard Fiona," Gavit said. His voice was a low and urgent whisper. "They've locked the city down like they have been doing for the past month. If you go

out there, or I help you go out there, and any of us are caught, we'll be banished from the city and be easy prey for the Rakweaves."

"Henry," Claire said, giving Henry a look of desperation. "We have to get out of here. Take us home. You know how, don't you? F—the seeds! Gran doesn't need them."

"I'm not—" Henry started to say, but then stopped. He wasn't ready to leave yet. "What's the matter?" he asked. "Nothing bad has happened yet. Why do you want to rush things?"

Claire looked murderous, like he'd just proposed they move into the city.

"Weren't you listening to that woman? Creatures out there are trying to break into this city. They're eating people! And you saw what that woman did! The people here turn into monsters." The last sentence came out like a curse she was scared to say, like maybe if she avoiding saying such things out loud they wouldn't be true.

"Listen to me, Claire. You know we can't leave until we have those seeds. It will only work then." Henry was becoming more nervous about Gavit's presence and curiosity. He glanced toward him as quickly as he could, and his face was tight with concentration, again like he was trying to memorize every word they spoke.

"Let me see that stone," Claire said.

"No," Henry said with force. You stormed out of the house before you could hear everything Gran said about it. The most important part about the stone is that since we came here for the purpose of getting the seeds, we won't be able to leave until we get them." This was a lie. Gran had never said such a thing, but he couldn't think of any better way to stay for a decent amount of time.

She looked both miserable and defeated. “Obviously, I don’t want those creatures to get us, but I also don’t want to stay here a second longer than we need to. We don’t know what’s happening at home! What if every second we spend here is like a year back there? Or even just a day? None of this makes sense, but I will not let this ruin my life.”

“But what if we leave and can never get back?”

She summoned that murderous look back up again, and Henry began to plan the counterarguments to the words he knew she was about to unleash upon him. But then Gavit raised his hand up between the two of them.

“I am clearly not involved in this business in the same capacity that the two of you are, but I know some about this world. City. These people. Let me help you get the seeds now, and then we’ll go from there.” Henry was surprised by the offer. Hadn’t Gavit been, just an hour ago, interrogating them? Asking if they were spies and why he should ever help them?

“But how will we get them?” Claire asked, interrupting Henry’s thoughts. “You said yourself that the city is locked down. And there are those monsters.”

“The Rakweaves are dangerous, yes, but they haven’t attacked anyone this close to the city yet, and it’s unlikely they’d attack the three of us together. Plus, we’ll be quick. And then of course, we have my small flames and your lighter. No, the Rakweaves won’t be the main threat.

“You’d risk getting banished from the city for us?” Henry asked.

“This isn’t my city. The risk is less for me than anyone else here. And if anything were to happen I could just travel home.”

From what Henry could tell in the dim light, Claire looked blissful, obviously thinking this was too good to be true. “Thank God you walked down that alley when you did, Gavit. So what’s the plan?”

Gavit said it was lucky that each of them was wearing dark clothes, and that sneaking out of the city would be fairly easy. It was getting back into the city that would be the challenge. Henry suspected, though, that Gavit would be embarking on that challenge alone if Claire got her way. She’d want to teleport back home the second they held the seeds.

Their escape began by following Gavit, yet again, through more alleys and streets. People were still making their ways home, so there was nothing suspicious about their movement. At times during their walk, Gavit would whisper random instructions like “avoid touching any of the plants near that door,” or else, “See the vines on this wall here? We’re going to have to walk on them to avoid those ferns.”

In short time, though, Gavit led them to a giant wall which, because of the incredible darkness, Henry hadn’t seen until they were standing at its base. This wall was similar to many of the houses and building surrounding them; stone and earth were mixed together, and plant life of all kinds teemed all the way up the wall.

“So how are we breaking out of here?” he asked. Gavit was busy knocking around at the base of the wall with a stick he’d broken off a cherry tree. The stick made a flat tapping sound against the wall until Gavit hit a certain spot, and they heard a dull thump.

“We’re going to swim,” Gavit said. As he said this, he pulled some small plants and branches out of the way and opened a small door that was as tall as Henry’s knees.

“Okay, so here’s how we’re going to do this,” he said. “I’ll go first, then Claire, and then

Henry. All you have to do is sit on your butt and scoot in. Claire, you'll be in the middle so we can all see with your lighter."

"Wait, is this sewage water or something?" Henry asked.

"No," Gavit said quickly, "this city's irrigation system is extremely complex, but also extremely clean."

"And when you say you want me to use my lighter..." Claire said, letting her voice trail.

"Yeah, if that's like any of the lighters I've seen back in Flint then it works underwater."

Claire looked as if she might argue the point, but then simply said, "Okay, if it will get us home, I'll try it. Thank God I just bought a Life Proof case for my phone."

The joke made Henry think of home, and for a brief moment, the easiness and familiarity of Ann Arbor struck him and made him sad.

"Good then. We all understand the plan?" Gavit asked. "Then follow me." He hopped down and put his feet and legs through the open doorway. Henry could hear the faint sound of running water. And then Claire, holding her lighter sat down. She clicked it, and the tiny light flickered to life. She pushed off with her other available hand and vanished with a splash.

Then it was Henry's turn. Better hurry, he told himself. If, somehow Gavit's right and that lighter works underwater, I want to be close to Claire. Frigid water rushed over his shoes and socks when he put his legs through the doorway. It occurred to him the he didn't know how long he'd be underwater or if he needed to hold his breath. To be safe, he emptied his lungs and refilled them as quickly as possible and pushed.

What followed was closer to a water slide at an amusement park than the potentially life-threatening swim Henry had been imagining. The ride through the tunnel lasted only around twenty seconds, and then Henry was sitting in a stream at Gavit's feet, who was helping Claire stand up. Jealousy rose up in his chest for a second, but then Gavit held his hand out for Henry.

"I guess I didn't need my lighter after all." It was still lit, though, and Claire looked at the with a sense of wonder. "But it worked underwater."

"Why don't you keep that lit for a while?" Gavit asked Claire. She complied, but Henry's eyes and gotten accustomed to the darkness, so he was blinded temporarily by the light.

"Where to now?" Henry asked.

Gavit pointed his finger out into the fields, or what Henry assumed were fields. "The pumpkins should be right over—" but a sound cut him off.

Henry felt the earth shaking beneath his feet more than he heard it. Claire's light cast just far enough that the three of them could see the soil parting in front of them, and just like had happened in the city, one of the ground dragons strode out from the earth. This one was clearly younger than Fiona's dragon form had been. The tusks were straighter and her skin seemed smoother. In the light from the flame, the dragon's yellow eyes gleamed. The dragon used these menacing eyes to stare at them, its spade like tail swinging low on the ground behind.

"Hello, Princess. It's a lovely evening tonight, isn't it? Plenty of starlight to keep us safe." Gavit snapped his fingers like he had before, and a flame appeared in his palm. He smacked the wrist of that hand with his other as if to give the flame more juice, and it

grew a bit larger, a happy fireball in his hand. “We’re not armed or anything. Won’t you speak with us? I know it seems strange that we’re out here, but it’s actually a fascinating tale if you’d like to hear it.” Henry again couldn’t read Gavit’s expression or voice. He certainly seemed calm and in control of himself, but was his heart pounding, almost painfully, like Henry’s own? The dragon, a princess? She gave a low roar, but one loud enough to be heard back in the city. But then, just like Fiona, this dragon shrank in size.

The process of reverting to human form was quick. But it looks so painful, Henry thought. The giant form receded and shaped itself into that of a young woman. She was tall in comparison to the rest of her people with hair that flowed down to below her waist. Unlike Fiona this woman was dressed after her transformation in a complex weaving of scarves and laces.

“Honey bee, what kind of trouble are you getting yourself into now?” she asked Gavit. Her voice had a twang to it, and seemed both bemused and annoyed. “You know I don’t want to kick you out of my city.”

“Princess Eleonora, meet Claire and Henry,” Gavit said. The twins awkwardly stood as the woman appraised them. She nodded.

“Are these friends of yours from Flint?”

“Actually no, they’re not.” Gavit didn’t say anything else but a strange expression flicked over Eleonora’s fine features.

“Really?” she asked, her voice telling Henry that she was intrigued. “Well where did you two daisies blow in from?”

“Far away,” Claire said hurriedly. “Just a small little town, most people haven’t heard of it. But our grandmother used to live here. We’re actually out here looking for some seeds to take back to her.”

“Seeds?” Eleonora repeated, incredulous. “You could’ve gotten those anywhere in the city? Or have you been in the city?”

“They didn’t get in before the gates closed, actually,” Gavit lied. “Do you think we need to be banished over something so trivial?”

“What kind of seeds are you looking for?” Eleonora asked. “I make particularly fine apple trees.” As she said this, she held her palm over the soil in front of her. From a small pouch at her side she grabbed something tiny and dropped it on the dirt. She then pulled her fingers like she was manipulating a puppet, and the ground bubbled like water. Then a shoot burst out of the earth and leaves and stalks sprouted from its sides. Then, like she had shrunk rapidly, the tiny shoot grew quickly, its trunk thickening and leaves filling out, and then the shoot was a small apple tree, and then a large one, with red apples hanging low in the boughs, shining in the reflection of Claire’s light.

“Actually,” Gavit said, “they want pumpkin seeds.”

“That’s easily arranged,” Eleonora said, reaching for her pouch again, but Gavit interrupted her.

“Their grandma has actually specified that the seeds she requires have to come from the oldest, fattest pumpkin in your fields...” Gavit told her. Henry was getting the distinct feeling that Gavit was saying more to Eleonora than he or Claire realized. Why were they both so calm about being outside the walls? And why did he and Claire’s home matter so much?

Just then, the sound of voices made its way over the fields. A bundle of torches was gathering outside the wall, and Henry realized they were moving in their direction.

“What do you say, Elle? Help us?”

The princess, if she really was one, looked torn for a second. But then she smiled easily and said, “Yes. Go stand by the wall in the stream. And you two put out those lights,” she said, pointing at Claire and Gavit. “I’ll be right back.”

The three of them did as she said, but Henry’s heart was still pounding. He was less concerned for himself because he knew, in an emergency, he could grab the stone and take them home. But if Gavit was caught? How could he forgive himself?

Eleonora’s voice carried over the field back toward them. She told the men and women, and two dragons, that she had been mistaken when she called them.

“False alarm,” she said cheerfully. “Thanks for checking!” After a few minutes of talking, the group started to head back. “I’ll be right behind you,” she called. A moment later she appeared with a torch of her own, apparently given to her by the group.

“We need to be quick,” she whispered, sounding serious for the first time. “I don’t have long before they’ll be expecting me back at the gates. Follow me.”

A sliver of a bluish tinted moon guided them as they walked across the fields. But the night was cloudy, and that sliver didn’t stay visible for more than a minute or two at a time. I wonder if that’s the same moon we have at home, Henry thought. The terrain was gently sloped in some places and completely flat in others, and they walked down avenues between all variations of crops. Once they’d gotten sufficient distance from the group of people, Eleonora questioned them.

“So how did you travel here? I’ve been told the Sun’s Road is impassable right now. But then again, you didn’t say which direction you came from.” This woman is going to be more persistent than Gavit, Henry realized with frustration. We’ll have to tell her something. I wonder if Gran would trust her. She is the princess of Gran’s own city, isn’t she?

“Actually,” Claire said, “we came up from the south. Have you heard of Ann Arbor?”

“The Arbor?” Eleonora asked with surprise. I didn’t know that place was hospitable to anything but the Solean. And isn’t it northeast of us? I still don’t see how you made it through the Rakweaves, because that’s more than a single day’s journey.”

“Uhhh,” Claire mumbled, “well we actually have family who lives along the way. And we stayed at an inn one of the nights. Our cousin lives south of here, by just a little, so that’s what I meant when I said we came from the south.”

“Yeah,” Henry joined in. If they both told the story together, it would sound more believable. “The Arbor is actually a great place to live for humans. Have you ever been?”

“Have I? Ever been to the Arbor?” Eleonora laughed and Gavit grinned along with her. “Are you two children of the wild people? And humans? What do you take us for?” she asked, indicating her and Gavit. But Eleonora held up her hand before they had to think of an answer.

“Quiet,” she said, her voice dead and flat. Gavit raised his little hand-fire up and pointed at Claire to do the same with her lighter.

“What is it?” Henry asked, but Eleonora shushed him.

“Did you hear them?” she whispered to Gavit. He nodded. “Follow me,” she said, her tone terrifyingly serious, and then she bolted forward. Confused, Claire and Henry followed. If there was something after them, shouldn’t they be heading back toward the gates? Claire struggled next to Henry as they ran. Why would she, the marathon runner, be having trouble? Was it that hard to run with a lighter in her hand? But her face was contorted with pain, and she looked like she was limping as she ran.

Wishing he had a source of light too, Henry fumbled around his pockets as he ran. The mirror was in his backpack, but his fingers brushed something cold and rough in his pocket. The stone! He’d forgotten completely. He was pulling it out of his pocket when, to his terror, a laughing scream pierced the air.

His blood felt hot and his skin tickled at the sound, in a way that made him sick. He couldn’t be sure which direction it came from, but it rang again and again. Eleonora and Gavit were scrambling up a large hill now, but Claire was struggling to keep up.

“God!” she shouted. “My ankle is burning!” Henry slowed down and kept pace with her. She wasn’t going any faster than a walk now.

“Come on, Claire,” he said, hoping to annoy her. Maybe if she was mad she’d be able to push through whatever pain she was feeling. “We’re going to lose them!” He was paying attention to her as she limped up the hill, and so he didn’t notice the large vine on the ground in front of him. His foot hooked under it, and he fell flat on the ground. Claire then ran into him and tripped as well, the lighter falling from her hand as she did.

They were in total darkness and the laugh pierced their ears again, echoing around them from all sides. Henry felt hot and dizzy as the laughter bounced around his head.

Claire was scrambling around for her lighter and cursing, and Henry, wishing he had a light, remembered the stone for the second time. He took it from his pocket.

To his amazement, the stone was bursting with light again. In the school hallway, the light had been like faint stars, but here, in the blackness, the light tore around them like a beacon. With this light Claire found the lighter she had been fumbling for, and Henry found the source of the laughter.

A mass of solid shadow scuttled around them. His eyes couldn't pierce the cloud as it undulated and ran around in a frantic circle. It seemed to be paralyzed by the light, which was cooling Henry's hot blood and clearing his head.

"Claire, come with me," Henry said, his voice calm and clearer than he believed possible. He helped her up and, while holding the rock aloft, let her lean on him as they inched up the hill. The dark mass continued to orbit around them, but it never came a step within the fierce light of the stone. In this fashion, the three of them crested the hill, and to Henry's astonishment, they almost walked into a bonfire.

Gavit and Eleonora were standing around a huge fire. Henry saw dry husks withering beneath large logs. The two of them stopped their work to gape at the twins. With the combined light of the stone and the fire, the shadow creature gave a withering shriek and shot away.

"You didn't tell me you had that kind of technology," Gavit said. The two of them seemed to be trying to take appropriate stock of the situation. But then a roar, a blessed deafening roar, sounded from the gates of the city.

"They'll be here in just a few minutes," Eleonora said. "And we'll be safe." Claire looked frantic at those words.

“Henry, we have to be close to the seeds. We need to get them. If we go back into that city there’s no telling when we’ll get back out here, especially after tonight.” She turned to the princess. “Take us to the pumpkins.”

Henry couldn’t believe her. Had she just commanded a princess? Eleonora didn’t seem mad though, but she looked contemplative, like she was making a move in a chess game.

“I will if that means you won’t go back into the city. Hurry, they’re just behind this hill.”

The four of them made their way down the other side of the hill and there, in unimaginable abundance, was a sea of pumpkins.

“Quick, just grab a fat one and crack it open,” Claire said.

“Here!” Gavit called. They made their way over to him, Henry still helping Claire to limp along. The pumpkin Gavit was pointing at was the size of a kitchen table.

“I think that will do,” Henry said. “Eleonora, does this mean we’re not welcome back into your city?” What she had said on the hilltop was haunting him.

“If my brother or mother see you, and know you carry that stone, they would never let you leave.” Eleonora strode forward, and to all of their surprise, punched a hole through the wall of the pumpkin. She dumped a handful of seeds, along with loops of wet, cold pumpkin sting, into his open hand.

“Do we need more than that?” Claire asked

“Uh, sure.” He pulled his backpack off and scraped the seeds, wet and sticky though they were, into one of the pockets. “Can we get a few more?”

Eleonora shot her arm back into the pumpkin and shoveled scoops of pumpkin into his bag. The roar from before sounded again, this time extremely close.

“You have to go,” Eleonora said, placing a well-manicured hand (the non-pumpkin one) on Henry’s shoulder. “Don’t forget to come back to me. And when you do, make sure not to tell anyone where you’re from until you find me again. Can you promise me that?” Henry was taken aback by her sudden closeness but felt frantic and so agreed quickly.

“Okay,” he said, wanting to be free of her clutch. “Thanks for the seeds and all your help.”

“Gavit,” he said. But he didn’t know what he wanted to say. “Thank you. I hope we see you the next time we visit.”

“Hurry, Henry,” Claire said, watching the top of the hill for the hoard of people they could hear approaching.

“We have the seeds,” Henry told the stone. This part was for show, of course, but if Claire knew now that he’d lied to her, she would rip him to shreds. “Claire, say it with me.”

“I want to go home.”

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