

The Doormaker

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## **Abstract**

Twelve-year-old Agnes Atwater and her brother Dean are sent north to spend the summer with their grandmother, a woman neither of them have ever met. They discover an enormous house nestled in a wilderness full of enchantment, mystery and a secret so enormous, it will change their world forever.

When the Atwater children and their new friend Peat discover that a necklace is actually the missing part of a key that allows the user to open doorways between their world and others, they are thrust into an adult world of danger and intrigue. On one side is their grandmother, part of an organization responsible for mapping and guarding the doorways between worlds. On the other side is Cabil, a mysterious foe, who will stop at nothing to find the “doormaker” named in an ancient legend. As the children follow the destruction left in Cabil’s wake—oozing black puddles, toxic landscapes—they must navigate the line between good and evil.

In Peat, Agnes finds someone she can trust with a secret—her ability to peek into other people’s memories. After a confrontation with a traitor in their midst, and a series of adventures that lead the children into another world, Agnes discovers that she has known the secret of the doormaker all along.

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## Chapter 1: Not-Memories

“I still don’t understand why you’re dumping us for the summer,” Agnes said. She kicked a pebble towards the tracks, but it bounced off the green metal train car and landed at her feet. Usually she enjoyed Boston’s South Station—the smell of the vendors roasting hot dogs and the clack of shoes on the marble floor as commuters hurried to catch their trains—but not today.

Agnes had just finished sixth grade last week. She had been looking forward to summer vacation for months: long, languorous days spent reading in their backyard tree house. And, when it got hot and sticky, she and her brother Dean would traipse down the street for a dip in the University’s pool, which was right next to the medical research lab where their parents worked. Sometimes Agnes spied them through the window—matching white lab coats and heads bent together over a microscope. This summer, however, there would be no trips to the pool.

“We aren’t deserting you, Honey. We’ve been over this,” said her mother. Maggie tried to smooth her daughter’s permanently messy brown hair, but Agnes shook off her hand. She knew it was meant to be comforting, but was too mad to accept even the small gesture.

Last night, the whole family had sat down at the dinner table as usual. Her parents had smiled and laughed, asking Agnes and Dean questions about the end of school and what their friends were doing for the summer. Then, they dropped the bomb: they would be spending a month in Vietnam for work. Not only would Agnes

and Dean be staying behind, they'd be shipped off to spend a month with their grandmother—a woman neither of them had ever met.

“Agnes, this is a very important opportunity for your Dad and me,” Maggie continued. “We’ve been studying these parasites in the lab—the diseases they cause—but this will give us a chance to get out in the field and,” her eyes brightened, “who knows, maybe even find a cure.”

Agnes glowered at a crack in the cement platform. She imagined it growing bigger and swallowing her up. Because, the thing was, being deserted by her parents wasn't the only thing on her mind. Last night at dinner they'd dropped another bomb: In the fall, her brother Dean would be skipping a grade. Agnes thought of the way they'd said it with proud teary eyes and felt sick to her stomach. Her little brother would be in the same grade as her, once again proving to the world that Agnes Atwater wasn't as smart as her genius family.

“Now, where did your brother get off to?” Maggie asked, peering around the crowded station.

Agnes spotted a pale, skinny boy near the front of the train. He had the same messy brown hair and pale, freckled skin as his sister. People often thought they were twins, which annoyed her to no end.

Dean was deep in conversation with a man wearing the blue uniform and flat-topped hat of a train conductor. Judging by the surprised expression on the man's face, Dean was probably asking him some mechanical question way over the head of a normal eleven-year-old. Agnes's brother was fascinated by how things worked; he could spend half an hour talking about the mechanics of a ballpoint pen.

Agnes had the feeling she was going to learn a lot about train engines on the four-hour ride to northern Maine.

“He’s right there, Mom,” said Agnes, “talking to the conductor.”

“Oh good.” Maggie straightened her jacket and picked up one of the matching red suitcases. “Will you get the other one?”

Agnes folded her arms across her chest. If she couldn’t be the smart Atwater, maybe she could be the stubborn one. “Why can’t we just stay home while you’re gone?”

“And who would take care of you?” Maggie asked, her voice teetering between exhaustion and irritation. “Besides you know what Mrs. Flannigan said...”

Agnes gritted her teeth. Mrs. Flannigan, the school guidance counselor, had convinced her parents that Agnes’s “mediocre performance at school” was due to her “overactive imagination”. Agnes had read the letter herself.

It wasn’t her fault that she was born a freak, Agnes wanted to shout at her parents. But she couldn’t. She couldn’t let anyone but Dean know. She thought of the last meeting she’d had with Mrs. Flannigan, in the woman’s office, which always smelled of mothballs. She had been telling Agnes about some dumb summer job she’d had in a perfume factory, urging her to “apply herself”.

“Well, when I was a younger thing,” Mrs. Flannigan had said on that afternoon as she lay a plate of stale cookies on the table, “I worked in a factory that printed perfume samples for magazines.” Her watery blue eyes took on a faraway look that meant she was gearing up for a long story. Agnes took a bite of a stale cookie that nearly cracked her front tooth.

“They were the loveliest smells, let me tell you—Violets and Roses and Cinnamon and—”

Mrs. Flannigan continued on in this way for a while, but by then Agnes had stopped listening. Instead, she stared out the window at the scraggly grass in the school’s front yard and let her mind wander.

The images often came to Agnes as gently as slipping into a daydream. The only difference was that these daydreams were pictures from someone else’s past. Dean, the only person who knew about them, called them her not-memories. That day, Agnes let her mind go quiet and saw an airy open room with windows set up high near the ceiling. The dim light filtered through to the factory floor in wide beams that trapped the dust motes and made them sparkle. A man in a ruffled suit, hitched up at one shoulder like a hunchback, stood at the top of a flight of metal stairs. His shoes made a funny clank clank clank sound as he muttered and walked round and round down the stairs.

Mrs. Flannigan paused and gave Agnes a stern look. “Now, what was I saying, Agnes? Are you even listening?”

“You were at the part with the clanking shoes,” Agnes had said, still staring absently out the window.

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, Agnes realized she’d made a mistake. Mrs. Flannigan opened and closed her mouth like a fish. Then she turned her blue stare on Agnes with the force of a spotlight.

“How do *you* know about Mr. Brown’s funny shoes?” she asked, suspicious.

Agnes opened her mouth to come up with an excuse. Nothing emerged but a faint squeak. They regarded each other in silence.

“You’ve told me this story before,” Agnes said quickly. “A lot of times, actually.” Mrs. Flannigan narrowed her eyes. There was an awkward silence while she dipped one of the stale cookies in her cup of tea. “Overactive imagination, I think,” she finally said. “That’s your problem.”

Mrs. Flannigan leaned over the table and Agnes caught a whiff of her strong floral perfume.

“If you could just get a hand on that overactive imagination,” she said, evidently liking the sound of her new term, “I think you’d do much better at school. Spend the summer outdoors doing something active, and not so much time staring out the window.” She sat back in her chair and began shuffling a pile of papers. “Any questions?”

Agnes had said nothing and stared down at her shoes. She always tried to be careful to separate real memories from her not-memories, to keep herself out of more trouble, but sometimes it was hard to tell the difference between what she was supposed to know and what she wasn’t.

Agnes sighed. Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad having Dean in her class after all. She’d never be as smart as him, anyways, and he was the only person who didn’t think she was crazy. She turned back to her mother.

“I don’t care what Mrs. Flannigan says. I’m twelve. I don’t need to be taken care of like a baby. Besides, you don’t even like her,” Agnes grumbled.

“Mrs. Flannigan?”

“No! Our grandmother.”

“That’s not true, I…” Maggie trailed off.

“Then why haven’t we ever met her?” Agnes finally sensed a weak point in her mother’s argument. “You don’t even have a single picture of your parents.”

Maggie rubbed her temples. Agnes noticed the dark purple circles under her eyes and tried to ignore the pang of guilt in her stomach. After all, their parents were the ones abandoning them. They deserved to feel bad about it.

“I don’t have any pictures because they were all destroyed when the basement flooded years ago. And—well—it’s complicated. When my father died, I was barely your age. Afterwards, my mother disappeared into her work. I spent all my time alone in this big crumbling house in the middle of nowhere. I felt completely abandoned and I—well—I found it hard to forgive her, I guess.”

“Abandoned like you’re abandoning us?” Agnes said.

Maggie recoiled as if she’d been slapped. Agnes realized that she’d finally gone too far.

“I survived sixteen years living with my mother,” Maggie snapped. “You can survive a few weeks.”

Her face softened a little. “Besides, she’s retired now and has lots of time on her hands. She lives in a beautiful area—lots of trees and lakes. It will be good for you to get outside and be active. I’m sure you’ll have a good time.” She cupped a hand around her mouth and called out, “Dean! Come help your sister with the suitcases.”

Agnes knew the conversation was over. Dean jogged across the platform to join them, balancing an armful of books and trying not to step on his untied shoelaces.

“The conductor said he’d let me blow the whistle if we get on the train now,” he said breathlessly. “Right now.”

Maggie smiled and ruffled his hair. Agnes scowled. Why was he allowed to have messy hair?

“Blowing the train whistle? That sounds exciting. We better get your suitcases loaded then.”

Soon, the luggage was stowed and Agnes and Dean were settled in two seats near the front of the car: the only ones that didn’t have giant holes with springs and stuffing escaping in cloudy white puffs. Agnes thought the train smelled like wet dogs. The only other passengers were a few boisterous college students heading home for the summer with gym bags and cardboard boxes for luggage, a harried-looking woman with two small kids, and an old man napping at the back, a ratty black fedora over his face to block out the light. Maggie handed over two brown paper bags, reminding them to save the food for lunch, and then went over The Instructions for the billionth time that day.

“Remember, you take the train to the end of the line, where—”

“Spade will be waiting for us,” Agnes interrupted. “And don’t leave the station or play on the train tracks or accept poisoned candy from strangers.”

“Why would we do that?” Dean asked with a frown.

Agnes rolled her eyes. Her brother could be very literal.

“Of course you wouldn’t, darling,” Maggie said with a stern look at Agnes. “Your sister just has an overactive imagination. Spade will meet you at the last station and drive you the rest of the way. Any questions?”

Dean shook his head. Agnes pouted and wouldn’t meet her mother’s eyes.

Maggie kissed each of them on the forehead and promised to send lots of postcards. As the train pulled away from the station, Agnes caught one last glimpse of their mother waving from the platform, her long black skirt billowing around her legs in the wind. For once, Agnes found she didn’t have anything to say and blinked at the tears stubbornly burning her eyes.

## Chapter 2: Finders Keepers

It hadn't taken them long to leave Boston's hectic streets and shiny glass office buildings behind. Now, the train rumbled through leafy green forests, passing the occasional lonely farmhouse perched on a hilltop.

"What kind of name is Spade?" asked Dean. He pulled apart his peanut butter and jelly sandwich and wrinkled his nose in disgust. Their parents could never seem to remember that he hated jelly. Agnes handed him the apple she'd been saving for lunch. "A stupid name." She felt mean for saying it, but didn't care.

Dean returned to his book. Agnes peered over his shoulder to see what he was reading: *Edible Plants of the North*. Great. On top of everything else, she was going to have to spend the next month making sure Dean didn't accidentally lick a poisonous tree as a science experiment.

Agnes sifted through the books and piles of loose papers scattered on the empty seat across from them. "Why are you reading this stuff?"

Dean shrugged without looking at her, lost in whatever mechanical problem he was trying to solve. She picked up a stack of papers, equations like black insects scurrying across the page, and pointed at a diagram that looked like a four-legged torture device.

"Dean, what is this?"

He squinted at the paper. "Instructions on how to build a wood stove."

"Why do you have plans for a wood stove?"

“Because the weather that far north can be unpredictable. Sometimes it even snows in the summer, you know.”

“Anything else?”

“And because our grandmother’s house doesn’t have electricity.”

Agnes groaned. She silently hoped that she’d catch pneumonia and die, just so her parents would feel as guilty as possible about banishing them to a cold, dark, crumbling house for the summer.

Dean reached over for her hand. “It won’t be so bad, Agnes,” he pleaded. “It might be fun. Like camping.”

Agnes gave her brother a small smile and ruffled his hair. She knew he was just trying to make her feel better, but “fun” might be pushing it. Anyways, Dean didn’t care where he was as long as he had his books with him.

The train let out a shrill whistle as they crossed a bridge over a cranberry bog, the tiny red berries floating on the surface. Agnes had once seen a bag of blood in her parents’ lab. The seal had broken and the blood had congealed into thick lumps. That’s what the bog looked like, a lake of lumpy blood.

The door between train cars whooshed open and the conductor stuck his head inside. “Next stop: Portland! Ten minutes!” he shouted.

The other passengers scrambled to pull their suitcases from the metal racks overhead as the train came to a halt. A baby began to cry in high-pitched bursts. Agnes buried her face in her arms and waited for the other passengers to get off, to go back to their lives and fun summer plans.

“I think we’re two stops after Portland,” Dean said. “What’s the name of the town again?”

Agnes lifted her head. Their mother must have told them—what with her detailed instructions about everything else—but Agnes couldn’t remember.

“It’s the last stop on the line. That shouldn’t be too hard to figure out.”

A few minutes later, the train started to move again. The only passengers were Agnes, Dean, and the old man, still snoring in the back corner. Agnes wondered if he’d slept through his stop. She got the sense that they had passed through some invisible line dividing civilization from the wilderness. No one else was dumb enough to go this far. The train engineers had even unhooked all the other cars and left them in Portland.

“Dean, what else did Mom and Dad tell you about our grandmother? I mean, that they didn’t tell me,” Agnes said. It had been bothering her for hours—the fact their parents confided in Dean about the house not having electricity. That they’d told him and not her.

Dean shrugged. “Not much else, really. That she lives in a big house on a bay. I don’t think they meant it to be a secret. It’s just that—well, you were so upset about having to go this summer and about me being in your class next year.” Dean wouldn’t meet her eyes.

Agnes took his hand. She was mad at their parents, yes, but she knew it wasn’t Dean’s fault that he was smarter than her.

“I’m not mad at you, Dean. It’s just, well, you’re so much better than me at everything.” Her voice cracked.

“That’s not true,” he said eagerly. “You’re better at music. Everyone says so.”

Agnes smiled. It was true. Music was the one subject in school she was any good at, but even then she couldn’t read the music. Somehow she could never connect the little black dots on the sheet music to the experience of hearing the melody itself. When she heard music it was something that appeared in colors and shapes—each note a thread that wound together to create something bigger than itself. She tried to explain this to her teacher, but he just frowned and told her she had to learn to follow the notes or she’d never amount to anything.

“And there’s, you know,” Dean lowered his voice, “the not-memories, too.”

Those were hardly a useful talent, but she appreciated the effort he was making. “Thanks, Dean.”

Her brother smiled and then went back to reading his book on edible plants. Agnes made a mental note to hide it as soon as they arrived. She didn’t feel like reading and went back to staring out the window.

The afternoon light had deepened the colors outside so the grass on the hills blended together and looked more like a carpet of fur. Agnes closed her eyes and imagined wrapping herself in a coat of soft green fur. She could lie down on the hilltop and blend in perfectly. She wouldn’t have to worry about not being good at anything useful. A hill had no other job than just *being*. For a moment she could feel the slightly damp, sun-warmed earth beneath her, taste the wind and smell the brown earth.

When Agnes opened her eyes, she was still reflected in the window as a girl—pale skin, stubby nose, freckles, and messy hair—not a hill at all. She inhaled

sharply. For behind her loomed the head of a black monster. Agnes froze, staring at the reflection. It couldn't be real. If she turned her head, slowly, the monster wouldn't really be there.

But when she turned it was there all right: a creature that looked part way between a dog and a wolf, standing in the aisle between the rows of seats. Spiky black fur covered its head and its glowing orange eyes stared straight into hers, just a foot away. The creature yawned, revealing a spotted pink tongue and double rows of sharp white teeth. It's breath smelled rotting.

"Dean," Agnes managed to choke.

Dean looked up from his book and screamed.

"I'm terribly sorry about that," a man hustled up the aisle and grabbed the creature by its spiked collar. "He must have slipped his leash while I was sleeping."

"This thing is your pet?" Dean mumbled, doubtful. He pushed himself as far back against the wall as he could go.

"Bad dog," the man said to the creature in a stern voice. Agnes swore she saw the dog—if you could even call it that—shoot him an annoyed look.

The man wore an old fashioned suit and a slightly squashed black hat. He must have been the old man sleeping at the back of the train. His white hair and beard were well trimmed, revealing a thick pink scar that ran from the edge of his blue eye, under his beard and down over his lips. Agnes wondered if his "dog" had done that.

"Well, this is my stop anyhow. Sorry again if he startled you," the man said with a friendly smile. He clipped a thick red leash to the dog's collar and began

dragging it towards the rack of suitcases at the front. He took down a small leather satchel and waited in the aisle. A moment later, the conductor stuck his head into their train car: "Next stop Ayers Junction! Last stop after that at Calais."

As the train rounded the next bend and began to slow, a small green building came into view. A sign on the roof declared it was **AYERS JUNCTION**. Dean had gone back to reading his book, shooting the occasional nervous glance at the dog creature, which was licking its plate-sized paws, each of which ended in six sharp claws. The man leant against the wall, the leash held loosely in one hand, and began humming a tune.

Agnes watched him out of the corner of her eye. The song seemed familiar, as if she'd heard it before. Maybe in music class? She could feel something start to take shape at the edge of her memory. The high screech of the train's brakes interrupted her thoughts. When they had come to a full stop, the door opened with a clank. The man walked towards it and then paused. He turned back to Agnes.

"Excuse me," he said, extending his arm in her direction. "I think you must have dropped this."

Agnes automatically extended her hand. The man placed a round piece of metal on a chain into her palm. Agnes had never seen it before.

"Thank you, but this isn't mine." She held her arm out, the chain dangling off her hand.

The man smiled at her, his blue eyes twinkling. The way his skin stretched made his scar look like an earthworm slithering across his face. "Well, then. Finders keepers."

Before she could protest, the man had climbed down the metal stairs onto the station platform, his enormous black dog trotting obediently at his heels. They disappeared through the green door of the station.

Agnes and Dean looked down at the necklace. The disc was about the size of a silver dollar and had the dull finish of tin foil. The metal was thin, but the charm felt oddly heavy and wouldn't bend. Agnes held it up to the light pouring through the window and gasped. What had originally seemed to be a solid piece of metal was actually covered with hundreds of tiny holes in an elaborate pattern. When the sunlight shone through them, the disc lit up like a constellation. It was beautiful.

"What is it?" Dean asked. He sounded nervous.

"I don't know." Agnes ran her fingers over the tiny bumps on the surface.

"Maybe Braille?"

"Braille is for reading books." Dean leaned away from the necklace, as if it might bite. "Are you going to give it back?"

"To who?"

"I don't know, Agnes. I just—I don't like it. And it doesn't seem fair to just keep it."

Agnes made a face at him. Was it fair that they were stuck on this cruddy train, heading for the most boring summer of their lives? Was it fair that he'd inherited all the brains in the family, while she got some weird psychic superpower that turned her into a freak? Life wasn't fair, she wanted to say. Instead, she slipped the chain over her head and tucked the disc under her shirt.

"Finders keepers," she said.

Dean went back to reading, occasionally shooting his sister a look like he wanted to say more. Agnes ignored him and stared out the window at the endless sea of trees until she fell asleep with her forehead pressed against the glass.

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*The grass was cool and slick under Agnes's feet as she crossed the open field. A brown rabbit with a fluffy tail and white spot on its ear hopped out of the tall grass and wiggled its nose. Agnes couldn't remember how she had gotten there, but it didn't matter. She knew the way.*

*She wove between the Aspens' spindly white trunks, their leaves shivering gently in the breeze, towards the deep shade that marked the beginning of the thicker forest beyond. Suddenly, a melody began to drift through the air—something piercing and beautiful and somehow familiar—and she paused to listen. The breeze swirled around, gently lifting her hair, and the music grew louder until—*

“Agnes, we're almost there.” Dean shook her shoulder. “You've been asleep for an hour.”

Agnes blinked and looked around, uncertain. The dream had felt so real. Through the window, she saw a white clapboard building in the distance. That must be the last station where Shovel or Spade or whatever his name was would meet them. When she turned back to ask Dean what time it was, the words died in her throat.

A small brown rabbit with a fluffy white tail sat in the aisle. It stood on its hind legs and scented the air with a wiggling pink nose. Agnes noticed the white spot on its ear. It was the rabbit from her dream. But that was impossible, she

thought. People said she had an overactive imagination and, yes, there were the not-memories, but she wasn't *crazy*. She didn't see things that weren't there.

Agnes watched as the rabbit hopped down the aisle and disappeared into the space between the cars.

"Dean, did you see—" she managed to choke.

"Did I see what?" He looked up from his book. "Are you okay? You look kind of pale. Well, paler than usual."

"Nothing. I'm fine."

Agnes stared at the empty aisle. The rabbit must have gotten on the train somehow, she reasoned. The dream was just a coincidence.

As the train stopped, they scrambled to collect their suitcases. Agnes looked around for the rabbit, but it was nowhere to be seen. The metal door slid open with a painful shriek and they stepped down, straight onto the tracks.

The station didn't even have a platform. On closer inspection, Agnes saw that the white clapboard building's windows were boarded up with rotting plywood. The whole structure tilted on its foundation, as if the slightest puff of wind would knock it down entirely. They stepped off the tracks and looked around. There was nothing but forest stretching endlessly into the distance, broken only by a rutted dirt road, empty of all traffic.

The conductor stuck his head out the window of the engine car and shouted "All aboard!" into the empty forest.

Before Agnes and Dean could protest, the train was moving, back in the direction they'd come. Two minutes later they stood alone by the tracks with only the occasional chirping bird for company.

"What now?" Agnes asked. She wished there was a phone so she could call their mother and say I told you so. More than ever, this whole trip was feeling like a massive mistake.

"We wait, I guess." Dean looked nervously into the shadowy forest. "Do you think there are bears here?"

"Bears?" Agnes gulped.

Luckily, just then they heard the sound of a car engine, coughing and sputtering up the road. A brown pick-up truck, covered in holes where the orange rust had eaten through the body, squealed to a halt a few feet away. It looked more like scrap metal than a car.

The driver's door was flung open and out stepped a man as tall and thin as an Aspen tree, with skin just as pale. Ears the size of saucers stuck out of his bald head, which would have made him funnier looking if his eyes didn't look so friendly.

"Hello there," he said, waving at them with a gangly arm. The man hiked up his pants, which were covered in mud, and shot them a sheepish grin. "Sorry I'm late. I had to move a tree blocking the road."

He picked up the two red suitcases and tossed them into the back of the truck. Before he climbed back in, Agnes called out, "Um, excuse me. Who are you?"

The man slapped his head with a large palm and walked over to where Dean and Agnes hovered uncertainly by the train tracks. The way his clothes hung off his tall, wiry frame made him look like a scarecrow.

“My apologies,” he said, holding out an enormous hand with spindly fingers. “I’ve heard so much about you, I feel like we’ve already met. I’m Spade.”

Agnes took the hand tentatively in her own, relieved when he shook it gently. “I’m Agnes and this is my brother Dean.”

“Nice to meet you both. What do you say we get going? I’ve got some pumpkin pie in the car if you’re hungry. The drive’s still a few hours and it would be better to get in before dark. I know Hibernia’s anxious to see you.”

Hibernia? Was that their grandmother’s name? Agnes realized that their mother had forgotten to tell them. Just then, her stomach rumbled and the thought of pie wiped all other concerns from her mind. Agnes climbed up into the front seat of the pick up and motioned for Dean to follow. Soon they were on the road, inhaling mouthfuls of pie as the truck bumped its way back down the dirt road.

Agnes licked a blob of whipped cream off her fingers. The pie was the best thing she’d ever tasted. The summer might be boring, but at least they wouldn’t starve.

“Your name is Spade?” asked Dean.

“Yup. Most people think I earned the name because of my green thumb, but really it’s because my feet are so big and flat they look like shovels,” Spade said without a trace of embarrassment.

“So do you work for our grandmother?” asked Agnes. Not only did she not know their grandmother’s name, she didn’t really know who this man was either.

“You could say that,” Spade replied.

Agnes and Dean strained against their seatbelts as the car swerved around a massive fallen log.

“I help Hibernia take care of the place. Been living there for,” a look of concentration came over his face, as if he was adding up numbers in his head, “about twenty years, I guess.”

“Twenty years!” Agnes replied, shocked. Even though Spade was bald, he didn’t look much older than their parents, certainly not old enough to have worked somewhere for twenty years.

“I was barely older than you when your grandmother took me in,” he said, a note of sadness creeping into his voice. “Hold on. This rut is a doozy.”

Sure enough, the car tilted forward steeply down one side of a large hole and up the other. Agnes groaned, feeling that she’d left her stomach behind.

“Do you get carsick?” Spade asked nervously.

Dean grinned. “It’s like being on the Oregon trail. Just pretend you’re in a covered wagon.”

Agnes glared at him and wondered if her face was turning green. She shouldn’t have eaten that second piece of pie.

### Chapter 3: The Patchwork House

Luckily, the rest of the car ride went by quickly. Agnes felt like she was on the verge of throwing up, but at least she didn't have time to worry about the rabbit hallucination on the train or the crumbling house with no electricity waiting at the end of the road. The damp salty breeze coming through the window settled her stomach, though she was horrified when she caught her reflection in the truck's side mirror. Her hair was soaking in the humid air like a sponge. It had practically doubled in size.

Soon, the road petered out in a grassy field. Spade parked the truck in the shade of a large pine, whose low bristly boughs sheltered it like a massive umbrella. They climbed out of the car and stretched their stiff limbs. Agnes sat on a stone and waited for her stomach to stop roiling.

Wildflowers grew all over the field in clumps of purple and blue like splashes of spilled paint. It was near sunset and the orange light reflected off Dean's pale skin as he wandered the field, making it glow. He paused by a blackberry bush. "Hey! Look at this!"

Agnes squinted. Dean stood beside a weathered sign nailed to a wooden post. **DARKTHORN**, it read in faded letters.

"Is that her name?" Dean asked with a frown. "Grandmother Darkthorn?"

Agnes snorted. It sounded like the name of a cartoon villain, not a grandmother.

Spade slammed the truck's tailgate and crossed the field, a suitcase in each hand. "It's the name of the house," he said. "Sort of an odd name for a person, don't you think?"

That was funny, coming from someone named after a shovel, thought Agnes. She stretched her arms and realized her stomach felt a little better. She was disappointed. The thought of going back to being angry all the time was exhausting.

Spade started off down a narrow dirt path near the sign that led into a dense grove of pines. Agnes and Dean had to jog to keep up with his long strides. After a few minutes, they reached a steep hill covered in a layer of slippery brown pine needles. Luckily, someone—probably Spade—had cut a staircase right into hillside.

When Agnes arrived at the top, she was already out of breath, but the view would have knocked it out of her anyways. To the left, crumbling cliffs rose up thirty feet. A few scraggly trees perched precariously on top. Some leaned so far over the edge that only their grasping roots kept them from plunging into the basin below.

Directly in front of them, a white pebbly beach sloped gently downhill until it reached the spot where the water should have been. Instead of the ocean, there was only flat muddy sand stretching into the distance, broken occasionally by an island of wet rock rising like the back of a giant turtle. It looked like someone had pulled the plug on the ocean.

"Where's all the water?" Agnes asked in wonder.

Spade smiled at her with a mischievous glint in his eye. "Don't worry, it will be along in a few hours."

Dean's brow furrowed. "I read about this. Fascinating geological occurrence, actually. Hang on." He began to dig through his backpack and eventually found the book he was looking for.

"Here it is." He cracked open the spine and found his place. "The tides in this region can rise and fall up to thirty vertical feet in just a few hours."

"That's like three stories," Agnes said. She realized if she squinted she could just make out the white tips of waves far in the distance.

"Anyway, there's the house," Spade said.

Agnes turned to her right. She'd been so distracted by the landscape that she hadn't noticed the massive grey shingled house perched on top of a steep hill further down the beach. In front of the house, a rocky spit of land extended into the bay like a pointing finger. Behind the house, lawn spread out in a bright green blanket until it reached the edge of the thick woods. And there, in the center of the lawn behind the house, was the last thing Agnes had expected to see in the middle of nowhere: a red and blue striped circus tent with a chimney pipe extending through the top. She pointed it out to Dean.

"I guess you won't need your plans for the stove, after all."

Dean shook his head. "This place is—well—weird."

"No kidding," Agnes murmured. For once, they were in complete agreement.

Spade smiled, as if it was a compliment. "Come on. Hibernia'll be waiting."

They picked their way across the beach, leaning into the strong wind. As they approached the house, it seemed to grow, but it wasn't only the enormous size that made it strange. One side had gingerbread trim and a tower like a castle, while the

other side was low to the ground and had an enormous blue door that looked like it belonged on a barn. Everything from the shingles to the windows looked mismatched. It was as if someone had taken parts from different buildings and sewn them all together.

“Look!” Dean said, pointing to the spit of land in front of the house.

A woman stood about halfway out, a long black shawl draped around her shoulders against the wind. A small pink pig trotted nearby, sniffing at the ground with a flat wrinkled nose. Suddenly the pig raised its head and gave a series of loud oinks. Then it began running towards them on stubby legs, its curly tail bobbing up and down. It was such a funny sight that Agnes couldn't help but laugh. The sound echoed off the surrounding cliffs.

The woman turned towards them and waved. The wind caught her long white hair and wrapped it around her neck like a scarf.

Agnes raised her hand to wave back. “Is that her?”

Spade nodded. “And this will be Baxter.”

The little pig ran straight up to Agnes and rubbed his wiggling wet nose into her shins with a snuffling noise. He squealed happily when Agnes bent down to scratch the wiry tufts of grey hair on his head. She still didn't want to be stuck there for the summer, but he was pretty cute.

“I see you've met Baxter,” said their grandmother as she walked the last few steps down the pebbly beach to meet them. She wore green rubber boots and a set of gold bangles that tinkled when she waved. Agnes was surprised to see a face that looked so much like her own mother. Older, yes, but unmistakable.

“Pigs are much smarter than other animals, you know,” said the grandmother. “Though they do get into awful mischief sometimes. Much like children, from what I remember.”

Agnes raised her eyebrows at Dean. Was she kidding?

Hibernia smiled at them, a bit uncertainly. They stood in a loose circle, silently regarding each other until Dean broke the silence. “Are we supposed to hug?” he asked, matter of fact.

Agnes jabbed her elbow into his ribs and he shot her a dirty look.

“I suppose so,” Hibernia said with a laugh. “But we can start by shaking hands if you’d prefer.” Her bracelets jangled together as she extended her hand to Agnes. “I’m Hibernia, your grandmother.”

As Agnes took her grandmother’s hand, she felt some of the anger she’d been feeling all day evaporate. The house might be old and crumbling, but at least Hibernia seemed glad to see them. And anyone who kept a pig as a pet couldn’t be too boring.

“I’m sure you’re tired and hungry. Follow me.” Hibernia set off towards the house.

They crossed the beach and followed Hibernia across the lawn towards the blue barn door. The door was even bigger than it had seemed from the beach: nearly ten feet square and divided in half so you could open the top and bottom separately. It looks like it was made for a giant, Agnes thought. The top half of the door was open and pinned against the wall. Inside, she could see a dimly-lit kitchen.

“Come inside,” Hibernia said, unlatching the bottom half of the door.

They followed her into the warm kitchen. Not much light filtered through the small windows, but the cherry red table and chairs and the coals burning in the large stone fireplace gave the room a cozy feeling. Agnes looked around and realized there was no refrigerator, no stove, not so much as a toaster. Dean had been right: no electricity.

A black iron pot hanging from a hook over the coals released a delicious smell into the air. Agnes realized she was hungry again. Baxter evidently felt the same way because he nuzzled his head against her ankle, alternately oinking and staring at the iron pot.

Spade took four bowls from a shelf over the sink and ladled them full of some kind of thick brown stew. Grasping them all in his large hands, he transferred them to the table. Agnes and Dean slurped the first bites hungrily and then, as the taste hit their tongues, wolfed down the rest. By the time they had all finished eating, the sun had fully set and it was dark. As they watched through the window, the moon rose, a glowing hangnail lighting up the mudflats.

Spade yawned loudly. "Been a long day. I think I'll pack it in for the night. Goodnight everyone." He whistled for Baxter and the pig followed him through the kitchen door and into the night.

"Does Spade live out in the tent?" Agnes asked.

Hibernia nodded. "At first he lived in here, but it's an old house and the doorways weren't made for someone of his—well—stature."

Hibernia cleared her throat. “So...” Her voice trailed off and she looked around the room, as if searching for something to say. She cleared her throat. “So, do you have homework to do over the summer?”

Dean shook his head. “We’re starting seventh grade next year. Junior high’s in a different school, so we don’t know any of our teachers yet.”

“What, both of you?” Hibernia asked, surprised.

Agnes gritted her teeth. Her voice came out harsher than she meant it to, “Dean’s skipping a grade.”

“Ah, I see,” Hibernia said.

There was another awkward silence full of more throat-clearing. When Hibernia spoke again, her words all ran together. “Well, there are lots of books in the library right through that door—I mean, if you like reading. Or, well, whatever you like. I just want you to have a nice time.”

Agnes realized that their grandmother was nervous. For some reason, this fact made her feel better about being there.

“For tonight, I imagine you’re both exhausted,” Hibernia continued, “so I’ll show you to your rooms and save the grand tour for tomorrow.”

She took a copper lantern off the mantel and beckoned for them to follow her into the pantry. They passed shelves lined with cans of soup so old the labels were black and peeling, and continued up a set of steep stairs. The candlelight flickered off the walls, giving the dark passage a creepy feeling. Agnes wondered if the house might be haunted, then shook her head at her own silliness. Phantom rabbits and ghosts. What would Mrs. Flannigan think? Overactive imagination, indeed.

At the top of the stairs, they stepped onto a square landing with two identical doors and a window that looked onto the bay. Hibernia pointed to another staircase running between the closed doors. It didn't look as steep as the last one and was carpeted in a worn green runner. "If you follow this all the way down, you'll end up in the library. The house is large and much of it is shut up, so be careful you don't take a wrong turn."

Agnes thought the green carpet looked like a snake, wriggling deep into the bowels of the dark house.

Hibernia opened one of the doors to reveal a room painted robin's egg blue. Inside was a wooden bed with a matching blue silk canopy and a fluffy duvet that had already been turned down for the night. Agnes's clothes were folded neatly in an open cupboard against the wall. Spade must have unpacked for them already. The only other piece of furniture in the room was a rocking horse. Agnes touched the horse's smooth head and it rocked silently back and forth.

"This was your mother's room," said Hibernia. She put the lantern down on the floor near the rocking horse. It almost seemed alive in the flickering light.

"Sleep well. Oh, and don't forget to blow out the candle before you go to bed. Dean, your room is just next door. Come with me."

Hibernia shut the door behind her. Agnes pulled on her pajamas and climbed under the thick duvet. In no time at all she was toasty warm, but the big drafty room felt lonely. She wished Dean was there, even if he did snore. For a while, Agnes lay awake, listening to the creaks of an old house settling down for the night. She played with the silver disc she wore around her neck, rattling it up and down its chain.

Agnes felt a little guilty for taking it. Maybe Dean was right; she should have given it to the conductor. Soon her eyelids felt too heavy to think about it any further and she drifted off to sleep.

## Chapter 4: The Thorn Garden

When Agnes woke up the next morning, the room began to reveal a few of its secrets. First, she noticed a window seat hidden behind the long blue curtains framing a window that looked out onto the bay. Overnight, the mud flats had disappeared under a layer of dark water. Waves lapped gently against the shore, creeping slowly closer to the house. She was also surprised to find a small door in the wall behind the rocking horse. After a few tugs it opened to reveal a narrow hallway with a matching door at the other end. The walls were lined with shelves, but they were empty of anything save for dust and a few dead spiders. Agnes pushed on the door at the other end, but it wouldn't budge.

"Morning."

Agnes jumped. She turned to find Dean, already dressed in jeans and a misbuttoned flannel shirt, hovering in the doorway.

"You scared me," she snapped.

"I see you're in an even better mood than yesterday."

Agnes glared at him.

"Maybe you should try being positive."

"Be positive? You can't just decide to be happy, Dean," Agnes grumbled.

"Well, fake it until you *become* happy, then."

Agnes sighed. There was no use in having Dean annoyed at her. He was her only ally in this strange place, after all, so she'd try not to be grumpy.

“Anyways, I heard you bumping around back here and came to investigate,” he said.

“This door must lead into your room,” Agnes said. “I pushed, but it won’t open.”

Dean looked the door up and down with a thoughtful expression. “You know, there’s a big wardrobe in my room. I bet it’s pressed up against this wall. Come on, I’ll show you.”

Agnes followed Dean out to the hallway and then into his room, which she hadn’t seen the night before. Tall windows cut into the dark wood paneling that covered the walls framed an endless forest of leafy treetops, quivering gold in the morning sun. Dean walked past the four-poster bed and stopped in front of a massive wooden wardrobe—over six feet tall with heavy brass handles. It looked big enough to house Spade, which was saying something.

“You think the door’s behind there?” Agnes asked.

“There’s only one way to find out. Come on.”

Agnes looked up at the wardrobe’s ornate trim: spiky carved pine trees and woodland creatures. If that thing tipped over, they would be impaled. “I don’t know, Dean...”

“What? You have something better to do?” He folded his arms across his chest. “You’re so stubborn sometimes,” Agnes grumbled. She took her position next to him and began pushing.

It was slow going, but they managed to move the wardrobe inch by inch, finally revealing a small wooden door with a tarnished brass knob. They collapsed on the ground, feeling hot and sweaty.

Dean tugged the door open to reveal the narrow empty hallway they had been standing in before.

“There’s nothing in there,” Agnes said, taking in the empty shelves. “Why would anyone go to the trouble of blocking it off?”

“Hey,” Dean said, “look at this.” He knelt by a small iron grate in the wall, just next to the door. “It looks like an old coal duct or something. It must have been behind the wardrobe.”

Agnes shrugged. It all seemed like a lot of work for nothing. “My teeth feel scummy. Now that the important task of moving the giant wardrobe is done can we please go find the bathroom?”

They ventured into the hallway, following the steps covered in the worn green carpet, which ended in a dusty hallway full of identical doors. Luckily, the first one they tried was a bathroom. Agnes felt better once she’d brushed her teeth and washed her face.

The stairs continued down to the ground floor, but were now sweeping and grand with intricately carved banisters in the shapes of bears and other fierce creatures. Agnes ran her hand over the smooth polished wood of a wolf’s fang. She was glad they hadn’t come up this way last night. The house had seemed creepy enough in the dark.

At the bottom of the stairs they found a library, the walls covered in bookshelves bursting with dusty tomes. Red and orange patterned rugs overlapped on the floor, as if fighting for space, and two overstuffed couches made of chocolate brown velvet faced off in front of a wide brick fireplace.

Beside the fireplace was the largest clock Agnes had ever seen. The body was over eight feet tall and wide as a tree trunk. The face was bright white—a stark contrast to the dark wood body—and painted with shimmering gold numbers. The splayed hands pointed to six and twelve, which was strange as it couldn't be much past nine. It must be broken, Agnes thought. The house was probably full of weird old junk.

Just then, the clack of footsteps rang out on the stairs. A moment later, Baxter trotted past them and through an open door on the other side of the room. Hibernia appeared next, dressed in a thick wool sweater and with a green silk scarf tied around her head.

“Well, someone's ready for his breakfast,” Hibernia said. “How about you two? I think I smell oatmeal.”

Agnes and Dean followed Hibernia into the kitchen where last night's cauldron of stew had been transformed into a steaming pot of oatmeal, full of cinnamon and chopped apples. It was almost as good as the pumpkin pie.

Agnes felt better after she'd eaten, as if every delicious meal melted a little of her resentment at being banished. Maybe Dean was right, though she'd never admit it to his face, maybe she could stand to be more positive.

Once they had all eaten their fill, Hibernia suggested a walk. Eager to see more of the bay and surrounding woods, Agnes and Dean pulled on their coats and followed her outside. As they walked across the lawn towards the water, she asked them about home and school. Hibernia and Dean chatted about nothing important while Agnes enjoyed the combination of cool morning air and hot sun warming her skin.

“What are we supposed to call you?” Dean asked. “Grandmother?”

Hibernia wrinkled her nose, as if the question smelled bad. “Goodness, certainly not. It makes me sound like I should be baking cookies in a frilly apron.”

Agnes hid a smile behind her hand.

“Well, what then?” Dean asked.

“Hibernia. It is my name, after all. You don’t hear me calling you ‘grandson’. Come, let’s go out onto the point. The tide is about to start going out again.”

They walked out onto the spit of land in front of the house. The wind was stronger there and scattered their clothes with beads of cold water. Hibernia picked up a round stone and tossed it towards the point. Baxter went careening after it, hooves clattering over the rocky ground. When he reached the rock, he sniffed it, then tossed his head and trotted away.

Hibernia smiled. “He’s always hopeful that this time I’ve thrown him a cupcake instead of a rock.”

She fiddled with the edge of her scarf, and her voice quivered a little when she continued: “I know you didn’t have much choice in coming this summer, but I

hope you'll be happy here. There's not much to do if you don't like reading or exploring. Even the water is too cold to swim for long, but I find it very beautiful."

Agnes looked out at the sun glinting off the endless blue water and thought she was right. It was beautiful, but also frightening. The waves crashed against each other like cymbals as the water was pushed and pulled by the strong wind. The tide stirred the mud floor of the bay until the water was murky brown. It was impossible to tell what lay beneath the surface.

"That's okay," Dean said. He cast a nervous glance at the place where the spit of land sloped gently into the water. "Agnes is a good swimmer, but I don't like it."

It was true, she was a better swimmer than Dean, but he never bothered to try. He didn't like the cold or the wet and always said humans weren't meant to live under water.

"There's a town a few miles down the road," Hibernia said. "Not many people still live there, but there is a young man about your age, Agnes. He brings the mail once a week. His parents were dear friends of mine and I'm sure he'll be happy for some company his own age."

Baxter lay on the rocks at Agnes's feet. She scratched his ears and wondered what had happened to this boy's parents. Hibernia had said they *were* friends of hers. Past tense.

The wind picked up. Agnes felt its icy fingers cutting through her thick coat. At home she'd be sweating by the pool. It was a strange feeling being dressed for winter in the middle of June.

“Come on,” Hibernia said, heading back towards the house, “I’ll introduce you to the sheep. Baxter is an excellent sheep herder.”

They followed her past the house and up a small hill. Agnes heard the soft, mournful bleating even before she saw the sheep clustered around the base of a tall stone wall hidden in the dappled shadows at the edge of the woods. The sheep chewed small bunches of white flowers that released a sweet fresh smell.

“The sheep love the flowers that grow here,” Hibernia said. “The only things they like better are the kitchen chairs.”

Agnes ran her hands over the soft moss growing in the gaps between the stones, worn nearly smooth by time. The top of the wall was a good ten feet above her head, but crumbling as if it had once been even taller. “Is it old?” Agnes asked.

“Oh yes,” Hibernia replied. “As old as the original house that stood here. Probably even older.”

A round wooden door—the same green as the moss—sat in the center of the wall. A rusty handle shaped like a twisting vine sat squarely in the center. Dean tried to peer through the tiny cracks between the boards. “What’s inside?” he asked.

Before Hibernia could answer, Spade’s voice rang out across the lawn like an alarm. “Hibernia! You forgot to latch the door!”

He stood by the kitchen door jumping up and down and tugging on his giant ears in distress. “The sheep are in the house again. They’re eating everything!”

Sure enough, they looked around and realized the ground was covered in half-chewed bunches of white flowers, but the sheep were nowhere to be seen.

“Drat,” Hibernia said. “I’ll take Baxter and get this sorted out. I’ll be right back.”

She walked briskly across the lawn with the pig at her heels. He paused and scented the air before trotting through the kitchen door with an angry oink.

“Come on, let’s see what’s inside,” Dean said. He pushed against the green door and it swung open with a squeal of protest from the rusty hinges. He clambered through the round opening with Agnes right behind.

Agnes had expected to find a small flower or vegetable garden on the other side, but instead found herself pawing through a tangle of brown bushes covered in thick, sharp thorns. Agnes stopped and tried to untangle her braid from a particularly long, nasty-looking thorn.

“What kind of garden is this?” she asked in disgust.

The tall stone walls cast a gloomy grey shade over the bushes. A narrow path in front of them led into the thick tangle, but Agnes couldn’t see how far it went.

“I wonder what kind of plants these are,” Dean said. He ran his finger over one of the smooth thorns, which glinted black in the sun. “Come on. Let’s see what’s further in.”

“Maybe we should just go back and wait for Hibernia!” Agnes called out, but her brother had already disappeared down the narrow path.

Agnes looked back through the open doorway at the lawn and the circus tent. Everything else seemed so carefully tended. It made her uneasy that this place had been walled up and allowed to run wild.

“Just push your way through,” Dean called, “it opens up on the other side.”

“When did you get so adventurous,” Agnes grumbled. She pushed aside her nagging anxiety and sidled down the path, trying her best to avoid catching on any more thorns.

The open ground on the other side was full of yellow, weedy grass. Twenty feet further back stood a row of five squat, twisted trees. The brambles had wound their stiff thorny vines around the trunks to form an impenetrable wall.

I guess there’s no back door, Agnes thought. She looked around at the thirsty grass and the dried brown tree limbs. “Everything looks dead.”

“I don’t think so,” replied Dean. He bent over a purple shoot growing up through the dry dirt, covered in tiny yellow thorns like teeth. “I think it’s a baby thorn bush,” he said, stroking it tenderly.

Agnes thought it looked like an alien tentacle emerging from the ground.

“I’m going to dig it up and bring it back to the house,” Dean said. “Maybe it’s in one of my books.”

Agnes sniffed. The smell of something sour and oily hung in the air. While Dean dug up the plant, she walked over the dead grass towards the twisted trees at the back of the garden. The smell was getting stronger. She stopped. On the ground sat a puddle of liquid so black it seemed to swallow the light around it. As she moved closer, a small bubble rose to the surface and popped, releasing a foul stench—like rotting meat mixed with metal. Agnes felt the hair on the back of her neck stand up even as something compelled her to move closer and peer into the puddle’s dark depths. It seemed to be pulsing slightly, as if breathing in and out. Moreover, Agnes was sure it was growing.

“Get away from there!” a panicked voice called out, tearing through her trance.

Hibernia pushed through the last few feet of brush, heedless of the thorns tearing at her scarf. She lunged for Agnes and pulled her roughly away from the puddle.

As her grandmother’s fingers closed around her arm, Agnes was suddenly plunged into an image of the thorn garden. It was cold. A man in a dark coat stumbled through the thick snow blanketing the ground. He wore a long red scarf wrapped around his face so that only his blue eyes peeked out.

The man pushed through the brambles around one of the trees, breaking off thorny branches. His hands were bleeding by the time he reached the other side. He trailed his hand along the back wall, pushing against the stones and leaving a smeared trail of blood behind.

“Where is it—where is it—” he muttered.

Branches snapped behind him. A voice cried out, harsh and hissing: “Where are you, blast it? Cabil, I know you’re in here! You can’t get away this time!”

The man’s movements grew more frantic. Puffy clouds of warm breath escaped the confines of his scarf as he looked fearfully behind him, towards the sound of snapping branches. He beat his fists on the wall and let out a string of curses. Then he froze.

He stared at a spot on the wall—no larger than a dinner plate—that was shimmering. He took a deep breath, placed his hand on the wall and then it was as if his hand had actual passed *through* the wall and disappeared.

Agnes gasped and pulled away from her grandmother. “What—what happened here...” she trailed off and looked around.

The ground was covered in a faint blanket of snow, perfectly white except for a bright trail of blood drops leading towards the trees. Agnes took a deep breath and closed her eyes. It was summer. There was no snow. No blood.

When she opened her eyes again the snow was gone and both Hibernia and Dean were looking at her curiously. Agnes forced a smile. What was happening to her? It was one thing to see an imaginary rabbit on a train, but this was something else—something a lot more frightening. Did the bleeding man exist, or was he a figment of her imagination? He seemed to be running away from someone and—

“What ever do you mean, dear?” Hibernia asked with narrowed eyes.

“Nothing happened.”

Agnes swallowed loudly. It felt like a large lump was stuck in her throat. She turned to look back at the black puddle, as if that’s all she’d been referring to. “The—the puddle, I meant. What is it?”

The black liquid released another foul-smelling bubble that drifted up a few inches and popped. The puddle definitely looked bigger than it had a minute ago.

Hibernia’s face went still and cold. The friendly, nervous woman from earlier that morning was gone. “Out,” she said, “both of you, out of here.”

She pushed Agnes and Dean roughly ahead of her through the bushes, not slowing even when a long thorn scraped Dean’s cheek and he yelped. They piled back through the doorway and she slammed it shut behind them.

“What was that?” Dean asked, rubbing at the scratch on his cheek. “And why do you have a garden full of thorns?”

“Oh, the house is named after them,” said Hibernia. She seemed distracted, but her voice had lost its cold edge. “People call it Darkthorn. Whoever built the house had to cut back an entire thicket of them. They left the garden there as a sort of souvenir, I suppose.”

“And what about the puddle?” Agnes demanded. “What was that stuff?”

“It’s nothing,” Hibernia said with a strained smile. “I just haven’t been there in a while. Let’s go clean that scratch, shall we?”

As Hibernia led them back towards the house, Agnes thought of what she had just seen. Why was Hibernia acting so strangely? And what had happened to the man’s hand? It couldn’t have just disappeared inside the wall. More importantly, what was happening to *her*? The not-memories were nothing new, but they had never intruded into the real world before. It was as if some line separating things was growing blurry, and she didn’t like it.

So many questions were bouncing around her head that Agnes barely noticed the small silver disc around her neck had grown warm and tingled against her skin.

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Hibernia acted distracted the rest of the day. At dinner, Agnes watched as she mistook the sugar for salt and not only sprinkled it all over her mashed potatoes, but then ate them without noticing. After dinner, she mumbled something about doing some work in the library. That was the last they saw of her all night.

Agnes and Dean retreated upstairs to play backgammon by flashlight. The weather had turned cold and Dean's room was drafty, so they huddled together under his thick comforter to cut the chill. As Dean pondered his next move, Agnes thought about telling him what she'd seen in the thorn garden that afternoon, but even *she* wasn't sure exactly what she'd seen. How was she supposed to explain it to him?

Twelve deep tones rang through the air, making the very floorboards beneath them shiver. Agnes threw off the blanket and looked at her brother in alarm. "What *was* that?"

"I guess Spade got around to fixing the clock," Dean said, "but you'd think he could have waited until the morning."

Of course, Agnes thought. It was the grandfather clock downstairs, striking midnight.

Dean glanced down at his watch and frowned. The green glowing dials showed it was only ten thirty. "I take that back. Hopefully it's not going to chime midnight all night."

Once the vibrations died, Agnes heard the murmur of whispers. The voices sounded far away and close at the same time.

"Who is that?" asked Dean. He tossed the blanket away and they both shivered as the cold air hit their bare skin. "Did you hear anyone arrive after dinner?"

Agnes shook her head. "And how can we hear them all the way up here?"

The door to Dean's room was closed.

“I think it’s coming from the vent.”

They dropped off the bed and crept over to the metal grate that had been covered by the wardrobe until that morning. Sure enough, the mumbling got louder until they could hear three separate voices: Hibernia’s and then two others Agnes didn’t recognize. The sound was so clear they could even hear the rustle of pages turning in the background.

“Well, we’re here, Hibernia,” said the low harsh voice. “What’s the monstrous emergency that couldn’t wait until our next meeting?”

“My grandchildren nearly stumbled into a tear in the thorn garden this morning.”

The man made a low hissing noise like air escaping from a bicycle tire. “How is that possible? You must be mistaken—”

Hibernia let out an angry laugh. “Aspis, do you think I’m so old and rusty that I don’t recognize a puddle of viscous, black liquid sitting in the middle of my backyard?”

“This isn’t helpful,” said a third voice. The accent was strange and halting, but the tone was calm. “Hibernia, no one is questioning what you saw.”

“Well,” Hibernia said, the anger draining from her voice. “It can only mean that Cabil is back.” Her voice sounded small, fragile.

Agnes inhaled loudly. That was the name she’d heard in the not-memory in the thorn garden. So the bleeding man was real. Downstairs, there was a long silence and then the man with the hissing voice spoke again. He sounded less sure of himself now.

“No one’s seen Cabil for nearly twenty years. Why would he resurface now? And besides, we have the second half of the key. There’s no way he could be making doorways without it.”

Hibernia let out a deep sigh. “He must have found another key.”

Aspis let out a derisive snort.

“Do you have a better explanation?” she snapped.

The man with the soothing voice cut in before the argument got too heated. “We always knew it was possible Cabil survived that day. And if he did survive, he’s had years to try and make a new key.”

“But that’s impossible,” Hibernia said. “People have been trying to create keys for hundreds of years and no one has ever succeeded.”

“*Yet*. No one has succeeded yet,” Aspis snapped. “If you had just listened to me when the Therouxes disappeared, instead of twiddling your thumbs—”

“Aspis,” the other man said softly, “I know it’s difficult, but Claire and Robert died that night.”

“We never found any remains—”

“The house was burnt to the ground,” Hibernia said, her voice crisp and cold. “Why you insist on constantly unearthing this tragedy is beyond me.”

“Then tell me—just tell me what Violet was doing there that night? It seems awfully convenient,” Aspis spat.

From his tone, Agnes could tell that he didn’t think it was convenient at all. He spoke of Violet with a voice full of hot, seething hatred.

The man with the calm voice cut in again. "Enough. All evidence suggests the fire was an accident. The question is: what do we do now?"

"Well," Hibernia said carefully, "if Cabil *is* back, then he will come looking for the other half of the key. We need to move it somewhere he won't find it."

"I should have killed him when I had the chance," Aspis mumbled.

Agnes's jaw dropped open. Who were these men their grandmother was talking to? Murderers? Were they the ones who had been chasing the bleeding man?

The other man sighed. "Yes, I suppose you're right. Aspis, you must go back, report to the others. For now, our priority must be to move the key."

Aspis hissed in frustration. "Wonderful. The world is tearing to shreds and you're sending me off to do paperwork. Well, I better get to it then."

Thudding footsteps rang out across the wooden floor. Before Agnes and Dean could hear more, the metal grate vibrated with the noise of the clock striking twelve once again. They pulled away, covering their ears to keep from going deaf. By the time it was safe to listen again, Aspis had disappeared.

"Has he always been this difficult or am I just out of practice?" Hibernia said with forced humor.

"Hibernia," the man said gently, "We need your help. I believe it's time for you to come out of retirement."

"I was afraid you would say that," she replied with a deep sigh. "My grandchildren are here for the summer, you know. I promised their mother, no disappearing acts."

"Maybe if she knew the whole truth—"

“Thank you, but no.” Hibernia’s voice sounded tired and bitter. “What happiness has the truth ever brought us?”

Agnes and Dean heard the low murmurings of farewells and then a door shutting softly. They waited a few minutes to make sure everyone was really gone and then crept back over to Dean’s bed.

Agnes had so many questions that she didn’t know where to start. But most importantly, she wasn’t crazy. The not-memory had been real.

Dean’s face was screwed up in concentration, as if trying to work it all out.

“Who’s Cabil?” he asked, just as Agnes said, “What do they mean by key?”

They looked at each other and laughed nervously.

“Maybe we can ask Hibernia tomorrow?” Dean said.

Agnes shook her head. “Then she’d know we’d been eavesdropping.”

Besides, it was clear that their grandmother knew what the puddle of black liquid in the thorn garden was and didn’t want to tell them. A tear, she’d called it.

Agnes wondered what that meant. “Dean,” she said, “There’s something I didn’t tell you earlier.”

He leaned forward as Agnes told him in low, urgent tones about the rabbit on the train and what she’d seen in the thorn garden earlier that day. When she was done, Dean was silent.

“So what do you think?” Agnes asked, a bit tense. “Do you think I’m crazy?”

“I don’t know what’s going on, but I know you aren’t crazy, Agnes. I think we should keep our eyes open and try to find out more.”

Agnes felt relieved. There was something strange happening, but at least Dean was on her side.

It was late and there was nothing more they could do tonight. Agnes returned to her own room and slid under the blue comforter. She tried to stay awake, racking her brain to see if there was anything hidden away that might shed some light on the evening's strange events, but soon she fell into a troubled sleep.

## Chapter 5: The Grove of Fallen Giants

Agnes awoke the next morning to a wet pink nose snuffling in her ear. “Agh, Baxter, go away,” she cried, striking out blindly with a pillow.

The pig ignored her and stood with his front legs leaning on the bed, oinking noisily in her ear.

She groaned and sat up. “Okay, okay, I’m up.” She pointed at the open door. “Now, go get Dean.”

Baxter trotted into the hall, his curly tail bobbing. A second later Agnes heard a muffled yelp from Dean’s room.

When Agnes and Dean were dressed, they took the grand stairs down to the library. Agnes glanced around the room, curious to see if there were any signs of last night’s strange gathering, but the room looked the same as ever. Well, not quite the same. She noticed that that now both the clock’s hands were pointed at the three. Looks like it hadn’t been fixed after all.

They passed into the kitchen where Spade was flipping blueberry pancakes on an iron skillet over the fire. Agnes and Dean sat at the table and he served them each a tall stack.

Hibernia was nowhere to be seen, but had left them a note:

*Back by dinner. Peat at 2. H*

“Where’d she go?” asked Agnes, placing the note back on the table. She wondered if their grandmother’s disappearance had anything to do with the conversation they’d listened in on the night before.

“Oh, she had to go away for a bit,” said Spade evasively. “Lovely day out though. I’ll pack you a picnic lunch.”

“And what’s a Peat?” asked Dean, but Spade had already disappeared through the kitchen door and was walking briskly across the lawn towards the circus tent.

Agnes pushed her empty plate away and looked out the window. Spade was right; it was a beautiful day. The sun reflected off the smooth surface of the bay like a mirror. Even the colors seemed brighter. She leaned over the table and whispered to Dean, “Let’s go back to the thorn garden.”

“Why?” he asked through a mouthful of pancakes. “You heard what they said last night. Whatever’s in that black puddle sounds dangerous.”

“I know,” Agnes said impatiently, “but after that stuff we heard them talking about—Cabil and the key—I don’t know. I feel like I need to see it again.”

The bottle of maple syrup made a glugging noise as the thick liquid smothered Dean’s second helping of pancakes. He wiped a sticky blob of syrup off his shirt.

“Come on,” Agnes said. “You were the one who said we needed to find out more. Let’s go before Spade gets back.”

Dean shoveled another bite into his mouth. “Okay, okay, at least let me finish breakfast.”

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They jogged across the lawn, shooting nervous glances over their shoulders in case Spade re-emerged from his tent. No one had expressly told them they weren’t allowed back in the thorn garden, but somehow Agnes knew that if Spade

saw them, he'd put a stop to it. When they got to the green door, slightly out of breath, they saw that someone had fastened the latch shut with a shiny new padlock. Agnes pushed at the door in frustration, but it just rattled in its frame. There was no way to open it.

Dean looked up at the high stone wall. It was clear they weren't getting in that way either. "Maybe there are some books in the library that might help?" he asked, hopeful.

Agnes sighed. "Maybe. I guess we might as well get our picnic."

They walked past the vegetable garden and hovered by the tent flap. They heard pots and pans crashing together inside and the sound of Spade humming loudly.

"Maybe we should knock?" Agnes asked.

"How do you knock on a tent?"

He had a point. She called out, "Hello? Spade?"

A bony hand pulled aside the tent flap. Spade's head emerged through the gap. "Hello there. Finish your pancakes? One second, I'm almost done."

The tent flap swung shut again, but not before Agnes caught a glimpse of the giant iron stove and cozy disarray of furniture inside. A moment later Spade himself emerged from the tent holding a wicker basket and red wool blanket. He handed them over and began listing the best picnic spots.

Suddenly Dean cut in, "Spade, what's that smell?"

"Oh, that's leftover from the elephants," said Spade as if reporting something no more unusual than the sunny weather.

“Elephants?” asked Agnes, all thoughts of the picnic shoved from her mind. She tried to remember if she’d seen anything that looked even vaguely like an elephant in her brief glimpse into the tent’s interior.

“I got the tent cheap from a circus that was closing up. I kept hitting my head on the doors inside the house. This is much more comfortable. They offered to throw in a spare alligator too, but I didn’t think your grandmother would appreciate having one of those in the bathtub.”

Agnes tried to hide her smile behind her hand when she realized Spade was entirely serious. “You didn’t want a lion or something instead?” she asked.

“Oh no,” Spade said, “I’m allergic to cats.” He thrust the blanket and picnic basket into their arms and disappeared back into the tent. A moment later, they heard the clattering of pots and pans start again.

Agnes and Dean headed back to the house to search the library for anything that might be of use in discovering the origins of the black puddle. Then, stack of books in hand, they set off across the lawn and spread the blanket in the shade of a grove of large pines at the edge of the woods and began reading.

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Spade had packed too much food and, even after Agnes and Dean had stuffed themselves, there were still enough sandwiches for a whole other picnic. They’d spent the morning flipping through the books Dean had brought and some others they’d taken from Hibernia’s library, but it had all come to nothing. There was plenty of information on types trees and birds, marine life and popular hiking trips, but nothing on oozing black puddles.

Agnes slammed shut a book on maritime history and tossed it on the ever-growing pile of books. "It's no good. There's nothing useful in any of these."

She vented her frustration on the sunny yellow dandelions that grew in clumps; they came free with a satisfying tear and soon she had a small pile on the blanket next to her.

"There must be hundreds of books in the library," Dean said. "Maybe we just haven't found the right one."

"Let me know when you find a book called 'toxic black puddles and rabbit hallucinations'," Agnes grumbled.

Dean opened his mouth to answer and then shut it again when a voice from the woods said, "Hi there."

They both turned to stare at the line of trees behind them. For a second Agnes wondered if the tree itself had spoken, but then a boy stepped out of the woods and into the sunlight. "Hi," he said again.

"Hi," Agnes and Dean echoed.

The boy had bright red hair that stuck out at funny angles—as if he cut it himself—and was dressed in a thick brown sweater with holes at both wrists that his thumbs kept sticking through like earthworms peeking from a pile of dirt. He looked friendly enough, despite the black eye patch covering his left eye. The boy pulled a bundle of letters from the back pocket of his corduroys.

"I'm Peat. I bring Hibernia's mail from town."

"Oh right," Agnes said, remembering the boy Hibernia had mentioned yesterday. "She told us you might be coming over."

“Peat?” asked Dean. “That’s a weird name.”

Agnes elbowed him in the side. She knew he wasn’t trying to be unfriendly, but her brother had a habit of saying every last thing that came into his mind.

Luckily, Peat didn’t seem offended. In fact, he smiled, revealing a slight gap between his two front teeth. “My parents are botanists. They named me after peat moss. It grows all over the woods around here.”

“What happened to your eye?” asked Dean.

“Nothing.” Peat lifted the eye patch to reveal a bright green eye, which did not match his other brown one. “It helps me see in the dark.”

Agnes wondered if he was a little crazy. “How can covering up your eye help you see?”

“He’s right,” Dean said. “Pirates wore eye patches to help them see below deck. Pupils get bigger in the dark so you can see better, but your eyes don’t need to adjust if one of them has already been in the dark.” He smiled at Peat, evidently impressed.

“Exactly,” Peat said, grinning back at him. He pushed the eye patch up onto his forehead and his green eye squinted in the bright sun.

Okay, so maybe he wasn’t crazy. Or, more likely, he and Dean were both crazy.

“So do you live around here?” Agnes asked Peat. It was strange the way he had seemed to materialize straight out of the woods. With his brown sweater and pants, he seemed almost like a tree himself. Except for the red hair, of course.

“I live in town,” Peat said, motioning vaguely towards the forest over his left shoulder. “My aunt runs the bakery. You just follow this path about a mile through the woods and then turn at the big pool. It’s much farther if you take the road.”

Agnes looked past him at the unbroken line of trees. It didn’t look like there was a path.

Peat abandoned his spot by the tree and sat on the grass next to the red blanket. “I have to drop off the mail, but I could take you both into town after. I mean, if you wanted.” He kicked at a clod of dirt with his sneaker and mumbled, “but it’s probably not as exciting as wherever you’re from.”

Agnes laughed. So far, Hibernia’s had proven to be anything but boring, but obviously Peat didn’t know about the secret midnight meeting or the rest of it. “We don’t have a circus tent in our backyard at home,” she said instead.

Peat smiled. “Good point. Well, I can just give these to Hibernia and then we can go.”

“Hibernia’s gone,” Dean said. “Spade didn’t say where, but she’s supposed to be back by dinner.”

They packed up the picnic and piles of books and headed back towards the house. Spade was nowhere to be seen, so they left the basket and letters on the kitchen table with a note saying where they’d gone.

After pulling on their coats, Agnes and Dean followed Peat back across the open lawn. Dean hovered uncertainly at the border of the woods. “What about the bears?” he asked, peering into the shadowy depths of the forest.

Peat raised his right hand and said solemnly, "I've lived here my whole life and never seen a bear. Promise."

Dean seemed to accept this. They followed Peat into the forest. After only a few minutes, Agnes felt like they were a million miles from the house. At first, the trees were skinny with bald trunks and needles that grew in clusters at the top, but soon they grew large and sparse, their canopies bursting with leaves that allowed patches of sunlight to dot the ground in golden pools. The smell reminded Agnes of Christmas.

As they wove between the trees, following Peat up an invisible path, Agnes worried that they were lost, but Peat walked with confidence, eyes always straight ahead. Either that or he's a good faker, she thought.

After a while, Peat stopped and pointed at a patch of thick springy moss. "That's my namesake," he said. "Sphagnum. Also known as peat moss. It likes wet ground, so you know we're close to water."

He bent down and began digging around a plant that had wide hairy leaves and a tiny white flower like a buttercup growing at the top. The plant came free from the dirt with a soft snap and he pinched off a piece of the shimmery yellow root and held it out to Dean.

"*Hydrastis Canadensis*," he said, "Otherwise known as Golden Seal. It's good for headaches and fevers. Go on, try it."

Dean put the tiny sliver in his mouth and made a face at the bitter taste. He wiped his mouth and looked nervously at the wall of identical trees in front of them. "Peat, how do you know where you're going?"

“Easy,” Peat replied. He marched up to a tree just in front of them and pointed to a purple splash of paint about five feet off the ground. “My parents marked paths through the woods with a paint hammer,” he said. “The forest has a way of—I don’t know—changing. Purple marks the path between Hibernia’s and town.”

Agnes felt relieved. At least they’d be able to find their way home. “Peat, did your parents know Hibernia well? I mean if they marked a path to her house...” Agnes trailed off at the look that passed across Peat’s face. He seemed almost angry.

“They *do* know Hibernia well,” he snapped. Peat smacked at the dirt clinging to the knees of his pants.

Agnes was taken aback. Hibernia had spoken about Peat’s parents as if they were dead, but clearly Peat didn’t think so. She wanted to ask more, or to apologize, but Peat had already turned and marched into the trees.

Agnes and Dean followed. They crested a small hill and walked into a field full of sweet-smelling flowers hanging from curved stalks like tiny white bells. The faint whoosh of running water sounded in the distance.

Peat picked one of the flowers and handed it to Agnes with a smile. “Lily-of-the-Valley.”

At least he’s not mad, Agnes thought with relief, and smiled back.

“They’re pretty, but poisonous.”

Her face fell and she dropped the flower on the ground. Okay, maybe he was still mad.

Peat shook his head. "Don't worry, they're not *that* poisonous, but if you fell asleep here you'd wake up with a headache, trust me."

"Then you could just eat some golden seal," Agnes said.

Peat's face lit up. "You have a good memory."

Agnes felt her face turn pink and she hurried to follow Dean, who was already halfway across the field where a small creek burbled its way deeper into the woods. They crossed the creek, jumping from stone to slippery stone, and then scrambled up a steep rock ledge. At the top was a large circular pool of dark water. Wet green moss glistened on the rocks around it.

Agnes bent down to dip her hand in the water, but Peat pulled her back.

"It's really slippery and, trust me, you don't want to get too close," he said.

"Why not?"

Peat picked up a dead branch and tossed it in the water. They watched the branch travel around and around the circumference of the pool, picking up speed until it stood vertically in the center and then was sucked under entirely.

"It's like a drain," Agnes murmured, taking a step back.

"There's an underground river than runs through this area," Peat said. "It's full of underground caves. Once, they even found the bones of some kind of ancient whale."

"Cool," Dean said. He peppered Peat with more questions about the underground river as they crossed back into the woods, into a grove of what Peat said were White Aspens, their slim white trunks glowing softly in the muted light.

At the edge of the grove, Peat stopped. “It’s a little out of the way, but there’s something I want to show you.”

He lifted his arm and pointed. Dean’s eyes widened; Agnes felt her stomach lurch down to her feet.

A giant black hole loomed in front of them, hemmed in by trees and undergrowth from all sides. She shaded her eyes against the bright sun and the black hole took on the rough outlines of a fallen tree—blackened and hollowed with age.

“Makes the rest of the trees look like saplings, huh?” asked Peat, obviously pleased to show them something so unusual.

They jogged across the clearing and stood just inside the hollow trunk. Dean ran his hands over the wood, which was smooth and charred like a piece of old firewood. “It seems solid,” he said, “not rotten at all.”

The ceiling above their heads was so high that Agnes could have stood on Peat’s shoulders and still wouldn’t have been able to reach the top. She squinted into the blackness and saw that there was an opening at the other end—maybe 200 feet further down. It was bigger than any tree she’d ever seen—bigger than any tree she even knew existed. It seemed sad to see it lying on the ground, discarded like a piece of trash.

“What happened to it?” she asked.

“Fire,” said Peat as he led them further inside. “*Cupressaceae Sentinelus*,” he whispered, making it seem like a secret password. “They’re called Sentinel trees.”

As Peat spoke, his voice echoed off the walls of the tree tunnel. “The bark is so thick it’s like a suit of armor. For a long time people thought that nothing could kill them—at least not disease or fire. They seemed to live forever.”

“So then what happened to this one?” Dean asked.

“Well, that’s the thing,” said Peat. “Nothing *really* lives forever. When the trees get big enough, their roots can’t hold them up anymore and they just topple over. A fire must have gotten this one after it had already fallen.”

“It just—fell?” Dean asked incredulously.

Agnes tried to imagine what it would be like—watching it fall. Like a skyscraper toppling over. She turned to Peat. “Have you ever seen one fall?”

He shook his head. “The trees stopped growing before I was born. That’s what my parents were studying when they—you know—disappeared.”

Agnes wanted to ask him what he meant, but stopped at the sad look that flitted across his face.

“Besides,” Peat said, “there’s only one left *to* fall. Come on, I’ll show you.”

He led them out the other end of the tree tunnel into the dazzling sunlight. Agnes gasped. Remains of the giant trees lay everywhere. Even fallen, some of the trunks were as high as the roof of a house. Others had hit the ground so hard, they’d smashed into pieces. Most of the broken scattered trunks had been there so long that grass and other small trees had started to grow on top of them. Dean ran his hand over a long branch whose fingers reached thirty feet into the sky.

It looks like a field of battle, Agnes thought, full of broken soldiers. “What happened here?”

“It’s called the Grove of Fallen Giants,” said Peat in a hushed voice.

“You said there was one left?” Dean asked.

Peat smiled. “Look up.”

They had been so focused on the carnage on the ground that somehow they had missed the giant tree that rose tall and proud among the ruins like a monarch of the forest. Agnes craned her neck to follow the cinnamon colored trunk hundreds of feet into the sky. It looked slightly swollen, she thought, as if someone had blown it up with a bicycle pump.

They wove through the ruins until they stood by the living tree, gazing into the branches far overhead. Peat led them around the base of the trunk, stepping over twisted roots that reached up through the dirt like curved fingers. They stopped on the other side of the base, where the trunk had split in two, leaving a huge black hole that led deep into the tree’s heart.

“Battle scars,” said Peat, pointing to the black hole. “A fire—probably lightning—when the tree was young. See how the bark is healing around it?”

The bark around the opening was thick and knobby and wept dark red sap. Dean sniffed the air. “It still smells kind of burnt.”

“Really?” asked Peat curiously. “I can’t smell anything.”

Dean pulled Peat over to a small tree and began peppering him with questions about the difference between pine, spruce and fir trees.

Agnes felt rooted to the spot. She shivered as she stared into the blackness at the heart of the tree. It felt like they were being watched. As if the tree itself had eyes

and didn't appreciate being gawked at. She took a step closer, feeling the pull of that black opening.

Suddenly, two yellow spots appeared deep in the gloom. Agnes heard a harsh rasp, like heavy hissing breath. Something began to stir: the faint shape of something fierce and horrible at the tree's heart. Agnes screamed and tried to back away, but her foot caught in a root and sent her sprawling onto the ground.

Dean and Peat ran over.

"Are you okay?" Peat asked, holding out a hand to help her up.

"It's inside—watch out!" Agnes scrambled to her feet and spun to face the tree, flanked on either side by Peat and Dean, who were staring at her curiously.

"What's inside?" Dean asked nervously. "You said there were no bears here!"

Agnes was about to reply that whatever it was looked way scarier than a bear when she caught a flash of movement from the tree. Her heart leapt into her throat and she was about to tell them to run when a small red squirrel jumped out of the blackness. It perched on a root and cocked its head at them before running off into the forest with a pinecone clutched in its mouth.

"It's okay," Peat said gently. "It's just a squirrel."

Agnes felt crushing embarrassment battle against relief. She ignored Dean's grin as she brushed by him. Peat patted her shoulder in a way that was probably meant to be encouraging, but made Agnes feel more like an idiot.

"Let's just keep going," she snapped at him. Agnes regretted her sharp words immediately when she saw the wounded look on Peat's face. She wondered if Mrs. Flannigan was right. Maybe she did have an overactive imagination.

As they left the grove of fallen giants behind, Agnes cast a nervous glance over her shoulder. The last sentinel tree stood tall among the ruins, the black hole in its side silent and empty.

## Chapter 6: Violet Tea

They walked for a while through a thick forest of pines. At first, Agnes jumped every time someone stepped on a twig, or a branch brushed against her shoulder. She had to remind herself angrily that the glowing yellow eyes had belonged to a squirrel. Fuzzy and cute, not scary at all. As they left the sentinel tree further behind, she began to feel better.

Soon, the ground sloped down, the underbrush thinned out and, beyond the trees, they spotted a dirt road.

“Hey, wait a minute!” Dean called from the edge of the woods. He seemed to be locked in a struggle with a small green bush. “I’m stuck!”

Agnes went to help untangle him and found that soon, she too was stuck. Not only were the leaves of the plant covered in thick sap, somehow the long curling stems had managed to wind around her hair, her fingers and even around the necklace she was wearing under her shirt. When she tried to pull free, she discovered that the sap had dried into glue. The leaves and stems only came free with a painful tearing—like ripping off a very sticky band-aid.

Dean started giggling uncontrollably.

“What’s wrong with you?” asked Agnes, annoyed. She didn’t see what was so funny. The leaves hurt when she tried to tear them off her skin and left red welts behind.

“Hang on,” said Peat, making his way over to Agnes and Dean while doing his best to avoid touching the sticky plant.

“Ugh, what is this stuff?” asked Agnes. A leaf had glued itself to her eyelid and she wasn’t sure she could get it off without going blind.

“It’s an Artemisia plant,” said Peat. “Its leaves are really sticky and—well—let’s just get you out of there quickly.”

“Why?” Agnes asked in a panicked voice. “Is it poisonous?”

“Not exactly.”

Peat snapped off one of the plant’s buds, which was closed tightly as a fist, and squeezed it between his fingers. The bud made a popping sound and released a gush of clear liquid that smelled faintly of vinegar. To Agnes’s relief, it dissolved the plant’s glue-like sap and soon she was free.

“Artemisia’s not poisonous, but the smell has a way of befuddling people,” Peat said.

They watched Dean, who was bent over with laughter, tears streaming down his face. “Befuddle,” he said with a giggle. “Beffidle. Beffidley fuddlement.”

“You better give me a hand,” Peat said. “Otherwise he might go on like this for hours.”

They managed to get Dean untangled and his laughter slowly died away. He looked confused, as if he couldn’t remember what had been so amusing a second ago. He scratched his head and spoke to his sister accusingly. “How come it didn’t make you go all funny?”

Agnes shrugged. The plant didn’t seem to have affected her.

“Had enough adventure for one day?” asked Peat cheerfully as he led them out of the woods.

Once they reached the road, Peat stopped and pointed to his right. "If you keep going that way, the road curves around the bay and eventually hits the main road. That's probably where you drove in with Spade." He turned left, where the road curved around a sharp bend. "The other way dead ends in town, just a little ways down."

A swift cold wind blew against their backs. Agnes shivered and wrapped her arms around herself. It felt like someone had opened a freezer door. Peat turned and shot a nervous look at the sky above the trees. Agnes turned too.

Sure enough, a black storm cloud loomed above the treetops like a dark mountain. The cloud sprouted fluffy tendrils, which reached out only to be swallowed as a mass of clouds rolled towards them.

"Looks like some weather's rolling in," said Peat, his voice raised against the strong wind.

A giant bolt of lightning crackled and shot out below the heap of clouds into the forest. A second later, thunder boomed so loudly that Agnes had to stop herself from clapping her hands over her ears.

"Wow! Did you see that? It was huge!" yelled Dean in a voice half excited, half terrified.

"Come on!" shouted Peat, "If we run, we might make it to town before the storm hits!"

They started down the road at a jog, rounding the sharp turn onto Main Street. Further down, Agnes saw shops in squat grey buildings and raised wooden sidewalks lining the road. She spotted a drug store and a gas station, its wooden sign

swinging violently in the wind. After that, the road seemed to peter off into the woods. So this was town.

Nearby, an unkempt dirt lane ran off the main road. A cluster of mailboxes at the end indicated that people lived back there. One mailbox was particularly rusty and had a missing door. **THEROUX** was stenciled on the side in faded letters. Agnes stopped in her tracks. She glanced over at Dean and saw that he was staring at the sign as well. So she wasn't imagining it: that was the name they had overheard that horrible man Aspis talking about the night before.

"Peat, who are the Therouxes?" Agnes asked as nonchalantly as she could manage while yelling over the wind.

"I am. Peat Robert Theroux," he said, puffing his chest out proudly.

"Your parents—were—are—Claire and Robert Theroux?"

Peat looked at her in surprise. "How do you know my parents?"

What had Hibernia said about them? A fire, they had died in a fire. Agnes felt her heart sink. Freezing drops of rain began to fall from the sky.

"We must have heard Hibernia talking about them," Dean said quickly with a glance at his sister.

Now the water was coming down in sheets so thick Agnes could barely see ten feet in front of her.

"Come on!" Peat grabbed her hand and pulled her towards the cluster of shops down the road. "This way!"

Peat sprinted towards a large window with *Violet's Bakery and Tea House* painted on it in flowing purple script. The shop was dark except for a hurricane lantern in the window that gave off a welcoming glow.

Peat battled against the howling wind to open the door and usher them inside. The wind slammed it shut behind them and the raging storm was suddenly muffled. Water streamed off their clothes, pooling at their feet on the spotless white floor.

Agnes shivered in the warmth. Something smelled delicious—like her favorite desserts rolled into one. A long counter running along the wall to their left was lined with towers of cookies, and yellow frosted cupcakes on white plates, all trapped under glass domes like insects in a museum display. Two small tables, draped in tablecloths covered in soft pink roses, stood against the opposite wall. On closer inspection, Agnes noticed that each flower was covered in sharp thorns. She thought of the thorn garden and shivered.

The sound of quick footsteps rang out in the room beyond. A short plump woman appeared in the doorway, inhaling sharply at the sight of the three children dripping mud onto the floor.

“My goodness!” she cried. “You’re soaked right through!”

She untied the checkered apron she was wearing over a pair of jeans and purple sweater and tossed it on a nearby chair. Planting her hands on her hips, she continued in a tone that invited no argument: “You stay right there. I’ll get you some chocolate chip cookies. They just came out of the oven and will warm you right up.”

She disappeared behind the counter, which was nearly level with her shoulders.

“Um, Aunt Violet,” Peat called after her, “maybe we could have some towels first?”

“Obviously!” Violet spun on her heels and marched back into the hallway, reappearing a moment later with four fluffy pink towels. Violet’s steely grey hair was cut level with her chin and didn’t move when she tossed her head to bark orders. It was more like a helmet than hair.

A few minutes later, they sat on an overstuffed couch in the next room eating cookies while Violet draped their steaming socks over the fire screen to dry.

“We lost power the minute the storm started,” Violet said with a sigh. “Not that a power outage or a storm is anything new here.”

Dean nodded seriously. “I’ve never seen a lightning bolt that big. We get storms at home, but never anything like this.”

“It’s not usually this bad here, either,” said Peat with a frown.

Violet settled into a striped chair near the fire. “You must have been very frightened. I used to worry about Peaty out in the woods in this weather.”

Agnes looked at Peat and raised here eyebrows. *Peaty?* She mouthed. Peat rolled his eyes and smiled in resignation.

“I keep telling him it’s dangerous,” Violet said in exasperation, “but I’ve had to either stop worrying or die of a heart attack. Peaty just holes up god-only-knows-where when the weather turns bad.”

She shot him a look of baffled disapproval. He grinned back.

“Mom and Dad always say I’m like a rabbit. I go underground at the first sign of danger.”

Peat stuck out his front teeth and wiggled his nose. Violet tried to frown at him, but had to cough to hide her smile. Just then, a particularly loud crack of thunder made them all jump and then laugh nervously. Violet got up and disappeared into the kitchen, saying an herbal tea would be just the thing to soothe everyone’s nerves.

Agnes felt relaxed. She liked sitting by the fire listening to the sound of rain pounding on the roof. The small room was bare but cozy. Besides the couch and armchair, there wasn’t much in the way of furniture. Just a small desk under the window and a bookcase stuffed with old paperbacks and a scattering of textbooks. The mantel was covered in candles in various stages of melting—some no more than flickering stubs. They must get a lot of storms here, Agnes thought. No wonder Hibernia didn’t bother with electricity.

The air smelled strongly of violets, a thick, cloying smell that made Agnes’s head swim. Violet herself reappeared a moment later carrying a tray laden with a teapot and four teacups. She poured them each a cup of the strong violet tea, and then settled back into the armchair with a ball of yarn and a pair of knitting needles.

“Now that everyone’s dry, tell me what you were doing outside in this weather. The whole town’s been shut down ever since we saw those clouds roll in after lunch.”

“We were in the woods,” said Peat with a shrug. “We must not have seen the storm coming.”

“And what about you two?” Violet turned to Agnes and Dean. “I know everyone from town, so I know you’re not from here.”

“We’re visiting our grandmother for the summer,” said Agnes. “Hibernia. Do you know her?”

Violet gave them a tight smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes. “Yes, of course. It’s a small town. We *all* know each other.”

As Agnes leaned forward to set her cup on the ground, the small metal disc on the chain swung forward and flashed in the firelight. She had almost forgotten she was still wearing it.

Violet’s hand shot out like lightning and grasped the disc, nearly pulling Agnes off the couch.

“Aunt Violet!” Peat cried. He reached out to grab her hand, but Violet had let go.

Agnes rubbed the back of her neck where the chain had dug in.

“Oh my goodness, I’m sorry,” Violet said. “I spend so much time kneading dough, sometimes I don’t know my own strength.” She smiled at Agnes in apology and picked up her knitting needles again.

“That’s okay,” said Agnes. Honestly, she was more startled than hurt.

Agnes felt her neck tingle where Violet’s fingers had scrabbled against her skin in their haste to get at the necklace. Now, those same fingers were busily knitting away as if nothing strange was happening. As if a faint layer of grey smoke wasn’t rising from them—rising from Violet’s entire body in fact—to choke the air with the acrid smell of fire.

Is this really happening? Agnes wondered. She glanced around, but no one else seemed to notice. She coughed as she inhaled the smoke, which was growing thicker by the second.

“Are you all right, dear?” asked Violet. “Do you want a glass of water?” Tendrils of smoke crept out Violet’s nostrils as she exhaled.

“I’m fine,” Agnes managed to choke. She closed her eyes. *There is no smoke. The smoke is not real.*

She opened her eyes and gave a strained smile to the others, who were staring at her. The smoke was gone, the air cold and clear.

“I’m fine,” she repeated weakly. “Just had something caught in my throat.”

Dean gave her an odd look, but Agnes shook her head. She’d tell him about it later. Could you die from inhaling imaginary smoke? With a shiver she wondered what would have happened if her imagination had conjured up a tiger instead of a rabbit on the train ride here.

“Oh, silly me,” Violet said, slapping her forehead. “Peaty would you run upstairs and bring me the ball of white yarn? It seems I’ve forgotten it and the stairs are hard on my poor knees.”

Peat hauled himself off the couch with a sour expression and disappeared into the hall. Violet clicked away at her knitting in silence for a moment before her eyes darted back to the silver disc that Agnes hadn’t yet tucked back inside her shirt.

“It’s such an unusual charm,” Violet said. “May I take a closer look?”

“Okay,” said Agnes suspiciously. She leaned forward and Violet reached out to pick up the disc, gently this time. The raised dots were still covered in a layer of

sap from where Agnes had gotten tangled in the plant earlier. Violet rubbed her thumb over them, her face expressionless.

“Where did you get this?” she finally asked in a steely voice.

Agnes felt her mouth go dry. The tea, which had been so refreshing a few minutes ago, left a bitter taste in her mouth.

“I found it.”

It wasn't the whole truth, but she didn't like the glint in Violet's eye as she held the disc up to the firelight. The tip of Violet's tongue, pink and pointed, darted out of her mouth and licked her lips. She seemed to be mulling something over. All at once, Violet dropped the disc and began to scratch frantically. Large red welts popped up on her hands and soon traveled all the way up her arms.

“Oh blast,” Violet said, “it must be something you've touched. I'm allergic to half the plants in the forest. If you'll excuse me.”

She leapt to her feet and hurried out the door just as Peat came back into the room empty-handed.

“I looked everywhere,” Peat called out after his aunt, who was disappearing up the stairs, “but I couldn't find the white yarn!”

He shrugged and joined Agnes and Dean back on the couch. Agnes saw that there was ball of white yarn sitting right in the middle of the chair. As she watched, a faint curl of grey smoke rose from it, snaking its way in a thin line through the doorway, as if searching for its owner.

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The storm disappeared almost as quickly as it had arrived. After finishing their tea—Agnes by pouring the rest of hers into a potted plant when no one was looking—the children left Violet's, thanking her for the cookies and promising to come again soon. Violet smiled at them, though her mouth was swollen and her breath sounded wheezy. She was still scratching at red welts on her neck as she let them out the front door.

Outside, Main Street was quiet except for the leftover rain dripping from the rooftops. Peat looked up at the sky, which was again the fresh clear blue of mouthwash. "There's still a couple hours of daylight left," he said. "I could take you back home through the woods if you—"

"No!" Agnes shouted. "I mean, no thanks." Her face turned red. She didn't mean to be ungrateful, but the last thing she wanted was to be in the woods at dark. Too many strange things had happened in the last few days—she didn't think she could handle any more.

Peat's face fell. "Okay. Well, if you follow the road, you'll be home in a couple miles."

He shuffled his feet and turned to go, but Agnes grabbed his arm. She didn't know what she was going to say, but she didn't want to let him leave like that, thinking she didn't like him.

"It's just that-um," she stumbled over her words, "I think it would be good practice for us to try and find our way back to Hibernia's on our own. You know, get to know the area," she finished lamely. "Thanks for everything today, Peat. It was great. Really. Maybe tomorrow you could show us more?"

“Yeah,” Dean piped in. “I have this great book on edible plants. Maybe we can try it out.”

Agnes was relieved to see Peat smile, though she still wished she’d gotten rid of that stupid book.

“I’ll be there after breakfast,” he said, turning and jogging back down the road towards Violet’s. He paused in the doorway and waved to them. Agnes and Dean waved back.

“Do you think we should tell him?” Dean asked. “That we heard them talking about his parents and the fire.”

Agnes bit her lip. It seemed wrong, dishonest, not to tell Peat what they’d heard, but at the same time, what did they really know? That a fire had killed his parents or made them disappear somehow? He’d told them as much himself. Aspis believed that Violet had something to do with the fire, and she did act weird, but it wasn’t exactly proof. And, frankly, Aspis seemed horrid.

“I don’t think so, Dean. At least, not until we know more.”

Dean squirmed, as if he knew she wasn’t going to like what he was about to say. “I don’t know, Agnes. Hibernia won’t tell us what *she* knows. Think how unfair that feels. How is this any different?”

Agnes scowled at him. “It’s not the same thing.” How could she make him understand? No one ever believed Agnes. No one except Dean. If they were really going to tell Peat everything, that would mean letting him in on the secret of her not-memories. Agnes wasn’t ready for that.

“Whatever you say,” Dean muttered under his breath. He started off down the road. Agnes had to jog to keep up.

## Chapter 7: The Clock Strikes Six

When they got back to the house, Spade was scooping coffee grounds into a tall metal kettle. He ushered them into the kitchen and slammed the door against the cold. Agnes and Dean sat on the floor to pull off their heavy sweaters and muddy boots. Waves of heat emanated from the fireplace, thawing their frozen cheeks.

“I was starting to worry,” Spade said, “what with the cold and dark falling and all.”

They were forced into silence as the clock struck the twelve deep tones of midnight.

“Right on time,” Spade murmured with a smile.

Agnes thought he had a funny notion of what it meant to be on time.

“We were with Peat,” Dean said. “He took us in to town and we got stuck at Violet’s because of the storm.”

Spade looked uncomfortable, like he wanted to say more. “Ah, that’s all right then, I guess.”

The kettle whistled and Spade pulled it off the fire. The air filled with the dark rich smell of coffee as he filled a mug and handed it to Dean.

“Here you go. Bring that in to your grandmother.”

Agnes jumped to her feet. “Hibernia’s back?”

“Go on in and let me finish up dinner,” he said, pushing them through the door into the library.

Hibernia sat on the velvet couch under a striped wool blanket, her feet propped up to catch the warmth from the blazing fire. She frowned down at a large leather-bound book in her lap, highlighting the deep creases between her eyebrows. As Agnes approached, she caught sight of the open page over Hibernia's shoulder. A shocked squeak escaped her throat before she could silence it. Almost half the page was an illustration of a giant black dog with long sharp teeth. Its orange eyes peered out of the page, glowing eerily in the firelight, as if it was about to jump out of the book and attack. It looked just like the dog on the train.

Hibernia caught Agnes's eye. She shut the book forcefully and slid it under the blanket. "You're definitely my favorite grandson," she said when she saw the steaming mug in Dean's hand.

"I'm your only grandson," Dean pointed out as he handed her the coffee.

"That is true also. Take a seat. Spade lit a fire hours ago. He always seems to know when a cold snap is about to hit. Sometimes I think we'd all starve and freeze without him."

Dean and Agnes settled on a bare patch of floor right in front of the fire, where it was warmest. They sat in silence, watching the orange light dance over the hot embers. Agnes had been planning to ask Hibernia again about the black puddle in the thorn garden, but now all she could think about was getting her hands on the book hidden under the blanket. She was surer than ever that Hibernia knew more than she was telling them. More than that, she had the feeling that somehow all these strange things were connected, but she needed proof.

“Spade tells me you’ve been spending some time with Peat,” Hibernia said. As she shifted, the edge of the blanket slipped. Agnes craned her neck for a better look as the firelight glinted off the gold letters printed on the spine: ATLAS. She frowned. An atlas was a book of maps. That couldn’t be right.

“He’s been showing us all sorts of stuff,” Dean said. He told Hibernia about the grove of giant trees they’d been to that afternoon.

“I’m glad you’re all getting along. I think Peat’s been lonely since his parents died.”

Agnes’s head snapped up. “Peat said they *disappeared*.”

“Ah,” Hibernia said with a touch of sadness. “Well, sometimes we believe what we want to believe about the people we love. I knew his parents well. Did he tell you that?”

She spotted the edge of the book sticking out and pulled the blanket over the cover, hiding it again.

“I helped the others in town search for Claire and Robert for days. We never found any reason to believe that they weren’t in the house the night it burned down.”

“Then why would Peat say that?” Agnes asked stubbornly.

“Did Peat tell you that he was there that night? That Violet managed to get him out of the house just before it collapsed? If Peat’s parents weren’t there, then it means they left him, all alone. Why would they do that?”

Agnes didn't have an answer. It sounded logical, but something in Hibernia's voice wasn't quite right. Not that she was lying exactly, but her voice didn't sound as certain as her words.

"Peat knows his way around, so at least I don't have to worry about you getting lost in the woods," Hibernia continued in a more cheerful tone. "But do be careful. People get lost all the time. They think they know where they are until suddenly they don't."

She stood and gracefully swept up the blanket and book in the crook of her arm. "I'll meet you all in the kitchen in a few minutes. Spade's made an apple crumble for dessert. It's my favorite."

She shooed them into the kitchen and shut the door softly behind them. A moment later the clock struck six.

"They really should get that fixed," Dean said absently. "That's gotta be the third time today."

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Hours later, Agnes sat in the empty bathtub on the second floor, staring up at the ceiling. The bathroom was huge—nearly as big as the bedrooms upstairs—and empty except for an enormous tub raised on metal feet shaped like lion's paws, sitting in the middle of the spotless white tile floor.

After dinner, Agnes snuck back into the library on the pretense of getting a sweater she'd forgotten. She'd looked everywhere for the book that Hibernia had been reading—the Atlas—but it hadn't been on any of the shelves or in the desk drawer. She'd even looked underneath the couch. Agnes was convinced that the

book held the answer—or at least some of the answers—to what was going on. When she'd tried to fall asleep, all she could think about was the illustration of the giant black dog. Agnes reclined against the smooth porcelain tub and let the events of the last few days fill her mind. She felt like all the pieces would fit together somehow, if she could just see them from the right angle.

Something scratched against the half-open bathroom door. Agnes sat up in alarm, jarring her spine painfully against the tub. A second later, Baxter's scrunched pink nose appeared in the doorway. She breathed a sigh of relief. His hooves clicked loudly against the tiles as he trotted into the room.

Agnes scratched the wiry tuft of hair on Baxter's head "Hey there, boy. It's probably too late for little pigs to be out of bed. I don't even know what time it..." her hand froze in mid air.

Time. That was it. She'd assumed the clock was broken since it seemed to chime random times throughout the day, but what if it wasn't random at all? The first time she and Dean had heard the tones had been right before the man—Aspis they'd called him—had left. Then they'd heard it again before Hibernia showed up for dinner, and again when they'd left the room. What had Spade said? "Right on time." What if he hadn't been talking about the clock at all? What if he'd been talking about Hibernia's arrival? Suddenly, Agnes was sure that the clock wasn't just a clock at all.

She climbed out of the bathtub and went to wake Dean. She might be wrong—or even worse, her imagination might be overreacting again—but if she wasn't, she wanted a witness.

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“I don’t see why I had to get up,” Dean grumbled. His rubbed at the pillow creases on his face and tried to pat down his hair, which was sticking up at every angle, giving him the look of a sleepy hedgehog. “The stupid clock’ll still be there in the morning.”

“And so will Spade and Hibernia,” Agnes pointed out. “I want to get a good look at it now, while no one else is watching.”

Dean sighed, but followed Agnes as she crept silently down the stairs holding the single candle aloft to light their way. As they passed the carved wolf banister with its sharp teeth, she shivered. The silent, dark house felt sinister.

When they reached the library, Agnes marched straight to the clock and stared up at its white face, which seemed to glow in the moonlight streaming through the window. According to the clock, it was six thirty.

“Dean, how does it work?” she whispered urgently. She knew her brother was still annoyed at being woken up, but he could never resist the urge to explain something mechanical.

“Well, there’s a series of weights and pendulums inside the clock,” said Dean, warming up to the topic. He pointed to a wooden door in the main body of the clock with a small golden knob. “The pendulum swings back and forth and the weights control the gears, which allow it to keep time.”

Agnes tugged at the golden knob. If Dean was right, it should have opened to reveal the gears and pendulum, but it wouldn’t budge.

“It’s broken, Agnes. It doesn’t even keep the right time. Can we go back to bed now?” Dean asked with a yawn.

Agnes ignored him. “Maybe it needs to be midnight for it to open?”

“If it strikes midnight, we’re going to wake up the whole house.”

He was right. Maybe there was some other time that would open it, though? Or a way to muffle the chimes...

She dragged over the chair from the writing desk and ordered Dean to stand on it. Before he could protest, she’d climbed onto his shoulders, from where she could just reach the golden hands of the clock. She pulled the minute hand back to the three so the clock read 6:15.

“Okay, try it now,” she said.

As Dean reached out to try the door, Agnes almost came tumbling down, but she caught herself on one of the clocks carved ledges at the last second.

“Careful,” Dean hissed. He pulled the knob, but the door was still stuck. “Now can we go to bed?”

“Just one more try,” Agnes said. She pulled the minute hand so that both hands were pointing at the ceiling: six o’clock. She was about to tell Dean to try the door again when a loud snap rent the air. Agnes was thrown off balance, knocking against the clock and silencing it just as the deep bong of the chimes began to sound. She landed on the carpet flat on her back, knocking the wind out of her lungs.

After a second, when she was able to breathe again, she sat up. Dean lay half on the brown velvet couch, scowling at her and rubbing his elbow where he’d banged it on the side table. “Now that you’ve started breaking furniture, CAN WE

PLEASE GO TO BED?" he said in a whisper that was also a yell, if such a thing was possible.

Agnes nodded and threw a sheepish glance at the chair they'd been standing on, which now tilted drunkenly on three legs. The fourth had snapped clean off under their weight. She picked up the chair and did her best to prop it up with the broken leg. It looked okay, but if someone sat in it, they'd get a nasty surprise. When she turned back to her brother—ready to apologize—his expression had changed from anger to wide-eyed curiosity.

"Dean?"

"No wonder the clock never tells the right time." He pointed behind her.

Agnes turned. While they'd been tumbling around the floor, the clock's door had popped open. The inside was empty of the gears and pendulum a normal clock would have. Instead, there was a narrow metal staircase shaped like a corkscrew, curving up and out of sight.

"You were right," Dean said.

Agnes felt a moment of satisfaction and thought about saying "I told you so", but curiosity soon won. She crept over to clock and peered up the stairs. They curved up—impossibly high. She could see a faint light shining at the top.

"Come on," she said. "Bring the candle."

Before Dean could protest, Agnes had stepped through the clock and was testing her weight on the first metal step. It seemed solid enough.

As they followed the stairs up, careful to muffle the clang of their feet on the metal, the air grew cold. Agnes caught a familiar smell—green, like some kind of

herb or plant. A sudden gust of wind puffed out the candle, plunging them into darkness. Dean gripped his sister's hand and they continued up, feeling along the wall so they wouldn't stumble and go rolling back down the stairs.

Finally, they emerged through a hole in the floor of a small circular room. A single open window, no more than a slit in the wall, looked out onto the bay where there seemed to be a double moon. One hanging in the air and another trapped beneath the still water. They must be at the top of the house in one of the circular towers they had spotted from the outside on the day they arrived.

The room was empty except for a wooden table in the middle and dozens of tall plants in ceramic pots scattered around the floor. The plants had woody stalks and curling green stems covered in bright white flowers that seemed to be the source of the strong smell.

Agnes caught a flash of silver moonlight reflecting brightly off something on the table. She wound her way between the plants and stepped closer. A small metal box rested on a velvet cushion beside a thick leather-bound book. Her heart jumped. It was the Atlas.

Dean cast a nervous glance over his shoulder, back towards the stairs. "Maybe we should go back," he said. "I'm not feeling very well."

"Just a minute," Agnes pleaded. "I just want to see what's inside."

As she opened the heavy cover, the book gave off a musty odor. The pages were brittle and fragile to the touch, as if they would crumble if handled too forcefully. The book must be very old.

Dean peered over her shoulder as she flipped through the pages. Most of the illustrations were maps—hundreds of them. They were incredibly detailed with rivers drawn in bright shimmering blue and forests in muted shades of green, but Agnes recognized hardly any of the names of towns and mountain ranges drawn in. The same went for the strange plants and animals drawn in the margins. One page showed a long black lizard with spikes growing out of its tail. *Narth*, the label said. She turned to the next page and paused as a loose piece of paper fluttered to the ground.

Agnes bent down to pick it up. The paper was yellowed and had a jagged edge, as if someone had torn off the bottom half of the sheet. It didn't have a map or a picture, just a few sentences scribbled in loopy cursive:

*Doormaker (legend), translated from ancient Greek. Tells of child with the ability to open doorways between (word scratched out). Distinguishing feature: different eyes and*

That was it. The rest of the page was gone. Agnes tucked the sheet back into the book and turned the page. Finally, she found the sketch of the black dog, drawn next to a pony to show it was nearly the same size.

"Is that...?" Dean started and then gulped.

Agnes nodded. "The thing we saw on the train."

"But that—that man said it was his dog? Maybe it's just a coincidence."

Agnes noticed that there was a single word scribbled underneath the picture: *fidelas*. She stared down at the creature's glowing orange eyes.

"What's that?" Dean asked, breaking into her thoughts.

Agnes closed the book and turned her attention to the small metal box sitting beside it. A jolt of electricity ran up her spine. Even without touching it, Agnes sensed the box giving off an electrical hum she felt deep in her bones.

“Do you feel that?” she murmured.

“Feel what?”

Agnes reached out her hand and hovered for a moment in indecision. Then she laid her fingers gently on top so they were barely touching the cool metal.

Nothing.

She let out a deep sigh, though she couldn't tell if it was disappointment or relief, and picked up the box. What she had originally taken for solid metal was really intricate filigree in the shape of hundreds of tiny tree branches weaving together to form a box. The slender metal branches were covered in leaves and blossoms so detailed she could see each individual petal. She wondered what you would keep inside a box that beautiful. Agnes tried to pry open the lid, but the top was sealed. A box that wouldn't open. One more mystery to add to the list.

Suddenly, the sweet green scent of the plants changed and the air smelled of chemicals and burning hair. In front of her, Agnes saw the ruins of a city: twisted metal and piles of smoking boards that were once houses. An overturned cart lay beneath two tall pillars covered in thick black lines that looked like some kind of writing.

A woman, badly burned and wearing charred clothes, lay still in the ruins. A man knelt beside her. He wore a suit, but the bottom half of his tie was burned off and his left leg was bare to the knee. His raven black hair was covered in a white

layer of dust, but his skin was smooth, his face long and oval as an ellipse. He grasped the woman's body and called out in a language Agnes couldn't understand, but she sensed his pain.

The man wiped the back of his hand across his face, leaving a smudge of black soot on his forehead. He turned away from the woman's body and began digging in the rubble around her until he uncovered a small metal box. Agnes was sure it was the same one she was holding. He slipped it into his pocket and turned, limping through the destruction towards the setting sun without looking back.

Agnes caught her breath and waited for the not-memory to fade. She felt the box cool in her hand and the hum grow silent, as if some kind of energy had been released.

"What is it?" asked Dean eagerly. "Did you see something?"

Agnes started to tell him what she'd seen, but the strange expression on his face made her stop.

He began to giggle. "Box rhymes with wox. Boxey woxey." Soon, he was laughing so hard, he had to sit on the floor.

"Dean?" Agnes said in a panicked voice. "What's wrong with you?"

He crawled over to one of the plants and, before Agnes could stop him, he took a bite of one of the white flowers.

"Dean!" Agnes shouted. She pried his mouth open and pulled the half-chewed glob of flower out of his mouth.

Dean grinned. "Tastes like pie."

Two of the plant's leaves were stuck to his cheek and as Agnes tried to pull them off, she groaned, suddenly understanding why the plants had smelled familiar. It was Artemisia—the same plant that Dean had gotten stuck in earlier that afternoon. She had to get Dean out of there before he did something stupid. Well, more stupid anyways.

She ripped the two leaves off his face, which made him yelp. Luckily, the pain also made him come back to himself. His face turned a little green and he said, "I feel funny."

"I know, Dean. I'm sorry. Let's get you out of here."

She looped her brother's arm over her shoulders and helped him down the metal steps. As the air grew warmer and the scent of the plants fainter, Dean seemed to return to normal, though he still let out the occasional hiccupping snort of laughter.

Agnes helped him back into the library and shut the clock's door behind them. Baxter lay on the floor, warming himself in front of the glowing orange coals. He lifted his head and oinked at them as they came in.

"Tick tock, clock wock," Dean said with a furtive giggle. He lay down on the carpet behind the couch.

"Come on, we have to go back to bed," Agnes said. She reached down to tug on his arm and realized she was still clutching the metal box. She'd forgotten to put it back.

"Pig, pig, pig," Dean chanted. A second later, he was making oinking noises that Agnes might have found funny if she wasn't desperately trying to figure out a

way to get her half-crazy brother back into his bed and replace the box upstairs without waking the whole house.

A door opened upstairs, followed by a sharp voice demanding, "What was that?"

Agnes froze. Footsteps rang out in the hallway. They were coming this way.

With only a second to spare, Agnes pulled Dean all the way behind the couch and crouched down beside him with her hand clamped firmly over his mouth. As the footsteps reached the doorway, Agnes prayed that whoever it was wouldn't come too far into the room.

"The sound was coming from in here," said the voice suspiciously.

Whoever it was must be standing right in front of the fireplace. Another few steps and he'd see them, crouching behind the couch. Agnes heard Baxter oink loudly at the intruder, followed a second later by a chuckle that could only be Hibernia.

"You're as paranoid as ever, Aspis. It's just Baxter."

Agnes knew she should stay hidden, but she wanted to see this person that kept prowling the house late at night. She glanced at Dean. His chin rested on his chest in a deep sleep. Agnes decided she could risk a look and peered around the edge of the sofa.

Hibernia and the man she'd called Aspis stood in front of the fire, their backs to the couch where Agnes and Dean were hidden in the shadows. As Aspis cast a last suspicious look into the hallway, Agnes caught a glimpse of his face. She thought he looked younger than her parents, despite the fact that his dark hair was graying at

the temples. He had olive skin and a deep crease between his bushy eyebrows. As he spoke, his mouth turned up at the corners in a way that gave him a permanent sneer.

“I may be paranoid,” he spat, “but you do have a bunch of brats roaming around the house. Great timing for a visit, Hibernia.” He rubbed his hands together and stared at the glowing orange coals.

“Those brats, as you call them, may be the future of our organization just as we once were,” said a third voice cheerfully.

Agnes craned her neck. There must be a third person in the room, somewhere she couldn't see. She thought the voice sounded familiar though, and realized it was the calm man with the strange accent she and Dean had heard through the grate the other night.

Aspis snorted. “The only one who might matter is that stupid boy.”

“For the ten thousandth time,” Hibernia said in a tone dripping with irritation. “You and Cabil are the only people deluded enough to think he's anything more than a perfectly normal twelve year old child.”

“Us and the Atlas.”

Hibernia's voice bristled. “One vague passage on a page half-eaten by moths.”

Aspis ignored her and flipped open a pocket watch on a silver chair. “I'm not going to waste any more time debating what we all know is true, even if I can't prove it. Let me know when you've found a suitable place to move the key. Until then, I have more pressing matters.”

“All right, journey safely,” said Hibernia. She took a seat on the couch with a deep sigh.

Aspis turned and, with a feeling of horror, Agnes realized that he was headed for the clock. She pressed herself against the back of the couch, praying that he wouldn't turn around.

Aspis grabbed a gleaming metal poker leaning against the fireplace and for one frightened moment, Agnes was sure that they'd been discovered and he was about to bludgeon them right in front of their own grandmother. Instead, he reached up and used the poker to move the clock's hands. As the minute hand reached midnight, the clock began to strike its twelve deep tones, making Agnes's teeth rattle.

On the twelfth tone, Agnes expected the clock's door to open. Instead, a trapdoor in front of the fireplace, the very spot on the floor she and Dean had been sitting on before dinner, popped open with a click. Aspis lifted the door and disappeared into the floor, pulling it shut behind him as if it had never been there at all.

“He may not be entirely wrong about the boy,” a voice said gently.

Hibernia sighed and rubbed her temples. “I'm doing what I can to keep an eye on him. My grandchildren seemed to have befriended him, which makes me more nervous than I'd like to admit. He's a good child, but until we know what happened to his parents and whether Cabil's really back, well, the situation is precarious. If he's really what Aspis believes he is...” she trailed off and bit her lip.

With a sinking feeling, Agnes realized that they were talking about Peat. It wasn't just his parents; somehow he was involved in this too. Tomorrow, she decided, she would have to tell him everything, even if it meant revealing her secret too.

"Hibernia, there hasn't been a human doormaker for hundreds of years. And we both know Aspis can be overeager. Often very intuitive, mind you, but he has little proof of anything."

Agnes heard the man shift in his seat. "I should be going as well."

The man rose and walked towards the hall. As he turned and paused in the doorway, Agnes stifled a gasp. His hair was pure white, but his oval face was smooth except for a few wrinkles around eyes. It was the same man she had seen in the burning city when she touched the box. She was sure of it.

The man bowed to Hibernia and said goodnight before disappearing into the hall. A second later, Agnes heard the sound of the front door open and close. Then Hibernia blew out her lantern and the room was plunged into darkness. The only sounds were Hibernia's footsteps disappearing up the stairs and Agnes's heart thumping loudly as she collapsed against the back of the couch in relief.

## Chapter 8: The Key

Agnes woke up the next morning with a stiff neck. Memories from the night before flooded into her mind as she rubbed her screaming muscles. She'd practically had to carry Dean back up the stairs and wrestle him into bed. She'd drawn the line at trying to put on his pajamas. She just hoped he'd be back to normal today.

Agnes reached under her pillow and felt the cool metal of the box she'd accidentally stolen. As Agnes turned it over in her hands, she noticed a long thin opening along the front and a tiny knob on the side that reminded her of her father's watch. She tried to wind it, but it wouldn't budge.

A muffled thump followed by a yelp came from Dean's room. At least he was still alive. She slipped the box into her pocket. While she knew she'd have to find a way to replace it later that night, she wanted to show it to Peat and Dean first. She didn't know how much her brother would remember and felt she needed some kind of proof she hadn't made everything up. Agnes pulled on a coat and went to find Dean. They had made plans to meet Peat at the edge of the woods right after breakfast and she didn't want to be late.

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"Sorry, I'm late," Peat called out as he emerged from the trees. "It's Aunt Violet's fault. First, she wanted me to help sweep the floors, then polish the teacups. It was like she was inventing reasons for me to stay home."

Agnes felt relieved to see him, but also nervous. What if she told him everything and he still thought she was crazy?

Peat stopped short at a tree on the edge of the lawn and bent down. "Come look at this," he called out.

Agnes and Dean joined him. Peat pointed at two long, narrow footprints in the ground. It had rained overnight and then the temperature had dropped suddenly, so the mud was frozen solid. The footprints were deep, like someone had been standing there facing the house for a long time, slowly sinking in the mud.

Dean frowned. "Maybe they're yours?"

Peat put his shoe next to it. The toe of his sneaker barely reached halfway up the frozen footprint. "I don't think so."

"Must be Spade's then," said Dean.

Agnes frowned down at the footsteps. "They're too narrow. His name is Spade because of his big wide feet, remember?"

Dean shivered. "Come on, Agnes, let's go inside. I'm freezing."

A light dusting of snow began to fall. The boys jogged across the lawn, eager to get inside by the fire. Agnes was unable to dismiss the footprints so easily. Anyone could have made them, she reasoned. It didn't mean that someone was watching the house. She was probably just being paranoid, but she couldn't shake the feeling of invisible eyes staring at her, as if whoever had made the footprints was hiding just beyond the next tree.

"Agnes!" Peat called from the doorway. "Come on!"

"Coming!"

With one last glance at the footprints she ran across the lawn to join them. The cold wind stung her cheeks. A thin layer of ice was beginning to form on the bay like skin on hot milk.

They burst into the kitchen, expecting to find Spade cooking breakfast over the fire and Hibernia reading in the library, but the house was silent, cold and empty.

“Where is everyone?” Dean grumbled. “I’m starving.”

Luckily, the coals in the library’s fireplace were still hot from the night before. Peat tossed on some wood from the stack beside the couch. Soon they were sitting on the rug in front of a roaring fire, making faces as their cheeks thawed.

“Peat,” Agnes said, “there’s something we need to tell you.”

Agnes and Dean exchanged a nervous look. It was now or never.

Agnes pulled the metal box from her pocket and placed it on the floor. They gathered around it in a loose circle. Dean picked up the box and examined it. The details of last night were still a little fuzzy in his head.

“What is it?” Peat asked.

“We don’t know yet,” Agnes said, “but that’s not all.”

She took a deep breath and began. At first, she’d meant only to tell him about the conversations they had overheard—about his parents and the doormaker, whatever that was—but soon she found that for any of it to make sense, she had to start at the beginning.

She told Peat about the metal disc the man had given her on the train, the puddle of strange black liquid in the thorn garden and the glowing eyes she had seen

inside the sentinel tree. She told him about her not-memories, the secret door in the clock, and, finally, she told him about the two conversations they had overheard late at night—the strangers who had been talking about the key—and her conviction that there was something Hibernia was hiding from them. Maybe even something to do with his parents' disappearance. By the time Agnes realized she had nothing left to say, the fire had died down again.

“So, what do you think?” she blurted.

Agnes had expected Peat's disbelief, but not the anger she saw on his face. His eyes were narrowed at her, the green one flashing. “You aren't making any sense,” he spat. “Why would Violet try and hurt my parents?”

Agnes was taken aback. “I—I don't know.”

“So, you find some jewelry someone forgot on a train. You *thought* you saw something inside an old tree. You eavesdropped on a conversation without really understanding any of it. What makes you think there's a connection between any of these things?” He jabbed his finger in her direction after each question.

“What about Hibernia's weird midnight meetings?” Agnes asked defensively. “They were talking about you, Peat. You and your parents. They knew things—”

“Everyone's been talking about that since the night of the fire. It's a small town.”

“But—”

“No, Agnes. Sometimes a tree is just a tree and bad things happen for no reason.”

Peat leapt to his feet and tossed another log onto the fire. Agnes felt stung—like Peat had slapped her. She never should have told him. She stared into the fire and tried to ignore the tears stinging her eyes.

Dean cleared his throat, breaking the silence. “Hey, are you still wearing that necklace?” he asked.

Agnes stared at him. How could he care about the stupid necklace at a time like this? Nonetheless, she pulled the chain over her head and handed it over. Dean untied the cord and slipped off the metal disc, weighing it carefully in his hand. He picked up the box and slid the disc into the narrow opening in the front. It was a perfect fit.

Agnes gasped. It was so obvious and it had been staring her right in the face. How had she not thought of it before?

Even Peat looked stunned. “Some old man just *gave* you that necklace?”

Agnes was so excited that, for a second, she forgot she was mad at Peat and grabbed his arm. “Now tell me it’s all just a coincidence.”

Dean put the box back on the floor and the three of them bent over it nervously, as if expecting it to explode or disappear. When nothing happened, Dean frowned.

“What now?”

Agnes pointed at the knob protruding from the side. “I think we have to wind it.”

She turned the tiny knob with the tips of her fingers, careful not to twist too hard. After a few turns she felt resistance and stopped. Nothing happened.

Peat shook his head. "It must be broken or—"

"No, wait," said Agnes. "Listen."

Soft music began to drift into the air. At first the melody was faint and she had to strain to hear it. Soon it grew louder and swelled as it rose into the air. On the surface, it had the tinny twang of an antique out-of-tune music box, but there was something familiar and powerful running underneath. It was like some ancient and nearly forgotten song was squeezing her heart.

Nearly forgotten, but not entirely. Why did the song sound so familiar? Agnes's thoughts whirled, grasping for an answer, until she just let the music wash over her. Then, she knew: it was the song the old man had been humming on the train. She didn't know how it was possible, but she was sure of it.

Dean's frightened voice broke into her thoughts. "Agnes! What's happening?"

He was staring at the fireplace with a mixture of awe and fear. Peat's mouth dropped open and he began to back away, dragging Agnes with him by the sleeve. The fireplace seemed to be going softer. Not disappearing, but fading in and out like a hologram.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING?" yelled a harsh voice.

Agnes jumped and the music box dropped from her hand and hit the floor with a thunk. She heard the sharp crack of metal snapping and then the music stopped.

A man in a long dark coat strode into the room. Agnes recognized the man she had last seen disappearing into the trap door in front of the fireplace. Aspis. He grasped Agnes by the arm and shook her until her teeth rattled.

“Do you have any idea what you’ve done?” His face twisted in rage.

“Let her go,” cried Peat. He delivered a swift kick to the man’s shin.

Aspis cried out and let go of her arm. At that moment, Hibernia rushed into the room, followed by the man in the green cloak, his hair shining white above the hood, which was caked in snow. “Enough, Aspis,” he said calmly. “Restrain yourself.”

Hibernia’s cheeks burned, red and angry. “Don’t you think you’re a little old to be wrestling with children?”

“Make all the snarky comments you like after you explain how the *child* got her hands on that,” Aspis said with a snarl. He clutched his leg where Peat had kicked him and pointed to the music box lying crookedly on the ground. One of its legs had snapped off. Agnes saw a glint of metal between the floorboards she was afraid might be the wind-up knob. A long crack along the top showed the gears and springs inside, some rattling around loose when Aspis bent down to pick it up. Hibernia’s face went pale and she gripped the back of the couch.

“Well,” the man in the green cloak said with a sigh. “We had always questioned whether the key should be destroyed. I guess that particular question has been answered for us.” He pulled off his cloak and shook out the snow onto the floor.

“That was our last weapon,” hissed Aspis.

“Weapon?” said Hibernia. “You sound just like Cabil.”

“Who’s Cabil?” Agnes interjected. “And—and what just happened?”

Hibernia looked at the children staring at her with confusion and fear. “I guess I have some things to explain.”

“Oh, grand,” Aspis said with venom. “Just what we need. A little chitchat.” He grabbed the broken music box off the floor and retreated to the corner by the window.

Hibernia hovered uncertainly in front of the fireplace, as if she didn’t know where to begin. Aspis slammed the music box down onto the desk in disgust. “Fine. I’ll start. Tell us how you got your hands on the key.”

The man with the white hair held up a hand. He draped his damp cloak over the couch and sat down.

“If I may, it seems rude to begin without introducing ourselves. My name is Hiro Kedokushi. Your grandmother you already know, of course, and this bristly gentleman is Aahmas Aspis.”

“Yes, yes, fine,” said Aspis impatiently. “Now that we’re all the best of friends, go on. Tell us where you found it.” He leaned forward over the desk.

“Key?” asked Agnes in confusion. “You mean the music box?”

Hibernia shook her head. “The box is only the first half and I know *where* you found that, though not how you managed to get in there, not to mention past the Artemisia plants.” She raised her eyebrows.

Agnes felt her cheeks turn red. She knew how it must look to them. She had broken into the secret room behind the clock and stolen the music box. And now it lay on the desk, damaged beyond repair. She stared down at the floor. She had nothing to say in her own defense.

“Anyhow, it doesn’t matter,” said Aspis. “The lost half of the key. Where did you get it?”

“You mean the necklace?” asked Agnes, glad for a change of subject. At least she couldn’t be blamed for having that. “A man gave it to me on the train. On the way here. I’ve been wearing it ever since.”

“On a train?” Aspis asked incredulously. A raspy chuckle escaped his throat. Then he began to laugh in earnest until tears streamed down his face and he was hiccupping. “You—some ten year old girl—just happened to find a key we’ve spent the last decade looking for? ON A TRAIN?”

“Twelve,” said Agnes.

“Excuse me?” He stopped and looked at Agnes darkly.

“Actually, I’m twelve. And I don’t know what to tell you except that it’s the truth.”

“This man,” said Kedokushi thoughtfully, “what did he look like?”

Agnes shrugged. “I don’t know. He was old and he had big scar across his face.” She drew a line from the corner of her eye across her lips.

“And he had a really big black dog,” Dean muttered.

The three adults froze with equally stunned looks. When Aspis spoke he stuttered, as if tripping over his frozen tongue, “You really believe this h-h-hogwash, Kedokushi? You think Cabil just showed up on the train and handed—”

Agnes sucked in her breath at the sound of the name.

“So it’s true,” Kedokushi said under his breath.

“Enough!” called Hibernia sharply.

“Why do you keep calling it a key?” Agnes asked. She was afraid if she stopped asking questions, the adults would send them to their rooms. “It’s a music box. How can it be a key?”

“Key is not precisely the right term,” said Kedokushi, “since it doesn’t in fact unlock a door, but creates the door itself. Door-maker would be more accurate.”

“Is that why the room went all fuzzy?” asked Dean, leaning forward eagerly.

“What do you mean it makes a door?” Peat interrupted. He crossed his arms over his chest and looked at the three adults suspiciously. “A door to what?”

Kedokushi picked up Hibernia’s emerald silk scarf draped over the arm of the couch and held it up to the lamp. In some spots the silk was worn thin and the light shone through like splotchy stars in a green sky.

“Imagine our world as this piece of cloth,” he said. “There are parts where the fabric is thinner and places where it hangs together by nothing more than a few threads. In those spots, passages often exist. Natural points where the material separating worlds has worn thin.”

He poked his finger through a small hole in the center of the silk square. “These passages are clear to anyone who knows what to look for and new ones can be created altogether by someone—”

“Someone with the right tool,” Hibernia said quickly.

Kedokushi bowed his head in assent.

“But what can a music box do?” asked Agnes. “It isn’t a— a knife.”

“Ah, that’s where you’re wrong,” he said.

“It’s not the music box, but the music itself,” said Dean thoughtfully. “The frequency. Think about it, if you hit the right note you can shatter glass.”

Kedokushi nodded. “Music can be a very powerful tool. But like anything of power, it must be wielded carefully.”

“What do you mean?” asked Agnes.

“You wouldn’t want to open a door into a burning house without consideration. Like any door to an unfamiliar place, you must be careful about what is on the other side. It might be a butterfly or it might be something, well, something or someone with larger teeth.”

“Like a black dog,” said Agnes softly. She thought back to the Atlas she’d seen upstairs. She had flipped through the pages quickly, not really thinking about the maps, but now she understood why so many of the place names had been unfamiliar. Maybe they hadn’t been places in this world at all.

“Perhaps,” said Kedokushi. He folded up the scarf. “And that is not the only reason the key is dangerous. You cannot create doors without changing the very tension of the threads that holds our world together. This can create tears in other places.”

Agnes frowned. That’s what they’d called the black puddle in the thorn garden: a tear.

“So when the room got that fuzzy look–” said Dean.

“That was the fabric of our world fading and a new doorway opening.”

Agnes looked around the room at the heavy wooden clock, the fireplace, and the brown velvet couches. It all *looked* solid enough. The cushions even had holes in them. It didn't seem like the kind of place that would be a doorway to another world.

"So these passages," asked Peat. "There's more than one?"

"Thousands have been discovered, but there are probably more."

The room filled up with a heavy quiet. Agnes felt questions bouncing around her brain like rubber balls. There were so many and they were so hard to grasp that she was plunged into silence.

Hibernia strode to the clock. She used the iron poker to move the hands and soon the room vibrated with six deep bongs. She disappeared through the open door and they could hear her heels clanking up the metal stairs. A few minutes later, she reappeared with the Atlas.

"This will help explain." Hibernia opened the cover and began to flip through pages and pages of maps.

She stopped at a page marked with a red ribbon. The children clustered around the couch and peered at it. The page was old and covered in smudged spots, tears, and even what looked like a cigarette burn. It was clearly supposed to be North America, but the map was all out of proportion. The top half of the continent was swollen like a balloon so that everywhere from Winnipeg to Texas was squashed down into the bottom few inches of the page.

"What's wrong with it?" asked Dean. "It doesn't look like any map I've ever seen."

“That’s because it’s not any map you’ve ever seen,” Hibernia said. “Let’s just say that it focuses on the areas that are most relevant.”

She skipped forward past many other maps and pages full of cramped handwriting and more drawings until they came to a map that depicted the area where they stood. Agnes could see Darkthorn written next to a tiny red square at the edge of a large yellow circle that encompassed the forest between the house and town. The sentinel trees had been sketched into the forest at the center of the circle. Agnes thought that whoever had drawn the map got their cinnamon-colored bark just right.

“Within these yellow circles are the areas that have been identified as particularly thin,” Hibernia said. “In other words, places where we’ve mapped these natural doorways or places where they are most likely to exist.”

“And you just let us wander around the woods?” Dean squeaked. “What if we fell through some magical doorway?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” snarled Aspis. He stood with his forehead pressed against the window. “We’re not talking about magic wands and spells here.”

“But you said—”

“The word magic suggests something of supernatural origins,” Kedokushi said gently. He waved a hand at Aspis, who went back to staring out the window and muttering.

“All we’re talking about is something as natural—and as powerful—as the force of gravity, which no one knew existed until it was given a name. We’re not inventing anything, we’re just naming it for you.”

“But we *could* have fallen through some non-magical doorway?” Dean persisted.

Hibernia sighed. “It’s possible but highly unlikely. For one thing, you’ve had Peat with you and he knows the woods like the back of his hand. Besides, most of the time you have to know what you’re looking for. And even then the passages can be difficult to find or barely big enough to stick your hand through.”

“That big black dog seemed to get through okay,” Dean grumbled.

A beam of sunlight cut through the blizzard, shining through the window and illuminating the open pages of the atlas. Small drifts of snow had built up in the corner of the window. Agnes wondered if the house would be buried. Her stomach rumbled in the silence of the room, making her blush.

Kedokushi cleared his throat. “I propose we adjourn this meeting for a bit of refreshment. Too much information on an empty stomach can be dangerous.”

“Good idea,” said Hibernia. She looked out the window at the thick white blanket of snow covering the ground. “If this goes on, you may not be able to get home for a while, Peat. Do you think your aunt will worry?”

Aspis made a scoffing noise, but was silenced by a stern look from Hibernia.

Peat shook his head. “It won’t be the first time I’ve holed up somewhere because of some bad weather.”

“Excellent,” said Kedokushi. “Let’s see what the kitchen has to offer then.”

It turned out that the kitchen had very little to offer except peanut butter, honey and a loaf of slightly stale bread. But the children found themselves suddenly starving and not about to complain.

They sat in the living room spreading peanut butter thickly over the bread while Hibernia built up the fire into a roaring blaze, which burned the chill out of the room and lit up the gloomy corners. Aspis refused to eat and instead paced back and forth, checking his pocket watch every minute and muttering “Where is he, where is he.”

The others ate in silence, mulling over their private thoughts until the bread was gone and the last remnants of peanut butter had been scraped from the jar with a long spoon. Agnes wiped a sticky smudge of honey off Dean’s nose.

Suddenly the kitchen door flew open and a blast of freezing wind blew into the living room. Spade slipped inside, wrapped up in so many layers that only his eyes and the tips of his ears stuck out. He tried to escape from his heavy coat, but got tangled in his scarf. Hibernia jumped up to help him. “What did you find?” she asked eagerly.

Spade unraveled the scarf covering his mouth and shot a look at the children, who were gathered on the floor in front of the fire.

“It’s all right,” said Hibernia. “The situation’s changed. You can speak freely.”

“It’s bad,” said Spade. “Very bad. I—I think you’re going to need to go see for yourselves. There’s hardly anyone left. Only a couple crazies who refuse to leave the old village. They said there’s a giant black puddle in the middle of the woods that smells awful. They—they said it’s growing, Hibernia. Does this mean—”

Hibernia held up a hand. “We don’t know what it means yet, but yes, I think you’re right. We need to go ourselves before it gets any worse.”

Aspis shut his pocket watch with a loud snap. "Want to go on a little field trip?" he said to the children with a smile Agnes didn't like.

"Are you insane, Aspis?" asked Hibernia. "They're children, we're not bringing them with us. It could be dangerous." Wispy white strands of hair were escaping from her tight braid.

"You're the one who wanted to tell them everything," Aspis pointed out. "They're the future, remember?"

Agnes saw that Kedokushi was nodding. "He does have a point, Hibernia. If Cabil really did give them the necklace, they're already involved. Until we understand why, well, they have a right to see what we're talking about."

Hibernia threw up her hands. "Fine! They can come on this one errand, but at the first sign of anything out of the ordinary, we turn back. Immediately," she emphasized the last word and glared at Aspis.

Spade stood in the doorway surveying the breadcrumbs and empty jar of peanut butter. "Is that all you've had to eat today?" he asked in horror. Without another word he spun on his heels and soon they heard the welcome sound of pots and pans banging in the kitchen.

## Chapter 9: The Craglands

The sky outside the window was a uniform grey. The snow had stopped just after lunch, but was still piled in drifts nearly three feet tall against the kitchen door. After eating quickly, Hibernia had disappeared into the study with Aspis and Kedokushi to make plans. The children sat at the table, waiting. Agnes wondered what a doorway to another world would look like. Probably some hulking iron door with a heavy brass lock, deep in the woods somewhere.

Just then, Hibernia swept into the room followed by the others. All three were dressed alike in heavy boots and green jackets made of oiled cloth that gave off a dull sheen. Hibernia's shining white hair was braided tightly and pinned up off her neck. Aspis wore a dark hat pulled down over his bushy eyebrows, which gave him the look of a bank robber. They were dressed for an expedition and, for the first time, Agnes realized that it was all truly happening.

Hibernia cleared her throat. "If you want to come with us, you must promise to do precisely as you are told. No matter what."

She looked each of the children in the eye and held their gaze until she was satisfied they understood. "Without this promise you may stay home and play scrabble."

Agnes and Peat promised eagerly. Dean mumbled his assent. His face was pale, his lips pressed together in a thin line.

"All right," Hibernia said. "Then follow us."

To Agnes's surprise, they didn't head off into the woods at all, but traipsed across the lawn towards the thorn garden. Without a word, Aspis flung open the round green door and they piled inside. The enclosure was full of the same black bushes. As the thorns tore at her hair and clothes, Agnes swore they were multiplying.

Hibernia frowned. "They're thicker than they were the other day." "I suppose you'll have to speak to your gardener then," Aspis retorted. He scowled as a long pointed thorn punched through his hat and was quiet after that.

They pushed through the tangle and into the clearing beyond. The black puddle was gone. In its place was a charred circle of burnt grass that smelled smoky, like an old campfire. As they crossed the clearing, Agnes wondered where they were going. If there were a door to another world in here, wouldn't she have noticed it before?

They stopped in front of the gnarled trees near the back wall. Hibernia pointed to a narrow gap in the thorns just large enough for them to squeeze through one at a time. "Through there."

Agnes waited, nervous, while the others passed through.

"Agnes! Come on," Dean called from the other side.

He seemed to be getting braver, while her legs were turning to jelly. Agnes kept thinking about the bleeding man she'd seen when she touched Hibernia's arm: the way his hand had sunk through the wall and the trail of blood in the snow. She held her breath as she pushed through the gap, wondering if there would be a human skeleton on the other side with a scarf still wrapped around its face.

To her relief, there was nothing there but a blank stone wall. Aspis glared at her and pointed at his pocket watch before going back to conferring with Hibernia and Kedokushi in hushed voices. Despite his demeanor, Agnes thought he was enjoying this.

She joined Peat and Dean, who hovered uncertainly by one of the squat tree's thick black limbs.

"Where's this doorway they keep talking about?" she whispered.

Dean shrugged. He seemed more cheerful. "No idea. I'm starting to think this was all a big joke."

Agnes wondered if he was right. Maybe her not-memories really were just hallucinations. At least that would mean the bleeding man hadn't really existed. She scanned the wall for the spot she'd seen in her vision.

Her eyes froze on a spot on the wall right above Hibernia's head. The wall was still there, but it was also not there. It faded in and out like a hologram. As she watched, the spot grew and contracted, pulsing as if it was a living, breathing thing.

Agnes glanced over at Peat and Dean, who were kicking a small stone back and forth across the yellow grass. Clearly, they hadn't seen it yet. She was about to say something, when she caught the smell of something earthy and damp, like a stagnant pond. She stared harder at the spot and wondered if there was water on the other side.

When she looked up, Kedokushi was smiling at her. "The world is full of things you don't see until you know to look for them."

Agnes smiled back. He was right. The doorway was hard to see, but once she *had* seen it, she couldn't believe she hadn't noticed it right away.

"What is he talking about?" Peat whispered.

Agnes pointed out the spot on the wall and watched as Peat's eyes went huge and Dean went pale. "I—I was sure they were messing with us," he said in a strangled voice.

Hibernia turned to the children and spoke sharply: "Now, remember, stay close and do exactly as you are told."

She turned back to the wall and held out her hands, palms open, reaching out towards the shimmering doorway. Her hands disappeared into the wall, just as the bleeding man's had done in the not-memory. With a fluttering noise, the edges of the doorway began to shimmer and move like waves born by a strong wind. They contracted, pulling away as if they didn't like to be touched. The doorway expanded until Agnes was looking into an entirely different world.

On the other side, thick thorny bushes—much larger than the ones growing in the thorn garden—grew in pools of murky brown water. A swampy smell of vegetable decay and dirty water drifted through the opening.

I'm looking at another world, Agnes told herself. She was surprised by how, well, boring it looked. At the very least she had expected a red sky and purple trees, maybe a few alien-looking animals. It all looked disappointingly normal.

Hibernia spoke over her shoulder. "Quickly now."

Peat turned to Agnes. His brown freckles seemed to jump out of his pale face. "Are you scared?"

Agnes knew she should be scared, but for some reason she wasn't. Probably because, for the first time in days, she didn't feel like she was crazy.

"No. I don't think so."

"Well, I'm glad someone's not," mumbled Dean.

Aspis grabbed Dean by the collar of his shirt and dragged him through the opening. A second later, they stood on the other side, Dean with a bewildered look on his face. Kedokushi took Peat gently by the arm and they followed.

As Agnes passed through the doorway with Hibernia, she felt a brief sensation of something warm and stretchy, like a living elastic band. Then she was standing with the others on a grassy knoll slightly raised above the rest of the swamp, which stretched endlessly in all directions.

Once they were all through, the doorway made a noise like the snapping of a rubber band and shrunk down to the size of a fist. The air around it shimmered for a moment and went still. If Agnes craned her neck at a certain angle, she could see a slight fading in the spot where the doorway had been, but it was basically invisible.

"How—how will we get out?" asked Dean in a panicked voice.

Aspis spat into the murky brown water. "With our magic wands."

Kedokushi laid a hand on Dean's shoulder. "Don't worry. The doorway will still be here when we return to this spot."

Aspis interrupted. "Let's get moving—now." He squinted at something invisible in the distance. "I, for one, would like to be home before nightfall."

For once, Agnes agreed with him.

The others followed in a single file line as Aspis set off down a path along the narrow strip of high ground above the swampy water. The air was thick and humid. Thorn bushes the size of apartment buildings towered over them. At the top, the thorns were shiny black and grew on branches as thick as an arm. On the ground, young purple tendrils with soft green thorns reached up through the water.

Peat, second in line, scrambled to keep up with Aspis's long strides. "So you didn't make the doorway?" he asked.

Aspis stopped where the path branched in three directions. "Didn't you listen to anything we told you earlier?" he hissed. "We can't without a key. And your little friend took care of that. Now shut up and let me concentrate before I lead us into a sinkhole."

Agnes felt her cheeks go red. If Aspis hadn't grabbed her, she never would have dropped the music box! Why was everything always her fault?

"But if you had the—the key, you could make new doorways?" Peat persisted.

"Yes, it would be possible," Hibernia said, "but creating doorways where no openings exist is dangerous. You might open up into another world, or you might end up floating in the nothingless blackness."

Dean shot his grandmother a terrified look. Agnes reached back to squeeze his hand, but she didn't feel much better. She didn't know what the nothingless blackness was, but she didn't like the sound of it.

"This way." Aspis stalked off down the middle path and the others scrambled to follow.

“Can’t you just get another music box?” Peat asked. The grass below his feet slid off into the swamp water in a large chunk and he would have fallen if Kedokushi hadn’t reached out to grab his shoulder.

“The art of making the keys,” Kedokushi cleared his throat, “as far as we know, is gone.”

Agnes felt a pang of guilt. She had no idea that the music box was so important or she never would have touched it.

The path wove through a clump of tall skinny trees growing straight out of the mud, their trunks bare except for clusters of needles at the very top. The air was thick with the sulfurous smell of the dirty water. On the other side of the trees, the path widened a little and the ground sloped up, leading them to dry land. They stopped to rest in another clump of thorns. Agnes reached out and touched the smooth black surface, careful to stay away from the pointed end.

“Are these the same kind of thorns as in the garden?” she asked.

Hibernia nodded. “Most doorways are large enough that seeds—and even the occasional animal—passes through.” She turned to Peat, who was leaning against one of the spindly pine trees. “It’s what your parents were studying, you know. They hoped it might give them the answer to why the sentinel trees were dying.”

Peat’s jaw dropped open. “They knew? About all this?”

“Of course they knew,” Hibernia said.

“Stay on the path!” Aspis barked.

Dean jumped and looked down at his feet. He had been resting on a fallen log, the heel of his sneaker just touching the water. Agnes rolled her eyes in Aspis's direction, which elicited a small smile from her brother.

When they set off again, the ground was definitely drier, but the mud still sucked at their shoes. Anyone who paused too long had to pull their feet free with a grunt. The ground wriggled as they walked. Agnes bent down and saw the mud was covered in tiny yellow worms, standing on end and waving, as if sniffing the air.

"Leeches," Peat said, squatting beside her.

Agnes made a face and pulled her feet free of the mud with a squelch.

"Almost there!" Hibernia called over her shoulder.

They reached dry ground at the edge of a forest of trees with wide spreading branches, more like the pines they were used to, except the needles had a blue tint and were covered in clusters of fat red berries that gave off an intoxicating scent. Dean reached out his hand towards one, but Aspis slapped it away sharply: "Don't touch those!"

Aspis broke off a branch a few inches above the cluster of berries and let it drop to the ground. He crushed the fruit under his heavy boot until they began to froth and sizzle with blue foam. Soon, they had burned a hole in the ground six inches deep. Dean stuck his hand in his pocket. Agnes decided she would stop rolling her eyes at Aspis, at least until they got home.

Unlike the deathly silence of the swamp, the forest was alive with sound. The deep gulp of frogs battled with the high screeching of insects that sounded like an orchestra of out-of-tune violins.

“Where are we, exactly, Hibernia?” asked Dean.

“The Craglands,” Hibernia said, glancing around a bit nervously, as if someone might overhear her.

“We’re here,” Aspisp said.

The group stopped and stared at what lay in front of them. The ground sloped sharply down, ending in a round, treeless crater about thirty feet across. At the bottom, a cesspool of black liquid rippled as if moved by a breeze, despite the stillness of the muggy air. It was just like the puddle in the thorn garden, but bigger—a lot bigger. If that had been a puddle, this was more like a pond. There was something so eerie about the perfect, depthless blackness, that Agnes felt a rash of goosebumps break out on her arms. She took an involuntary step backwards, bumping into a tree.

Hibernia pulled a small glass vial full of a powdery white substance from her pocket. “Aspisp?”

“Hang on, hang on.” Aspisp stalked down to the edge of the black pool, muttering what sounded like mathematical calculations.

“What is he doing?” Agnes asked.

“Guessing, would be my guess,” said Kedokushi. He held a similar glass vial, though his was full of reddish liquid. “Aspisp is a chemist. He invented the formula to neutralize the black liquid, but it’s very volatile. The measurements need to be exact or—well—poof, so to speak.”

“Poof?” asked Dean. His voice came out high and squeaky.

“Wait here,” Hibernia said to the children. She walked down the sloping sides of the crater, followed by Kedokushi. They stopped a few feet from the pool and spoke in hushed tones.

“What did he mean poof?” Dean asked again.

Agnes and Peat shrugged at the same time, and then both smiled. Yesterday morning, their world had been the only world they knew. Now they were standing in a swamp in the Craglands. Agnes wondered if she should pinch herself, just to make sure she was awake.

“Look, something’s happening,” Peat said.

Sure enough, the trio had moved so they were standing scattered around the edge of the pool at equal distances. Hibernia held out the glass vial and looked up at the others to make sure they were ready. When Aspis nodded, she uncorked the bottle and dumped the white powder into the pond of black ooze. Aspis went next, and then Kedokushi.

As the last drops of the red liquid hit the surface, the viscous black pool began to steam and boil. Slick iridescent bubbles swelled on the surface, until they were the size of watermelons, and then popped, releasing the foul smell of rotting eggs. The puddle began to bubble faster, and then the liquid sunk, as if draining away. Soon, all that was left was a large round circle on the ground—bare of all grass and blackened like it had been burnt.

Agnes realized that she had been holding her breath and inhaled deeply. She heard a bird chirp in the distance and smiled. It was over.

The trio walked back up the rise. Aspis wore a satisfied smile and rubbed his hands together like someone who had just finished a dirty job.

“Now, that’s how you take care of a tear in the fabric of the world, if I do say so—”

He was interrupted by a noise like an enormous clap of thunder. Hibernia and Kedokushi froze, matching looks of horror plastered to their faces.

“What was that?” asked Peat.

Before anyone could answer, the tremor hit.

At first, it looked like a ripple passing through the ground, starting at the burned spot and tossing up leaves and sticks and tearing tree roots from the ground as it spread outwards through the forest. They were all flung to the ground as it passed beneath their feet. Agnes dug her fingers into the dirt, trying desperately to cling to something solid as the earth vibrated beneath her.

After seconds that felt like hours, the ground went still. They climbed shakily to their feet. Agnes felt dizzy. She couldn’t tell if she was just unsteady or if the earth was still reeling. Kedokushi held out a hand to steady her. “We must move quickly now,” he said.

Agnes looked past him and saw a faint plume of smoke rising from the ground where the puddle had been.

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They sprinted back through the woods, dodging between trees and jumping over fallen logs. Every time one of the children slowed, Aspis would yell at them to

keep moving. By the time they reached the edge of the swamp, they were all exhausted.

Hibernia eyed the stretch of still, murky water and then turned to the children. Agnes and Peat squatted on the ground, slumped against each other. Dean stood, leaning against a tree near the edge of the water.

“Remember,” Hibernia said, “stick to the path and move as quickly as you can.”

She stepped onto it just as another tremor struck, tossing her against the nearest tree, which she gripped for support. Agnes and Peat held onto each other for balance. Aspis lunged for Dean, but he was too late.

Dean fell backwards and rolled down the steep embankment, crying out as he landed face down in the swamp with a splash. Aspis reached out his hand, but the tremors forced him down onto the ground, where he cowered, helpless as the others.

Then the earth went still. Dean wiped his eyes and coughed, spitting out mouthfuls of brown water. He was coated in yellow slime, but waved up at the others, who were watching anxiously. He didn't seem to be hurt.

Dean crawled back up to the high ground and used a low tree branch to haul himself to his feet. “It smells terrible, but at least it's not too deep—”

Aspis threw his coat over Dean's head, cutting him off. In one swift gesture, Aspis kicked Den's legs out from under him and began rolling him in the dirt. Dean beat his fists against the heavy cloth, yelling to be let go.

“Stop it!” Agnes screamed as she climbed to her feet. “You're hurting him!”

She turned to Hibernia, expecting her to look outraged, but her grandmother just stood there, biting her lip. Kedokushi reached over and squeezed her shoulder. What was wrong with them? Were they just going to stand there and watch Dean get beaten to death?

Agnes ran forward, unsure what she was going to do, but sure she had to do something to save her brother. Just then, Aspis stopped. He tossed his coat aside. “Don’t touch that,” he barked as Agnes came closer.

Dean blinked up at the faces staring down at him. Agnes was relieved to see that he looked unhurt, though a little confused, but that was no surprise considering he’d just been shaken, half-drowned and then kicked and rolled in the dirt.

Kedokushi bent over Dean and squeezed his fingers. “Dean, what do you feel?”

Agnes frowned. That was a strange question. He should have asked *how* Dean was feeling.

“Nothing,” replied Dean in dull voice. “I don’t feel anything.”

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“What’s wrong with him?” asked Agnes. “He sounds like a robot.”

At first, as Dean had recounted his symptoms—numbness in his legs and arms—he had sounded mostly normal, if a little tired. But after only a few minutes, his voice had taken on a machine-like quality that Agnes hadn’t liked.

“Move your left leg,” Aspis commanded. His voice was low and gravelly. He sounded worried, and that made Agnes feel worse than ever. She wished he’d go back to his usual snarky self.

Dean stared blankly into space as if he hadn't heard. Agnes watched as a thin line of drool escaped his slack jaw. She wiped it away with the corner of her shirt and tried to ignore the hot, wet ball of dread in the pit of her stomach.

Hibernia covered her mouth in horror and leaned against a tree for support. "I never should have let you come," she said softly. "Never, never."

Agnes grabbed Aspis's arm, forcing him to look at her. "What does she mean?"

He shook her off and ran his fingers through his hair. "It's bad enough just touching water from the numb swamp, but he drank it." He paused. "Usually you just lose feeling for a few hours."

"What do you mean *usually*?" asked Agnes shrilly. She was beginning to feel angry, which felt better than being worried.

"Well, I've never seen anyone *drink* the water," Aspis snapped.

"But the shaking," Peat cut in, "what was that? An earthquake?"

"We just closed a tear, a very large tear," Aspis replied with a shrug. "Things get stirred up."

Agnes felt like hitting him. "This is your fault then! Why don't you do something?"

Aspis scooped Dean off the ground and slung him over his shoulders like a sack of potatoes. "We can't do anything until we get out of here. It will be dark soon. The crags will have felt the tremor and it won't be long before they come looking for us."

"Crags?" asked Peat.

“Enough questions,” Aspis snapped. “We need to go, now.”

He set off through the swamp without looking back to see if the others were following. They jogged along the path, more careful than ever to avoid touching the water. Now that Agnes knew what the swamp could do, her imagination was making it rise and press in from all sides. But as the water began lapping at her toes, she realized it was more than just her imagination.

Hibernia stopped in the grove of trees they had rested in on the way to the black pool. “It’s no good,” she said. “The water is rising too quickly. We won’t be able to make it back to the doorway before we’re trapped. We have to go back.”

“And then what?” panted Aspis. He switched Dean’s limp body to the other shoulder with a grunt, staggering a little under the extra weight. “Who knows how long it will take for the water to sink again—or if it ever will.”

Kedokushi shook his head. “We have to find another way home.”

“If we stand here debating this any longer, we won’t have a choice,” Hibernia said. She pointed to the water, which was slowly creeping up the grassy knoll and lapping at the tree trunks.

Aspis cursed. They spun and began to backtrack, their feet squelching over their own muddy footprints, now full of water from the numb swamps. By the time they reached the edge of the woods, the path was nothing more than a thin line of mud. As they caught their breath under the trees, thin fingers of water reached out until the swamp had swallowed the path completely.

Peat collapsed on the ground, breathing heavily. Hibernia pulled him to his feet. “Up. I know a place nearby where we can rest.”

“What about Dean?” asked Agnes.

Her brother lay slack over Aspis’s shoulder. His clothes and hair were streaked with sickly yellow mud, now drying and crumbling off in chunks.

“There’s nothing more we can do right now,” said Hibernia. “The effects should wear off in time, but Aspis can’t carry him forever and we shouldn’t stay in the open any longer than we can help.” She peered into the still silent trees surrounding them and spoke the next words so softly that Agnes barely heard. “The crags will know we’re here. There is one place we’ll be safe, for now.”

Aspis frowned. “You can’t mean—”

“The workshop, yes.”

Aspis paused, turning the idea over in his head. He ran his fingers through his hair, leaving behind clumps of dirt. He looked like he wanted to protest, but just nodded.

They plunged back into the woods, following a dirt track hemmed in from both sides by underbrush. Trees loomed over them, blocking out the grey sky. They ran until Agnes felt her legs must be as numb as Dean’s. Just as she was about to collapse, the path abruptly emerged from the grey woods, ending in a clearing where a stone building stood, tall and alone in the middle of the forest.

The peaked copper roof of the building, green with age, rose nearly as high as the trees around it. Their feet shuffled through tall grass as they approached the wide stone stairs at the entrance. The steps were grooved in the middle, as if they had been worn away by the passage of thousands of feet, but it was clear no one had been there in while. Rusted iron hinges hung from either side of the empty doorway;

a gaping hole, guarded on either side by two fierce stone sculptures standing upright on spindly insect legs, their reaching antennae and sharp tusks daring unwelcome visitors to enter at their own peril. Peat ran his hand over the insect's carved back, round and humped like a turtle shell. "What are these supposed to be?"

"That is a crag beetle," Hibernia said in a clipped tone.

"A beetle?" Peat asked doubtfully. He ran his finger down one of the long fangs.

They hurried up the stairs and into a single open room. The green marble floors were covered in a thick layer of dirt and dead leaves that crunched under their feet. There were no other doors, just a giant fireplace in the back corner. Faint sunlight filtered through a skylight made of many panes of blue glass. The colored light made them look as if they were underwater.

Kedokushi shook out his cloak and spread it on the floor in front of the fireplace. Aspis bent over with a grunt and placed Dean's body on top, where it lay curled and limp.

Agnes swallowed loudly, horrified that she'd thought of Dean as a *body*. She looked around the room, desperate for a distraction.

A number of large metal tables were scattered across the floor, covered in twisted scraps of metal, rusted tools, and glass beakers. Agnes thought it looked sort of like her school's science lab, but everything in the room was covered in a thick layer of dust. She picked up a sheet of metal with ragged edges. It was thin as aluminum foil, but oddly heavy. "What is this place?"

Hibernia's eyes rested briefly on each object before dismissing it and darting to the next. Her shoulders were drawn up in a way that made her look tense, fearful. As she took the sheet of metal from Agnes's hands, a look of unbearable sadness crossed her face. She looked fragile, like a glass that would break. A moment later the look was gone and her face was stony, her posture erect. She held the sheet of metal up to the skylight. Hundreds of tiny holes lit up with blue green light.

Agnes gasped. "It's just like the key."

"This place used to be a town hall," Hibernia said, "before, well, the town's troubles began."

"Troubles?" Aspis scoffed. "You say that like it was something that just *happened*." He turned to the children, vibrating with anger. "This," he spat, "was Cabil's workshop."

Peat looked at the detritus scattered over the tables and floor: the twisted glass beakers and charred papers. "What was he making?"

"He was *trying* to make a key," said Kedokushi. "You see, he had the disc, but that was only the first half. He needed the music box in order to copy it. Even then, it must be made of a very particular kind of metal for the music to create the right frequency, to be able to cut through the fabric separating worlds. Without that, it would just play a pretty tune. It would be like trying to cut through steel with a toothpick. Luckily, the metal cannot be found in our world."

"So he couldn't do it?" Agnes asked. She still felt guilty that she'd destroyed the music box—the last remaining key—but relieved that at least Cabil didn't have one either. At least it would be a fair fight, if that were what it was.

Kedokushi and Hibernia exchanged a shadowy look. "As far as we know," he said. "By the time we discovered what was happening and got here ourselves, he was gone. He'd deserted the workshop and moved on. Later, he came back for the music box, but...." he trailed off with a glance at Aspis, who was staring at the back wall as if his eyes could bore through it.

Agnes peered into the dark corners of the vast room, suddenly nervous, as if some shadowy figure would be lurking there.

"Don't worry," Hibernia said. "This place has been deserted for years. Cabil is long gone."

"But gone where?" Dean asked.

Hibernia shook her head. "That, we don't know. But the fact that we found a tear, it means, well..." Her eyes clouded as if she was plunged in some other memory and hadn't even noticed she'd stopped speaking out loud.

"It means Cabil is back," Aspis said matter-of-factly, "not long dead and rotting in the swamp somewhere as we'd hoped."

Agnes shivered. It was strange to hear him speak so coldly of another person's death.

"More importantly, he's back to work—somewhere, we just don't know where," Aspis finished. His hands clenched and unclenched as if he was imagining them around Cabil's neck at that very moment.

"Enough," Kedokushi said firmly. "We need to collect wood and build a fire before night falls. Dean needs to be kept warm."

“Have it your way,” Aspis mumbled. He stalked off into one of the corners and began sifting through a pile of scrap, pulling out small pieces of wood and paper to use as kindling.

“Come with me,” Kedokushi said to the children. “He just needs a few moments to gather his thoughts.”

They went back down the front steps. In the time they’d been inside, the sun had sunk behind the trees, washing the surrounding woods in deep orange light like the horizon was on fire. Kedokushi instructed Agnes and Peat to gather dead wood in the surrounding forest, making sure to stay together and within site of the stone building. Then he returned to the steps and conferred quietly with Hibernia, their heads bent closely together so the children caught nothing more than the faintest rise and fall of hushed voices.

“Come on,” Peat said. “Let’s get the wood before it gets dark. This place gives me the creeps.”

Their feet crunched over dead sticks and leaves as they scoured the forest for fallen branches, testing them for dryness before adding them to the quickly growing stack at the edge of the forest. He stopped and turned to Agnes.

“I’m sorry I didn’t believe you before. I mean when you first told me about everything.”

Agnes stopped, her hand resting on a dead branch. She shrugged. “It’s okay. I’m used to it.”

Peat put his hands on her shoulders, spinning her body so they were facing each other. “No, I mean it. It’s just that, deep down I think I *did* believe you. But if Hibernia really thought my parents were dead, then maybe I’d have to too.”

“Aspis doesn’t think they’re dead,” Agnes pointed out. She didn’t like Aspis, or necessarily trust him, but that didn’t mean he was wrong.

“But if he’s right, then Aunt Violet had something to do with their disappearance. I just can’t believe that. The whole thing makes my head hurt.”

Agnes squeezed his hand. “If we ever manage to get out of here, we’ll figure out the truth.”

Peat smiled at her, grateful. They each loaded up their arms with as much wood as they could carry and staggered towards the stone building.

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Light from the fire danced over the walls of the stone room. Every time a log crackled, the sound echoed off the high ceiling. It made Agnes feel the room was full of cackling dancing creatures. She hugged her knees to her chest and stared at the carved mantle, high above her head. The dark polished wood was covered with the same beetles as the stone sculptures near the door, except there were hundreds of them on the mantle, clawing and climbing over one another like a vision from a horrible nightmare. Agnes tore her eyes away and stared at the fire. The fireplace was massive and extended back into the wall at least ten feet. It was like a whole other room and made their small fire look piddling, though it gave off comforting warmth.

Hibernia and Kedokushi had walked off into the woods at sunset and now the others waited, nibbling on the granola bars that Spade had stuffed in their pockets. Except for Dean, who lay curled on his side, as close to the fire as he could without being in danger of catching an errant spark. Aspis had spread his coat over the boy and now he sat to one side, shivering slightly and poking at the fire with an iron rod he'd found somewhere. Agnes wanted to thank him, for caring enough about her brother to endure the cold, but she couldn't find the words.

Footsteps rang out across the marble floor. They turned to see Kedokushi and Hibernia approaching with grim faces. They weren't even pretending to be cheerful, which Agnes found more distressing than what Kedokushi said next: "The swamp is still high and the water is rising further. We won't be able to go back that way."

"Well," Aspis said. "That's that." He settled himself against the wall and closed his eyes.

What did he mean "that's that"? Agnes looked at her grandmother, bewildered.

"We can't go back the way we came," Hibernia said, "and, well, without the key, we don't know any other way. Not yet, anyhow."

The full weight of her words sunk in. They didn't know how to get home. They could be stuck here forever. Agnes felt panic burning her throat like acid and tried to calm down. Aspis, Kedokushi and Hibernia would figure out a way to get them home. They were grown-ups; they would figure it out—they had to. Agnes wanted Hibernia to give her a hug, to reassure her that everything would be all

right, but she didn't. Instead, Hibernia mumbled something about taking first watch and half-walked, half-staggered back to the steps, where she sat hunched over, staring out at the dark forest. Peat picked at one of his shoelaces. He had purple circles beneath his eyes.

"Kedokushi," Agnes said, "can I ask you a question?"

"Well, I suppose you already have." Kedokushi smiled and settled himself on the floor nearby.

Somehow, his smile made Agnes feel better. If he could still make a joke, then things couldn't be as bad as they seemed.

"That black puddle in the woods, the one you called a tear, what was it?"

"Doorways like the one in the thorn garden are natural. They have existed forever as the fabric of worlds frays and stretches and rebuilds itself. But when someone tries to cut new doorways, it can tear the fabric in other places. These tears can be repaired, but only if you find them in time, before they get too big and the poison kills everything around it."

Agnes thought of what must have happened to the people who lived here before Cabil came. She shivered. It didn't make sense. Why would someone knowingly release a poison?

"But—then—why would anyone try to make new doorways if it's so dangerous?"

Aspis sighed behind them and his answer came out as a grumble. "Don't you understand yet? Cabil wants control over the entire universe. He wants the power to

open and close doorways between worlds at his command, and his only. Even if he has to destroy entire worlds in the process.”

“Maybe someone *should* close them all,” said Peat with a shiver. “This place feels evil.”

“No place is evil until people make it that way,” Aspis snapped. “This used to be a town full of people, you know. But Cabil upset the balance of this world.” He rubbed his hands over his eyes, which were swollen and bloodshot. “You can’t just reshape the world, take whatever you want with no thought to the consequences.”

He leaned back against the wall and closed his eyes. “Now shut up and let me get some sleep.”

Kedokushi cleared his throat. “Yes, I suppose we should all try and sleep.” He tossed a few more logs on the fire and then stretched out on the ground. Peat and Aspis were already asleep, their breathing deep and even.

“Kedokushi,” Agnes said softly.

He opened his eyes.

“It—it just—it doesn’t make sense.” Agnes paused and thought hard about what she was trying to say. “You said it’s about control, about power, but why? What does Cabil *get* from all this?” She spread her arms wide.

Kedokushi frowned. “That is a hard question to answer. Probably only Cabil himself truly can, but for some people, just having the power is enough.”

“So he was just born wanting it? Born evil?”

Kedokushi shook his head. “No, Agnes, I don’t believe anyone is born to be one thing or another. Our choices—the way we use our gifts—make us who we are.”

“Gifts?”

“Well, that’s a story for another day. Now, go to sleep. Things will look brighter in the morning. They always do.”

Agnes felt a pang in her stomach. It was something her mother always said when she’d had a bad day. As Agnes closed her eyes, she wondered if she would ever see her mother again.

## **Chapter 10: The Whirligig Beetle**

The first thing Agnes noticed when her eyes opened was the light. The fire had died, but the room was still bright. She didn’t feel that she’d been asleep that long, but it must have been morning already. She stretched and looked to see if the others were up yet. The space in front of the fire, where Dean had been laying on the cloak, was empty. So was the wall where Aspis had been sleeping. The others were gone.

“What is it you want?” a voice growled. Agnes spun around.

The room was completely changed. All the piles of trash, the years of dust and decay, were gone. The green marble floor sparkled, reflecting the polished glass beakers and metal instruments that lay in orderly rows on the long tables.

In the far corner, a tall man perched on a wooden stool, his legs folding at the knees like a grasshopper. His bald head and enormous ears reminded Agnes of Spade. Two large bruises, old and beginning to yellow, nearly covered the man's swollen cheeks. When he spoke, his voice cracked.

"What do you want? Gold? You can have it. We have no use for it here."

A high, thin laugh echoed from the stone walls. Another man stepped out of the deep shadows in the corner.

"I don't want what you *have*. I want what you know."

Agnes gasped and then clapped her hand over her mouth. It was the man she'd seen on the train. Cabil. Luckily, he didn't seem to have noticed her.

"If I tell you. Then you'll leave? I have your word?"

Cabil smiled. Something on the table gave off a pulsing red light. "Yes. Give me what I want and I'll leave your little village behind."

Agnes rubbed her eyes, willed herself to wake up. She had a feeling she didn't want to see whatever came next. The man on the stool let out a deep breath. His body wilted, a balloon with no air left inside.

"All right."

"Excellent," Cabil said, cheerful. He set aside a beaker of some dark substance, and picked up a miniature brass cage. As Cabil lifted it off the table, the cage glowed with colored light—orange, red, yellow—flashing in quick succession. Agnes heard a soft buzzing, like a fan, and the light stopped. Cabil dropped the cage into the man's lap.

"You'll leave us alone? If I tell you, you'll leave?"

The edges of Cabil's lips turned down. His blue eyes narrowed. "I don't like repeating myself. Continue."

"It's all to do with the colors," the man said. The words spilled out all at once, like he was trying to get the telling over with as quickly as possible. "The whirligig beetles can sense when they're near a thin spot in the fabric. They glow different colors—like a kind of guide. A—A code."

Cabil's eyes lit up. "Fascinating. And do you know what the colors mean?"

"Some of them," the man said quickly. "For your world, it's blue."

"Blue for home," Cabil murmured.

He unfastened a door on the side of the wire cage, sticking his hand through the opening. When he removed it again, he was pinching a small beetle between his thumb and index fingers. Two tiny propellers on the end of the insect's antennae began to whirl with a whooshing noise as it struggled to escape. Its body lit up a fierce red Agnes could see reflected in the whites of Cabil's eyes.

"Fascinating," he murmured again. "How much we can learn from the workings of such a small creature."

He carried the beetle to one of the worktables and positioned it on a wooden plank, pinning it there with his finger. His other hand rummaged through a drawer until he found what he was looking for: a long nail, thin and sharp as a needle. The beetle let out a high, thin squeal. The man on the stool swiveled around so his back was facing Cabil. He buried his face in his hands.

Agnes realized what Cabil was about to do. She screamed without thinking, "No!"

Cabil's head snapped up just as he drove the nail through the beetle's body, pinning it to the board, ending its life with one small screech.

Agnes felt a sharp pain in her stomach, as if the nail had also passed through her. Her eyes clamped shut and she doubled over. After a few seconds the feeling faded. She opened her eyes to a faint buzzing.

The room was cold. Hibernia slept with her back against the wall, dancing firelight reflecting off her face. Peat slept soundly, curled around Dean. Their exhalations sent white puffs into the cold air. Agnes felt her heartbeat slow to normal. She'd been dreaming. That was all.

She turned. The room was dusty, full of broken glass and trash, just as it had been when they arrived. Kedokushi lay in the empty doorway, his hands folded behind his head. The steps were empty. Aspis must be prowling around outside.

Agnes heard the buzzing again, though fainter this time. She squinted at a bright orange spark rising in the fireplace. It seemed to be coming towards her, hovering in the air like a floating candle. It wasn't until the light landed on her palm that Agnes realized what it was: a whirligig beetle. Its legs probed the soft skin of her fingers, tickling. The tiny propellers on the beetle's antennae began to spin. It rose into the air, glowing yellow and then red, the colors softly fading into each other.

"Blue for home," Agnes murmured.

As the beetle took off into the fireplace, Agnes realized that it hadn't been a dream at all. What she'd seen had been real. If she could catch the beetle, maybe it

could show them the way home. Then she'd be the hero instead of the one who broke the music box and ruined everything.

She leapt to her feet, sidling around the fire, which only took up a fraction of the enormous fireplace, and followed the glowing light. As she moved deeper into the fireplace, a soft breeze rustled her hair. A large stone in the back corner had crumbled, leaving a gap big enough to crawl through. Agnes saw trees waving in the distance.

The beetle landed on the edge of a crumbling stone, probing the hard surface with its front legs. If it flew outside, everything would be lost. Agnes crept closer on silent feet, slowly reaching out her cupped hand. The beetle froze, turned towards her.

"It's okay." Agnes lowered her voice so it was soft, soothing. "I don't want to hurt you. I just want your help."

The beetle darted outside just as she lunged forward. Without a second thought, she threw herself through the opening after it, landing in a heap in the tall grass.

The beetle flew in lazy loops, blinking on and off like a Christmas light. Agnes watched as it landed on a tree, just beyond the edge of the woods. She knew she should go back inside, but by the time she called for help and explained everything—if she even could explain—the beetle, their only way of getting home, would be gone.

She jogged across the field.

The trees were packed tightly together, blocking what little moonlight there had been in the clearing. Agnes plunged forward, following the beetle, slapping at branches that lunged out of the darkness to block her path. After a few minutes, the whirligig landed on a smooth black stone, just out of reach. Agnes looked back over her shoulder. The stone building was just a faint smudge of grey in the distance. She'd come too far. One last try and she'd go back, with or without the beetle.

Agnes crouched down. The beetle crawled forward, its white light a beacon against the smooth black rock. It was now or never.

Agnes launched herself forward, hands cupped together to trap the insect. She landed hard on the rock, which gave way with a sickening crunch. Agnes rolled to one side. Bright light shone between her fingers. She felt tiny propellers whirring against her skin. She'd done it. She'd found the way home.

Agnes climbed to her feet and did a victory dance, careful not to loosen her grip. The sound of leaves rustling made her stop and turn, her eyes scanning the woods. The murky forest was silent. There was nothing there but the black stone. The beetle inside her hands pulsed red, like a siren, a distress signal.

The black stone lurched forward. Agnes reeled back, thumping into a tree. She watched, frozen in terror, as the black stone began to grow.

Like an iceberg, just the very tip had been poking out from the ground. The crag shook off the leaves covering its knobby black shell and rose from the dirt on spindly insect legs. A high screech echoed through the forest—like nails on a chalkboard. Agnes resisted the urge to cover her ears. She still clutched the whirligig

beetle, which was scrabbling frantically against her fingers; she wouldn't be able to pick up so much as a stick to defend herself.

Just like the stone carvings, the crag had a long, barrel-shaped body, enclosed in a thick plated shell sprinkled with patches of yellowish fuzz or mold. Sharp white teeth covered the pinchers protruding between its white tusks. Its enormous body gave off a putrid odor. Agnes gagged, trying to keep as quiet and still as possible.

The crag probed the air with one long feeler attached to the front of its head. The other one hung uselessly, snapped in two. Luckily, the crag was having trouble navigating without it. The creature gave a frustrated screech as it tripped over the broken feeler and banged into a tree.

Agnes turned to look at the stone house. It seemed impossibly far away, but she would have to make a run for it before the crag found its balance. She tightened her hands around the whirligig beetle, took a deep breath, and then she was off, crashing through the woods without looking back, ignoring the briars and branches pulling at her clothes.

Agnes burst into the clearing and ran towards the gap in the wall. She was almost there when something hard smacked into her legs, knocking her flat on her back. A dark shape loomed over her. Agnes screamed and kicked out with her legs. She expected to feel the crag's hot, stinking teeth seize her neck, but all she saw was Aspis staring down at her. He did not look pleased.

"Where have you been, you stupid girl?" he asked through clenched teeth.

"I—the woods—blue for home," she stammered.

"If you can't make sense, I'll have to knock you down again."

“The crag—I—I saw it in the woods.”

Aspis’s olive skin went pale, making him look a little green. He whirled towards the trees, but the forest was silent. Nothing pursued her.

Just then, the others came running around the side of the building. “We heard someone yelling,” said Peat sleepily. His eyes widened when he saw Agnes’s cupped hands. The beetle had begun to glow the dark purple of an eggplant.

“What is that?” Hibernia asked sharply. “And what are you doing out here?”

Agnes climbed to her feet and told the story in disjointed fragments—how she’d seen Cabil in the workshop, what the man had said about the whirligig beetles. As the words spilled out, Agnes’s fear grew until she could taste it as a lump in the back of her throat.

When she was done, Kedokushi spoke slowly, carefully choosing each of word. “Agnes, tell me, do you *see* things?”

Agnes nodded, stunned that she didn’t have to explain the not-memories. A look passed between Hibernia and Kedokushi, but it wasn’t disbelief, as she’d expected. It was fear. With a sinking sensation, Agnes realized they were afraid of her.

A low droning sound echoed through the clearing.

“They’re coming,” Kedokushi said.

“Where’s Dean?” Peat asked.

In the rush to get outside, they had forgotten he was lying still and frozen on the floor. They spun and ran.

Hibernia was the first to reach the doorway, where she stopped suddenly. Agnes bumped into her grandmother from behind, nearly letting go of the beetle. She peered around Hibernia's shoulder and screamed, "Dean!"

Two giant insects bent over Dean. Hard shells covered in patches of yellowish fungus arched over their knobby spines. The larger creature stroked Dean's cheek with its front legs, which were tipped with hooked yellow claws. At Agnes's scream, the smaller insect spun towards the doorway.

Hibernia moved forward slowly, motioning for the others to follow at the same gradual pace. One of the insects stood on its hind legs. It seemed to be sizing them up with its waving antennae.

"Spread out," Hibernia whispered. They fanned out in a tightly packed line, as if they were one giant creature moving forward. The larger crag scuttled backwards towards the fire, hissing. The smaller one scurried after it, through the hole in the fireplace and out into the night. They breathed a collective sigh of relief.

Aspis scooped Dean off the floor. A faint red welt was rising on his cheek where the beetle had rubbed him with its claw. His eyes still stared blankly ahead.

"The crags hunt in groups. There will be more soon," said Kedokushi. "We have to move quickly."

"Move where exactly?" huffed Aspis.

Kedokushi nodded at the tiny light still clutched in Agnes's hands. "If Agnes is right--"

"And what if she's not?"

"Well, then we're no worse off than we are now. Let it go, Agnes."

Agnes tried to reach out with her mind, show the tiny creature that they meant it no harm. They just wanted to go home. The beetle stopped its frantic thrashing. Agnes opened her hands.

The whirligig beetle glowed red, then dimmed to pale orange. It tested the air with its feet and then its tiny propellers began to spin, lifting its body into the air as it glowed like the tip of a lit match.

“Follow it closely,” said Hibernia.

The whirligig hung suspended near the ceiling, as if trying to make up its mind, then darted towards the door. The group scrambled after it.

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In the woods, Agnes felt hungry eyes watching. The whirligig beetle had taken off into the trees and they followed at a sprint. Rain began to fall steadily, making it harder to see the insect’s faint yellow light. The soft ground soaked up the water like a sponge. Soon they were wet and covered in mud.

By the time they reached the steep cliff that rose into the clouds, they were cold and exhausted. The beetle paused above the entrance to a cave, as if making sure they were following. Its yellow glow took on a faint green tinge.

“That’s closer to blue,” Agnes whispered. “That’s good, right?”

“Humph,” said Aspis.

The beetle flitted into the cave. The passage was long and dim. It dead-ended at a deep pool filled with black water. A faint light glowed somewhere far beneath the surface. The beetle landed in the center of the pool, glowed a deep, brilliant blue and then went dark.

“What does that mean?” Peat panted.

Hibernia frowned, peering into the gloomy water. “If we’re right, it means the doorway home is down there.”

They stood at the edge of the water, staring into its black depths.

“Under the water?” groaned Agnes. “But how are we supposed to get through? It’s pitch black. And Dean can barely swim—even if he was awake. There’s got to be another way.” She looked around the cave, hoping for a door marked ‘home’.

“There is no other way,” said Kedokushi. “At least not for us.”

A high clicking sound echoed off the walls of the cave.

“We have company,” said Aspis. “Hurry.” He pulled off his belt and wrapped it around Dean, buckling it in front so the boy was securely fastened to his back. Aspis waded into the water and suddenly disappeared.

“Dean!” yelled Agnes.

Aspis surfaced, Dean’s head slumped on his shoulder. “It drops off steeply. Swim towards the light.” He took a deep breath and plunged under the water.

The buzzing grew louder. The very air seemed to vibrate, making Agnes’s teeth chatter. Peat grabbed her arm. “It will be okay. I’m a good swimmer. Just follow me.”

She nodded and kicked off her sneakers. Peat took her hand. They were about to jump in when a crag shot out of the darkness, tearing Peat’s hand away and knocking him flat on his stomach.

Peat wriggled on the ground, trying to get away, but the crag had him pinned. “Agnes! Help!”

Agnes watched in helpless terror as the giant insect hissed, spreading its wings and raising its hooked claws. She lunged, reaching for Peat’s outstretched hand, but was tugged back. “Let go! Let me go!”

Hibernia dragged her towards the water. Kedokushi stepped forward and kicked the crag in the head with his heavy boot. The insect rolled onto its back, legs wriggling in helpless fury. A second later, another took its place, crawling over Peat’s back as he tried to get up.

Agnes thrashed against her grandmother, but Hibernia was too strong. They landed in the water with a splash. “We have to help—Peat!”

Agnes had time for a single deep breath before Hibernia pulled her under.

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Underwater, it was so dark Agnes could barely see her own hand. She heard the sounds of a struggle and the awful buzzing noise, but couldn’t tell which way was up. She had no choice but to follow Hibernia and pray that Peat and Kedokushi were behind them.

They swam through an underwater arch towards the weak light. It seemed to be coming through another opening at the other end of the watery tunnel. Agnes felt pressure in her ears as she squeezed through the low gap and into more open water. Light filtered down from above. Agnes kicked fiercely upwards until her head broke the surface, where she coughed and spluttered, sucking in air like she had never tasted anything so delicious.

They were in a large open cavern. Hibernia was already swimming towards the far rock ledge where Aspis stood, thumping Dean on the back as he coughed up mouthfuls of water. Agnes pulled herself up onto the rock and turned back towards the still, silent pool.

“Where are they?” she croaked in a faltering voice. They had to be okay, they just had to. Peat had called to her for help. If something happened—no, she wouldn’t even think about it.

Hibernia stared at the surface of the water, muttering under her breath: “Come on, come on.”

Bubbles stirred the water. Then, two heads broke the surface, Peat’s arms flailing wildly as Kedokushi dragged him by the collar. They pulled themselves onto the ledge. Agnes pulled Peat into a tight hug. He grinned and hugged her back.

“I don’t think I’ve ever been this happy to see anyone in my whole life. I thought I was a goner.”

Kedokushi wrung out his red tie on the rock. “Let us hope that crags can’t swim.”

Agnes and Peat froze with matching horrified expressions. Six heads swiveled towards the water, but the cave was silent. It seemed that the crags liked the water even less than Dean.

“Can what swim?” Dean asked. He was sitting up, looking around with a perplexed expression.

“Dean!” shouted Agnes. She squeezed him so tightly he coughed and had to push her away.

“It’s nice to see you too,” he said. “What happened? Where are we?”

That was a good question. Agnes looked around. They were in a large open cavern filled with water of the purest, clearest blue she had ever seen. Stalactites hung from the ceiling like petrified icicles, dripping water into the pool with a musical drip drop. A scattering of small openings high on the wall let in bright shafts of sun that lit up the water like spotlights, making it sparkle.

Agnes touched one of the stalagmites rising from the floor. It was cold and glistened like a giant crystal.

Just then, Peat leapt to his feet. “Wait! I’ve been here before!”

The others turned to him, surprised.

“Agnes, remember I told you about the underwater river? All the caves?”

Agnes nodded.

“Come on. Follow me!” Peat picked his way carefully over the sharp rocks. The others climbed wearily to their feet and followed.

After a few minutes, the cave narrowed. The air grew dark as they left the glowing blue water behind. Agnes wondered how often in her life she had floated above, or walked near, something as dangerous and life altering as a doorway to another world without realizing it.

“We just squeeze through here,” Peat said. He inched forward, disappearing through a gap between an overhanging rock and the cave wall. Dean went next, then Agnes. The first thing she saw when they emerged into the woods on the other side was a purple splash of paint, bright against the brown tree trunk. They were home.



## Chapter 11: Cabil

The sun was still rising as the group trudged through the woods towards Hibernia's house. Peat let out a whoop as he sighted the open blue door spilling light onto the grass. Puffs of white smoke billowed from the chimney. Agnes caught the smell of cinnamon and spices on the breeze. It was good to be back.

They burst through the kitchen door, Agnes in the lead. "Spade! We—"

She froze. Spade sat at the kitchen table, a mug of coffee in his hands going cold. Across from him, Violet perched on the edge of the chair, her grey hair greasy and uncombed. She sprang to her feet, pushing past Agnes to get at Peat.

"Thanks heavens!" she cried, pulling him into a smothering hug. She whirled on Hibernia. "How dare you! After everything—"

"Violet, we—"

"How dare *we*?" Aspis asked, his voice dangerous. "How dare *we*?"

"No," Violet hissed through clenched teeth. "I don't want to hear any of it. We're leaving. We're leaving right now."

She clenched Peat's arm in an iron grip and dragged him towards the door. Peat followed looking tired and miserable. Aspis glared at Violet, but made no move to stop her.

Agnes didn't know what to do. If Aspis was right, if Violet had something to do with the fire that killed Peat's parents, then they couldn't let her take him. She thought of how strangely Violet had behaved when she saw the disc around Agnes's neck, the smoke she had seen rising from her hands. At the time, she had thought it was just her imagination, but what if it was a clue?

“Wait!” Agnes shouted.

She grabbed Peat’s other arm. He was halfway through the kitchen door, Violet tugging him along. Agnes was afraid the woman might keep pulling, that they would tear him in two, but she stopped, whirling on Agnes with a look of pure loathing.

“Peat is coming back with me, with his family, where he belongs. It’s what Claire would have wanted. I’m taking him away from this mad place and you, none of you, are going to stop me.”

Peat looked between Agnes and Violet in helpless confusion. Hibernia pulled Agnes gently back.

Violet marched Peat across the lawn. Just before they crossed into the trees, he looked back at Agnes, his face pale and his eyes fearful. It was like watching him march to his doom without lifting a finger to help. Despite the bright sun, a light rain began to fall outside, droplets stirring the surface of the bay.

“She had something to do with the fire,” Agnes said. “I just know it.”

Hibernia shook her head. “We never found any evidence, Agnes. There’s nothing we can do. Come, there are things we need to discuss.”

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The library’s windows framed the black clouds filling the sky. As Agnes and Dean sat on the couch, a clap of thunder sounded in the distance. Hibernia and Kedokushi sat across from them. Aspis perched on the arm of the couch, his arms crossed over his chest.

“Tell us again,” Hibernia said, “about the man who gave you the key.”

Agnes began her story again: the train ride, the old man sleeping at the back, the black dog and the necklace he had given her. When she finished, even Aspis was staring at her with an intent gaze.

“But why?” she blurted. “Why would Cabil just give it me?”

Hibernia shook her head. “We don’t know, not yet. Perhaps he hoped you’d uncover the other half, that he could get it somehow.”

Aspis snorted. “Unlikely. He’s never been one to leave anything to chance. And even then, why *now*?”

Hibernia rubbed her temples. “It doesn’t make sense.”

“What if was intended as a distraction?” Kedokushi asked quietly. “What if he doesn’t need the key anymore? If he’s made another....” he trailed off.

“But why me?” Agnes persisted. “How would he even know I exist?”

Hibernia looked uncomfortable. She opened her mouth and then closed it again, burying her face in her hands. “I just—I can’t.”

“Agnes,” Kedokushi said. “Cabil has a gift that is, I believe, similar to yours. He sees into people, understands them. In a way that is his greatest power. If you understand people, truly understand them, they are much easier to control.”

Agnes stared at him, dumbfounded. She’d never considered that there could be other people who saw the not-memories, others who were different like her.

“How do you know so much about him?” Dean asked.

Hibernia and Kedokushi exchanged a look. She shook her head.

“Cabil wasn’t always the person he is today,” Kedokushi continued. “Up until twenty years ago we all worked together, part of an organization called the

Doorkeepers. We were a branch charged with keeping the Atlas, adding to it and correcting it as we explored the places where other worlds overlapped with our own. We mapped them in order to protect the secret, as others had before us for a thousand years.”

Hibernia stood and walked to the fireplace, staring deep into the flames as she spoke: “One day, everything changed. Cabil has always been ambitious—always wanted more of everything. More responsibility, more knowledge. His ability,” she paused, spitting the word, “made him nearly perfect at his job, allowed him to see more than the rest of us ever could, allowed him to hide his true self.” She turned to face the children. “He began to talk about opening new doorways, about using what we found in these other worlds, controlling the very fabric of the world and everything in it. It was madness.”

“That’s why he needed the key,” Agnes said. She tried to ignore the way Hibernia’s voice sounded when she talked about Cabil’s ‘ability’. She made it sound like a curse.

“Yes. The keepers have had the key in our possession for a thousand years, but used it sparingly, only in the direst emergencies. You see, we are explorers and protectors, chosen for our love of knowledge,” Hibernia finished, turning back to the fire.

“Most of us know that true power lies in understanding *when* to use that knowledge and when to leave the world alone,” Kedokushi said with a sigh. “Even with his gifts, that is something Cabil has never understood.”

“When he left,” Hibernia continued, “he managed to take the disc. Luckily, we found out in time to keep the music box away from him, though not without great sacrifices.” She looked at Kedokushi, tears brimming in her eyes.

Kedokushi’s body sagged. He looked years older than he had a few minutes ago. When he spoke, his voice was full of pain. “People died protecting the music box because they knew if Cabil had that kind of power, he would try and reshape our universe in his image, destroying entire worlds in the process.”

Agnes thought of the woman in the rubble she’d seen when she first touched the music box. So this was what Kedokushi meant when he talked about her “gift”. It really was a curse.

“So what happened to—to Cabil?” asked Dean.

“We pursued him, back here. He escaped into the thorn garden and through the doorway, but there—there was blood everywhere. Afterwards, the black puddles stopped appearing. Most of us believed he was dead. There has been no sign of him for nearly twenty years. Until now.” Hibernia cleared her throat. “Now that you understand what is happening, how dangerous and important it is, I hope you understand why I have to send you home.”

“What?” Agnes asked, shocked. Hibernia couldn’t send her home, not now, when she were just beginning to learn the truth—about herself, about the world. “You can’t!”

“I must,” Hibernia said forcefully. “Don’t you see? You are already far too involved in something more dangerous than you understand. You’re children.”

Agnes scowled. "Our parents aren't home. Even if you write to them, the letter will take days—weeks—to get there."

"Spade will stay with you until your parents get back. This is the end of the discussion. Pack your suitcases. You leave first thing in the morning."

"But Peat—"

"Will be fine," Hibernia said. "Violet knows the danger. She will keep him safe. It is my job to keep *you* safe."

Ages fumed silently.

"What about you?" Dean asked, looking back and forth between Hibernia and Kedokushi. "What are you going to do?"

"We leave now," Hibernia said. "Report back to the rest of the keepers. Whatever Cabil is up to—if he has somehow managed to make a new key—then it's not enough to just be ready. This time, we will go looking for him."

She rose and went to the desk, digging through the drawer until she found a notepad and pen. Hibernia scribbled a few lines and handed the paper to Dean. "If anything happens, or if you need to talk, you can reach us here. There's a telephone number too."

Dean looked down at the paper. "But this address is in Prague." He paused, scanning his mental map of the world. "That's in Europe."

Aspis tapped out an impatient staccato rhythm on the floor with his heel. "Now that we've covered history and geography, can we please get moving?"

Kedokushi smiled. "Not all the passages necessarily lead into another world. There are some places where the fabric of this world is, well, wrinkled. It folds in on

itself and if you go through a passage you end up somewhere else. Not a different world, just a different place than you started.”

“This is all really complicated.”

Hibernia squeezed his hand. “Come on, we’ll show you before we go.”

The coals in the fireplace glowed, the orange light dancing off the walls, creating strange shadows in the corners. Kedokushi used the fireplace poker to move the hands on the clock to midnight. As the last chime sounded, the trap door in front of the fireplace slid open.

Agnes stared down into the dark hole. A wooden ladder led underground into a dim tunnel with crumbling dirt walls, roots poking out here and there like the heads of snakes. She watched an earthworm slither beneath a root, angry at having its dark lair disturbed.

“What’s down there?” Dean asked, nervous. He had never liked dark, enclosed spaces.

“Come along. You’ll see,” Hibernia said. She grabbed a metal flashlight from the mantel and pressed the switch. Nothing happened. She smacked it against her leg until the bulb flickered and came to life.

“Stay close,” she said. “It’s dark.”

They followed Hibernia down the ladder one at a time. Agnes jumped off the last rung onto a soft earthen floor. Exposed wooden beams ran through the dirt over their heads. They must be beneath the house’s foundation. The flashlight beam illuminated rocks and more withered roots lodged in the walls as they continued down the dark, sloping tunnel.

The rich soil was soft and loose underfoot, the air damp and cool. Soon, the foundation disappeared and the tunnel narrowed, the dirt roof propped up by wooden crutches. The tunnel dead-ended in a small, square room. The flashlight flickered once and then died, plunging them into complete blackness.

Agnes could hear Dean's labored breathing. She reached for his hand. Kedokushi's tranquil voice emerged from the darkness: "It's all right. We're here."

But where, exactly, was *here*? Agnes wondered. Then, as her eyes adjusted to the dark, she finally saw what they had come for.

A spot on the floor about two feet wide shimmered with faint light in the dark, damp room. On the other side, Agnes saw the base of a tree and, past it, leaves dancing in the wind. Beyond it, just clear blue sky.

Agnes's head spun with vertigo and her knees threatened to buckle. Something was wrong with the perspective. The floor was solid beneath her feet, but when she looked through the doorway, she seemed to be looking up. Hibernia reached out a hand to steady her.

"It takes some getting used to."

Hibernia smacked the flashlight against her palm and it flickered back on, casting a yellow circle of light on the dirt floor.

"The passage comes up from the ground in the woods, about a mile from a train station that will take us into Prague." Hibernia pulled Agnes and Dean into a swift hug. "I'm sorry, but this is where we have to leave you. Spade is getting the truck ready. He'll drive you back home first thing in the morning."

She let them both go and looked at Agnes. “I’m sorry to leave you this way, but we must move quickly.”

Agnes nodded. She knew that Hibernia thought she was doing the right thing, but it was so unfair—to tell them all this and then force them to go home. How could they leave knowing that Peat was stuck with Violet? Knowing that she might have burned down his house, when no one believed them and no one was doing anything about it. Finding Cabil was important, but so was Peat.

“I—I know,” Agnes stammered. It was the best she could do.

Hibernia handed her the flashlight. “Take care of each other. I’ll be in touch as soon as I can.” She hopped forward, passing through the doorway feet-first. A moment later, she was looking down at them, waving. Agnes felt the same sense of vertigo threaten to knock her down.

Kedokushi and Aspis stepped through the passage to join Hibernia. Their faces peered down into the basement for a moment and then they were gone. Agnes and Dean lit their way back up the ladder and into the library with the flickering flashlight.

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Once the others were gone, there was nothing left to do but go upstairs and pack, as Hibernia had commanded. Agnes crumpled her clothes into balls and tossed them at the open suitcase. It didn’t make her feel any better. When she was done, she zipped up the bag and kicked it as hard as she could.

“Whoa!” Dean said, ducking out of the way as the suitcase careened into the hall. “I guess you’re all packed, then.”

“Sorry. I just—I can’t believe they’re sending us away like this!”

Dean sat down on the unmade bed. “I thought you’d be relieved to be going home after everything that’s happened. You were the one who didn’t want to come here in the first place, you know.”

Agnes glared at him. That was before. She couldn’t just go back to splashing around the pool for the summer. Not now. She had the feeling that there was something they were missing, something important.

“Come on,” Dean said. “Let’s go find Spade.”

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The rain had stopped and the sun was trying to break through a thicket of grey clouds. Agnes and Dean squelched over the wet grass to the striped tent. The flap was pinned open, but Spade wasn’t inside.

“Hibernia said he had to fix the truck. He’s probably out there,” Dean said. “I guess we should just wait for him to...” He trailed off and peered over Agnes’s shoulder, into the forest.

She turned, but didn’t see anything but a small bird, digging for a worm.

“Dean, what is it?”

He shook his head. “Nothing, I just—I thought I saw someone out there.”

Just then, Agnes caught a flash of movement behind one of the trees.

Someone *was* there. “Peat!” she called out, relieved.

She dashed into the forest, Dean close at her heels, calling for her to wait.

Agnes pelted past rows of trees, wet leaves slapping her face and soaking through her clothes. She stopped, panting, and waited for her brother to catch up.

Dean bent over to catch his breath. “Did you see him?”

“No, but who else would it be?”

“Sorry, to disappoint you.”

Agnes and Dean jumped as a man stepped from behind a nearby tree. He was dressed in dark clothes that blended into the shadows, but his white hair stood out, shimmering in the dappled light. A thick scar ran from the bottom of his eye to the top of his beard.

Agnes felt her heart thrum loudly. Cabil. Here.

The giant black dog sat at Cabil’s feet. Its furry snout reached nearly to his shoulders. The dog creature bared its teeth and growled. Dean made a choked noise and recoiled, banging into his sister. Cabil patted the creature’s head. It stopped growling and licked his fingers. “My apologies. He can be a bit territorial.”

Agnes gathered her courage. “I know who you are, what—what you’re doing.”

Cabil chuckled. “So Hibernia has told you the whole story has she? You know everything about evil old Cabil now.” He bent forward. “Did she tell you about my ability?”

“Yes, she did.” Agnes lifted her chin and glared at him to show she wasn’t afraid.

Cabil raised his eyebrows in mock surprise. “Well then. Were you horrified to know where your own gift came from?”

Agnes faltered. What was he talking about? How did he know about the not-memories?

“Ah, perhaps she didn’t tell you *everything*, did she?” Cabil leaned back against the tree. The scar made his smile crooked, only half a smile. He seemed to be taking his time, enjoying himself.

“Agnes, you inherited your abilities from me. I am your grandfather.”

Agnes and Dean stared at him, unable to hide their astonishment. Their grandfather? It couldn’t be true, could it?

“Our grandfather is dead. He died when our Mom was a kid,” Dean said, though he sounded uncertain. They’d never seen a picture, after all.

Cabil tugged at his beard. “Funny, I don’t feel dead. Though, doubtless Hibernia finds me more convenient gone.”

Cabil looked Agnes directly in the eye when he spoke. His voice was urgent, forceful. “Why do you think I gave you the disc, Agnes?”

She shook her head. She didn’t have an answer.

“I’ve been watching you, both of you.”

“The footprints by the tree,” Agnes murmured, “that was you.”

“Oh yes, but I’ve been watching you for much longer than that. I watched your mother bring you home from the hospital, watched your birthdays, watched you build that tree house in your backyard. I’ve watched and waited.”

Agnes swallowed. She didn’t want to believe him, but something inside her said he was telling the truth. “Waited for what?”

“Waited until I was sure you were special, like me.”

Agnes’s stomach lurched. “But you—you’re evil!” she blurted.

“Evil,” Cabil said, “is a matter of perspective.” He took a step back, receding further into the shadows. The dog’s long spotted tongue darted out to lick its nose.

“You’ve seen what’s in these other worlds,” he continued, “terrible, terrible things. And there are places where much worst things dwell. But there are also places wondrous beyond belief, places that could solve the problems of *this* world—the wars, the fight for resources. Think how much better our world would be if we had control—” his voice rose and his eyes seemed to look beyond the children. He paused, focusing on Agnes’s face. “I digress. The point is, Agnes, together we could do great things.”

Agnes felt her head spin. She didn’t like Cabil. There was something unnerving about him, but what he said made some kind of sense. Maybe Agnes’s gift didn’t just mark her as different. Perhaps it marked her as special. Maybe she could even use it to be helpful, to make up for breaking the music box.

“Don’t listen to him,” Dean cut in. He turned to Cabil. “You’re making those tears—we’ve seen the black puddles. They poison everything around them. They—they said you’re upsetting the balance of the world.”

Cabil listened with his head cocked to one side. He shrugged. “True, there have been some unfortunate consequences, but if a few plants—and, yes, even people—have to suffer, that seems a small sacrifice to build a better world, a world where everything and everyone is of use.”

Agnes looked for something to say that would contradict him, but came up blank. Dean stepped in front of her, protectively.

“Why should we believe anything you’re telling us?”

Cabil smiled. "If I were you, I would wonder why Hibernia wasn't giving me the whole truth. After all, I only want to help."

Dean narrowed his eyes. "Prove it."

"Very well." He extended his hand to Agnes. When she didn't take it, he sighed deeply. "Do you want to know or not?"

"Agnes, I don't know about this—"

But Agnes had already stepped forward and grabbed the pale hand, which was dry and cold as stone. She had to know.

"Close your eyes."

The images banged into her head with the force of an explosion, so quick and bright they were painful to see. A woman, her face pale and freckled, bouncing a toddler on her knee. The baby's eyes were mismatched: one green, the other brown. He reached up, tangling his chubby fist in the woman's hair while she laughed. A man wearing a black silk eye patch joined them. He lifted the baby up, tossed him in the air. Agnes felt emotions—happiness, comfort—radiating through her body to the tips of her fingers. Then it melted away.

A searing pain in her chest. She couldn't breathe through the billowing smoke. Violet, her face smeared with tears, snot running from her nose, kneeled in front of a curtain. She held a candle in her outstretched, shaking hand. The flame spread up the curtain, licked at the ceiling. Then the scene changed again.

Night. Fear. The same man and woman, running through the grove of fallen giants. The man stopped, staring up at the last sentinel tree. Its waving branches seemed to scrape the sky. The woman clutched his arm, "Oh, Robert, I can't," she

moaned. “How can we just leave him behind?” The man took her face in his hands, kissed her. “We have to go, now.” They stepped into the black heart of the tree, venturing forward by touch until a small, shimmering spot appeared in the darkness. A doorway.

Agnes gasped. She had seen, had felt everything. It was like she’d been standing there for hours, though another part of her was aware it couldn’t have been more than a few seconds. Her voice was shaky. “How—how did you do that?”

“There are many things I could teach you, Agnes.” Cabil’s voice was sympathetic, hypnotizing. Agnes forgot everything else, but that voice.

“I still—I don’t understand. Were those people Peat’s parents? What were they running from?”

“Perhaps you should ask Violet.”

Just then, a voice rang across the clearing. Agnes tore her eyes away from Cabil’s. Spade stood by the kitchen door, his hands cupped around his mouth. “Dean! Agnes!”

“I believe it’s time for me to be on my way. I’m sure the others are on the hunt,” Cabil said with chuckle. He turned to Agnes. “Think about what I said.”

With that final message, he spun on his heels, whistling for the dog creature to follow as he disappeared into the trees.

Part of Agnes wanted to call out, tell him to wait, run after him. The desire was like a guilty fire, burning in her stomach. She didn’t know what to think or who to believe anymore. Dean grabbed her arm.

“Don’t, Agnes.”

“Don’t what?”

“He’s bad, Agnes. I’m surer now than ever. We have to go tell Spade, warn the others.”

“I know that,” she snapped.

“Do you?” Dean stared at her as if he could read her confused thoughts.

Agnes wrenched her arm out of his grip and sprinted through the trees, calling out for Spade.

## Chapter 12: The Traitor

“Cabil? Here?”

Spade rubbed his hand over his bald head. Agnes and Dean had burst out of the trees as if a pack of wild dogs were at their heels. They breathlessly related what had just happened, talking over each other until Spade held up his hands for silence.

“Let me get this straight. Violet started the fire? Peat’s parents fled through a doorway in the sentinel tree? And Cabil, standing right over there,” he pointed at the woods behind them, “just *told* you all this.”

“Well, not exactly told. He sort of—sort of showed me,” Agnes said.

Spade stared at her, not understanding.

“It doesn’t matter!” Agnes shouted, frustrated. “You have to find Hibernia and the others. We have to help Peat. Violet did this! This is all *her* fault!”

Spade tugged at his ears and shot an anxious glance into the trees. He grabbed Agnes and Dean and pulled them into the kitchen, slamming the door shut behind them. “Sit.”

“But—”

“Sit!” he said more forcefully.

They each pulled out a chair and sat, watching in silence as Spade paced back and forth in front of the fire. “Okay,” he said finally. “You both stay put. I’m going to find Hibernia and the others. They’ll want to know Cabil’s been here. Did he say anything else? Any hint of what he’s up to?”

Agnes and Dean both shook their heads.

“What about Peat?” Agnes asked. “We can’t just leave him with Violet after—after what she did.”

“Whatever you *think* Cabil told you—or showed you—he did for himself. That’s just how he works,” Spade said. “We have to warn the others. They’ll know what to do.”

“He wasn’t lying!” Agnes said. “I—I saw it!”

“Stay here,” Spade barked. He ran into the library, nearly hitting his head on the doorframe on the way.

A second later, they heard the clock strike midnight. Agnes and Dean were alone.

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By the time an hour had passed, Agnes couldn’t stand it any longer. She leapt from her chair, shouting. “They don’t understand! Peat’s in danger. His parents fled to a whole other world just to escape Violet!”

Dean regarded her, calm. “And you saw this?”

Agnes stumbled over her words. “Well, not—not exactly—but it was implied. She burned their house down, Dean! I’m sure of it.”

“Stop yelling at me.”

“Sorry.” Agnes collapsed into the chair. Dean’s face bore a look of deep concentration as he thought through their dilemma. Finally, he spoke.

“I think you might be right.”

Agnes squeezed her brother. “I knew you’d agree with me. Come on, let’s get our coats!”

“Hang on.” Dean disentangled himself from her arms with a stern look. “I agree that we owe it to Peat to find him and tell him what you saw. That’s all.”

“Fine, fine,” Agnes said. “Just hurry up.”

Agnes pulled on her rubber boots and rain jacket, at Dean’s command, while he scribbled a note: **GONE TO FIND PEAT. BE BACK SOON. SORRY.**

They left it on the table and slipped out the kitchen door. The sky had turned grey and rain began to fall softly, turning the ground into a slippery mash of leaves and mud. Agnes was glad Dean had made them put on their raincoats. Her brother was an expert at “just in case”.

They jogged through the forest, pausing occasionally to look for the next tree marked with purple paint. By the time they reached the whirlpool, the water had driven through their raincoats and pooled in their shoes, making squelching noises as they ran.

“We turn east here, right?” Dean asked. He looked around for the next marker.

“There!” Agnes cried. She pointed to a fir with a purple splash of paint on the bark.

“Come on, the road wasn’t far.”

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Rain was coming in thick sheets, turning the surface of Main Street to mud. Agnes could barely make out the window of Violet’s bakery, just ahead. When they reached the door, Dean put out a hand to stop her. “Look.”

Sure enough, a small painted sign declared the bakery *Closed*. Frustration and relief battled like rabid butterflies in Agnes's stomach. Maybe Violet had nothing to do with the fire—maybe she'd already taken Peat away, somewhere safe. But she couldn't dispel a sense of unease.

Dean cupped his hands around his eyes and peered through the window. "It's dark inside. I think they're gone."

A clap of thunder boomed in the distance, followed by a flash of lightning. Agnes tried the door. To her surprise, it was unlocked. A bell tinkled as she pushed it open.

"I'm pretty sure this is breaking and entering," Dean said, hovering in the doorway.

"Come on," Agnes said. "We came all this way and, besides, there's lightning. Even if they're gone, we can wait out the storm a little."

They stepped inside. "Hello?" Agnes called. "Is anyone here? Peat?"

All the smells of freshly baked cookies were gone. Instead the air smelled stale. A battered suitcase lay on the floor. As Dean lifted it by the cracked leather handle, the side fell open. It was empty. He put it back down. "Maybe they left without packing. No one's here, Agnes. We should go."

Agnes stepped over the empty suitcase and walked through the open parlor door beyond. The curtains were drawn, blocking out the black clouds looming in the sky. A half-empty cup of tea sat on the desk. Another cup lay on the floor, shattered like it had been dropped or thrown. A flash of lightning illuminated the room,

followed a second later by a crash of thunder that rattled the remaining teacup in its saucer.

Dean shivered. "The storm's getting closer."

"Hello?" Agnes called again. She was greeted by silence. "Let's look around a little," she said. "Something weird is going on. You look around the front room. Cough if someone comes in."

"What are we looking for?" asked Dean.

"I don't know," Agnes said. "Something. A clue."

"What kind of clue?"

Agnes shrugged. "You'll know it when you see it."

"Know what when I see it?" Dean grumbled, but he retreated to the bakery.

Agnes surveyed the room. She didn't know what she was looking for any more than Dean did, but she felt that there had to be something inside the house that would help them find the truth. She had to start somewhere, so she pulled open the desk drawer. There was nothing inside but a few chewed up pens.

The fireplace was cold and the candle stubs on the mantle had solidified in mid-drip as if time itself had frozen. She glanced at the bookshelf. On the top shelves, rows of cookbooks fought for space with books about knitting and a collection of paperback romances. Agnes felt a funny tingling at the back of her neck as she stepped closer.

On the bottom shelf was a row of books with faded spines. One was large enough to read the title from across the room: **BONN'S BOOK OF BOTANY**. The textbook was bound in grey cloth, but the cover was worn around the edges so

the cardboard poked through. It was covered in a thin layer of dust, as if it hadn't been used in a while.

Goosebumps broke out all over her arms as she pulled the book off the shelf. She brought her nose to the cover and inhaled, coughing at the dust. The book smelled of old paper and mold, but there was something else too. Something happy that reminded her of bubbles and holidays. She was about to call Dean, when she heard a loud pop behind her.

Agnes spun around. She was standing in a different room. Her eyes flashed rapidly over the overstuffed couch and piles of books on the floor. She glanced out the window. The edge of a greenhouse, bursting with green plants and flowers, was clearly visible beneath a sky lit up in pink and orange. She must be in Peat's old house.

Just then, she heard voices echoing in the hallway. A man with brown hair peppered in grey and a black eye patch stepped through the doorway carrying a bottle of champagne balanced on a heavy grey textbook. It was the same man Cabil had showed her, Peat's father. The bottle overflowed, spilling frothy champagne all over *Bonn's Book of Botany*. Claire Theroux appeared just behind him, her curly red hair pulled into a ponytail. She juggled three tall glasses. "Quick! Pour it in here!"

She laughed as the champagne overflowed the glasses and spilled over her fingers, dripping onto the floor.

"What's all the fuss about?" asked a familiar, matter-of-fact voice. Violet stood framed in the doorway, hands sternly on her hips. She saw the glasses and raised her eyebrows. "Champagne? What's the occasion?"

Claire's face beamed as she held out a glass. "We figured it out, Vi. We found a doorway!" The words began spilling out of her so fast she never noticed Violet's smile falter and disappear.

"That's why the sentinel trees have been dying off all this time. It was Robert's hypothesis at first—I don't know why we didn't think of it sooner—but he realized there had to be a doorway somewhere in or near the grove. There must be something happening on the other side of it that's stopped the trees from reproducing. Once we figure out what it is, we can stop it."

Claire smiled and took another sip of champagne. Violet looked pale. She caught Robert's eye and looked away. He frowned and put his glass down on the table near a brass lamp.

"We should tell Hibernia," Robert said, looking directly at Violet.

Violet bit her lip. "We—we can't tell her—"

Robert spoke softly, but as if he was weighed down by something incredibly heavy, "Enough."

Claire looked at him in surprise, but he was glaring at Violet. "You knew this already, didn't you?"

Claire laughed awkwardly and put a hand on his arm. "Of course she didn't know, Robert. How could she possibly know?" She turned to her sister. "Tell him, Vi."

Two bright spots of color appeared on Violet's pale cheeks. She met her sister's look and then quickly dropped her eyes. Claire glanced from her husband to her sister as if she didn't understand what was happening.

“This has something to do with Cabil, doesn’t it?” asked Robert.

“Cabil?” asked Claire in a disgusted voice. “Don’t be ridiculous. No one’s seen him since I was a child.”

“Violet?” asked Robert.

“I—he—he’s been in another world all this time,” Violet said. She stood up straighter. “He’s been getting stronger, making plans. He knows about the passage in the tree. That—that’s where he is.”

Claire stared at her sister in shock. When she finally spoke her voice was nothing more than a squeak, “But how could you possibly know all this?”

Violet glared back. “You’ve been so worried about your trees and your precious plants, you haven’t even stopped to think about what kind of horrors are on the other side of those doorways! Cabil showed me what these so-called other worlds look like. And if a few trees have to die to protect you—to protect Peat—”

“He’s insane, Violet! Whatever he’s doing is dangerous. He’s interfering with the very fabric of the world,” Claire yelled. She looked at Robert, panic spreading over her face. “We have to tell Hibernia, we have to tell her now.”

“No!” Violet cried. “There’s no time. That’s why I’m here. Cabil—Cabil’s coming for you, Claire. He knows you’ve been looking for the doorway, that it was just a matter of time before you found it and—”

Robert grabbed Violet’s shoulder. “He knows because you told him.”

Tears leaked out the corners of Violet’s eyes. She brushed them away with her sleeve. “He’s making a better world, a safer world...” she trailed off.

Claire pulled her hand back as if she was going to slap her sister in the face. She stood there, eyes burning, and then her hand dropped to her side. Violet grabbed it. Her voice was pleading. "I didn't want anyone to get hurt, I swear. If you just stay and talk to Cabil, make him see that you understand what he's doing, that you'll promise not to tell about the passage and the Cirq—"

Claire snatched her hand away, cutting Violet off. "He'll destroy every living thing in this world. We'll have no part of it." She turned to Robert and he nodded.

"We have to run," he said. "We'll go through the passage itself. It's the last place he'll think to look for us."

"But Peat—"

Robert stroked his wife's cheek. "We can't take him. Not where we're going."

Violet clutched her throat and took a step back. "You can't be serious? You can't go—not there!"

"What choice have you left us?" Robert spat.

Claire nodded, tears silently running down her face. She turned to Violet. "Whatever else you've done, I know you love Peat. Swear to me you'll take care of him. Swear it."

"I swear," Violet moaned. "I—I'll cover your tracks. I never meant for any of this to happen." She buried her face in her hands and didn't watch as Claire and Robert fled the room hand in hand. The only sound was the bottle of champagne dripping onto the floor where it had been knocked over.

Violet wiped her sleeve over her face and took a deep breath. She lit a candle and carried it over to the window. The lawn was dark and empty. She set the candle

on the floor next to the curtain and opened the window, just a crack. Her face looked grim and determined. A cool breeze blew through the window, stirring the curtain until it danced just in front of the flame. She nudged the candle closer with her toe.

Violet watched as the flame reached out and finally caught the cloth. The fire danced up the curtain and the orange light flickered over her stony face. When the fire reached the ceiling, she turned and walked out of the room.

Agnes looked around, desperate for something to put the fire out. But even as the smoke burned her eyes, the scene began to fade. She was left on her hands and knees, coughing into the shag carpet in Violet's parlor.

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Dean rushed into room and fell to his knees by Agnes, who was gasping for breath. "Agnes! What happened?"

She sat on the ground, still shaking a little. "I—I was wrong."

"What do you mean? It wasn't Violet?"

Agnes licked her parched lips.

"No—I mean, yes. Violet did set the fire, but she's working with Cabil. Peat's parents weren't running from her, they were running from him."

Agnes shook her head. How could she have been so stupid? Cabil showed them exactly what he wanted them to see, nothing more.

"So they did go through the doorway?" Dean asked.

Agnes nodded. "They found the passage in the tree. Cabil knew—he wanted to keep it hidden. He—he's doing something on the other side he doesn't want anyone to know about."

A door slammed in the bakery. Someone was out there. Agnes scrambled to her feet, but there was nowhere to run. Lightning exploded in the sky, followed by a clap of thunder so loud it seemed to shake the very foundation of the house.

Footsteps rang out in the hall. The lights flickered and went out.

Agnes felt for Dean's hand in the dark. The air was filled with the hum of electricity. Suddenly, the lights flashed on to reveal Violet standing in the doorway.

She looked dazed. The bottom of her pants was caked in mud and her sweater had turned deep purple from being soaked with rain. Her hair was tangled with sticks and leaves. Violet's eyes searched the room wildly, stopping on Agnes. Her face crumpled like a wet piece of paper. "Is Peat here? Did he come back home?"

Agnes felt alarm leap in her chest. If Peat wasn't with Violet, where was he?

"We—we know what you did," Agnes spat. "We know you're working with Cabil."

"Peat doesn't understand," Violet said mournfully. "I tried to tell him that I did it all for him. I was trying to keep him safe. I loved Claire—love her—but I just wanted to keep them safe." Violet began pulling stick and leaves from her hair and dropping them on the floor.

"You told Cabil that they knew about the passage. It was your fault they had to run!"

"Told him?" Violet laughed. "How do you keep anything from someone like Cabil? He *knows*. It's like he's looking into your mind."

Violet narrowed her eyes. "You can do it too, can't you? That's how you knew about the fire." She shivered and looked at Agnes like she was a bug to be squashed. "He's the real abomination. And you are too. Get out of my house."

Agnes felt stung. Maybe she was an abomination, but it didn't matter now. What mattered was helping Peat. If Violet was afraid of her, maybe she could use that fear.

Agnes lowered her voice and took a step forward. "I'm not going anywhere until you tell me what you've done with Peat."

Violet backed away, her hands raised protectively.

"Tell me," Agnes barked. "Tell me or I'll tell Cabil everything. That you betrayed him."

Violet's eyes grew wide. Now she was clearly afraid, very afraid.

"I didn't do anything!" Violet said, cowering against the wall. "I wanted to take him away, somewhere safe, but he went after them!"

Agnes felt the horror of what she'd just heard sink in. She glanced at Dean, who wouldn't meet her eyes. He too seemed afraid of her. Agnes took a step back from Violet and stared down at her shaking hands. She realized that she'd enjoyed it—seeing Violet afraid, making her suffer for what she'd done. Agnes swallowed her self loathing. When she spoke, her voice quivered.

"He went after his parents? Through the doorway in the tree?"

Violet nodded. "He—he's gone."

Agnes thought of the glowing yellow eyes she'd seen at the heart of the tree. "We have to tell someone. We have to help him."

Violet slid down the wall into a crumpled heap on the floor and began to sob. “You don’t understand. This—this was part of Cabil’s plan all along. He—he *wants* Peat there.”

“But—but why?”

“Because he believes Peat may be the doormaker.”

Agnes stopped. Where had she seen that word before? Her memory spun, rewinding back to the moment in the tower. The page that had fallen out of the Atlas told of a doormaker, a child with “different eyes”. Her stomach sunk. Peat had one green eye, one brown. This was what it had all been about, not the key at all.

Violet looked up at Dean and Agnes, her face red and puffy. “Didn’t you hear me?” she shouted. “It’s over! Get out!”

Agnes could still hear her shouting as they sprinted into the bakery. Dean yanked open the front door and they let the storm swallow them.

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Agnes and Dean ran down the road, back toward Hibernia’s. Hail the size of golf balls banged into the mud around them. A hailstone caught Dean in the side of the head, knocking him to the ground. He got up, clutching a bleeding gash on his head.

“We have to get off the road!” Agnes shouted over the wailing wind. “It’s too open here!”

She grabbed Dean’s hand and sprinted for the cover of the woods.

The forest dampened the noise of the storm. They fought through sodden bushes that pulled at their clothes. They ran without paying attention, trying to put

as much distance between themselves and Violet as they could, trying to outrun the storm itself.

As if someone had flicked a switch, the noise died and the hail stopped. The sun pushed through the black clouds, casting a deep red light over the surrounding forest. Agnes stopped, her breath searing her lungs. It felt like they had run for miles.

“What,” panted Dean, his breath too short to get out more than one word at a time. “What....now?”

“We have to find Hibernia and the others. They’ll send someone after Peat before Cabil finds him.”

Dean nodded. “Agnes, you wouldn’t really have done it? Told Cabil about Violet, I mean.”

“Of course not!” Agnes snapped. She didn’t like the look on her brother’s face. Like he didn’t trust her.

Dean just stared back.

“I—oh—I don’t know, Dean.” She buried her face in her hands. “I just said it without thinking. That—that stuff she said about me being an abomination...”

Dean squeezed her hand. “You aren’t.”

He sounded so sure—her logical, wonderful brother—that Agnes wanted to hug him.

The smile dropped off his face. “Agnes, look where we are.”

Agnes turned. They stood on the border of the grove of fallen giants. Hail stones crunched under their feet as they ventured forward towards the last sentinel

tree, still rising proudly from the center of the grove. As they stood in front of it, the wind began to pick up and the sky darkened.

“Hey, look.” Dean bent down and picked up something small and black. The silk was dirty and torn and the elastic had come off, but they knew what it was right away: Peat’s eye patch.

“It’s true,” Agnes said. “He really went through the doorway. Alone.”

She stared at the gaping hole in the tree. The bark seemed to pulse with life as if there was a black heart beating at its center. The wind howled, rustling the leaves violently. Thunder boomed in the distance. It was time to go.

Suddenly, a snapping noise rang through the grove like a gunshot. One of the giant tree’s roots had torn from the ground. It waved in the air like a flailing hand. A second later another snapped. The tree shuddered and tilted a few feet to one side with a jerk.

“It’s going to fall!” Dean shouted. He grabbed Agnes’s hand and tried to pull her away, but she stood her ground.

“The doorway is inside it, Dean!”

If it fell, Peat would be trapped on the other side alone. Agnes took a step forward. So much of everything that had happened had been her fault. Cabil had left her the disc and she’d stolen the music box, just like he planned all along. If she hadn’t destroyed it, maybe there would have been a chance to rescue Peat, even if the tree fell, but not now. She thought of the moment back in the Craglands when Peat had looked her right in the eye, had called to her for help. She grabbed Dean by the shoulders.

“You have to go back. Find Hibernia and the others. Tell them where Peat is—that I went after him.”

“Are you crazy?” Dean shouted, his voice cracking. “You have no idea what’s on the other side. It could be an ocean or a field of crags—or—or something even worse!”

The electrical hum was back in the air. The sky was nearly black. The tree tipped a little further as another root snapped.

“That’s why I have to help him!” Agnes shouted above the roaring wind.

Dean stared at the tree. The opening seemed to be growing, the dark expanding forever backwards like a hole in the world.

“I’m coming with you.”

“Dean, you don’t—”

“I’m not leaving you alone!” he shouted.

Agnes felt relieved and then hated herself for it. She didn’t want to put her brother in danger. “Are you sure?”

He nodded and gripped her hand. They stood in front of the pulsing black doorway. The trees around them creaked and groaned in the raging storm.

“If the tree falls and the doorway is destroyed, how will we get out again?”

“If Peat really is the doormaker he’ll be able to get us home,” Agnes said with more confidence than she really felt. The fear in her stomach was like something alive, eating her from the inside out.

“And if he’s not?”

“Then we’re on our own. Dean, it’s not too late for you to go back.”

Another violent snap rang out in the air as an enormous root burst free in an explosion of mud. Agnes watched in horror as the tree began to fall in slow motion.

“Now!” Dean shouted.

Agnes squeezed his hand and they threw themselves forward into the blackness.

## Chapter 13: A World of Darkness

Agnes felt as if all the oxygen had been sucked from her lungs. She had expected to hear the crash of the tree hitting the forest floor with the weight of a meteor. Instead, there was nothing. It was as if she had stepped into a completely silent, perfectly dark room. Disoriented, Agnes's feet tangled, and she landed on her knees in soft dirt. She felt the darkness pressing in on her from all sides. She extended her hand, blindly searching for her brother. "Dean?"

Agnes nearly screamed as the side of her finger swiped something warm and wet.

"Watch out!" called Dean's voice. "My eye's full of dirt now."

Agnes apologized and breathed a sigh of relief. Dean sounded like he was right in front of her.

"Sorry. Are you okay?"

"I think so."

She heard Dean climb to his feet with a grunt.

"Put out your hand," he said. "Slowly, this time."

It was a strange, Agnes thought, having Dean sound so close but not being able to see him at all. She extended her hand slowly until it found his.

"Now don't let go," he said. "If we lose each other in here we're toast."

"Where do you think here is?"

They heard a soft whoosh followed by a burst of air that smelled of damp leaves and wood. It was as if someone had softly shut a door.

“Do you think—” Agnes started, but couldn’t finish.

She had known the tree was going to fall, cutting off any chance of escape. But knowing it in theory and knowing it in reality were very different things. Now they were trapped in perfect blackness, completely alone, with no idea what was in front of them.

Agnes fought against her rising panic. What if they had stumbled into a world made of nothing but darkness? What if they stumbled into a bottomless pit or were eaten by some terrible creature?

Dean tugged on her hand until she was standing. “Let’s start walking. But slowly. Feel ahead with your foot.”

They started their blind, shuffling progress forward.

It soon became clear that they were in a large open space. Their voices echoed, as if the sound had to travel far into the distance, but eventually bounced off some kind of wall or ceiling. Agnes felt a breeze. It was no more than a faint breath really, but it gave her hope that there was an opening somewhere ahead.

In the black silence, it was hard to tell how much time had passed before Agnes’s foot connected with something solid. She tamped down the scream rising in her throat. She’d hit a wall. It was smooth to the touch.

“Igneous rock,” Dean murmured.

Agnes had no idea what he was talking about.

“It means rock made by cooled lava. It’s usually smooth, like glass. Don’t you ever listen during science?”

Agnes ignored the exasperation in his voice. Lava?

“Dean, are we in a *volcano*?”

“I don’t think so. The walls feel cold. What now?”

Agnes shrugged before remembering that Dean couldn’t see her. “I guess we just pick a direction.”

They followed the wall, fingertips lightly trailing on its surface to make sure they didn’t get turned around. Eventually the pitch black darkness lightened to dull grey. Something ahead was glowing.

Dean squeezed his sister’s shoulder. “What do you think it is?”

“I don’t know. Let’s go closer.”

The light was coming from a thin crack along the base of the wall a few feet long. A puff of air tickled Agnes’s cheek. It must be a way out. Dean tapped his knuckles against the wall just above the crack. The sharp twang of metal echoed back.

“Maybe it’s a door,” Agnes said. She fumbled for a handle, silently rejoicing when her hands closed on a metal ring. A moment later, her hope died. She pushed and pulled the ring, but the door was stuck.

“No! It won’t open.”

Dean pushed her out of the way. He ran his hands over the smooth metal surface. Agnes could almost hear him concentrating.

Bright light spilled out of the crack, illuminating the dirt around the bottom of the door and their filthy sneakers. Agnes didn’t want to be trapped here, not when they were so close. Come on Dean, she silently prayed.

Finally, Dean pushed against the handle and rotated it to the left. The door popped open with a faint click. Agnes planted a kiss of pure joy on his cheek, not caring that his face was covered in dirt.

The hinges of the door groaned as they pushed, forcing it open a few more inches. Sharp pain stabbed Agnes's eyes as blinding light spilled through the opening.

"Wait," Dean said. "We've been in the dark too long. We have to let our eyes adjust."

They turned their backs on door and got the first glimpse of the space they'd been wandering through. The walls of the enormous chamber were made of black rock, polished to a reflective sheen. Natural pillars, wider at the base and high above near the ceiling, gave the space the feeling of an ancient castle. Agnes saw two sets of footsteps in the soft earthen floor, leading back into the blackness. She wondered what they would find if they traced their own footsteps back.

"Do you think the doorway home is still back there?"

Dean shook his head. "I don't know, but somehow I don't think so. We got really lucky, Agnes. If we had missed this door..."

He didn't finish, but Agnes knew what he was going to say. If they had missed that small metal door, they might have wandered forever in the giant black cavern. With a pang, she wondered where Peat was.

"Hello?" she called into the vast space. No one replied but an echo.

"Ready?" Dean asked.

Agnes nodded. There was nothing to do now, but go forward.

They pushed at the door until it opened a few more inches and they slipped outside onto a dusty dirt road.

The wide, flat road had been cut into the side of a mountain. They could see the tips of trees just on the other side, where land sloped steeply down. Far below, a plain stretched into the distance until it ran into more snow-capped mountains, their craggy purple peaks reaching up into the clouds.

In the flat basin between the two mountain ranges, a winding river shone in the warm glow of twilight. A handful of buildings clustered together on a spot where the river turned and then bent back again, making it nearly an island. Agnes could see trails of smoke coming from the chimneys.

“Dean, there are people down there. Maybe that’s where Peat went?”

But Dean wasn’t listening. He pointed at the metal door.

Long, thick scratches covered the inside. Agnes thought they looked like the claw marks they had seen on a tree in Yellowstone Park last summer. Grizzly Bears, the ranger had said. These scratches were much bigger and, presumably, whatever had made them was still inside, waiting in the dark.

Agnes thought of Peat, who had come through the doorway alone. What if they were too late? She pushed the thought out of her mind.

“Should we close it behind us?” Dean asked. “What if Peat’s still inside?”

Agnes stuck her head into the black cave. She called Peat’s name until her voice was hoarse.

“I don’t think so, Dean. He must have moved on already.”

They pushed against the metal door, the groaning hinges echoing like the cries of some ancient and terrible monster. Finally, the door shut with a faint click.

They sunk onto the dirt road to rest. Lights twinkled in the windows of the houses in the valley below. It was getting dark. Agnes thought of the claw marks and decided that she didn't want to spend the night there. "We should start moving."

"Start moving where?"

"Whichever way Peat would have gone."

"And where would that be?"

"You're the genius, you figure it out," Agnes snapped, even though she knew she had no right to be mad at Dean. After all, she was the one who dragged him here. "Sorry. Give me a second."

Agnes tried to think like Peat. The woods. Peat would have trusted the plants and animals more than whatever people lived here. But he also would have been thinking about what his parents would have done. How did you think like someone who was trying to think like someone else?

"I don't know. Let's head for the town. Maybe someone there's seen Peat."

"What if it's a village full of crags or something?" asked Dean, nervous.

"I don't think we have a choice. We can't just stay here."

They climbed to their feet and started following the road down the mountain, keeping to the far edge so they could duck into the woods if they had to hide.

As soon as the sun set behind the mountains, darkness swallowed them. Luckily, the road was smooth and wide and their path was lit by a sky full of twinkling stars. Soon, the road curved around a blind corner, hugging the steep rock

wall. Just below it turned sharply, heading back the way they'd come. It curved back and forth down the mountain in switchbacks until it reached the valley floor far below. They kept going.

At first, it was cold, but as they started moving the cool air felt pleasant and fresh. They walked for hours without hearing any signs of life beyond an occasional cricket. The familiar sound almost made Agnes forget they were in another world entirely. Almost.

They stopped to rest at a brook that bubbled out of the mountains. Agnes took deep gulps of the cold sweet water. Dean splashed some on his face and wiped away the streaks of dirt left from the cavern. They were both too tired to talk.

Dean's stomach growled loudly, reminding Agnes that she hadn't eaten in hours. They had walked for hours, but the lights of the village still seemed impossibly far away. Agnes felt like she couldn't take another step.

"Come on, Dean. We aren't going to make it tonight. Let's go into the woods a little and find a place to sleep."

The air was warmer now that they had dropped down from the exposed rocky cliffs. They crossed the road and found a soft bed of pine needles beneath a tree that spread its boughs over them like a blanket. Together they tumbled into a dreamless, bottomless sleep.

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The woods were bathed in the pale, buttery light of dawn. Agnes stretched her arms and legs, which were stiff and caked with dirt. She had slept still as a stone all through the night, not waking until the first fingers of sunlight stretched over the

mountain. She thought of what her mother always said: things seem better in the light of day. Maybe she was right. Yes, they were chasing after Peat in a strange world with no way to get home again. Still, if Agnes hadn't been so hungry, she would have felt almost cheerful.

Dean stood and brushed at the pine needles stuck to the seat of his pants and threaded through his hair. He froze abruptly and sniffed the air. "Do you smell that?"

Agnes inhaled the fresh scent of sun-warmed pine. Underneath it was the smell bacon and eggs. But that was impossible. They were both starving, probably sharing the same hallucination. If they were lucky maybe they'd find some berries they recognized, but she didn't think that, even in other worlds, fried eggs grew on trees.

"Come on," Dean said. He stumbled deeper into the woods. She followed, protesting.

"Dean, there's no way—"

A clump of bushes rustled just ahead. They both froze. Agnes thought of the claw marks and cursed herself for not sticking to the road. They backed away slowly.

Just then, a huge beast came flying out of the bushes, breaking branches and slamming into Dean in a whirl of slobber and fur. Two furry grey paws rested on his chest, keeping him firmly pinned as he squirmed, trying escape.

"Dean!" Agnes shouted in horror.

The creature turned its pale blue eyes on Agnes and cocked its head, curious. She took a step forward, but the grey fur on the creature’s neck bristled. It growled, baring two sharp rows of teeth.

Agnes gulped. Two rows of teeth—just like Cabil’s dog. The creature was larger and grey instead of black, but it had the same wolf like shape and glowing, intelligent eyes.

Dean lay on the ground, his eyes wide with fear as the grey creature sniffed his neck with its wet, black nose. A high-pitched whistle rang through the trees. The creature threw up its head and howled, no doubt calling the rest of its pack of horrors.

A girl sprang through the bushes. She stopped short when she saw Dean, still pinned to the ground under furry paws. The girl clutched a curved knife in one hand. Maybe there was hope after all.

“Watch out!” Agnes screamed. “It’s got my brother—”

In a flash, the girl was behind Agnes, pressing the cold steel blade to her throat.

Agnes let out a choked squeak. What was wrong with this girl? Did she not see the giant slobbering creature attacking Dean?

“Who be you? What do you want?” the girl whispered harshly.

Agnes opened her mouth to reply and was shocked when instead of words, all that came out was a low harsh sob. Soon, tears ran down her face. The girl lowered the knife and stepped back, staring at Agnes as if she’d never seen anyone cry. Even the monster was looking at her, confused.

Agnes felt like she was watching her collapse from far away. Her mind was still rational, but somehow she couldn't control the sobs tearing through her throat. Finally, it was just too much. This was all her fault again. What had she gotten them into? And where was Peat? Was he even here? Was he okay? How would they ever ever ever get home? She let her knees buckle and she hit the forest floor with a dull whump, waiting for whatever came next.

Nothing happened. She wiped her nose with the sleeve of her filthy shirt, imagining how she must look. Suddenly, she wasn't afraid any more, just embarrassed.

The girl frowned and kept her distance. Finally, she seemed to come to a decision. "Down, Zaine."

The grey creature craned its thick neck and gave the girl a look that said: *Are you sure about this?*

She shrugged and tucked the curved knife into her belt. The grey creature unrolled its long pink tongue and licked the side of Dean's neck, as if in apology. Then it trotted over to the girl and sat at her feet.

Agnes was surprised at the creature's speed and watery grace. From the thick fur and rippling muscles, she had expected it to move with the heavy lumber of a bear, not the light grace of a wolf.

The girl pressed her forehead against the creature's pointed snout and sighed. "These be strange times, Zaine, and only getting stranger."

Zaine tickled her cheek with his tongue. It was such a gentle gesture that Agnes felt her terror drain away. This creature might be as strong and fierce as Cabil's black dog, but it was something else too. It seemed to be the girl's friend.

The girl pulled a leather cord from her pocket and tied back the brown dreadlocks that hung nearly to her waist. Finally, she turned to Agnes, hands planted on her hips, and demanded again, "Who be you?"

Agnes's mind rolled through a number of possible stories before rejecting them all. She had no idea where they were and what sort of lies could help or hurt them, so she decided to stick with the truth.

"We came through a—a doorway in a cave." Agnes pointed at the cliffs towering above them. They were lit in flashing yellow by the morning sun, though the valley below was still plunged in purple shade.

"You be from Away?" the girl said with a sharp hiss. Zaine backed away, his fur raised in a grey Mohawk over his haunches. He bared long pointed teeth, growling.

Evidently, that had been the wrong thing to say. Agnes felt her stomach drop down to her feet. This time, she'd stay calm.

Dean scrambled along the ground on his hands and knees until he was sitting in front of his sister. Agnes raised her hands to show they were empty. "Look, we have no weapons. We couldn't hurt you even if we wanted to, which we don't. We're just looking for our friend."

The girl eyed them suspiciously, but eventually made a clicking sound in the back of her throat. Zaine relaxed and his fur went smooth again. He turned, parting

the bushes with his snout, and disappeared at a slow trot. Agnes helped Dean to his feet. They stood still while the girl patted them down to see if they were lying about having weapons.

“What—what’s your name?” Agnes asked.

The girl snorted in reply and tossed the tight coils of hair over her shoulder.

“I’m Agnes and this is my brother Dean.” Agnes tried to sound as friendly and harmless as possible, but her voice came out high and squeaky.

The girl stepped back and looked them up and down, her green eyes flashing in the light. Agnes thought she looked amused.

“Well, you be not lying about the weapons, at least. Though you be dirtier than a mud dog and smell worse than a narth.”

Agnes smiled weakly, though she was fairly sure it had not been a compliment.

“Is—is that your breakfast cooking?” asked Dean eagerly. Agnes elbowed him in the side, but the girl just motioned for them to follow.

Just beyond the bushes they found a small campfire with bacon and eggs frying on a flat black stone. The girl crouched down, using her knife to flip them over. When they were cooked, she tossed a couple of the eggs to Zaine, who caught them in mid air with one snap of his powerful jaws. He wagged his long shaggy tail and curled up by the fire. The girl split the remainder of the food between the three of them. They all ate eagerly, licking the grease off their fingers when they had finished.

“That was the best thing I’ve ever eaten,” Dean said.

The girl nodded to acknowledge the compliment, but said nothing else. Instead, she started cleaning up her camp, packing her few belongings into a worn leather satchel.

Agnes watched her, curious. The girl wore loose-fitting clothes, which were a mixture of green and brown, earth colors that allowed her to blend in with the surrounding forest. Her pants looked worn and patched but clean. Agnes was aware of how dirty and tired she and Dean must look.

Whenever a bird sang or a twig snapped in the forest, the girl's eyes flicked to the source of the noise, and her hand went unconsciously to the hilt of her knife. Agnes thought they were about the same age, but somehow the girl seemed much older.

"You never told us your name," Agnes said softly.

The girl considered Agnes with narrowed eyes, as if deciding whether or not to answer. Agnes noticed that even though her hair was brown, the girl's eyelashes were a bright and startling red.

"I be Ahne," she finally replied.

Agnes smiled and thought she saw a hint of a smile on the girl's lips in return. Ahne opened her mouth to speak but was interrupted by a sharp yelp of pain. Her hand leapt to her knife and she spun around, muscles tensed.

Her hand fell when she saw Dean rolling on the ground blowing on his hand. Angry red blisters rose on the end of his index finger. Dean pointed at the smooth black rock at the edge of the fire pit. "It's hot. I mean *really* hot. I barely touched it."

“It be a cooking rock. What did you expect?” asked Ahne. “Will you be sticking your hand in the fire next to check if that be hot too?” She shook her head as if she had never met anyone so stupid.

“But it’s a rock,” Dean protested sourly. “And it wasn’t even *in* the fire!”

“A cooking rock,” Ahne corrected.

Agnes cleared her throat. “Like I said before, we’re looking for our friend Peat. We think he came this way not too long before us. He—he might be in trouble. Maybe you’ve seen him?”

At the mention of Peat, Zaine pricked up his ears. Small tufts of white fur above his eyes shot up in a questioning glance.

“Not now,” Ahne said with a wave of her hand.

“Can—can he understand us?” asked Agnes.

“Of course,” scoffed Ahne.

“What kind of—uh—dog is he?”

Ahne frowned. “Dug?”

“No, dog.”

“Daweg?”

“Never mind.”

Ahne shrugged as if she wasn’t sure what Agnes had been asking. “Zaine be a fidelas.”

“And does he—do you—do either of you know anything about Peat?” Agnes stumbled over her words. She wasn’t used to addressing an animal like a person.

Ahne made a clicking noise at the back of her throat and Zaine trotted up beside her. She swung the satchel over her shoulder and leapt onto his back. Agnes was sure Ahne had had enough of their questions, that she was going to abandon them there. Then what?

Ahne spoke impatiently: “Come on. Zaine will carry you too, though you be an ignoramus strange bunch.”

Dean shoved his burnt finger into his pocket. “Carry us where exactly?”

“To Village Grove. Hurry up now and ask your questions later. It will take a day and a night to get there if I must be dragging you along.”

“We’re not *that* slow,” grumbled Dean.

Ahne exhaled loudly through her nose. “Zaine can’t be carrying three persons at a run for a whole day. Do you want him to be breaking?” she snapped.

“No, no, of course not,” said Dean in a small voice. Zaine nudged him with his nose as if to say, *No offense taken*.

A group of birds exploded into the sky in loud, surprised squawks. Ahne cast a nervous glance into the trees behind them and spoke in a low voice, “We must be moving as fast as we can today. Beyond be narth who be hunting here at night. There be more of them than there used to be.”

“What’s a—a narth?” asked Agnes.

Ahne looked stunned. “You really are from Away.”

“I would think that was obvious by now,” Dean grumbled.

Ahne held out a hand and helped him scramble onto Zaine's back. Agnes came next, apologizing when she accidentally put a toe in Zaine's eye as she gracelessly clambered up. It looked much easier when Ahne did it.

"Hold on," said Ahne. She whistled softly. Immediately Zaine took off into the woods with Agnes and Dean clinging to his mottled grey fur, trying their best not to fall off.

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Zaine moved fast, even for an animal of his considerable size. Branches whipped past Agnes's face in a green blur. She marveled at how Ahne kept her balance without even holding on. At first, Agnes was sure she'd fall off at every bump and turn, but soon she learned to move with Zaine's loping stride and released her death grip on his fur.

As they moved through the forest that morning, Agnes occasionally saw the road wink into sight between the trees. By afternoon, it had disappeared. When the sun hung low over the mountains, Ahne clicked her tongue loudly and Zaine's pace slowed. He stopped beside a large rock so Agnes and Dean could climb down. Ahne leapt gracefully to the ground without assistance. She offered Zaine a drink of water from a round canteen tied to her bag that looked like a coconut. Ahne took a deep sip, wiped her mouth, and then passed it to Agnes.

Dean ambled around the rock with the gait of a cowboy in an old Western. He saw Agnes grinning and scowled back. "What? You're trying to tell me your legs don't hurt?"

Ahne began pulling items out of the leather satchel: a thick folded cloth that looked shiny and wet; a small wooden box with a sliding lid; and two small, flat pieces of metal. She held one in each hand and brought them roughly together, as if striking a match. An orange spark leapt up with a loud sizzle. Ahne nodded, satisfied.

Just then, a loud popping noise rent the air.

“What was that?” Dean asked, looking around fearfully. He was answered by another popping noise. A small seed exploded out of a tree and bounced off his forehead. “What on earth—”

Dean ducked, covering his head as fifty more seeds exploded, hurtling down from the tree like missiles. When it stopped, the ground was covered in hundreds of tiny red and black seeds—hard as pebbles.

Ahne coughed, trying to hide her smile. “You should not be standing there.”

“You couldn’t have said that, you know, before?” Dean moved away from the tree.

“The pods be heated by the sun and then the seeds explode,” Ahne said in a school teacher’s voice. “That be how they grow.”

“You could have warned me at least,” Dean said.

“Is this where we’re spending the night?” Agnes asked to change the subject.

The clearing was long and narrow, surrounded by trees on all sides. The top part was flat, but the ground rapidly dropped down a steep embankment. At the bottom, a creek fed into a pond of clear, blue water. Past the tops of the tall trees, in the valley below, Agnes could see the village. It was no longer directly below them

but all the way over to the right. It seemed that they had been traveling *away* from it all day.

“Yes, we be staying here,” Ahne said. “Zaine be tired and I don’t want to be moving at dark. Even if the narth be near blind.”

“Is that why we’ve been staying off the road?” asked Agnes. “Because of the narth?”

“The narth be not the only things on the road,” Ahne muttered darkly.

“It’s just that we seem to be moving away from the village, not towards it.”

Ahne’s lips pressed together in a thin line. She appraised Agnes coolly. “If you do not like the way we be going, you be free to find your own way.”

“Uh, Agnes,” said Dean, “maybe you shouldn’t be such a backseat driver, just now.”

Agnes shot her brother a wounded look.

A moment later, Zaine emerged from the forest at a bouncing trot, two furry creatures that looked like rabbits or squirrels clutched in his jaws. He dropped the carcasses at Ahne’s feet and licked a smear of blood off the end of his nose. Agnes looked at the limp bundles of fur, her lip curling up in disgust. Her eyes rose to meet Ahne’s stony stare.

“If you be not hungry, do no eat. I don’t know where you be from, but if you want to survive here you best be tougher than *that*.”

The words were loaded with such disdain that Agnes felt tears spring to her eyes. She blinked them away. Ahne was wrong. She was a survivor. She would find Peat and then get them home. All of them.

Ahne crouched down, striking sparks against a smooth black stone. It seemed to be soaking them in like a sponge and turning a deeper black. Agnes stood in front of her until Ahne looked up. “I want to thank you for everything you’ve done for us and I—I’d like to help with dinner. If you’ll show me what to do.”

Ahne stared at her, surprised. A look of guilt flitted briefly across her face. Then she handed Agnes the sharp, stubby knife. Soon, she was busy telling Agnes all the ways she was skinning the rabbit incorrectly. Agnes noticed that, for the first time, Ahne seemed at ease. She was even smiling. Maybe everything really would be okay.

## Chapter 14: Village Grove

After dinner, Ahne showed them how to set up a shelter with the large cloth. The fabric was unlike anything either Agnes or Dean had ever seen. It was fluid until Ahne draped it over a branch and then it grew stiff and unyielding to wind or water. Dean swore it even changed colors depending on where she moved it. "It's like it knows what you want from it," he whispered to his sister when Ahne was down at the pond filling up her canteen. "But that's crazy right?"

Agnes shrugged. She wasn't sure she knew the difference between crazy and not crazy anymore.

When Ahne got back, they ducked under the shelter, which was just big enough for the three of them, if they slept curled up together. Agnes felt a root poke her in the back and shifted over despite Dean's protests that she was squishing him. It grew cold as soon as the sun had dropped behind the mountains, but the tent seemed to trap their body heat and keep the chill at bay. "What about Zaine?" Agnes asked.

Ahne yawned. "He always sleeps outside. It be making him nervous to sleep under a roof. Even one like this." She poked the top of the tent. For a second, the spot around her fingertip turned the same coffee color as her skin.

"Sleep well," Dean said. He rolled over on his side.

Ahne sat up and glared at him. "What be wrong with you? Do you want to smother us all in your bad luck?"

"Uh, sorry," Dean said. "Well—uh—break a leg."

Ahne stared at him blankly. "Sometimes I think you be even stranger than I know." ~~~~~

"Don't move."

A hand was clasped tightly over Agnes's mouth. Something heavy pressed down on her. Her eyes flew open and then clouded with confusion. Ahne sat on her chest, pinning her arms to the ground. Ahne bent over so her mouth was an inch away from Agnes's ear and whispered a single word which sent bolts of terror shooting up her back: "Narth."

Agnes nodded. She didn't know what a narth was, but she could hear the fear in Ahne's voice, which quivered and snapped like a bowstring wound too tightly. And she didn't seem like someone who scared easily.

Dean was already crouched by the edge of the shelter, peering out into the empty clearing. "I don't see anything," he whispered.

Ahne shook her head and put a finger to her lips. She crawled out of the shelter and motioned for them to follow. As Agnes ducked into the open, she felt a fresh wave of terror grip her chest. Even though she knew it was silly, she had felt protected by the shelter's flimsy walls. Out in the open, she felt exposed and very small.

Ahne paused behind a tree. The cooking rock was still hot and released a fog of ghostly vapor into the cold air. Below them, the tranquil surface of the pond reflected the deep orange glow of the moon. A moon, Agnes corrected herself. Who knew if it was the same one as back home.

The night was still and silent. Agnes was about to ask Ahne what exactly a narth even was when she heard a muffled shuffling in the woods behind them.

They spun around just as a long shadowy shape slunk out of the dense forest. Pointed black scales, each the width of a hand, glinted in the moonlight. The narth's belly nearly dragged in the dirt as it moved towards them on powerful bent limbs ending in tufts of spiky hair growing between curved orange claws. A long red tongue, forked like a snake, flitted out of its mouth. Slitted nostrils flared, catching a scent.

The narth's massive square head rotated slowly in their direction until the children were caught in the glare of its huge eyes—two shining yellow orbs the size of human skulls.

“Run,” said Ahne in a choked voice, springing to her feet. “Run for the pond.”

Agnes and Dean jumped to their feet and sprinted, close on Ahne's heels, across the clearing. Agnes thought she heard the slithering sound of a long, spiked tail being dragged through the forest behind them, but she didn't dare turn around and look.

Then they were half running, half sliding down the steep embankment, pushing off trees and trying not to lose their footing. Agnes heard an angry sound—somewhere between a roar and a kettle boiling—and the snap of a large tree somewhere behind them breaking and hitting the ground.

Agnes burst out of the tree line just as Dean threw himself into the pond. Ahne was already submerged up to her neck. Agnes hit the water, gasping at the

freezing temperature. By the time she reached the others, she was shivering violently. The center of the pond was shallow. Agnes could stand on her tiptoes.

“W-w-w-where is it-t-t?” asked Dean through chattering teeth.

Ahne forced the words out of her mouth in short bursts. “Terrible eyesight. Must have. Hit a tree. Saved us.”

“W-w-w-hat now?” Agnes asked. Her arms and legs tingled painfully. She couldn’t feel her feet at all. If she had to run now, she was pretty sure she’d just fall over.

“Water. No smell,” Ahne whispered weakly.

The narth emerged from the trees. A gash across the top of its head wept a thick black substance Agnes hoped was blood. It walked to the edge of the pond and flicked its tongue, swiveling its massive head back and forth, tasting the air. The children clung together, as still as possible in the freezing water, only their eyes and the tops of their heads above the surface. As the narth released another furious hissing roar, its jaws opened to reveal long white teeth coated along the bottom in the rotting brown slime of its last hundred meals. The jaws snapped shut and the narth turned back to the forest, deprived of its midnight snack.

Agnes felt Ahne’s grip on her arm slacken and looked over just in time to see her eyes roll back in her head. Dean lunged forward, trying to catch Ahne as her body went limp, but he wasn’t quick enough. She hit the water with a loud slap. The narth’s head whipped around and then it was running full tilt for the pond. Agnes and Dean stared in frozen terror.

Suddenly, Zaine burst through the trees on the other side of the pond in a frenzy of barking, his hackles raised so high he looked twice his usual size. Even so, the fidelas barely came halfway up the narth's leg. Zaine barked and growled and jumped until he had the narth's full attention. Then he took off into the trees, running away from their camp. The giant lizard followed in hot pursuit, the three shivering children in the pond forgotten.

Without another word, and so cold they could barely force their legs to move, Agnes and Dean dragged Ahne out of the water. They lay her on the ground.

"I—I thought we were goners for sure," Dean whispered. He looked down at Ahne's pale skin and blue lips. "What do we do now?"

Agnes was relieved to see the girl's chest rising and falling in even breaths. "We have to get her warm."

"We can wrap her up in that cloth back at camp. Remember how warm it got in the shelter?" Dean stopped and peered into the woods. "What if that—that thing comes back?"

Agnes shook her head. "Hopefully Zaine will lead it somewhere far away. But even if he can't—well—there's nothing we can do about it right now. If we stay in that water we'll all freeze to death."

They stumbled back up the hill, Agnes hooking her hands under Ahne's shoulders and Dean at her legs. They lay her down near the still-warm cooking rock. Dean pulled the cloth down from the branch. The stiff tent-like structure went limp in his hands.

“Wrap it around all three of us,” Agnes said. “Our body heat will help warm her up.”

They huddled beneath the cloth. Almost immediately, the air grew warm and humid. Steam began to rise from their wet clothes. After a few more minutes, Ahne’s cheeks lost their deathly pallor and her lips turned pink.

“I think it’s working,” Dean said, rubbing her hands.

Ahne’s eyes opened slowly. She took in the faces peering at her anxiously. “We be alive,” she said softly.

Agnes couldn’t tell if it was a statement or a question, but she nodded.

“Thanks to Zaine.”

“Right after you passed out he busted out of the woods and led that thing back into the forest,” Dean added with a grin.

“I hope he’s okay,” Agnes said quickly.

Ahne nodded and sat up stiffly. “Let us be hoping.”

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As the first traces of sun peeked over the mountains, and after an hour of nervous waiting, Zaine reappeared, limping slightly. Ahne sprinted across the clearing and threw her arms around his neck. Zaine nuzzled her hair and growled softly. She grasped his ears between her hands and looked into his eyes. “What is it?”

He jerked his nose at his hind leg. A short, deep gash ran through the layers of skin and muscle. The fur around it was matted with blood and dirt.

Ahne bit her lip. "Lie down." She pressed lightly against his side. Zaine gave a clipped bark and stood, swaying on his three good legs.

"For once in your blasted life, do what I tell you," she said gently and then turned to Agnes. "Bring me the box from my bag."

Agnes rifled through the leather satchel until she found the wooden box with the sliding cover. When she got back, Zaine lay prone in the dirt, his breathing ragged. She handed the box to Ahne, then laid her hand tentatively on Zaine's head and looked into his dark intelligent eyes. "Thank you," she said. Zaine nudged her with his nose, which was dry and hot.

"What's wrong with him?" Dean asked. "He seemed fine a couple minutes ago. The wound didn't even look that bad."

Ahne opened the box and took out a pinch of dried crushed leaves. She sprinkled them into the top of her canteen, which was half full of water. She mixed it around until it formed a thick paste, which she spread over Zaine's wound. He winced at the sting.

"It be the narth claws," Ahne said, stroking Zaine's fur. "They be full of evil and disease."

Dean shuffled closer. "But he'll be okay, right?"

Ahne looked at him with pleading eyes. "The catkin paste will lower the fever, but we have to get him back to the village."

She spoke so softly that Agnes wasn't sure she heard right. It sounded like "before it's too late."

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The morning was slow going. For a while after the medicinal paste had soaked in, Zaine seemed almost his usual self. He limped, but still trotted ahead of them, snapping at the occasional bug that flew too close. But after a few hours, it was clear that it wasn't working. His limp became more pronounced, his head and tail drooped. He slowed until the children could easily keep pace.

They stopped to rest beneath the shade of a large tree, its branches so thick and knotted that they rested on the ground like elbows. Ahne mixed up the last of the herbal paste and spread it over Zaine's wound.

"We be almost to the road. Then there be farmers on their way to town with their wagons and crops. They be bound to take us the rest of the way. You will see."

Agnes bit her lip. Zaine didn't look good. The edges of his wound were red and puffy and it was weeping a thin whitish fluid.

"The ground is nearly flat now," Dean whispered to his sister. "We can't be far from the river."

Agnes hoped they were both right.

Once Zaine was strong enough to walk, they continued through the forest. Soon they hit a wide road, rutted and criss-crossed with wheel marks. As far as any of them could see, it was empty in both directions.

"We will head for town," Ahne said. "Someone will overtake us."

The others plodded behind, Zaine bumping into Ahne and then Dean as he wove back and forth across the road. As Agnes reached out a hand to steady him, she thought she could feel the fever, hot and slick beneath his fur. She hoped it was just her imagination and scanned their surroundings for a distraction.

To their right, the forest stretched out, flat at first, and then rose up into the towering mountains. The road wound up until it was nothing but a thin white scar. It was hard to believe that they had come all that way. To their left was the river—broad and shining with blue silver ripples in the sun. The tall marsh grass at the edge of the water flicked back and forth in the wind, one moment screeching, the next making a sound like a low moan. Dean shot the green field an uncomfortable glance and moved to the far side of the road.

Ahne noticed their nervousness. Her mouth turned up in the shadow of a smile. “It be only the panic grass rubbing against itself.”

“Panic grass?” asked Dean. “That’s what it’s called?”

“Because it sounds like screaming.”

Agnes looked out at the green grass. She couldn’t shake the sensation that it was an animal or person screaming in terrible pain or fear.

The road followed the gentle curve of the river until it passed through a crumbling stone arch towering three stories above the flat fields and water. Then it widened into a paved square lined with a dozen one-story buildings. The windows and doors were made of plain, dark wood, but the walls had been lacquered so they shone, reflecting images back like the surface of a still lake.

In the center of the square, a few women and girls, dressed in soft earth tones like Ahne, stood in a tight cluster around the lip of a fountain that gurgled and spat clear water into a circular stone pool. A tall woman with long blond dreadlocks threaded with grey approached the fountain. A few of the women waved or dipped

their knees in a greeting that looked like a curtsy. The woman smiled warmly and bent over the fountain to fill the red clay pot in her hands.

A few fidelas lounged in the dappled shade created by a tall, leafy tree growing near the stone arch. A particularly fat one with glossy white fur and black spots raised its head as the children passed. It narrowed its eyes at them, then heaved its corpulent body to its feet and lumbered away down the street.

As the children approached the square, Zaine began to wheeze loudly. The other fidelas sat up, ears flicking in alarm. The women at the fountain stopped their conversation and turned to look at the newcomers. The blond woman's mouth opened in a shocked O as she dropped the clay pot. It smashed on the square's white and black tile surface.

Zaine stumbled. The children leapt forward to catch him, staggering under his weight as he fell. The next second, the woman was there, helping them lower Zaine to the ground. She felt along his side with nimble fingers until she reached the swollen red skin around the claw mark. She inhaled sharply. "What happened?"

Ahne managed to choke out: "Narth."

The woman stood and pointed at a pair of onlookers by the well. "You, fetch my healing box from the house. The Mayor will show you where it is. And you, get the stretcher and at least two others to carry it."

The women ran in opposite directions, one into a white building on the other side of the square and the other around the corner and out of sight.

The blond woman turned to Agnes and Dean, as if seeing them for the first time. Her eyebrows twitched slightly, but there was no other sign that she noticed

their short hair and strange, dirty clothes. A moment later, four women burst from the white building carrying a square stretcher suspended from flexible wooden poles. They lifted Zaine onto it and hurried back across the square.

Ahne leapt to her feet and ran after them. When she reached the fountain, she stopped abruptly and whirled around. She ran back to Agnes and Dean, whispering to them urgently, "Your friend—he be here and he be safe. But there—there be things you do not know."

The blonde woman stepped forward and took Ahne's hand. "You must go with Zaine. He needs you. I will take care of these ones. Be not afraid."

Ahne nodded, then took off across the square after Zaine. Agnes watched her disappear through the double doors of the shining white building. She could see her own reflection in its polished surface, though the luminous white background made it look like she was lost in a blizzard.

"Zaine saved our lives. Will he be alright?" Agnes said.

The woman spoke with authority: "They will give him medicine now to kill any remaining disease. And once he be strong enough, I will cut out the bedeviled flesh. He be weak for a few days, but he will survive."

Agnes and Dean nodded, relieved.

"They will not need me for an hour or two yet, which will give us some time to make our acquaintances. But first I think you will enjoy a bath and some hot food. I be right?"

The children nodded again. Neither had ever been in such dire need of a hot meal and a good scrub.

“Good then. My name is Rubia. Follow me.”

When Rubia smiled, the fine lines around her eyes branched out like a faintly etched tree. She had the same bright green eyes and red eyelashes as Ahne. Agnes wondered if everyone in this place did.

Rubia strode across the square at a fast clip, her long brown skirt swirling around her ankles. Agnes and Dean jogged to keep up. They followed her behind the row of buildings that lined the square and into a grove of white-barked trees that stretched far into the distance in every direction. A few of the boughs were laden with dark blue fruit that looked like furry apples, but mostly the trees were bare, the white bark turning a sickly grey. Some trees were covered in soft fur that looked like mold. The fruit on those trees was black and shriveled.

In the middle of the dying orchard a two-story house shone with the deep blue of twilight. As they approached, a man passed through the front door onto the steps. He squinted against the bright sun and wiped his hands on his pants, leaving damp sweat marks behind. Agnes thought he could have been handsome at one point, but his mouth was too pinched and his eyes were ringed with deep lines that made him look ancient, despite the fact that his remaining hair was still brown. The man’s eyes had a vacant, unfocused look as he scanned the faces of the visitors.

Rubia marched up the steps and kissed him lightly on the cheek before turning back to the children. “This be my husband, the Mayor of Village Grove.”

Agnes and Dean greeted him politely. The Mayor responded with a quivering smile. Rubia opened the front door and beckoned them inside.

The front hall was cool and dim. Besides the rough yellow paper covering the walls and a richly woven midnight blue carpet, there was little in the way of furnishings. Rubia disappeared behind a yellow silk curtain, calling out that she would prepare lunch. Agnes, Dean and the Mayor stood in the front hall, shuffling their feet against the plush rug.

The Mayor's hands shook and his eyes darted around the room when he spoke, never resting on anything for more than a second at a time. Agnes and Dean exchanged a look. Was this man really the town's mayor? He seemed like a frayed rope, about to snap at any second. It was hard to imagine him married to Rubia, who seemed so strong and certain. "You be hungry?" he asked.

"Yes, thank you," Agnes said.

"We're looking for our friend, Peat," Dean said, cutting straight to the point. "He's a little taller than Agnes with red hair and freckles."

The Mayor made a low humming noise at the back of his throat. A second later, the black and white Fidelas they had seen in the square waddled into the room. It was even fatter up close.

"Arthur, can you fetch our new friend?" The Mayor asked. The Fidelas disappeared through the front door, but not before casting an annoyed look at Agnes and Dean over his shoulder.

The meaning of the Mayor's words sunk in. "Do you mean, Peat?" Agnes asked. "You mean he's really here? Right now?"

"Yes, yes," said the Mayor. "Your friend rambled into town two days ago. He be tired and wet, but not much worse for the wear."

Agnes was shocked into silence. Some small part of her—a part she had been trying to shut out—hadn't believed they would ever find him. She felt tears spring to her eyes and blinked them away.

"Where is he now?" Dean asked. He looked around the room, as if Peat might be hiding under the rug.

"In kindness, he offered to help in the orchard. Or what's left of it," the Mayor muttered in a sour voice. Agnes got the feeling that he had forgotten they were there. She thought of the rows of sickly trees they'd passed on the way.

"What's happening to the trees?" she asked.

The Mayor cleared his throat loudly four times in a row and pulled on the hem of his shirt. He looked so distressed that Agnes was sorry she had asked.

Just then, Rubia stuck her head back through the curtain, saving them from any more stilted conversation. "I prepared a snack to tide you over until your friend will arrive. It be a long walk from the edges of the orchard."

She motioned for Agnes and Dean to join her in the kitchen where she had laid out a veritable feast. Agnes's mouth began to water—something she thought only happened in cartoons—and Dean looked like his eyes were about to fall out of his head. Platters of exotic sliced fruits fought for space with cold cuts, steaming bread and even a frosted chocolate cake. Rubia handed each of them a plate and pulled out the long wooden bench, urging them to sit.

"It be the custom here to welcome visitors with food. I be insulted if you do not eat until you be well and full. Now, I will go heat water for your baths and check on you in a little while."

Agnes and Dean nodded silently, unable to tear their eyes away from the food. Rubia disappeared back through the curtain, leaving them alone.

“Do you think it’s alright?” Agnes asked in a low voice. The Mayor seemed pretty harmless, but she wasn’t so sure about his fidelas, Arthur.

“Are you crazy? I’d say it looks better than alright.” Dean tore off a chunk of bread and slathered it in creamy butter.

Agnes grabbed his arm. “I don’t just mean the food. Something else doesn’t seem right here. What did Ahne mean we don’t ‘know all’? And why is the Mayor acting so nervous?”

Dean pulled his arm away. “In the last two days, we’ve escaped the world’s biggest falling tree, found our way out of a pitch black cave, fought off a giant lizard, and maybe even found Peat. Maybe there’s something bad going on here, but right now I’m starving. Can we *please* just eat and worry about everything else later?”

Dean gave his sister a pleading look. Agnes nodded. He was right. There would be enough time later to worry about whatever was coming next. She bit into a piece of soft orange fruit. The sickly sweet juice dribbled down her chin.

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After Agnes and Dean had eaten until they were about to burst, Rubia reappeared. She led them up a narrow set of stairs covered in the same papery cloth as the walls. At the top, she opened a door to reveal an enormous wooden tub that looked like a giant barrel, full of steaming water. Agnes’s limbs itched to remove the layer of dirt covering them.

Rubia pointed to a brass chain with a wooden handle dangling from a pipe. “The water be heated in a large cistern below the house and piped up here. Just pull if you need fresh water.”

“Why do you collect water in the town square if you have it here in pipes?” Dean asked.

Rubia’s face fell. “That be different water—special water for drinking.” She pointed to a neatly folded stack of clothes on a table next to the tub. “You may wear these and bring your dirty clothes downstairs once you be finished.” She led Dean out of the room and downstairs to the other bath. Agnes heard him peppering Rubia with more questions about the water supply as they went.

Agnes dipped her arm in the warm water and wriggled her fingers beneath the surface. When she pulled it out again, the lower half of her arm was visibly whiter than the upper half. A thin film of grime stuck to the surface of the water. Agnes peeled off her filthy clothes and sunk into the tub, closing her eyes, enjoying the feeling of being full and warm. She reached for the soap and began the business of removing her second skin of dirt.

By the time Agnes was done, the water was oily and grey. She climbed out of the tub and dried off before pulling on the pants that Rubia had left. The clothes were in the same style worn by the rest of Village Grove: loose and soft, an earthy green the color of moss. As Agnes pulled on the shirt, she noticed frayed threads inside the collar, like stitching that someone had pulled out. They reminded her of the name tags her mom sewed into the back of her shirts before summer camp. Who

did these clothes belong to? Again, Agnes was struck by the feeling that something was not quite right in Village Grove.

She drained the dirty bathwater and did her best to wipe off the ring of dirt left behind. When she was done, she carried her grubby clothes and towel down to the kitchen. The food had been cleared and the table was scrubbed spotless. "Hello?" Agnes called. "Anyone there? Dean?"

A flash of movement through the window caught her eye. Rubia and Dean stood side by side at the edge of the first row of fruit trees. Agnes noticed that the trees here seemed healthier than the ones they had passed before: more fruit and less of the grey mold.

Dean raised his hands, curving his fingers to imitate claws, and gnashed his teeth. Agnes realized he was mimicking the narth. As Dean scuttled to the side, mock running into the tree, Agnes caught a flash of red hair from a third person standing nearby.

"Peat," Agnes whispered. As if he had heard, Peat's head jerked up and met her eyes through the glass. His freckled face burst into a wide grin and he waved.

Agnes spun and ran through the house and down the front steps, nearly smashing into Arthur, who tried to nip at her ankles, but overbalanced thanks to his fat stomach and tumbled through the front door. Agnes leapt over the last two steps and ran around the side of the house.

Peat had dark circles under his eyes and a puffy bruise on one cheek that was turning yellow, but he hadn't been eaten by a narth, hadn't fallen into a bottomless

black pit, and hadn't been kidnapped by Cabil. He saw Agnes and opened his arms wide. She leapt into them.

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Agnes, Dean and Peat all began talking at once. Rubia cut in, laughing. "You will not get to anywhere that way. Why do you not come inside and catch each other up. I will make some tea."

They followed her, Dean tripping on the steps as he craned his head back to finish telling Peat about the north. Agnes was only half-listening. She tugged on the edge of Peat's shirt, which was the deep green of a pine tree, to make sure he was really there. She was glad to see him, but it also brought reality crashing down. Now that they'd found Peat, she began to wonder about Hibernia and the others. They must be worried sick by now. Agnes still had no idea how they would get home. Then there was Cabil. If what Violet had said was true, he was here somewhere, probably even looking for Peat. Agnes shivered.

"What is it?" Peat asked.

"I need to tell you about Cab—"

Peat's elbow shot out, crashing into her ribs. Agnes rubbed her side and shot him a hurt look, but Peat had a fake-looking smile plastered to his face. He shook his head. It was such a slight shake that Agnes wondered if she'd imagined it.

"Yeah, the *cold*," Peat said. "It gets much colder here at night."

Agnes looked past Peat. Rubia had stopped pouring water into the kettle and was looking at them intently, interest and fear on her face.

“Yes,” Agnes said, slowly understanding. “That’s what I was about to say. I—I was just wondering how everyone wears these thin clothes when it gets so cold at night.”

Dean looked back and forth between Peat and Agnes. He opened his mouth to ask what was going on, but was silenced when Agnes kicked him under the table.

Rubia’s mouth, which had been pinched shut, broke into a smile. “Funny, Peat be wondering the same thing when he first arrived. Something in the fibers hold the body heat. Though we have cloaks as well.” She nodded at a row of garments hanging on the wall. They were made of different colors and materials: some seemed no heavier than silk, while others were lined in lustrous speckled fur.

“Of course, you may use whatever you need,” Rubia said. “I hope you consider our home to be your home, for now.”

She leaned forward, sliding her hand over Agnes’s. As she did, a series of disconnected images flooded Agnes’s mind: Rubia gripping the hand of a boy with white-blond hair and delicate features, her face smeared with tears. Trees, withering and twisting as if in fast-forward. A crowd gathered around the well in the town square, their image reflected in the surface of the buildings, making them seem twice as many. Fire. A pool of blood. Rubia’s mouth in a wide-open scream. Agnes coughed to cover her gasp and snatched her hand away.

“T—thank you,” Agnes said in a choked voice. “Thank you for everything you’ve done for us.”

Inside her head, another voice wondered loudly, what had happened in Village Grove?



## Chapter 15: The Resurrection Man

After serving them tea and snacks, though Agnes and Dean said that they couldn't possibly eat anything more, Rubia pulled on a sky blue cloak that made her hair look pale and shining as snow. She announced that she was going into town to check on Zaine and Ahne.

"I may be late, so Peat can show you where you all be sleeping," she said. "It be a bit crowded but will have to do for now. And the Mayor, well, he be around somewhere." She shrugged, as if it didn't really matter. "Do not let Arthur anywhere near the food. He be fat enough as it is."

Rubia whistled, a high musical sound that reminded Agnes of the Bobwhites they used to hear in the woods back home calling each other from the trees. A lithe fidelas the color of sand trotted out of the orchard and met Rubia on the front steps. They wove through the trees side by side in the direction of the village until they disappeared from sight.

Peat glanced around to make sure the front hall was empty. "Come on, I'll show you where we're staying," he said loudly. Then he lowered his voice. "Let's go upstairs where we can talk. Arthur's always skulking around down here."

Peat pushed open a door at the top of the stairs. Inside, the floors were bare, but swept spotless. A few dark, square patches stained the papery walls—the ghosts of paintings or pictures that had once hung there. Maybe they belonged to the original owner of Agnes's clothes? She shifted uncomfortably; all of a sudden, the soft shirt felt itchy.

A single window looked onto fruit trees as far as the eye could see. Most of them were grey, with bare, twisted limbs, but occasionally a tree still had green leaves and a few fuzzy blue fruit clinging to its branches.

In addition to the narrow cot beneath the window, two other beds had been made on pallets stuffed with straw.

“I guess this is where we’re all sleeping,” Dean said, flopping down onto one of the pallets. He sighed and closed his eyes. “It looks like a dog bed, but it’s actually really comfortable.”

Peat grinned. “Well, I think they’re for fidelas.”

“What are they exactly?” Agnes asked.

“I don’t really know, but they aren’t pets. They seem to have a status that’s not less than people exactly, just different. And they’re smart. I swear the fat one downstairs notices twice as much as the Mayor.”

Agnes sat on the bed next to Peat. “What’s wrong with the Mayor? He seems so jumpy all the time.”

“To be honest, I don’t really know anything,” Peat said. “I’ve only been here a day longer than both of you. After I left Violet, I came through the doorway inside the tree. I stumbled around in the dark for hours until I fell into water. I tried to swim for shore, but it was so dark I didn’t know where the shore was. Next thing I knew, I saw light and the river passed through a hole in the rock. Someone in a boat picked me up and brought me here.”

“We must have gone different directions. Dean and I found a door and came out way up in the mountains.”

Peat lowered his voice again. "When I got here, everyone was nice but seemed, well, edgy. I tried to tell them about Cabil and the doorways, but it was like they weren't hearing me."

"Well, it *is* kind of hard to believe," Dean said, "a random kid showing up and telling them about doorways to different worlds."

"No, you don't understand. It wasn't like that. They didn't even look surprised. It was like they knew about it already. All of it."

"Knew about Cabil?" asked Agnes, caught off-guard. "But how?"

"That's the thing. I think something happened here, something no one wants to talk about."

"What about your parents?" Agnes asked. "Has anyone seen them?"

Peat frowned. "I don't know, but I have a feeling that it's all connected somehow. If we can find out what happened in Village Grove then maybe, just maybe, we'll be able to find out what happened to my parents too."

Agnes nodded and tried to stifle a yawn. Through the window, she watched the pale orange moon rise, casting a fiery glow over the grey trees. Her eyelids felt heavy. It had been ages since she'd slept, warm and safe in an actual bed. She slid onto one of the pallets. Dean was right: it was comfortable. The smell reminded her of hayrides.

Peat yawned. "We might as well go to bed. People get up with the sun here." He pulled back the covers and slipped under the dark blue sheets. Then he sat up again, looking down at Dean and Agnes with a serious expression. "I—I just want to

thank you for coming after me. You didn't have to and, well, it means a lot. I don't know how we're going to get home yet, but I promise I'll find a way."

"We'll find a way together," Agnes said. Suddenly remembering, she reached into her pocket and pulled out the torn piece of black silk that had once been Peat's eye patch.

He rubbed it between his fingers. "Where did you find it?"

"By the sentinel tree. That's how we knew you really had gone through the doorway. It's your Dad's isn't it?"

Peat nodded and slipped the eye patch into his pocket. As he blew out the lamp, plunging the room into darkness, Agnes wondered if Peat knew anything about the legend of the doormaker, about why Cabil wanted him here. She opened her mouth to speak, but heard soft breathing coming from either side of her. Dean and Peat were already asleep. Oh well, she thought, it will keep until tomorrow. She closed her eyes and fell fast asleep.

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The red glow of sunrise lit the sky just above the tips of the fruit trees. Light rain fell, coating the windowpanes with scattered drops. Peat stretched and tossed off his blankets before padding softly to the window.

"There he goes."

Agnes pressed her nose to the glass just in time to see the Mayor disappear among the trees. Arthur plodded at his heels, daintily stepping over patches of mud.

"Where's he going?" Agnes asked.

Peat shrugged. "One more thing to add to the list of mysteries. This is the third morning I've seen him disappear into the orchard at dawn. I offered to help pick fruit yesterday, so I could look around a little, but I didn't see anything but trees and more dead trees."

Dean joined them at the window. "Maybe he's just going to pick fruit."

"Maybe, but he always comes back all nervous and shaky, like you saw him yesterday." Peat shook his head. "I think it's something else."

Something whined softly behind them. The children turned and saw the sandy fidelas sitting in the doorway. It was small, at least in comparison to the others, closer to the size of an enormous dog than a bear. Agnes wondered if it belonged to Rubia. Or, for that matter, whether the fidelas belonged to any one person. It had seemed more like Ahne and Zaine belonged to each other.

"Maizie, how'd you get the door open?" Peat asked.

Maizie hooked her snout around the edge of the door and pulled it mostly shut. Then she stuck her head back through the opening and barked once before whirling and trotting away, her claws clicking on the stairs.

"Do you think she overheard us?" Agnes asked, uneasy.

Peat shrugged. "Maybe, but I guess there's nothing we can do about it now. Let's go down. Rubia probably sent her up here to call us for breakfast."

When they got downstairs, Rubia had whipped up another feast. As the children filed into the kitchen, she passed them bowls full of yogurt and the midnight blue fruit. Agnes took a bite and was surprised at the flavor; it was both sweet and tart, and somewhere between crunchy and soft.

“It’s delicious,” she said, wiping a trickle of blue juice off her chin. “Is this what grows on the trees outside?”

“What?” Rubia asked. She seemed preoccupied. “Oh yes, the mainzaines. You know, I be so accustomed to eating mainzaines—mainzaine pie, mainzaine jam, mainzaine stew—that sometimes I forget how good they be. You can help pick later if you wish,” she paused, glancing out the window at the dribbling rain, “though probably not until the fruit be dry this afternoon.”

She rinsed her hands in the tall cistern of water in the corner. “I am sorry to leave so quickly, but I must check on Zaine to see how he be doing this morning.”

“Please tell him we say hello,” Agnes said. “And Ahne too, if you see her.”

But Rubia had already disappeared out the door and down the front steps at a jog.

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A few hours later, the rain still fell at a steady drizzle. There was no sign of the Mayor, so the children decided to walk into town. Agnes hoped that they might be able to find Ahne. Maybe she would answer some of their questions.

They strolled through the silent orchard and onto the main road, where they passed row after row of silent, dark houses. Once they caught a glimpse of a pale face watching them through a window, but immediately the face was withdrawn, the window empty.

“It’s too quiet,” Agnes said with a shudder. “Where is everyone?”

The small group drew closer together. The square was as empty as the rest of the town. The fountain gurgled away with its stream of crystal clear water and the children cupped their hands and took a long, refreshing drink.

“It be nice, no?” said a voice behind them.

The children turned and saw Rubia standing on the steps of the shining white building. She came down to meet them. “The water comes from a stream high up in the mountains. They say that no illness can fall on anyone who drinks it.”

“Is it true?” Dean asked.

Rubia smiled sadly. “Who truly knows? Zaine be much improved, by the by. Well enough for visitors if you would like to give your greetings.”

The children agreed eagerly and followed Rubia into the white building. The floor was made of polished white wood, which reflected the candlelight of the chandeliers hung every few feet. The result was a soft glow which lit even the furthest corner, but was never too bright.

Rubia escorted them down a long hallway lined with rooms full of narrow beds made with clean, white sheets pulled so tightly you could bounce a coin off them. It seemed like a hospital, but without any patients.

They passed into another room full of empty beds, though these looked more like the pallets Dean and Agnes had slept on last night. Zaine lay in the corner, a white bandage wrapped loosely around his hind leg. When the children walked in, he lifted his head and his tail thumped loudly against the bed in pleasure. Maizie sat nearby, as if standing guard. She barked happily and stood aside to make room.

Agnes scratched Zaine behind the ears, earning a slobbery lick. "You look so much better," she said.

"Does he not?" asked Rubia. "I be happy to say that the diseased flesh is entirely gone. He should be up and on his feet as usual by tomorrow."

"Where's Ahne?" asked Dean.

"I sent her home to get some rest. She waited up all night and was dead on her feet."

"Oh," he said, disappointed.

"You will have plenty of time to visit with her once she has slept," Rubia said firmly. "Now that you have said your greetings, I will have to shoo you out so our friend can have his rest as well." She ushered the children out the door and back into the empty town square.

"Now what?" asked Dean.

Peat looked up at the grey sky. "The rain's stopped and the Mayor's probably back by now. Why don't we go help in the orchard? It's better than standing around here."

Agnes looked around at the quiet, seemingly empty buildings and agreed.

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When they got back to the house the Mayor was sitting on the front steps staring blankly into space. Beads of sweat rolled down his pale face despite the coolness of the afternoon. Arthur sat at his feet, using his sharp canine teeth to pull briars out of his fur.

As they walked up the path, Dean stepped on a twig, breaking it with a sharp snap. The Mayor started and clutched his chest with shaking hands.

“Sorry,” Dean called out. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“Q-q-q-quite all right,” the Mayor stuttered.

“We thought we could help in the orchard again this afternoon,” Peat said. “I helped pick fruit yesterday, so I can show them what to do.”

“Why—yes. I suppose that be all right. Very kind of you to offer.”

The Mayor patted his pockets, distracted, then disappeared back into the house. With a huff, Arthur hauled himself up and followed.

Agnes shook her head. “He seems even more nervous than yesterday, if that’s possible.”

“Come on,” Peat said. “There are sacks we can use in the orchard. We might as well get started.”

They walked behind the house to where a narrow path led between the ghostly white tree trunks. Mist rose off the grass as the sun dried the morning rain. The children continued further into the orchard until the house had disappeared in the fog.

A wooden chest beneath one of the largest living trees contained empty burlap sacks and a roll of twine. Peat showed them how to pick the ripe blue fruit from the lower branches, twisting it so it came free with the stem still attached. They picked for a few hours, but the healthy trees were so few and far between that they only managed to fill one sack between them.

After exhausting his row, Dean sat on the grass. Agnes helped Peat tie the sack closed with the twine, then they joined him.

“What are we going to do?” Agnes finally asked.

“I don’t know what we can do,” Peat said. “Everyone’s been nice, but I get the feeling that we wouldn’t be *allowed* to leave, even if we wanted to.”

“There you may be right,” said a nearby voice. The children jumped in surprise as a shadowy figure appeared, parting the fog and stepping into the sun.

“Ahne!” Dean shouted, jumping to his feet. He ran towards her as if he wanted to give her a hug, but then stopped and sat down again on the ground with red cheeks.

Ahne grinned at him. “It be nice to see you too.”

“We went to the hospital earlier,” Agnes said, “to check on Zaine.”

Ahne nodded. “Yes, he be doing much better. He be walking when I left.”

Peat cleared his throat and stood, brushing some damp leaves from his pants. “Hi, I’m Peat.” He held out his hand, but Ahne just looked at it curiously. He let it drop to his side.

A muffled bark rang out across the orchard, but the fog dampened noise and it was impossible to tell how far away it was. Ahne cast a nervous glance back towards the house, which was still wrapped in a cloak of white mist.

“Ahne,” Agnes said. “Yesterday you said there was something we didn’t know...” Ahne squatted down. “I be not supposed to talk to you,” she said softly.

“But why?” asked Dean. “And why don’t you think we’ll be allowed to leave? Ahne, what’s going on?”

“It be a long story. You best sit down.”

The others sat at the base of the tree as she whispered the story.

“About five years ago, the trees started dying of a strange fungus no one had ever seen before.” Ahne tore off a patch of furry grey mold growing on the tree trunk. She ground it beneath her foot in disgust. “You must understand, our whole village depended on the fruit trees, for food, for trade, for life itself. Soon, there wasn’t enough food to go around. People fought over what was left. There were riots, even a fire.” Ahne stopped, steeled herself to continue.

“Then, one day, a man appeared. Our saviour,” she said, spitting the word. “He told stories of doorways, of other worlds full of riches beyond our imagining, medicine to save the trees. At first, no one believed him, but then he did it—he cured some of the trees, stopped the spread of the disease. This man would resurrect our lives from the ashes, he would save us.”

“What did this—this man want in return?” Agnes asked, though she was beginning to guess who *this man* might be.

“Workers. He had a project up in the mountains, a mine. He was searching for a special kind of metal. He never told us why, not that anyone cared to ask.”

“The village,” Agnes said softly. “That’s why it’s so empty?”

Ahne nodded. “It has been this way for years now. Some of the trees bear fruit, but the man told us it will take time, years, until they are healthy again. Until

then, people have no choice but to work in the mountains. But I don't believe him. I think the land is poisoned forever."

"What makes you say that?" Dean asked.

Ahne lowered her voice. "Last year, people began to get nervous, talked about sending the stranger on his way. My—my father tried to raise a resistance, but he disappeared, along with my brother and a few others helping him. All the trees belonging to those people died while some, like the mayor's, continue to give fruit. It can't just be a coincidence."

"This man—this stranger—it's Cabil, isn't it?" Agnes asked.

Ahne flinched at the name, but nodded. "There are ears everywhere, so he is referred to by many names. Most call him the Resurrection Man."

Peat's eyes flashed as an idea had leapt into his head. "It's the Mayor isn't it? He's the one who talks to the Cabil and takes his orders?"

"That's why he's so nervous all the time," Dean said. "And why he sneaks off into the orchard every morning."

Ahne nodded. "That be why you be kept here. So they can watch you."

"But why does Cabil care about us?" Peat asked. "I mean, we're just kids."

"That, I do not know."

Agnes cleared her throat. "There's something I think I need to tell you."

Agnes and Dean hurriedly filled them in about their meeting with Cabil, about the torn passage in the atlas that recounted part of an old legend about a child with the power to open doorways between worlds.

“But that’s ridiculous,” Peat said when they had finished. “I didn’t even know the doorways existed until a few days ago. And I think I would have noticed if I could open a doorway to another world.”

Agnes considered this. “I—I don’t think it matters. If Cabil believes that you *might* be, then that’s enough to make you valuable.”

“Why are you telling us this?” Dean asked Ahne. “When no one else will help us.”

Ahne sighed. “Because I need your help. There be a rumor of a prison inside the mine. It be where he keeps my father and brother.” She turned to Peat. “If your parents be alive, that is where they be.”

“How—how do you know?” Peat asked.

Ahne stood up, her spine straight as a rod, and looked Peat in the eyes when she spoke. “Because I be the one who turned them over to the Mayor.”

Peat, Agnes and Dean stared in dumbfounded silence.

“You—you what?” Peat managed to stammer. “But why?”

Ahne’s voice cracked when she spoke. “My mother be dead. My father and brother be the only family I have left. When I saw these two strangers stumble out of the hills, asking for my help—well—I thought that if I turned them over to the Mayor, maybe The Resurrection man would give back my family.”

“Did he?” Peat asked in a stony voice.

Ahne shook her head miserably. “I know I have no right to ask your forgiveness, but I—I want to help you.”

“My parents trusted you to help them and look where it got them. Why should we trust you now?”

Agnes touched his elbow, trying to draw away some of his anger. “She saved our lives, Peat. And—well I don’t think there’s anyone else here who *will* help us. At least she’s telling us the truth now.”

“I know where the prison is,” Ahne said eagerly. “I have seen the mines with my own eyes and I think there be a chance—a small chance maybe, but still a chance—that we can get them out.”

“All right,” Peat said. “We’re listening.”

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They planned to meet in the orchard the following night after Rubia and the Mayor went to bed. Then, they could slip out of the village unseen. Peat had wanted to leave right away, but Ahne said no. There was a village meeting that evening and people would be out later than usual. Also, she needed time to collect supplies for the trip and to make sure Zaine was back on his feet. Until then, they were supposed to lay low and act as if they didn’t know anything about either Cabil or Village Grove’s history.

“Do you think this will really work?” Peat asked as they walked back to the house.

“I do not know,” Ahne said. “But I believe it is the only hope we have. And this life,” she opened her arms wide as if embracing the village and all its inhabitants, “it be not *life* anymore. It looks like life, but it be empty on the inside.”

As they neared the house, Ahne ducked down another path and promised to meet them in the same spot the next night. The children walked back to the house, dragging the heavy sack of fruit behind them. When they entered the kitchen, Rubia looked so happy to see them that Agnes felt a little guilty about their plan. She had to remind herself that they were doing the right thing.

“Thank you for doing all this,” Rubia said. “Ever since our son—” her voice broke and she turned towards the window. When she turned back, she was smiling again. “Never mind. I think I will bake a pie for your dessert while we be at the meeting. It is the least I can do to show my thanks.” She kissed each of the children on the forehead and sent them upstairs to bathe before dinner.

The children joined the Mayor and Rubia for a meal filled with uncomfortable silences. They tried to act normally, but with everything Ahne had told them and knowing that Cabil was so close—it proved nearly impossible. Luckily the Mayor was as silent as ever and Rubia seemed so distracted that neither of them noticed the awkwardness.

When they had finished eating, Rubia and the Mayor got ready for the village meeting. As they stood by the front door in their cloaks, the Mayor whispered something in his wife’s ear. Rubia turned to the children, a tight smile plastered to her face. “I nearly forgot about the pie. Why do not you take it upstairs and have dessert in your room?”

Agnes frowned. Something was wrong. “That sounds really nice, but we were going to help clean the dishes first.”

Rubia's smile faltered. "That be very kind, but do not worry about the washing up. I will do it when we return. Come, I will help you carry it upstairs."

It didn't seem like they had a choice. Rubia took Agnes and Dean firmly by the shoulders and marched them into the kitchen where she loaded them up with plates and spoons and sent them upstairs. A minute later Peat opened the door to their bedroom, holding a delicious-smelling pie, which he placed on the table by the door.

"Are they gone yet?" Dean asked.

Peat shook his head.

"It's weird," Agnes said. "Why do they want us to eat upstairs?"

As she spoke, the bedroom door slammed shut. A second later, they heard a key turn in the lock and the clomp of footsteps retreating down the stairs. Agnes tried the knob, but the door was locked.

"I guess that's why," Dean said. "They must suspect that we know something. Now what do we do?"

"They can't keep us locked in here forever," Peat said. "And as soon as they let us out, we can run into the orchard and hide. We have to meet Ahne, no matter what."

They climbed silently into bed, leaving the uneaten pie on the table.

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Agnes awoke to a light tapping on the window. The sky outside was dark with a dusting of stars, so it must have been at least a few hours since she had fallen asleep.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Peat sat up. "What is that?" he whispered.

"I don't know. Something at the window."

They woke Dean and crept over to the window. Two stories below, white tree trunks floated like ghosts in the darkness. Dean opened the window and stuck his head out. "I don't see anything, but—ouch!" He pulled back, rubbing his forehead.

"Look!" Agnes pointed to a shadowy form, which limped forward until its thick grey fur and pink tongue came into focus. "It's Zaine!"

Ahne stepped forward. She had been pressed against the house directly under their window. "Quiet," she hissed. "Do you want to wake the whole village?"

She dropped a handful of pebbles on the ground. "It took you long enough to wake. I have been throwing these at the window for an hour."

"What are you doing here?" Agnes asked. "We're not supposed to meet you until tomorrow."

"The situation be changed," Ahne said. "We must leave now. It be nearly midnight and Rubia and the Mayor have been asleep for hours. We cannot waste any more time."

"We're locked in," Peat said. "We can't get down."

"There be a window," Ahne said.

"There also *be* a twenty foot drop to the ground," Dean grumbled.

Ahne disappeared into the trees on silent feet.

“Do you think she’s going to leave us here?” asked Peat, his voice full of worry.

“Not Ahne,” said Dean.

Sure enough, she reappeared with Zaine trotting at her side. She pointed up at the window and whispered something in his ear. Zaine tossed his head. Then, he reared up on his hind legs, bracing his front paws against the side of the house.

“Now climb,” Ahne called softly.

“Are you crazy?” Peat asked.

“Do you want to remain locked in there forever, or do you want to rescue your parents?” she hissed from the ground.

Peat’s face hardened. He lowered himself over the windowsill, hanging on by his fingertips until his toes just grazed Zaine’s haunches. As he let go, Zaine lowered his body in one smooth motion. He ended up on all fours with Peat clinging to his neck. Peat dropped into the grass. “Nothing to it,” he whispered, grinning up at Agnes and Dean.

“Go on, Agnes,” Dean said, nervous. “You next.”

“You’re shorter than me,” Agnes replied. “You won’t be able to reach Zaine unless I help lower you down.”

She gripped Dean’s hands and lowered him until he was only a few inches above Zaine’s furry head. “Okay, let go.”

Dean shook his head miserably. “I can’t, I can’t, I’ll fall.”

Agnes felt his hands slipping. Before she could say anything, her hands were empty. Dean hit Zaine’s shoulders with a jolt that the fidelas hadn’t been expecting.

Claws raked against the side of the house. Dean's arms wind milled in the air and he fell, hitting the ground with a soft whump. Agnes cried out and then clamped her hand over her mouth.

Dean climbed to his feet and flashed the thumbs up. At least he was okay.

Agnes expected to see the Mayor and Rubia run onto the lawn in their bathrobes, but nothing happened. They were safe, for now. She scrambled through the window as quietly as she could. Zaine lowered her to the ground. She scratched his ears in thanks. Ahne motioned for them to follow her into the trees where she had hidden her leather satchel.

"What's the big hurry?" Dean asked. "What happened?"

"The Mayor and a few of the village leaders met in secret after the meeting. I hid below the window to hear what they were speaking of—and it be you."

The children exchanged worried glances.

"What did they say?" Agnes asked.

"The Mayor said that the Resurrection Man wants you. He be coming for you in two nights and they be supposed to keep you locked up until then."

"Does Rubia know too?" Agnes could believe that kind of treachery from the Mayor, but Rubia? The woman had treated them so kindly and seemed protective of them.

"Yes, she be there too."

"All right," Dean said. "What do we do now?"

Ahne stopped rifling through her bag and looked up. "What do you mean?"

"Cabil's expecting us now. We can't just walk straight into his prison."

Ahne grinned. "That be exactly what we will do."

Dean's mouth dropped open. "You're crazy."

Ahne shook her head. "He be expecting you to be *here* when he shows up in two nights. But if we leave now, we will be in the mountains by then. He will be here and we will be there."

"Yeah," Dean said. "I guess that could work."

"There be one problem," Ahne said, biting her lip. "It be a three day journey into the mountains and I have no food or water. I thought we would have more time to prepare."

"I believe I can help," said a faint voice. Rubia stepped forward from the, carrying a large bundle. She set it down: four cloaks, a sack full of bread and cheese, and canteens of water.

Ahne eyed the food suspiciously, as if it might be poisoned. "Why be you helping us? You know the Resurrection Man be coming for them."

Rubia tied her robe tightly. She looked tired and pale. "You know, I never stop thinking about the night of the riots. The fire, the blood, and death." She turned to Agnes. "My son be killed that night. You have been sleeping in his bed and wearing his clothes and when I think of turning you over to that—that man," she shook her head, "it would be like killing him all over again."

Rubia turned back to the dark house. "My husband be not always the man he be now. Our son's death emptied him. We have been cooperating in the hopes that we might save our farms, save our families from hardship, but I believe we have been wrong all this time. We have been cowards who saved a few and probably

doomed many." She looked at the children, grief-stricken. "I will hide your disappearance as long as possible. I hope you find what you be looking for."

She turned and shuffled back inside. Agnes thought Rubia was wrong. She wasn't a coward at all.

"What will happen to them when Cabil shows up and we aren't here anymore?" Dean asked.

"If they be smart," Ahne said, "they will be gone by then."

The children wrapped themselves in the cloaks and split the food between Ahne's bag and the burlap sack Rubia had given them. Soon, they were weaving between the ghostly white tree trunks, disappearing into the darkness.

## Chapter 16: The Cirq

After a few hours, the children passed the last of the fruit trees and stepped onto the riverbank. They found a spot that was wide, but shallow, and forded the river in the darkness. Even though the water barely reached their knees, the current was so strong it threatened to pull them off their feet as they sloshed along the stony riverbed. On the other side, they stumbled through a field of panic grass, the wispy stalks tickling their necks and moaning in the wind. When they reached the edge of the forest, the trees were so densely packed that the children lost the guiding light of the moon and were forced to stop and catch a few hours of fitful sleep.

They rose again at first light and ventured further into the forest. Soon, they had to grasp branches and roots for support as they pulled themselves up steep hills and embankments. They had reached the mountains. They walked for the entire day, pausing only to nibble the cheese and bread Rubia had given them. That night, they pulled their cloaks tightly around their bodies against the cold and slept.

The next morning, they reached the invisible line that marked the end of the forest. Above were steep slopes covered in loose shale, and above that nothing but bare stone cliffs rising into the sky. The children were so high above the river valley where they had started that their breath felt tight in their lungs. Every few steps they had to stop and take deep gulps of the thin air. In the woods they had shivered in the cool shadows, even when the sun was high in the sky. Now, without the trees for cover, the sun beat down mercilessly. They scrambled between the craggy boulders, searching for a bit of shade.

In the afternoon, they stopped beside a small stream. When Agnes looked up she saw water flowing in a twinkling silver line from the top of the highest cliffs, where white fields of snow had not yet melted despite the summer heat. Ahne squinted into the distance and pointed at a spot halfway between two peaks where the ridge dipped down. “That be where we be going. That be the cirq.”

“The cirq?” asked Peat, gasping for breath.

“It be three high mountains connected by ridges that dip into a bowl at the bottom. The only way in or out be there—at the saddle between the two peaks. The entrance to the mines and the prison be on the other side.”

“It’s like trying to break into a fortress,” Dean groaned.

“Worse. The entrance be a single door at the base of the highest cliff.”

Dean rolled his eyes. “And it’s probably guarded by an army too.”

“The Resurrection Man has no need,” Ahne said softly. Something in her voice scared them more than the thought of a waiting army.

Three hours later they reached the base of the saddle, which looked even steeper now that they stood right below it. Ahne dropped her pack beneath a rough black boulder covered in shining flakes of mica. “We must wait for darkness. Best get a few hours sleep if we can.”

She lay down, using her pack for a pillow. Zaine curled up next to her. The others lay down wherever they could, spreading their cloaks over the rough stony ground. Agnes tried to ignore the fact that everything they hoped for and feared was just beyond the next ridge. She thought she’d never be able to fall asleep, but in only a few minutes, exhaustion won.

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When Agnes opened her eyes Ahne was standing over her, nudging her gently with her foot. "It be time," she said.

Agnes sat up. A full moon hung in the sky, balanced on the tip of the highest peak like a rubber ball. The stones glittered in its orange light. Peat and Dean were already awake, eating small loaves of bread covered in slabs of cheese: the last of their food. Ahne handed Agnes a loaf. She ate mechanically, forcing herself to chew and swallow even though her stomach was tied in knots. They finished eating and refilled their canteens. It was time.

The climb was even harder than they had imagined. Not only was the slope steep, but the loose, flat shale kept sliding under their feet. They had to walk fanned out in a line or risk starting a landslide. With the falling rocks and the muffled cries every time one of them slid, Peat was sure that Cabil would hear them coming from a mile off.

"No," Ahne said. "It be the cirq's one weakness. Because of the high walls, the echoes be so great, you can not hear anything coming from below."

Dean dug his fingernails into a boulder as a piece of shale slid from beneath his feet and went clattering down the mountain. "The other weakness is the fact that it's impossible to get up these mountains without getting yourself killed," he grumbled.

When they crested the ridge, Ahne motioned for them to get down. They lay flat on their stomachs, peering into the darkness. They seemed to be lying at the bottom of a giant bowl. The area in front of them was flat, but the mountains rose in

sheer cliffs on all sides, creating a horseshoe shaped basin. The narrow dip where they lay was the only way in or out. At the far end of the basin stood a square stone building with three sheer walls, easily twenty feet high. The fourth wall was the mountain itself. The only way in looked to be a gate made of metal bars as thick as an arm.

“The entrance to the tunnels is built straight into the cliff on the other side of that gate,” Ahne said.

“How are we going to get in?” Peat asked. “I doubt they’re going to just open it for us.”

“Not through the gate. Over there.” Ahne pointed to a long wooden shack huddled against the nearest stone wall, as if trying to shelter from the wind that roared around the cirq.

“What is it?” asked Agnes.

“A latrine,” Ahne said. “There must be a hole or some kind of pipe cut into the wall that runs underground. It comes out there.” She pointed to a low opening in the rock about fifty feet away from them where a steady stream of watery brown sludge was leaking down the steep side of the mountain. The pipe’s opening was just wide enough for a child to crawl through. Just then, the wind shifted and the children caught a whiff of the contents. It smelled worse than the world’s dirtiest public bathroom. Dean gagged.

“No way am I crawling underground through that all the way over there,” he said, pointing to the stone building two hundred yards away on the other side of the cirq.

“There’s no other way,” Ahne said impatiently.

“Why don’t we just run?” Dean argued. “If we stick close to the side of the mountain, maybe no one will see us coming.”

Ahne laid a finger against her lips and pointed into the dark. A long, shadowy shape slunk along the rock near the stone building, its pointed scales moving like black water. The narth raised its massive head and sniffed the air, turning its yellow eyes in their direction. The red tongue flitted into the air.

Then, it was hurtling towards them. Agnes opened her mouth to scream, but Peat roughly clamped his hand over it. She looked at him with wide eyes, but he made no movement to run. When the narth was halfway to their hiding spot, it was roughly jerked back by an invisible hand. The lizard hissed, its slitted nostrils flaring.

Peat pointed to a thick metal chain fastened around its neck, the links glistening in the moonlight. The chain was threaded through a round metal circle fasted directly into the side of the mountain. Agnes followed the line of links and saw that it continued through the gate. Someone had put the narth on a leash.

“It must be attached to some kind of winch,” Dean whispered. “That way if they tighten it, the narth won’t be able to reach the gate and Cabil can come and go. But if they loosen it—”

“Then it will stop anyone else from trying to get in or out,” Ahne finished. “There be no other way but the sewer.”

Dean nodded. Crawling through a sewer suddenly didn’t seem so bad.

They crawled over to the pipe's entrance, trying to make as little noise as possible. The fetid odor was so strong it made their eyes water. Ahne paused, facing the others. "Once we get inside, it be too narrow to turn around. If you want to turn back, you must do it now."

She turned to Zaine. "This be where we must leave you, my friend."

Zaine whined softly. Ahne pressed her forehead against his and closed her eyes. When she opened them again, she looked ready. "If all be well, we will be back in a few hours. If not, you know where to go."

Zaine growled and stepped back into the shadow of an overhanging rock.

"Let us go," Ahne said. She crawled into the pipe. Peat took a deep breath, like a swimmer about to go underwater, and followed.

Agnes watched the bottom of Peat's shoe disappear into the darkness. The jagged rocks concealing the pipe reminded her of sharp teeth. It's like crawling into a narth's mouth, she thought as she took a breath of the foul-smelling air.

"Are you ready, Dean?"

"No, but I don't think I'll ever be. Let's go."

The air inside the pipe was thick and sour. Even worse than the stench was the complete darkness. Though at least it meant they didn't have to see the lumpy liquid that reached up to their elbows.

The pipe sloped gradually upwards, which kept the liquid flowing past them in a constant stream. After a few minutes of crawling, Agnes stopped. She strained her ears, but could no longer hear Ahne and Peat sloshing ahead. Just then, Dean

bumped into her from behind. His arms slipped on the slimy surface and he landed with a splash.

“Agh,” he said in disgust. “Thanks a lot. Now I’m coated in this stuff. I think some even got in my mouth.” He spat loudly.

“Sorry,” Agnes said. “It’s just—I can’t hear the others.” There was a faint light up ahead. She could just make out Peat and Ahne jostling to sit side by side.

Agnes crawled on to meet them. “What’s going on? Why did you stop?”

As she moved closer, she saw the answer. A large metal grate stretched across the pipe, blocking them from going any further. They were trapped.

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Ahne shook the bars in frustration. “We must be almost there. What do we do now?”

Dean began running his hands along the top of the pipe where faint light was filtering in through three small, round holes. The others watched, curious.

“Got it!” Dean said. “I found an edge. I think it’s a manhole cover. We should be able to get out this way.”

“A what?” Ahne asked.

“They need some way of accessing the pipe in case it gets clogged.”

“What about the narth?” Peat asked. “Unless they shortened the chain it’s still going to be up there. If we come up outside the gate...”

The others went silent. In the excitement of finding a way out of the foul pipe, they had nearly forgotten the cirq’s reptilian guard. Ahne shook her head. “We can

not stay here and I will not go back. We must hope that it does not see us. I will go first.”

Ahne stood, using her shoulder to shift the heavy metal cover and push it aside. A fresh breeze drifted through the opening. They could see stars above their heads. Ahne stuck her head out, surveyed the area quickly, and then ducked back in.

“We be only a few feet from the latrine and no sign of the narth,” she said. “It must be on the other side of the building. If we move quickly, it will never know we be here.”

She pulled herself up through the hole in one quick motion and was gone, sprinting across the open ground until she was sheltered in the corner where the wooden shack met the stone wall. Agnes and Peat followed, leaping over the narth’s silver leash, and throwing themselves against the side of the stone building, hearts beating wildly. The chain lay still, stretching over the ground and around the corner.

Ahne found a loose board and began to pry at it with her fingernails. Agnes turned back and saw Dean struggling to replace the heavy manhole cover, the metal scraping loudly against stone. “Dean! What are you doing?” she hissed. “Come on!”

“If someone sees that it’s open they’ll know we’re here,” he said. “This will only take a second.”

“Fine, but hurry up.”

Agnes turned to help Peat and Ahne pry the nails out of the rotting wood until they were able to slide the board aside. The gap was just big enough for them to slip through. Ahne got inside without a problem, but Peat’s shirt got stuck on some wooden splinters and they had to tear it loose. Agnes spun around, intending

to tell Dean to hurry, but her voice died in her throat. The silver chain was dragging along the ground with a clinking sound.

Dean wrestled the cover securely back over the opening. His eye caught the moving chain.

“Run,” Agnes croaked.

But Dean was frozen to the spot. With a snuffling noise, a horned black head emerged around the corner of the building, testing the air with a long red tongue. Two sets of hands grabbed Agnes around the middle and roughly pulled her through the hole in the boards. She struggled. “We can’t just leave him!”

Peat did not loosen his grip.

“You be dead for sure if you go out there,” Ahne whispered. “You won’t help him that way. If he stays very still he may be all right. Narth have terrible eyesight.”

Ahne sounded confident, but her eyes were wide and full of fear. Agnes pressed her eye to the crack between the boards. The narth’s tail dragged along the ground, leaving a faint trail in the dust. It passed so close to the shack that she could see a few papery dead scales clinging to its skin. Dean huddled on the ground, so covered in the thick foul-smelling muck that he looked more like a shivering pile of mud than a boy.

The narth stopped and pressed its tongue to the ground, tasting the human trail that led from the pipe to the latrine shack. It turned its glowing yellow eyes towards where Agnes, Peat and Ahne huddled together in the damp darkness. The force of its stare made Agnes shiver so hard her teeth rattled. After a second, the lizard turned its eyes on Dean.

It was so close to him that Agnes could see its warm breath rustling her brother's hair. Dean squeezed his eyes shut and went still and silent as a rock. The narth ran its red tongue over his neck. Suddenly its massive black head recoiled, and its jaws snapped shut, full of nothing but air. The narth turned away with an angry hiss.

Dean's eyes flew open in time to see the narth disappear around the side of the building, dragging its jangling leash behind it. He stared down at his hands, as if he couldn't believe he was still in one piece.

"Dean!" hissed Ahne from their hiding spot. Dean leapt to his feet and sprinted over the open ground. When he reached the wooden shack he dove through the opening. Ahne pulled the loose board shut over the hole.

"What happened?" Dean asked breathlessly.

"You taste like a toilet," Ahne said with a grin. "Even the narth didn't want to eat you."

Dean's mouth dropped open and then broke into a grin. Agnes gave her brother a fierce hug, despite the fact that he really did smell terrible.

Once the excitement had passed, the children realized that they were not out of danger yet. They could hear voices outside the shack, inside the stone building. They also had to press themselves against the wall so they didn't fall into the large hole in the floor or hit their head on the toilet seat above their heads—a rough opening cut into a wooden plank.

"So how do we get out of here?" Agnes whispered. "Up through the hole?"

Ahne gripped either side of the toilet seat and pulled herself through the opening. They watched her dangling legs disappear. A second later, she stuck her head back through and said the coast was clear. The others followed, until they were all crammed in the tiny outhouse. Heavy footsteps clicked over the stones outside the shack.

“Narth?” Dean whispered.

Ahne shook her head. “Shoes.”

They made sure the door was bolted shut and pressed their eyes to the cracks between the boards. What had looked like a massive stone building from the outside was really nothing more than a large courtyard. A few dozen men with soot-stained faces and ragged clothes stood slurping bowls of thick gruel from chipped mugs. A couple of Cabil’s ferocious black dogs lingered nearby, snapping their teeth at anyone who got too close to the giant metal wheel standing just inside the gate. The narth’s chain was threaded through the bars and attached to the spoke of the metal wheel. Dean had been right about how Cabil controlled his guard.

“Who are they?” Agnes whispered. The men didn’t look at all happy to be there. In fact, they looked tired, hungry and miserable. But they didn’t exactly seem like prisoners either.

“Those are the mine workers,” Ahne whispered. “They work here for a month and then get a few days off back in the village. They must be getting ready to leave.”

Just then, a large, pale man with stringy blond hair emerged from narrow door built directly into the rock cliff that made up the fourth wall of the stone courtyard. His massive arm muscles strained against the sleeves of his dirty grey

shirt. The man lumbered over to the metal wheel, giving the black dogs a wide berth. A ripple of eagerness passed through the cluster of workers. The man gripped the spokes of the wheel and began to turn it, winching in the chain so the narth was pinned against the far wall, hissing and spluttering.

Only then did he remove a heavy ring of keys from the leather belt around his waist and unlock the gate with a clang.

“All right, off with you,” he called out. “And be back here in five days time, or else.”

The men filed silently through the gate with downcast eyes, giving the narth a wide berth as it strained against the chain. The man with the keys locked the gate again and headed back across the empty courtyard towards a metal door in the cliff.

Brackets on either side of the door held lanterns glowing with small orange flames, the only smudge of color amidst the grey stone. The man grabbed one of the lanterns and whistled for the black dogs to follow. A moment later, he was gone.

“Come on,” said Ahne.

They ran across the courtyard to the metal door. Peat pulled on the handle and it swung open on silent hinges. They peered into the tunnel beyond: dirt floors and rough rock walls led into pure, silent blackness.

Ahne unhooked the remaining lantern and led the way. As Agnes crossed the threshold, she looked back at the bright pinpoints of stars spread across the sky. With a pang, Agnes wondered if she’d ever see the sky again.

As she stepped into the dim circle of light cast by the lantern, the door closed behind her with a soft whump, as if pushed by an invisible hand. Agnes turned,

pressing against the door first lightly and then with all her strength. “It won’t open,” she said, trying to keep the panic out of her voice.

Ahne lifted the lamp. They saw a small keyhole where the door handle should have been. “It locks from the inside,” Peat said with a groan. “Stupid. We should have guessed they wouldn’t be worried about anyone trying to get *in*.”

Ahne brushed by him. She stopped and turned back to the three still huddled by the locked door. “We will have worry about it later,” she said with a sigh. “There must be a key in here somewhere or another way out.”

“She’s right,” Peat said. “There’s nothing else we can do now.” His face brightened. “Besides, this is a rescue mission and we still have rescuing to do.”

“But who’s going to rescue us?” Dean grumbled. But he didn’t have a better idea, so he followed the others on the path that led towards the dark heart of the mountain.

## Chapter 17: The Keeper of the Keys

The air grew cool as they followed the tunnel, which sloped gently downhill. They walked in a tight group so no one was outside the warm yellow circle of protection cast by the lantern. They came to a stream of water flowing from a crack in the wall. It dripped down into a depression in the rock, forming a large shallow pool. Ahne stopped and put the lantern down. "Let us stop here a minute and wash off."

Agnes looked down at the thick brown crust of grime covering her skin. She dipped her arms in the pool and scrubbed them with a rough stone.

"We don't have time for a bath," Peat said impatiently. "My parents are down here somewhere."

"My family too," Ahne snapped. "Do you think I've forgotten? If we do not wash, anyone in here will smell us coming from a league away." She bent down and began angrily scrubbing at the dirt on her face. She looked up at Peat, who hovered uncertainly over her shoulder. "Besides, the smell of you is making me want to lose my dinner."

"To what?" Peat asked.

Dean grinned. "I think she means barf."

Peat's face reddened. He kneeled and began splashing his face. When they had done their best to clean up a bit, they continued down the passage.

After a few minutes Peat stopped and motioned for them to do the same. "Do you hear that?" he whispered.

At first Agnes didn't hear anything. Then, she caught a faint growl that sent an icy shiver up her spine. The fearful looks on the others' faces confirmed that she wasn't just hearing things.

"There haven't been any other openings in the tunnel," Peat said. "So whatever it is must be in front of us."

"Let us keep going," Ahne said, "but carefully."

Ahne was so intent on the faint noise, she nearly fell down a set of steep stairs cut into the rock beneath their feet. Dean shot out his hand and pulled her back just in time. The growling had stopped, but now they heard a faint whoosh, like wind or water.

They made their way down the stairs towards where the tunnel opened into a wide chamber. The air had a musty animal smell. Beneath that was the sharp tang of something rancid. When they reached the bottom of the stairs, the growl started again, louder this time. Ahne shielded the lantern and they were plunged into darkness.

Agnes strained to hear the whispering sound but all was silent, except for the occasional drip of water somewhere in the distance and Dean's heavy breathing. She nudged her brother in the side. "Stop breathing like that. Whoever's out there is going to hear you coming from a mile away."

"That's not me," Dean whispered back.

Agnes felt Peat grab her arm and lean so close that she could feel the tips of his hair tickle her cheek. "Agnes," he whispered in her ear. "Don't move."

She looked over his shoulder. A dozen orange eyes floated in the darkness, staring at them.

“Don’t panic,” Peat whispered. He cupped his palm around her cheek so he could feel her nodding in the darkness.

Ahne moved the lantern, bathing the chamber in light. The glowing orange eyes squinted and retreated further into the shadow of the far wall. Agnes saw that they didn’t belong to narth after all, but a squirming pile of black puppies peering out at them from behind the bars of an enclosure built into the overhanging rock.

They crossed the chamber until they were standing in front of the cage. Ahne raised the lantern and the puppies yelped softly as if the light burned them. They were tiny by fidelas standards—barely bigger than a full grown cat—and their fur was black and slick as a seal’s. They looked so small and helpless, even with the evil glowing eyes, that Agnes reached a hand through the bar without thinking.

Peat jerked her back just as a whirling mass of slobber and gnashing teeth launched itself at the bars. The puppies’ mother snarled, standing over her babies protectively as the children backed away from the cage. Agnes saw that the rotting smell was coming from a piece of raw red meat, still dripping blood, in one corner of the cage. The puppies pulled at it with small pointed teeth. She felt nauseous. Cabil’s black dogs were terrifying, but they also seemed intelligent. It must be terrible to be shut up in a place like that.

“They look so evil,” Dean said softly.

“Cabil made them this way,” Agnes said. “It’s not their fault.”

Beside the cage was a door. Peat pushed against it lightly and it swung open. He propped a large stone against it, just in case it locked behind them.

They filed into a roughly carved open room lined with row after row of cages. Hundreds of orange eyes glared at the intruders. Any normal creature would be barking or growling, but these just stared silently, their eyes brimming with hatred. The fidelas were all different ages and sizes—some barely older than the whining pups outside and some full grown, the size of a small bear. Those ones had their own cages and paced back and forth like captive animals in a zoo. They all had the same glistening black fur that made them look like living shadows.

The rest of the room's contents were no less terrifying. Four silver chains with spiked leather collars at the end were attached to a metal post in the middle of the dirt floor. Stuffed burlap sacks sewn in the rough shape of a person, complete with painted-on faces, were piled haphazardly in one corner. Some of them were covered in dried brown stains and had holes where the white stuffing came out in puffs. Nearby, a tall bucket full of dark liquid gave off a metallic smell. Ahne leant forward to get a better look. "Blood," she said.

"What is this place?" asked Agnes in horror.

"This must be where Cabil trains them," said Dean.

The painted faces of the burlap scarecrows seemed to leer at Agnes with sinister expressions.

"How can they *all* be black?" Peat asked, looking at the row of cages.

“He be breeding them this way for years,” said Ahne. “A pup with any other color or an ounce of kindness in its heart, well, he probably feeds them to the north or drowns them.”

Agnes shivered. “Let’s get out of here,” she begged.

As they retreated, followed by the unnerving orange stares, Agnes heard a weak plaintive whine. She couldn’t tell where it was coming from. Peat bent down to move the rock, but Agnes stopped him. “Wait.” She slipped back into the kennel.

“Agnes?” Peat whispered. “What are you doing?”

There it was again. The whine sounded like a child crying. It seemed to be coming from the pile of trash in the far corner. Agnes crept over and began rifling through the strips of torn burlap and frayed rope. She tipped over a metal bucket with a hole in the bottom that made a loud clang as it rolled across the floor.

“Agnes!” Peat whispered urgently from the doorway. “We have to go. Come on.”

“Sorry,” she called over her shoulder. “Just one more second.”

She stopped. On the ground, where the bucket had been, was a fideles puppy so purely white it glowed like a snowball. Agnes ran her fingers through its soft fur. The puppy trembled and groped along the floor with its tiny paws. It couldn’t be more than a few days old: its eyes weren’t even open. It had clearly been left there to die. Agnes bit her lip. She couldn’t just leave it there. She scooped it up and returned to the others, who were waiting impatiently.

“What be you doing in there?” asked Ahne suspiciously. When she saw what Agnes held in her hand her eyes opened wide. “No,” she said flatly, shaking her head.

“No, no, no.”

Agnes bristled. “Why not?”

“Have you seen where it comes from? It’s a killer like all the rest.”

“It’s a puppy,” Agnes snapped back. “Look at it. It’s hardly dangerous. Besides, they left it there like a piece of trash.”

Peat ran his finger over the puppy’s soft white belly. Its ribs, fragile as toothpicks, slowly expanded and contracted.

“Peat,” Agnes said, “Please.”

Peat smiled at her. “It’s a rescue mission, right?”

Agnes tucked the puppy into the inside pocket of her shirt where she could feel its warm body nuzzling into her belly.

“Fine. Just don’t let it slow us down. We have to keep moving,” said Ahne.

“That whispering sound we heard earlier,” Dean said. “It must have come from somewhere.”

“You’re right,” Peat replied. “There must be another door nearby.” He took the lantern from Ahne and began to walk along the wall, looking for some kind of opening.

Finally, in the far corner they found a curved staircase built straight into the rock. It wound steeply down around a central column, so that even with the lantern raised high they couldn’t see more than a few steps ahead. The last person in line was left stumbling in the dark.

They followed the staircase down until Agnes felt sure they were miles beneath the surface of the earth. The whispering they had heard earlier grew louder.

“It sounds like water,” said Peat.

Ahne nodded. “An underground river runs through these mountains.”

“It must be nearby if we can hear it through the rock.”

Finally, the staircase ended in a narrow hallway. Lanterns hanging from the wall every few feet cast flickering orange shadows against the dark stone, but the light didn’t offer much guidance. The passage stretched out, identical and featureless in both directions. “Which way?” Peat asked.

Ahne shrugged. “No one has ever come this far. At least no one who returned to tell of it.”

“Well, that’s a comforting thought,” said Dean.

Agnes looked in both directions. To the left, the floor sloped down and the rock was bare except for the lanterns. The walls seemed to grow rougher and narrower as the tunnel continued, as if it was only half finished. To the right, the tunnel continued for a few feet and then carved sharply to the right. It seemed to be slightly brighter that direction, as if there was a source of light just around the corner. “Let’s go that way,” she said, pointing towards the light. “I think there’s something there.”

They tiptoed along the corridor with Peat in the lead. He paused where the tunnel turned and peered around the corner. “You’re right,” he whispered. “There’s a door a little ways down. I think there’s someone inside.”

They stopped to listen. Agnes realized he was right: she could hear the faintest murmuring of voices.

“Agnes and I will go see who it is,” Peat said. “You stay here.”

Ahne grabbed his sleeve and hissed, “Why should we stay behind? My family be here too, you know.”

“If it’s some kind of trap, there’s no point in all of us getting caught in it,” Peat replied.

Ahne thought about this and nodded. She pressed herself flat against the wall, as if trying to disappear into the rock. “Good luck.”

“Be careful,” Dean whispered. Peat handed him the lantern and turned to Agnes. “Ready?” he asked.

They tiptoed down the hallway. When they reached the open door, they looked through. Inside was a short staircase. At the bottom, a steady white glow reflected off the walls. Peat squeezed her hand. They crept silently down the stairs. Agnes’s heart thumped wildly. She was terrified at what they would find at the bottom, but when they peered around the corner, there didn’t seem to be any sign of people and the voices had stopped.

They stepped into an open cavern that seemed to be some kind of workshop. The white glow came from an open furnace built into the far wall where a massive pile of coals pulsed with a steady glow, like a heartbeat. Even from across the room it gave off a terrific, almost unbearable heat. Above the furnace an opening had been bored straight up into the rock. It gave off the mechanical whoosh of a giant fan. In

front of the furnace, a worktable was scattered with a few thick sheets of metal and a pile of charred tools.

“Maybe there’s a set of keys in here?” Peat whispered.

They began sifting through the scraps covering the worktable. Agnes moved a set of metal pincers and a pair of thick leather gloves. Underneath lay a small circle of metal with tiny holes punched in it. Agnes grabbed Peat’s arm.

“It’s the key,” she said, feeling a mixture of excitement and fear. “Cabil must be trying to make another one to replace the one that we broke—well, that I broke.”

“That must be what he’s mining in these mountains,” Peat said, “the special type of metal he needs.”

Before Agnes could reply, a loud howl echoed from the walls. Agnes grabbed Peat’s hand and pulled him out of sight below the table. She knocked against a bucket full of murky water and had to steady it before it tipped over.

“What was that? A dog?” Peat whispered.

Agnes’s voice caught in her throat. “It sounded human.”

They peered cautiously over the edge of the table and saw a wooden door beneath the stairs. They could see movement through the gaps between the planks. “That must be where the voices were coming from,” Peat said. “Come on.”

They crept closer and peered through the cracks. Two figures stood inside a square room. A lantern rested on a wooden table, alternately lighting their faces and casting them into deep shadow. Even in the dim light, Agnes recognized Cabil. He was dressed in a loose fitting black shirt and pants tucked into rubber boots. The

flickering light made the scar on his face look pink and shiny—like a snake slithering across his face.

“It’s almost time for me to collect my prize,” Cabil said. His eyes glowed black with pleasure.

The other figure was the man with stringy blond hair they’d seen outside in the courtyard. Up close, his skin had the yellowish tint of curdled milk and his lips were so pale they were nearly grey. Agnes wondered when he had last seen the light of day.

“And what if the girl be *not* what you hope her to be?” he asked.

Agnes frowned. Who were they talking about? Cabil was supposed to be looking for Peat.

Cabil spoke softly with a voice full of menace. “Bernard, I suggest you stick to hammering metal like a good blacksmith and leave this particular subject to me.”

The man’s face went even paler. He nodded his head so violently that Agnes thought he might give himself whiplash.

“But first, it’s time to take care of some housekeeping and test my theory,” Cabil said lightly turning his attention to the far corner where a figure with matted hair and filthy clothes crouched against the wall. “Luckily,” he continued, “I know someone who can help us on both accounts.”

The person on the floor whimpered and looked up. Agnes gasped just as Peat inhaled sharply. The woman’s face was smeared with dirt and her purple sweater was torn, but it was, without a question, Violet.

“Well, Violet, my dear,” said Cabil. “What are we going to do with you?”

“I—I can help you,” Violet said miserably. “I can tell you where Peat is, I can help you find him.”

“Tut-tut-tut,” said Cabil, stepping closer. “Just yesterday you were telling me how it was your sworn duty to protect him. You know how I hate a flip-flopper. Make up your mind. Protector or betrayer?”

“Yes—I—just, please don’t hurt me,” Violet whined. She buried her head in her arms.

Agnes felt Peat’s body stiffen where she gripped his shoulder.

Cabil crouched down so his face was only inches from Violet’s. “Besides,” he whispered, “I already know where your nephew is. Down in the village with my good friend the Mayor. Conveniently waiting for me. So, you see, there’s nothing you can give me that I don’t already have.” He straightened and turned back to Bernard. “Well, Mr. Claque, I must be going. I’ll leave it to you to show our visitor the door.”

Bernard Claque nodded and pushed two greasy locks of hair behind his ears. “Uh—which door exactly do you mean, sir?”

Cabil put a finger to his lips and turned to the far wall. Three curving lines had been chalked on the grey stone. Chalk drawings of doorways. Cabil pointed to the one in the middle. “That should do the trick.”

Violet’s eyes went huge and round. She crawled forward and wrapped her hands around Cabil’s leg. “That one—it—it goes home? Right?”

Cabil smiled and laid his hand on her head. “You have been useful in your way, Violet. You will get all that you deserve.” He pushed her away gently before brushing off the smears she had left on his pants with her dirty hands.

Cabil reached into his pocket and pulled out a square metal box. He began to wind a small key protruding from the side. A moment later, the room was filled with the tinkling of music.

“Oh no,” Peat moaned softly. “He’s done it. He made a new key.”

“Maybe it won’t work,” Agnes said, hopeful.

The tinny music drifted into her ears. It was like the old music box but with an extra twang, as if slightly out of tune. Somehow, she heard it with her ears and in the center of her head at the same time. And once it was in her head it started to change. She could hear the melody with a new force and clarity. It seemed to stretch and shine with its own light, so bright she could see the separate elements that wove together: the strings that were frayed and the gaps where it was imperfect. It was so beautiful that it made her gasp.

Peat shot her a worried look. “What is it? Are you okay?”

Agnes nodded. She didn’t trust herself to put it into words. The song only lasted a few seconds and then the air was full of an expectant silence.

Cabil stepped forward and paused in front of the chalk outline on the right. The rock there began to pulse softly, as if breathing. The, the ground shuddered. The doorway appeared in the rock with a terrible cracking, like bones breaking.

Agnes craned her neck to see what was on the other side: row after row of trees, their white trunks glowing softly in the moonlight.

“The orchard,” Agnes whispered. “That must be how he meets the Mayor.”

Cabil stepped through the doorway. A moment later, it closed with a snapping noise, and the wall was rock once more.

Bernard grabbed Violet's arm and hauled her up. He stood in front of the chalked middle door, nervously shifting his weight and licking his lips.

"Home—home—home," Violet muttered under her breath as if it was a spell to save her from whatever came next.

Bernard fumbled in his pocket for another metal box. This one was round, the metal rough and hammered. He wound the key with a meaty finger.

The music that emerged was low and throbbing, dark and terrible. Agnes felt it squeeze her insides. Bile rose in her throat. She had to force herself to keep her eyes open. She didn't want to see. There was going to be something horrible on the other side—a den full of narth or some other bloodthirsty creature. But, as the stone split with a jagged, roaring tear, what it revealed was even more terrible than Agnes had expected. Behind it was nothing but an endless, living blackness.

Before Agnes or Dean could react, Bernard had laid his hand on Violet's back and shoved her unceremoniously through the doorway, its edges glowing like deep red sparks. As Violet stumbled through, she let out a small squeak. At first, nothing happened, then liquid black tendrils wrapped around her neck, passing up her nose and through her mouth as she tried to scream.

Violet didn't exactly disappear; it was more like a dissolving. Her body went pale and then translucent. And then she was gone.

"No!" Peat shouted. He shouldered open the wooden the door and ran into the room.

"Who in the blaze be you?" asked Bernard, turning to stare at the two intruders.

Behind him, the doorway snapped shut with a flash of red light. Peat shoved past Bernard and began running his hands frantically over the rough stone.

For a moment, Bernard just stared at him with a shocked expression. Then he laid an enormous hand on Peat's shoulder and pulled him away. Peat shook it off and whirled, his face red with fury. "Open it!"

Bernard shook his head. "It be no good, boy. She be gone. Not that this be any of your business," he finished with a frown.

Peat banged on the rock wall with his fists, then turned, his shoulders sagging. His face was covered in white streaks where tears had cut through the dirt. His expression looked so sad and defeated, it made Agnes want to cry too. But she couldn't. She had to get them out of there.

Bernard ran his fingers through his greasy yellow hair and looked back and forth between Peat and Agnes in distress. "How did you get out?"

Agnes's brain whirled, confused. What was he talking about?

"Not that it matters," said Bernard. "Because you be going right back in the cell before the Cabil gets back."

The prison, Agnes realized. He thought they had escaped from the prison.

Bernard pulled a large ring of keys from his pocket and grabbed Agnes and Dean roughly by the shoulders, pushing them into the workshop. "Be it the blasted door? I told Cabil that the alloy be not ready yet," he grumbled.

Agnes stopped and tried to pull away. "We didn't escape, we're from the village," she said quickly. "Our parents are in prison here. We wanted to see them. But we'll just leave." Her heart beat violently. The puppy tucked in her shirt stirred.

Bernard looked at them with narrowed eyes. "You do not *talk* like you be from the village."

Agnes opened her mouth to speak, but couldn't think of an excuse that even Bernard would be dumb enough to believe. She met Peat's eyes and he mouthed a single word: *Run*.

Agnes shoved Bernard away with all her strength. It should have been like trying to shove a boulder, but the keeper of the keys had not been expecting any kind of resistance and was caught off balance. Peat twisted out of his grip and ran towards the furnace. Agnes felt the collar of her shirt tear away. Bernard looked stupidly down at the useless piece of cloth in his hand, as if he didn't understand where the girl attached to it had gone.

Agnes and Peat faced Bernard across the worktable. He might be much bigger and much stronger than they were, but he was slow on his feet. He couldn't catch them as long as they kept the table between them. There was only one problem: he was between them and door.

"Come on," he said impatiently. "I will catch you eventually."

He feinted clumsily to the right. Peat and Agnes slid around the table. Agnes felt the enormous heat of the furnace at her back and was afraid that any second her hair would catch on fire. As she shifted, her foot hit the metal bucket with a clank. An idea sprang into her head. "Distract him," she whispered.

Peat threw himself to one side like was making a break for the stairs. As Bernard's eyes followed Peat, Agnes lifted the heavy bucket above her head and emptied its contents onto the blistering furnace.

As the water hit the coals, there was a sizzle so loud it sounded like the roar of an enormous animal. Billowing clouds of steam radiated from the embers, and soon the room was cloaked in an impenetrable white fog.

Agnes heard shuffling footsteps, then a sharp cry followed by a crack and the thud of something very heavy hitting the ground. Someone grabbed her arm. She was twisting to get free when Peat's face emerged from the cloud of steam. "Come on!" He pulled her towards the door.

The steam was already dissipating and, as they sprinted up the stairs, Agnes caught a glimpse of Bernard lying unconscious on the ground, his protruding belly still as a mountain. When they got to the top of the stairs, Peat slammed the door shut behind them.

"When he wakes up, he's going to come after us," Agnes said.

Peat raised his arm with a metallic tinkle: he was holding Bernard's ring of keys. Agnes threw her arms around Peat's neck and, without thinking, planted a kiss on his cheek. Bright spots of color appeared on Peat's neck, rising until his entire face was lobster red, but his grin grew even wider. He locked the door to the workshop from the outside and they ran back down the hallway to find Dean and Ahne.

## Chapter 18: Jailbreak

“Dean?” Agnes called. Her voice sounded was muffled as it echoed back down the empty hallway. *Dean....Dean....Dean.....*

It was as if there were many versions of her, all calling for her brother.

“Where could they have gone?”

“They wouldn’t have just left. Do you think someone could have found them?”

Peat asked, worried.

“I hope not.” Agnes thought of Violet—her faint squeak as Bernard had pushed her through the doorway, the way she had faded into the nothingness. She tasted fear. “We have to find them, Peat. We have to find everyone, before-before—”

“I know.”

They hurried past the stairs where they had first descended into the bowels of the mountain, and into the unfinished tunnel beyond. Agnes felt the puppy roll over. She was thankful for the comforting warmth.

The walls grew rough and narrowed. Wooden supports propped up the ceiling, and the ground was covered in a layer of loose, crumbling stones. The path forked into two separate tunnels. Only one was lit with lanterns.

“Which way?” Agnes asked, though she knew Peat couldn’t possibly know the answer.

“I don’t know. Let’s follow the light.”

After a minute, they heard footsteps ahead. They both froze—unsure of whether to run away or call out. Luckily, a tentative voice whispered, “Agnes? Peat? Is that you?”

“Dean!” Agnes called in relief.

Dean emerged from the darkness. “We heard yelling back there and thought you might have been captured. We ran down here to hide. Boy, am I glad to see you.”

“We ran into some trouble,” Agnes said, “but we’re okay. Where’s Ahne?”

“She’s back here. That’s the other thing. We found them.”

“Who? Ahne’s parents?”

“Everyone. The prisoners are in a cell at the end of this tunnel, I’m sure of it. The only problem is we can’t open the door.”

Peat held up the ring, the keys jingling softly. “Maybe we can help.”

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At the end of the tunnel, Ahne stood in front of an enormous metal door, much taller and wider than the others. She glared at it, her arms crossed over her chest, as if she might be able to bore a hole with just her anger. Her frustration turned to relief when she saw who was with Dean. “Thank the gods. We thought you be lost.”

“We’re okay,” Agnes said. “Cabil doesn’t know we’re here yet, but he’s on the way to Village Grove, so it won’t be long before he figures it out. We have to move quickly.”

Peat hurried forward. “Is it true? Did you find them?”

Ahne turned back to the door. “We think they be in there.”

The door was made of dull grey metal. The surface was lumpy, like liquid that had solidified. The handle rose roughly from the surface and curved back in. It looked more like a natural growth—like the tentacle of a grey creature feeling the air—than a door handle. There was no window, no markings, and more importantly there didn't seem to be a lock.

Peat's face fell and he looked down at the ring of keys in his hand. "What now?" "What makes you think the prisoners are in there?" Agnes asked.

"We heard a noise on the other side," Ahne said, "and there be nowhere left to look."

Agnes frowned at the door. It could be prisoners on the other side, but what if it was something else? A doorway into the nothingless blackness? They had to be sure.

"How do we get it open?" Peat held up the keys. "If there's no lock, these aren't going to be any help."

Ahne grabbed the handle and pulled with all her strength. When that didn't work, she took the knife from her belt and slid it into the miniscule gap between the edge of the door and the wall. She tried to use the blade to lever the door open, but the knife cracked at the hilt. She tossed the broken handle away in disgust.

With a cry of fury, she started kicking the door and beating on it with her fists. "Anyone there?" she screamed. "Can you hear us?"

Her voice echoed through the tunnel. Agnes hoped Bernard was still unconscious and locked in the workshop. There was no answer but silence.

"There's no way in." Ahne kicked the door again, then retreated to the wall.

Dean looked the door up and down. "There must be a way in. I mean, they have to eat and someone had to put them there in the first place."

Agnes heard a faint hum. It seemed to be coming from the door itself. She took a deep breath and laid her hand flat against the metal surface. Almost immediately, her vision began to swim. She heard Peat's voice calling her, as if from very far away: "Agnes, what are you doing?" Then, Dean's voice, even smaller and farther away, replied, "Let her be."

The black spots swimming in Agnes's vision spread until she was plunged into total darkness. She floated there for a minute, wondering whose not-memory she was seeing, when a floating lantern broke the blackness. As it drew closer, Agnes saw it belonged to a woman in a mud brown dress.

"Everything be ready," the woman said as she shuffled up to the door. She seemed to be speaking to someone standing just behind Agnes.

A man in a black coat, buttoned up to the neck, stepped forward. A long scar ran across his cheek. Cabil.

The woman shivered. Agnes couldn't tell if it was from the underground cold seeping through her thin dress, or the force of Cabil's bright stare.

"Good. Bernard seems to think this particular alloy hasn't been perfected yet, but I say we give it a test run anyhow. After all, we can't accomplish anything without a bit of trial and error. Wouldn't you agree?"

The woman shrank inside her clothes.

"Now, give me your hand," said Cabil.

"Sir?"

“I know you aren’t going to make me ask you twice.”

The woman extended her hand, gritting her teeth as if she was about to pet a dog that she knew would bite. Cabil took her hand and folded the digits back until only the pointer finger was extended, like an arrow, towards the door. “Like I said before,” Cabil continued, nonchalant, “the alloy hasn’t been perfected yet, so this may sting a little.”

The woman let out a tiny whimper. He pulled her forward until her hand made contact with the metal surface. There was a moment of stillness, and then the door began to glow white. The woman screamed like she was being burned alive. Cabil’s expression remained unchanged as he drew the woman’s finger in a wide, curved C.

When he let go of her wrist, she cradled it like a baby and fell to her knees.

“Now, do you see?” Cabil asked. A note of satisfaction had crept into his voice.

“No, I do not.” The woman stopped. A keyhole had appeared just below the door handle.

“Fascinating, isn’t it?” Cabil crowed. “A very unusual metal. Native only to your land, as far as I know. It looks solid, but it’s actual a liquid so dense that it would take a thousand years for it to flow all the way to the floor.” He stepped back and looked at the door fondly. “The metal is nearly unbreakable and has a kind of sense memory. Like any beast or human, it can be trained to execute your will.”

“I—I have to do that every time I need to unlock the door? To feed the prisoners?” the woman asked weakly. She looked ten years older than she had just a few minutes ago.

“Obviously,” Cabil said. The smile disappeared.

It was as if he had actually expected her to be excited about it, Agnes thought.

“But it hurts!” the woman wailed.

“Fool. The pain is only in your mind. Look at your hand.”

The woman opened her palm. Agnes expected it to be red and blistered, but there wasn't a mark on it. The woman flexed her fingers in wonder.

“Like I said before,” Cabil said, “the alloy isn't perfect yet, but—”

He stopped speaking, then turned so he faced Agnes. Even though she knew it was only a memory, that he couldn't actually be looking at her, Agnes felt her heart jump into her mouth.

Cabil took a step forward. His eyes cut through the darkness. “Is there someone there?” he asked softly.

The voice was simultaneously in the memory and inside Agnes's head. Panic rose, choking her as Cabil took another step forward, clawing at the air an inch from her face.

*Get me out of here!* Agnes screamed inside her head.

The picture faded.

Agnes pulled her hand away from the door. She opened her eyes and saw the others staring at her.

“What is it?” asked Peat.

“The door,” Agnes said. “I think I know how to open it.”

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Agnes told them what she had seen in the not-memory, though she left out the part where Cabil had spoken to her. Even though she was sure it had actually happened, it was also impossible. She didn't know what to think.

"So we just draw a C on the door and then we can use one of these keys to unlock it?" Peat asked. He reached out to place his finger on the door, but Agnes grabbed his wrist. "There's something else. I think that it's going to hurt. A lot."

Ahne stepped forward. "Let me do it."

Peat shook his head. "I can't ask you to do that. It's my parents in there."

"Mine too. And it be my fault that your parents are here in the first place," she said firmly.

"It's not your fault," Peat said. "It's Cabil's. I'm sorry if I'm blamed you before. It wasn't right."

Ahne smiled at him, then shook her head stubbornly. "That may be, but I still *feel* responsible. Think of this as my apology."

Before any of them could stop her, Ahne placed her finger on the exact center of the door. Where her skin touched the metal, it began to glow white. She didn't make a sound, but beads of sweat popped out on her forehead and ran down her neck while she drew the wide arc. Dean managed to catch her as her legs gave way.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

Ahne stared down at her unmarked hand. "It be strange, like being burned by something without heat or cut by something without sharpness. Like being hot and cold and nothing all at once."

"That was really dumb, Ahne," Dean scolded. "You could have been hurt."

Peat pointed at the door. "Look. It worked."

While they had been bent over Ahne, the lumpy metal had shifted to reveal a keyhole just below the door handle. Agnes and Dean helped Ahne to her feet while Peat flipped through the keys until he found one that fit in the lock. He looked at it, as if he hadn't really expected it to work.

"What be you waiting for?" asked Ahne impatiently. "Turn it."

Peat looked at Agnes. "What if they aren't there? What if we've come all this way for nothing?"

Agnes grabbed his hand and squeezed. "You'll never know until you open it, Peat."

He turned the key. The bolt clicked, and the door swung open.

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Ahne was the first one through. "Hello?" she called. The only sound was the drip drop of water in the distance. She turned back to the others, despairing. "There be no one here."

Just then, a figure leapt from the shadows, shoving her to the ground. The lantern shattered, plunging them into a dark blur of thrashing limbs. When the scuffle was over, Agnes and Dean had pinned their assailant's flailing arms and legs to the ground. Ahne sat on his chest. "Someone get a light," she shouted.

At the sound of her voice, the prisoner stopped moving. His voice was tentative. "Ahne? Be that you?"

Peat burst back through the doorway with a fresh lantern. He lifted it high above his head, casting a pool of light. The boy who had attacked had close-cropped hair and wore clothes covered in holes. He lay still.

Ahne stared at him. "Galin?"

"Do you know him?" asked Dean.

"He be my brother," said Ahne, giving Galin a hug.

They helped Galin to his feet. When Ahne pulled back and looked at him more closely, her face fell. Galin's skin was covered in open sores and his wrists were so thin they looked like they might snap if she squeezed too hard.

If the prison could do this to someone who was as young and strong as Galin, thought Agnes, what would the others look like?

As if echoing her thoughts, Ahne turned to her brother. "Father?" she asked in a faltering voice. "He be—"

"Alive," said Galin firmly. "Ill, like many others, but alive." He looked past Ahne. "You be from Away?"

Peat stepped forward. "My parents have been Cabil's prisoners for the last year. Do you know them? Their names are Claire and Robert."

Galin did a double take. "You be Peat, then? They will not believe it. Come."

They propped the door open, then followed Galin deeper into the cavern. The ceiling was so low an adult would have to stoop. Water dripped from the ceiling into deep puddles. The further they walked, the stronger the stale, dank smell grew.

Agnes wondered how anyone could have survived there.

They followed Galin around a bend. A group of people huddled around a single lantern, clustered tightly to keep warm. They all looked pale and thin. Peat stepped forward, holding the lantern above his head. Twenty pairs of eyes turned to look at him. “Mom? Dad?” he called.

At the sound of his voice, two people in the center of the group stood. The woman’s cheeks were hollow, her collarbones fragile as the bones of a baby bird. Her auburn hair was threaded with shimmering grey streaks. The man had a bushy grey beard. One eye was just a mass of knotty white scar tissue.

Claire Theroux took a few halting steps toward her son. She touched his cheek, as if to make sure he was solid and not a dream. Peat fell into her arms. Robert swooped forward and wrapped his thin arms around both of them. He turned his face up to the ceiling and let out a rusty laugh.

“I don’t believe it,” he said, “How did you—where did you—?”

Peat pulled the black eye patch out of his pocket and handed it to his father. Robert rubbed the torn silk between his fingers.

Ahne and Galin hurried over to a man lying on the ground, his head propped up with a bundle of rags. His bones poked painfully from his skin, and his hair had fallen out in patches. “Father?” Ahne said. The man reached up and touched her face with the pads of his fingers.

“I thought I would never see you again,” he said. “Thanks be to the gods.”

Ahne leant forward and kissed him on the cheek.

Agnes put her arm around Dean. He turned to her and spoke with a voice full of longing. “Agnes, I want to go home.”

“We’re going to get them out of here,” Agnes said firmly. “And then we’re going to find a way home. I promise.” She felt the puppy nuzzle against her bare skin as if in agreement.

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Once the initial shock of the unexpected arrival had passed, the prisoners were eager to hear about the outside world. Each of the children related their own part of the story as quickly as they could, finishing with what Agnes and Peat had seen in the workshop. “Poor Violet,” Claire said with a sigh. “No one deserves to end that way.”

“What do you mean?” Peat asked. “What happened to her?”

Claire glanced nervously at her husband. He said, “They’ve come this far and have seen what they’ve seen. I don’t see the need to protect them from the harsher truths.”

“All right,” Claire continued. “From what we can tell, different worlds don’t always exactly overlap. Sometimes there’s a sort of buffer between. If you open a doorway in these spots, it’s incredibly dangerous, like opening a door in a cold black space full of a-a sort of living nothingness.”

Agnes frowned. “Those black puddles that we saw with Hibernia and the others, the ones from the tears, were they the same thing?”

Claire nodded. “Sometimes when tears are made, the nothingness leaks through and if you can’t repair it, well, entire worlds have been destroyed. It’s best not to even think about it.”

Murmured conversations rang out through the cavern. The prisoners were eager to hear news of their families back in the village. Ahne raised her hands for silence. “You can ask them your own selves once we get out of here.”

Some of the prisoners backed away, staring at their feet. Ahne looked confused, then angry. “Cowards,” she hissed.

“What’s going on?” Dean asked. “What’s wrong?”

“They want to stay here.”

“It has nothing to do with wanting,” said a deep voice. A man with a scraggly brown beard and long hair stepped forward. His clothes were at least four sizes too large—as if he had once had a large belly, but now was nothing more than loose skin and baggy clothes. “My wife be the jail keeper. She cooks our meals and does her best to keep us alive. Do you think she does it because she *wants* too?” His voice was gentle, but scolding. “Every one of us be afraid for the safety of someone we love—here or in the village. We live only to keep them safe or a goodly number of us would have drowned ourselves in one of those puddles long ago. What you have done is very brave, but do not call our kind of bravery cowardice.”

Ahne stepped forward so she and the man stood toe to toe. Even with his reduced size, the top of her head barely came above his elbow. “That may be,” she said, jabbing a finger into his chest, “but do you think you will help them now by staying here?”

“What if The Resurrection Man catches us?” a voice called out from the back of the group. “What happens then?”

“And what if he does not?” Ahne snapped. The next words she spoke softly in the silence of the cavern. “If you stay here when the key to your own freedom is in your hand, he will always win.”

A wave of whispered conversation spread through the group. People pressed themselves against the wall, shooting fearful glances at the prison door.

How long would you have to be locked in here for this to seem like a better plan than escape? Agnes wondered. She whispered in Ahne’s ear, “You’ve done everything you can, but they have to decide for themselves. We have to go.”

Ahne helped her father up and, leaning on Galin for support, he began to shuffle towards the door. Peat followed behind with his parents. Agnes and Dean were the last to cross the threshold when a voice behind them called out, “Wait!”

The jail keeper’s husband came out of the darkness. Behind him, the rest of the prisoners followed, clutching each other as if they walked on thin ice that might crack beneath their feet.

“You be right,” he said. “The time for doing nothing has passed.”

Dean rolled the stone into the hall and let the door close on the empty cell.

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The only sound as they crept down the tunnel was the shuffling of feet and an occasional ping as someone kicked a stone. They passed the fork in the path. Agnes heard the sound of rushing water from the dark path they had not taken.

They stopped at the base of the stairs, listening for any sign their jailbreak had been discovered, but heard nothing. The former prisoners filed up the stairs in a single file line. Ahne was about to follow, when Dean grabbed her arm. “Wait.”

Peat fumbled with key ring until he found the key they had used to lock the workshop. He unhooked it and handed the other keys to Ahne. "What be this?" she asked in confusion.

"We're not coming with you," Agnes said. "You have to lead them out of here."

"But what about you?"

"We need to go back to the workshop and find the music box for the third door," Agnes said. "The doorway we used to come into this world is gone, but I'm betting Cabil made a way to get back. Finding that key might be our only chance of getting home."

Ahne looked back and forth between Peat, Agnes and Dean. She opened her mouth to argue, but when she saw their determination, she only nodded. The rest of the prisoners had disappeared up the stairs. Their footfalls echoed as they walked up and up. Peat handed over the key ring.

"We don't know which key will open the door to the outside," he said, "so take them all. Just make sure you don't let the door lock behind you. If we're wrong, we don't want to get stuck in here."

Ahne smiled, tears in her eyes. "Journey safely."

Suddenly, they heard a thunderous clank. The ground shifted. Agnes was thrown against the wall as rocks tumbled down around her head.

"The cavern!" shouted Robert. "It's going to cave in!"

The next seconds were a blur of choking dust and falling rocks. When the shaking stopped and the air cleared, Agnes saw Peat slumped over, cradling his arm. Robert sprang into action, tearing off a piece of his shirt to use as a sling.

“Dean!” Agnes shouted.

“Here,” he called from behind her. He was coughing up dust, but seemed otherwise unhurt. Claire used the edge of her shirt to staunch a thin gash on Ahne’s head.

She looked at Peat. “Is it broken?”

“Just sprained, I think,” Robert said.

Peat gave his mom a weak smile. The dust settled around them like snow. Agnes flexed her arms and legs. Nothing seemed broken

“Oh no,” Ahne said in a strangled voice. She pushed Claire’s hand away and stood.

“What is it?” Agnes asked.

Ahne pointed. A massive boulder was wedged in the stairs, blocking the only way out.

## Chapter 19: The Doormaker

They pushed and pulled at the boulder, searching for anything that would give them leverage. It was no use. The rock was wedged too tightly.

“Ahne?” called Galin from the other side, his voice muffled by the enormous stone.

“We’re here,” Ahne called back. “Is everyone over there safe?”

“We be fine,” Galin called back. “The way above be open. Can you move the rock? The staircase is too narrow for us to do anything.”

Ahne’s face took on a look of grim determination. She lay down on her stomach and peered through a tiny gap in the corner of the stairs, just wide enough for her to reach through. She fished the key ring out of her pocket and thrust her arm through the hole. “Galin, can you reach my hand?”

“Got it!”

“Galin, you must take the keys and get the others out of this place.”

Silence.

Ahne bent down, peering through the gap. “Galin?”

“Ahne, I will not just leave you here. We will move the boulder, we can—”

“It will not move, Galin. We have tried.” Ahne pressed her forehead against the rock. “You have to go.”

Agnes bent down next to Ahne. “One of the doors in the workshop leads to the orchard. If we can figure out how to get it open, we can get you home that way.”

“Did you hear that, Galin? You must lead the others. I will find another way. I will probably even beat you home,” Ahne said with forced cheer.

A thin arm, coated in dust, reached through the gap. Ahne squeezed his hand.

“Journey safely,” said a chorus of voices from the other side.

When the shuffling footsteps disappeared up the stairs, they were left in silence. Ahne sniffled, and then cleared her throat. “It be worth it, even if I only got to see them for a few minutes. I know they be safe.”

“Don’t say that,” Agnes said. “We’re going to figure out a way to open a doorway and get out of here.”

She hoped.

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They crept towards the workshop, picking their way around piles of fallen rock. Some of the hanging lanterns had fallen and smashed during the earthquake; it was dark and broken glass crunched underfoot. They paused at the sharp bend in the tunnel. Robert peeked around the corner. A puzzled look crossed his face. “Are you sure this is the way? It looks like a dead end.”

“That’s impossible,” Agnes said.

She stepped around the corner and came face to face with an impenetrable wall of rock. The pile of boulders reached from floor to ceiling, even the gaps were full of dirt and tiny stones. A pebble fell the fifteen feet from the top of the pile, rolling down until it bounced off Agnes’s shoe.

“Oh no,” Peat groaned.

Just then, the ground began to shake again, slamming Peat, injured arm first, into the wall. The others dodged the loose rocks tumbling down the pile.

When the aftershock stopped, Agnes saw light shining through at the top of the pile of fallen rock. The tremor must have shaken something loose. The gap was small, but maybe big enough for her.

“Look,” she pointed. “Maybe I can squeeze through.”

“I don’t know,” Robert said.

“You won’t be able to fit,” Agnes pointed out.

“What about me?” Ahne stepped forward.

“You know this area better than the rest of us,” Agnes replied. “Someone has to stay here, just in case. Look, I’ll just see if I can find the music box and then come right back.”

Dean stepped forward. “I’m coming with you.”

“Be careful,” Peat said. He winced as Ahne tightened the sling around his neck.

Robert and Claire looked nervous, but handed over the key to the workshop. Agnes and Dean climbed, careful to test each rock before they trusted it with their full weight. When they reached the top, Agnes barely squeezed through the gap. She kicked her feet for leverage, accidentally jarring a stone, which started a miniature landslide, half filling in the hole.

Dean crouched on the other side. “I can’t fit. I’m going to clear a few of these stones.”

“There’s no time, Dean. If the ground starts shaking again, we’ll all be trapped.”

He exhaled loudly and ran his fingers through his brown hair, which had turned white from all the dust. “Okay, you go ahead, but I’ll be right behind you.”

Agnes descended. When she reached the door, she pressed her ear against the metal surface. The only sound was Dean grunting as he cleared away rubble. She unlocked the door and entered the workshop, keeping flat against the wall.

The room was empty. Bernard was gone. The door had still been locked, Agnes realized, which meant he must have escaped through one of the doorways. Maybe there was even another music box. Agnes hurried to the room beneath the stairs, holding the lantern aloft.

The three chalk outlines were still on the far wall. On the wooden table in the center of the room lay a music box—their key out of the endless, dark tunnels.

“I wondered if you might come back,” a voice spoke from the shadows.

Agnes whirled, the lantern sliding out of her hand and crashing to the floor. The light went out with a hiss.

“No matter,” Cabil said as he stepped forward. “I have another.”

He placed the lantern on the table. Grey dust lay thick on his hair and shoulders. Agnes couldn’t tear her eyes from the music box. If she could just distract him somehow, long enough to grab it and run. As if sensing her thoughts, Cabil picked up the music box.

“I’m sure this is what you came for, though I’m rather surprised, since you don’t need it.”

Agnes frowned. What did he mean?

Cabil chuckled. "Haven't you figured it out yet, Agnes? Why I've been waiting for you?"

"It's not me you want, it's Peat," Agnes stammered.

"Please," Cabil scoffed. "It was never Peat. I had no use for him beyond getting you here."

"But Peat's the one with the different colored eyes!"

"Silly girl, you are far too literal," Cabil said with a sigh. "The legend isn't talking about what things *look* like. It's talking about perception. The way you see the world is different than the rest of us. That is your gift. It's you, Agnes. You are the doormaker."

Agnes felt something in her brain grow still and quiet. Then, it was as if the pieces came together, and everything made sense. She thought of the way the not-memories had changed when she was wearing the disc. She thought of the moment Cabil had wound the music box, the way she had seen the threads that wove together to form the song, just like the threads that held together the fabric of the world.

It had all been right in front of her, but she dismissed it because she didn't feel special, just different. Tears welled in her eyes. If he was right, she'd had the ability to get them home all along and hadn't used it, had been too afraid to even try.

"I wasn't sure it was you," Cabil said, "not until I *felt* you in my mind, probing, searching for a way to open the prison door."

Agnes shrunk back. The not-memory. She'd been right. Somehow, he had seen her.

"I don't believe you," she said, but it sounded weak and unconvincing, even to her.

Cabil stretched out his arm and stared down at his fingers. "My whole life I've tried to acquire the ability I've seen in you, but it's always been just out of reach." He stepped closer. "I can't tell you how frustrating it was, knowing that I was flawed somehow, but unable to see it. And then you came along..."

He turned towards Agnes, a pleased, proud smile on his face. "My granddaughter. And I knew that I had created something perfect."

The way he looked at her—like she was some tool that he'd built, to be used however he felt like—made her skin crawl.

"You didn't make me," Agnes said. "You have nothing to do with me."

"That's where you're wrong," Cabil replied. "We are connected Agnes, by blood and by our abilities. Though, perhaps I put it badly. We will make each other. My knowledge, your gift."

He took the music box from his pocket and wound the key. The music was soft and lilting, the tune comforting. Agnes stared at the chalk outline on the left. As she watched, pliable blue threads began to separate from the grey rock wall, disentangling and unweaving themselves from the greater fabric.

The doorway opened on an empty cobblestone square. On the other side of the square stood a white stucco building, its red roof bright in the dim light. Attached to the building was a stone tower with an enormous clock in the center,

unlike anything Agnes had ever seen. It had two faces: the top was blue and orange and covered in black metal dials and golden symbols. The bottom one had no hands to tell time—just pictures that didn't make any sense: an old man holding out a branch, a farmer with a plow.

The moon appeared from behind a cloud. Agnes recognized its mountains and valleys. It was the same moon she had stared up at through her attic window all her life. The doorway led home.

Cabil reached his hand through the doorway. The elastic edges pulled away from his touch. Agnes saw the blue threads inch forward, trying to heal the break. They recoiled the nearer they came to his skin.

Cabil spoke at a leisurely pace, as if they had all the time in the world, even as the ground began to vibrate. "Come with me, Agnes. Come home and help me finish the work I started here."

Agnes tore her eyes away from the familiar moon. She thought of the gaunt, frightened faces of the prisoners, the twisted, poisoned trees of Village Grove.

"Work means building something," Agnes said. "All you've done is destroy. I know what you want—it's just control. Power."

Cabil sneered at her. "I see you're channeling my old friend, Kedokushi. Words, empty words. All I'm doing is using the knowledge *he* gave me to do something useful."

"Was it useful to hurt all those people?"

“Of course,” Cabil said. He sounded surprised and frustrated, like a schoolteacher trying to explain a simple problem to a dense student. “Do you think I enjoy hurting people, Agnes? That I’m a monster?”

Cabil rubbed his temples, leaving behind smears of dirt. When he spoke, his voice sounded different, pleading. “Agnes, sometimes we must make sacrifices on the path towards true understanding, something that the others never understood.”

“I think they understand enough,” Agnes said quietly.

“It’s maddening,” he roared. Agnes stepped back, surprised. He’d never raised his voice before.

The vibration grew stronger. A few rocks clattered to the ground. Cabil didn’t seem to notice. His voice was frantic.

“The way they collect knowledge—hoard it—scribble in their books. Watching, watching, always watching. What a waste,” he spat, “to have all that knowledge and never do anything useful with it. To have the power to shape the destiny of entire worlds and never *do* anything with it.” He took a ragged breath.

“It can be different for you and me. We have a gift—an ability to change the world. Come with me.” He held out his hand. “Choose to be useful, Agnes.”

Agnes stared through the doorway behind him. A light mist rose over the clock face, obscuring it. She imagined the smell of the fresh breeze as she choked on the stale, dusty air of the workshop. She wanted to see the moon again. She wanted to be useful, to be special, to know that she had the power to change the world for the better.

Agnes thought of Peat and his parents, Dean and Ahne, waiting, trapped in the endless tunnels of darkness just behind her. Tunnels Cabil had created. Agnes thought of what Kedokushi had said to her back in the Craglands: “We are the choices we make.”

She looked into Cabil’s bright, feverish eyes and took a step back.

“No.”

Cabil’s eyes darkened like two extinguished candles. “So be it.”

He drew back his hand. Agnes flinched, sure he was about to hit her. Instead, he grabbed the lantern and stepped through the doorway. He strolled across the square towards the clock, without looking back.

As Agnes watched in horror, the door snapped shut, leaving Agnes alone in the dark.

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Agnes spun around, reaching out for the door. A crash came from the workshop. Feet scuffled towards her over the tools and scraps of metal scattered over the workshop floor.

“Agnes?” Dean’s voice shouted. “Are you here?”

“Dean! I’m in here!”

“Hold on, I’ll find a light.”

After a few more crashes, the workshop was bathed in a yellow glow. Agnes breathed a sigh of relief. She didn’t like the idea of being trapped underground, especially not in the dark.

Dean hurried over, holding the lantern aloft. Agnes's eyes bounced frantically around the room, desperately hoping against reason that Cabil had left the key behind. But there was nothing.

She closed her eyes and tried to see what she'd seen when he wound the key—the shimmering blue threads that unwove to reveal the way home. But all she saw was cold, dark stone.

“I thought I heard voices,” Dean asked, lifting the lantern to light the corners.

“It was Cabil,” Agnes said. “But he's gone. And he took the key with him. We have to find another way out.”

She didn't say anything about the offer Cabil had made her—to go with him, leave the others behind. She felt guilty for even having listened.

“Okay,” Dean said. “We'll find another way.”

They searched the room for anything they could use, but left empty-handed. Everything Cabil had left behind was broken and useless. He'd really left them there to perish underground.

Agnes and Dean crawled back through the hole in the rubble. Robert was pacing back in forth in front of the rock pile. He let out a deep sigh when he spotted them.

“What did you find?” Ahne asked eagerly.

“Cabil's gone,” Agnes said. “He took the key with him. We can't get out that way.”

Peat groaned, gritting his teeth again the pain. His swollen fingers were beginning to turn purple. “What do we do now?”

“We have to go back,” Agnes said. The stairs weren’t an option, but she had heard running water earlier. Maybe there was another way out?

“Back? Back where?” Peat asked.

“Where the two tunnels split. It sounded like there was water at the end of the other one. If some kind of river runs through here—”

“Maybe we can follow it out,” Peat finished. His parents nodded with tired, defeated expressions, as if they had never really expected leave this place alive.

They retraced their footsteps back to the fork. The way to the prison looked inviting with its tall ceiling and glowing lanterns. The other path tilted steeply downwards, its rough walls so low that Robert and Claire had to stoop. Agnes wondered if she was leading them into even deeper trouble, but she didn’t see any other option, so she grabbed lantern off the wall and beckoned them to follow.

As they crept along, the passage began to seem more like a natural cave and less like a tunnel that someone had carved out of the mountain. The sound of the river grew so loud that they had to yell to be heard at all. The tunnel was also growing narrower. At first, Agnes felt the ceiling brush her head, but soon she had to stoop. She looked back and saw that Peat’s parents were crawling. Just when she was afraid they were going to be stuck, she saw an opening ahead. “I think we’re almost there!” she called over the roar of the water.

They squeezed through the opening and into a cave. About fifty feet away, the ground dropped into a ravine carved by the rushing river, which frothed and plunged over the rocks. After crashing over a steep drop, the water flattened out. A dirt island covered in a handful of smooth, round black stones sat in the middle of

the smooth, swift water. The river flowed around the island, and then out a tall opening in the rock on the other side.

“You be right,” Ahne said. “The river does flow out of here.”

Dean pointed down at the rough swirling water. “Yeah, but how are we going to swim in that?”

Dark purple smudges had appeared under Robert’s eyes. He spoke in a voice heavy with fatigue and uncertainty. “Maybe we can find something to make a raft.”

Claire sat on a boulder near the edge of the drop with her eyes closed, swaying slightly. Agnes was afraid she might fall in. “Peat,” Agnes whispered, “we have to get them out of here. They don’t look like they can hold on much longer.”

“Maybe there’s something back in the prison that will float?”

The puppy, which had been sleeping soundly curled against Agnes’s stomach, began to whine and scabble against her skin with its tiny claws. “Ouch!” Agnes pulled it out of her pocket. The small white body was trembling violently.

“I told you not to bring it. What be wrong with it?” Ahne asked.

Agnes frowned. “I—I don’t know. It was fine a second ago.”

Then, they heard it: Clack. Clack. Clack.

They turned just as the narth stepped from the shadows, its sharp nails clicking against the stones as it slunk towards them.

The group backed away until they reached the edge of the precipice. The water swirled and crashed below. The narth stopped in front of the entrance to the tunnel. Its tongue flicked out, as if already tasting its next meal.

“It’s blocking the only way out,” Dean said. “What now?”

“We will have to risk the water,” Ahne said.

A thunderous roar from below shook the walls of the cavern. They spun around, momentarily forgetting the giant, hungry lizard behind them. Far below, on the rocky island, another narth—twice as large as any they’d seen yet—lay curled around the smooth black stones. It glared at the intruders with its glowing eyes, and opened its mouth to let out another angry roar, revealing row after row of shining white teeth.

They weren’t stones at all, Agnes realized. “It’s a nest,” she said. “They’re trying to protect the eggs.”

Claire’s eyes rolled back into her head and she slumped, unconscious, against her husband. Robert bent double under her weight. He looked like he too might collapse any second. They heard the clack clack clack of claws over stones. The narth behind them was on the move.

Agnes felt an itching somewhere in her brain. If she could just recreate the music she had heard in the workshop, remember it perfectly, maybe she could get them out of there. It seemed like a long shot, but she had to try.

Agnes closed her eyes and tried to block out everything around her—the sight of the narth, the sound of the water, the feel of the puppy’s claws scraping against her skin, and the smell of the fear seeping out their very pores. Everything grew quiet. She was floating in a warm, white place, a blank canvas. She saw the threads of the music in front of her, woven together with the texture and color of an intricate tapestry. She saw the blue threads, and understood how to unweave and

change the pattern, so that they made a new picture. She knew how to get them home.

When Agnes opened her eyes, the others were staring at her, mouths open in shock.

“Agnes, what did you do?” Dean asked. “You were singing, but it wasn’t like singing at all it was like—”

“Look!” Ahne shouted.

A great whirlpool had formed in the middle of the crashing rapids far below them. Its surface shimmered blue, silver and then black, like a hologram.

“It’s a doorway,” said Peat, staring at Agnes in wonder. “You opened a doorway. It’s you—you’re the true key, not me at all. Agnes, *you* are the doormaker.”

“Come on,” Robert called to them. “We have to jump!”

He gathered Claire’s body tightly to his chest and took a running leap off the edge of the cliff. They watched him fall until he plunged into the exact center of the whirlpool. Dean grabbed Ahne’s hand and pulled her over the edge of the cliff. Peat and Agnes jumped right after. The last thing Agnes heard before the water closed over her head was the lizard’s angry roar.

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“Agnes! Open your eyes! Come on! Breathe!”

Agnes thought Peat sounded angry. She opened her mouth to tell him she was fine, but instead of words, a great gush of water came out. She rolled onto her side, coughing and spitting out water until she could take a full breath.

“Are you okay?” Peat asked. “You’ve been out cold for ten minutes. You scared us.”

Agnes sat up. Robert and Claire were kneeling by her side. Their clothes were dripping wet.

“Where’s Dean?” She asked.

Peat bit his lip, and then stepped aside. Dean stood with his back to them on a small patch of green moss at the edge of a large round pool. The water was still, but as Agnes watched it began to revolve slowly, like water draining from a bath. Something about it tugged at her memory. She looked up at Peat. “The whirlpool,” she said, “are we...”

Peat nodded. “We’re home.”

“Not all of us,” Dean said.

When Dean turned, Agnes saw that his eyes were red. She felt a sinking sensation in her stomach. “Where’s Ahne?” she whispered.

Dean shook his head. Fresh tears leaked from the corners of his eyes and ran down his face. “I thought if I could just hold onto her hand, but the current was so strong. She got pulled away, and then she was just—just gone.” His knees buckled and he collapsed onto the moss, sobbing.

Agnes didn’t trust her jelly legs to support her, so she crawled over to her brother. He cried into her shoulder. “Ahne’s a fighter. If she’s not here, she’s probably floating down the river, halfway home by now.”

Dean smiled through his tears. “Do you really think so?”

“Yes, I do.”

If any of them could make it past a narth and swim the river to get home, it was Ahne. Dean pulled back, wiping his arm across his eyes. "Agnes, what is that?"

He pointed down at a wriggling bulge in the leg of her pants. A small pink nose appeared near her ankle, followed by the rest of the tiny white body of the fidelas.

"I don't believe it," Claire said.

Agnes picked up the puppy. It licked the base of her thumb with a soft, pink tongue. Peat scratched it delicately behind the ears.

Just then, the puppy opened its eyes for the first time. They were a bright, milky blue. Agnes frowned. "Is it—is she—?"

"Blind," Robert said. "Yes, I believe so."

Agnes felt angry. Why did everything have to be so hard? It was like every time they won, even a little a bit, they lost even more.

Dean scratched the puppy's belly. "She'll be okay," he whispered to Agnes. "She's come this far, so she must be fighter too."

Agnes smiled gratefully and tucked the puppy back in her shirt.

They climbed to their feet and stood at the edge of the pool. Agnes sent out a silent message to Ahne full of hope that she'd made it home safely, that they'd see her again someday. Just then, Agnes felt ancient, like she had seen too much of life in her twelve and a half years on the earth. The others also said their silent goodbyes. Then, they traipsed through the woods towards Hibernia's house.

When Agnes caught sight of the mismatched turrets over the trees, tears sprang to her eyes. Suddenly, she missed her parents. She missed her family's boring

house and their boring days by the town pool. She even missed their dumb cat. She wanted to go home.

A cluster of people stood outside the blue kitchen door. Spade was easy to recognize: he stood a foot taller than anyone else. And there was Hibernia, her white hair catching the sunlight like a beacon. But the other two? Agnes squinted in the bright light. One of the figures turned. The familiar profile made her heart leap.

“Mom!” Dean called out. “Dad!”

Then he was sprinting across the grass with Agnes at his heels.

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Everyone was talking at once, except for Spade, who wept into his sleeve, muttering something about allergies. Hibernia’s eyes had gone wide when she saw the children, and even wider when she spotted Claire and Robert Theroux.

Maggie and Peter Atwater looked cheerfully around the circle. They clearly had no idea what had been going on in their absence. Peter pushed his glasses up his nose. “Well, what have you been up to this summer?”

Everyone stopped talking.

“Oh, I imagine there’s so much to tell that no one knows where to start,” Hibernia said.

“Well,” Maggie said, “You’ll have to tell us all about it over breakfast.” She led the way through the barn door into the kitchen.

“Maybe not all of it,” Hibernia whispered under her breath as she followed.

Soon, only Agnes, Peat and Dean were left outside. Yellow sunshine danced over the waves on the bay like they were capped with fire.

“What will happen now?” Peat asked. “How much will you tell them?”

Agnes sighed. “I don’t know. Maybe we can just go inside and have breakfast? I think I want life to feel normal again—even if it’s only for a little while.”

They crossed the lawn and headed for the kitchen. Agnes paused in the doorway, and turned back. A light breeze rustled the treetops. She thought of how many things were possible—things she couldn’t begin to imagine. Then, she turned and looked at her family gathered around the table, laughing and telling stories. There will be time enough later, Agnes thought, and stepped through the doorway to join them.

**THE END**