

Max and the Gatekeeper

Book II

The Hourglass of
Souls

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1

Surprise Visitors

Thirteen-year-old Max Rigdon sat in class staring out the window, his green eyes fixed on the stranger in the alley on the far side of the playground. The man made Max anxious. He wore black clothing and his face was hidden deep inside a large hood. Since spending last summer with his grandpa, the sight of dark-clad people worried Max, especially after so many had tried to kill him.

By outward appearances, Max seemed the same as everyone else in his class. He was thin and a little above average height. His wavy, light brown hair and tanned complexion made some of the girls in his class say he was cute. What separated Max from the other boys and girls his age was something much deeper; something to do with his heritage. A secret no one at school knew about. Max was involved in a battle that had been raging for centuries. Last summer, Max was unwittingly caught up in a magical

war between good and evil when he discovered his grandfather possessed a powerful gateway. This gateway opened paths to other dimensional worlds with a host of other peoples and creatures, many bent on controlling life everywhere.

The mysterious man leaned against the building which gave Max a creepy impression the stranger was staring at him. *He almost looks like a Night Shade.* Max shivered as he remembered the pitch-black skin and hissing voices of the evil creatures. On several occasions last summer, Night Shades had attempted to destroy him, his grandfather and his best friend Cindy as they ventured into other worlds.

Max glanced around the classroom. His teacher sat at her desk grading papers, while the other students busily worked on their assignment. *Only three days of school left and she still gives us stuff to do.* He went back to watching the dark figure outside, remembering the evil powers this figure possibly possessed.

I wonder. Max had an idea. He fished around in his pocket for the small crystal his grandfather had given him last summer. Marko, a man Max had believed to be his friend but who later betrayed him, had shown him how the crystal would give off a flash of light on anyone who didn't belong to the dimension he was in. Max peered around the classroom again to make sure everyone was concentrating on the homework and not him. Satisfied no one would notice, he waved the crystal in front of the stranger across the street. The result was quick and terrifying. The crystal gave off a small twinkle of light confirming Max's fear. The man across the street didn't belong here in this world.

Max's heart started racing and his palms grew sweaty. *A Night Shade! What's he doing here? Is he waiting for me?* Max glanced at his watch noticing the bell was about to ring. *What should I do?* He peered out the

window again to see someone approaching the stranger in the alley. It looked like a drunk or a homeless person seeking a hand out. The stranger's quick movements were like those of a striking snake. A crooked knife blade glinted in the sun as he held it high over the beggars head.

As he swung the knife down, Max screamed and stumbled as he tried to get out of his seat. He knocked over several desks, sending papers in all directions. The entire class watched as a hysterical Max landed on his back between two rows of desks. "He killed him! He killed him!"

"What? Who killed who?" Max's teacher rushed to help him into a sitting position.

"Outside!" Max struggled to breathe. "A man, a man in the alley just got stabbed!"

Everyone's attention went from Max to the alley, as the students scrambled to the windows.

"Where? I don't see anything but a man standing against a building," one student commented.

"He's right. There's only one guy," added another.

"No one's been stabbed," several added with a hint of annoyance.

Max climbed to his feet and pushed his way to the window. The stranger stood against the building as if he had never moved. There was nothing out of the ordinary. There was no sign of the beggar. "That can't be."

"Are you sure you didn't doze off?" His teacher looked mildly concerned.

The ringing bell filled the air and the disappointed students gathered up their things and filed out of the classroom.

"I swear. I saw a man get stabbed," Max emphasized to the teacher, who gave him a disapproving look.

She shook her head, looking more exasperated than concerned now. “I think you fell asleep and had a dream.”

As the teacher went back to her desk and the students emptied out of the classroom, Max waved the crystal in front of the stranger. Again the crystal responded with a soft, white light confirming what he had seen earlier. *He killed someone and somehow he got rid of the body.*

Max ducked to the side of the window as the stranger stepped out of the alley. Once again, the stranger appeared to be looking right at him.

“Are you all right, Max?” the teacher asked, looking up from her papers.

“Uh, yes,” Max added as he moved back to his desk and began packing up his things.

How could they have found me? Max wondered. It had been almost nine months since he had spent the summer at his grandfather’s house. From that time he hadn’t seen anyone from his grandfather’s town, let alone another world. Max had minimal contact with his grandfather during the school year. His grandfather felt it would help hide Max and his mother from the enemy.

Max walked through the main hallway towards the front doors of the school as students jostled in all directions, excited for the end of the school day. As he approached the glassed-in foyer of the school, Max could see through the sea of students another stranger standing across the street. This figure appeared to be intently watching the school. He wore a deep hood, which cast a shadow over his face, just like the man outside Max’s classroom. Max flattened himself against the wall of the corridor to let other students go by. The stranger’s head swiveled back and forth, clearly searching for someone among the groups of students scattering into the surrounding streets. *Do they know what I look like?*

“Hey, Max,” Max’s friend Brian yelled as he wandered up the hall towards him.

“Are you walking home?” Max asked.

“Yeah, you want to go together?”

“Sure,” Max said feeling a little better at the thought of having company. He took his baseball cap out of his backpack and pulled it low over his eyes to hide his face.

Max and his friend proceeded out the front doors and strolled towards the main sidewalk. Max kept his friend engaged in idle conversation while keeping an eye on the strange man as they exited the school grounds. The stranger casually fell in line several yards behind them as they turned left down the street.

“What’s with the hat?” Brian jovially asked with a slightly puzzled expression. “You on the run from the police or something?”

“I have a headache and the sun’s hurting my eyes,” Max lied.

“Do you have to go to your grandfather’s for the summer again?”

“Yep!” Max said with a smile.

“You sound excited,” his friend added. “You won’t be playing baseball again. Last year you were totally bummed about going there.”

“I,” Max started and jerked to a halt when he spotted another unusual man waiting at the end of the block. He didn’t know what to do.

“What’s the…” his friend began, and then he too noticed the strangers. “Who are they?”

“You need to get out of here,” Max stammered as he looked for a place to run. “There, between those houses. Go!”

“Uh, Max, I think you’re over-reacting.” Brian looked at him as if he was crazy.

Several strange, unrecognizable words littered the air. Max's friend immediately stiffened and fell to the ground unconscious.

"Maxsssssss," the figures hissed in unison.

"Who? Who's Max?" Max attempted to act as if he didn't know what they were talking about.

"We knows who yous are. You cants fools usss," the approaching Night Shade hissed.

"I don't know any Max," Max continued, taking a small step back to keep the Night Shades at a safe distance. "My name is Marko." Max flinched as the traitor's name rolled off his tongue.

"Holds outs your handsss, and proves usss wrongs, Maxssssss," the second one hissed.

"Yessss," murmured the first. "Shows usss your handsss."

"*Premakni!*" Max shouted and thrust one hand out towards one Night Shade and the other towards the second. The spell caught the Night Shades and threw them several yards backwards. Max bolted down the alley between the houses, deciding the Night Shades wanted him, not his friend. As he looked back to see the Night Shades racing after him, Max banged his knee on some garbage cans and stumbled.

Max picked up a trashcan and threw it towards the Night Shades as he clambered to his feet. Turning and fleeing down the alley, a high-pitched screech echoed off the walls and almost froze his entire body. A black-winged creature flew across the sky following him from above. It was one of the gargoyle-like beasts he had encountered last summer. *What are they doing here, where everyone can see them!*

Down the street screams rang out followed by shouts of fear and confusion from people passing by.

"What is it?" a voice called, followed by a child's scream.

“Some kind of devil with wings!” cried another.

I'll never lose them if I stay in the open. Max emerged from the alley onto another street. People screamed and pointed at the winged beast descending from the sky.

A third Night Shade came from Max's left, which caused Max to run to the right. The two trailing Night Shades closed in fast. *How can they be here? This can't be good if they are willing to let everyone see them.*

Sharp pain exploded in Max's shoulders as the flying creature's talons punctured his flesh and the weight of the winged horror drove him to the ground, asphalt scraping the skin painfully from his hands and knees. Screeching tires and crunching metal filled the street as several cars collided with each other at the sight of the strange winged creature.

The car wrecks and the frightened spectators gave Max all the distraction he needed. The commotion startled the creature enough for Max to break free. Ignoring the searing pain in his shoulders, Max rolled onto his back and thrust his hands forward. “*Prizgaj,*” he called and a fireball engulfed the winged nightmare.

The beast roared in pain, silencing the spectators.

Max jumped to his feet and raced through the traffic jam of smashed cars. He made his way down the street and into an apartment building. Max knew what he needed to do as soon as he passed through the front doors. He headed for the stairs. Suddenly, breaking glass and flying debris thundered through the building. A violent force threw Max down the stairwell as the glass doors to the apartment building burst inward behind him. Shards of glass, metal, brick and dust filled the air.

The Night Shades stormed into the building. The cloud of debris helped Max avoid detection as he rolled around a corner and down another flight of stairs.

“Maxssss,” the leading Night Shade hissed. “We wills findsss youss.”

The landlord rushed out of his apartment to see what was causing the disturbance. A spell from the Night Shades thrust him back into his place of residence.

“Searchsss everywherssss,” one Night Shade ordered.

Max reached the lower level of the building and entered the parking garage. Running in a crouched position, he hurried along a line of cars. He tried to steady his heavy breathing and pounding heart. He could feel blood running down his back where his flying attacker had pierced him with its claws.

Loud footsteps rushing through the garage caused Max to duck down between two cars. He dropped to his stomach, crawled under a parked car, while watching a frightened couple get into their car and speed away. *I need to get out of here! I have to get home and call Grandpa.* He waited in silence for several minutes before deciding to move.

He slid out from under the car noticing that he ached all over. After pausing to make sure the parking garage was empty, he climbed to his feet and hustled to the exit. Max could still hear the sounds of fear and hysteria outside as he hesitated before daring to sprint blindly into the street.

Max peered around the edge of the wall, his eyes darting up and down the street. He couldn't see any Night Shades or winged creatures. After several moments of gathering his courage, Max decided remaining motionless was worse than moving and ventured out into the open. *It's now or never.* He hugged the wall of the building before dashing across the street.

A loud shriek penetrated the already chaotic noises from the street. Max knew the enemy had spotted him. People fled in all directions at the site of the terrifying creature diving into the crowd. Max sprinted into the middle

of a bunch of people, feeling guilty about endangering others, but needing to confuse his pursuer.

The gargoye-like monster hovered over Max and a group of hysterical people. A gunshot echoed off the buildings followed by another high-pitched scream. The wounded beast fell to earth and smashed into several parked cars. A police officer had shot the attacking nightmare out of the air. Before the cop could fire his gun a second time there was a bright flash of light and the winged monster disappeared.

Max didn't hang around with the astonished crowd. The Night Shades were still somewhere behind him and he had to get out of sight. He weaved in and out of people and cars until he reached the end of the street.

Max thought he was never going to reach the safety of the apartment where he and his mother lived. He took alternate routes and doubled back to make sure no one was following him. Down back alleys and through empty lots, always looking over his shoulder for pursuing Night Shades.

When he finally reached his own neighborhood, he stopped behind a parked car across the street from his apartment building. Sweat streamed down Max's forehead as he gulped down several deep breaths to regain his strength. He scanned the surrounding area for anything out of the ordinary. He even searched the sky and the tops of the buildings. *I definitely don't want them to know where I live. What if they already know?* The thought sent a shiver up his spine.

They know what city I live in. "I need to call Grandpa, right now," he murmured as he determined whether the coast was clear. He rounded the fender of the car while still glancing in all directions for any hint of the enemy.

He was halfway across the street when a woman's scream caused all the fine hairs on his body to stand on end. "Mom!" he shouted in a panic and sprinted towards his apartment.

As he entered the building, he bounded up the first flight of stairs. More screams mingled with furniture smashing filled the hallway along with a strange sulfurous smell. "Mom!" Max yelled as he grabbed the doorknob only to find the door locked.

"Mom, Mom," he cried as he fumbled in his pocket to find his key and unlock the door.

"Max!" his mother screamed from inside the apartment. "Max! Help me!"

Max finally got the door open when a spell propelled him backwards across the hall where he thudded into a neighbor's door. His mother struggled against the two Night Shades who were binding her arms and legs. A third Night Shade stood in front of her with its arms extended. A strange, thin light hovered above the kitchen floor behind his mother and the Night Shades. It stretched from just above the ground to the ceiling and was only an inch wide. Every few seconds the light would pulsate in different areas along its vertical axis.

"*Premakni*," Max called with extended hands. The spell caught the Night Shade standing in front of his mother and slammed him into a bookshelf.

The small crack of light grew more intense and changed into a man-like shape. When the light shrank back to its original size another Night Shade appeared before it. A moment later a fifth Night Shade emerged from the light.

"*Pridi*," Max called. The spell yanked his mother from her captors' hands towards the open doorway. As Max's spell propelled her through the

air, her head collided with the doorframe knocking her unconscious. Max raced to her side but before he reached her another spell sent him back across the hall. The tremendous collision with the wall stole the air from Max's lungs.

Max struggled to breathe as he tried to cast another spell. Before he could speak another word, the Night Shades lifted his mother off the floor and carried her towards the strange light.

"Pridi," Max gasped. This time the Night Shades held tight to their prisoner, but the whole group of them slid several inches backwards. Their wicked laughter filled the apartment as the light grew and shrank swallowing the Night Shades and Max's mother.

Max dashed towards the kitchen desperately hoping to follow his mother. Just as he reached the light, it disappeared in a shower of sparks.



2

To Uncle's House

“She...she’s gone! They took her!” Max stammered into the phone as he tried to catch his breath. His hands shook uncontrollably, making it hard to hold onto the phone.

“What? Who’s gone? Who took who?” Grandpa tried to sound calm.

“Mom!” Max gasped for air looking around the apartment for answers. “Night Shades came and took Mom!”

“What? When? How?”

“Just now! Th-they came through a t-type of gateway and took...” Max couldn’t finish the sentence, fighting back the tears he could feel building up inside.

“Relax, slow down,” Grandpa said. “Take a deep breath.”

Max inhaled and exhaled several times. His hands and knees continued to tremble. “Some N-night Shades entered our world through some kind

of gateway and took m-mom,” his voice cracked.

“Gateway? What are you talking about?” Grandpa sounded nervous. “I need you to tell me everything. Don’t leave out a thing.”

Max drew air into his lungs, and tried to picture the events leading up to that point. He relayed everything that had happened from the moment he saw the stranger outside school. “What should I do?” Max felt the helplessness of his situation.

“You need to call the police, if some neighbors haven’t already.”

“What? Call the police. And what do I tell them?”

“Tell them that some men broke into your apartment and kidnapped your mother,” Grandpa explained. “You need to dial 911 immediately.”

“What about me? What should I do? Where do I go?”

“Go with the police after they arrive. You should be safe with them. I’m on my way. I’ll be there in about an hour.”

“How?”

“Don’t worry about that. I’ll be there. See you shortly. And Max, try not to worry, we’ll get your mother back.”

Max felt as if he was falling. With every inch he dropped it seemed to take him farther from his mother. He hung up the phone and before he could pick it up again to call the police, it rang.

“Hello, Max,” an oddly familiar voice came from the receiver.

“Grandpa? Who is this?” Max asked.

“I like to think of myself as an old friend,” the voice continued.

“Alan,” Max hissed through clenched teeth. His hands tightened around the receiver as his blood began to boil.

Alan, one of the enemy, had the nerve to call. Alan had been among the people involved in the plot that tried to destroy Max and his friends last

summer. Max hadn't missed him or his bully of a son, Larry, one bit since leaving Grandpa's house at the end of last summer.

"What do you want?" Max demanded, his blood pressure rising. Somehow he knew Alan was involved in the abduction of his mother. Why else would he call? Alan had killed his father and now he had taken his mother away.

"To send my condolences on your mother Rachel's disappearance," Alan said in a cool, aloof manner. "I do hope nothing terrible happens to her."

Max had no trouble imagining Alan's sinister grin, certain to be present, which enraged him even more.

"I also called to tell you something very important, and if you want to ever see your mother again you'll do exactly as you're told and nothing else."

Max suddenly had a flashback to last summer when Hudich's followers had kidnapped his best friend Cindy. They used this situation to help bring Hudich, the most evil creature alive, out of his prison, a world called Pikel. Grandpa Joe had thwarted Hudich's followers from complete success by placing a collar around Hudich's neck that prevented him from performing magic. The device also allowed Grandpa to track Hudich at all times. "You want the key," Max spat.

"Yes, but not in the way you expect."

"What do you mean?" His whole body shook with anger.

"For now, you need to do as you're told. We don't have much time. The police are already on their way. I want you to tell the police whatever story you and that fool you call a grandfather decided on. Then you will ask them to take you to your Uncle Frank's house. You will stay there until I contact you again."

"What about Grandpa?"

“You will not contact him until I say so,” Alan paused. “That includes your communicator that allows you to send messages from different worlds. You won’t like the consequences if these directions are not followed completely. If you choose to ignore these instructions, your mother will be the one who suffers for any disobedience on your part.”

Max’s heart sank into his stomach, he felt nauseous at the thought of Alan mistreating his mother in anyway. It was hard enough when they took Cindy captive, but it was unbearable for them to have his mother.

“Max,” Alan brought him out of his thoughts. “If you don’t do as you’re told your mother’s body will be found somewhere in the city. Just go to your Uncle Frank’s and wait for more instructions.”

It was as if Alan had punched him in the gut. His mouth was dry and he couldn’t believe what was happening. He wanted his mother back and would do anything to make it happen. The joy he received from wrecking the enemy’s plans last summer disappeared. He hated Alan and vowed to ruin whatever scheme they had developed and get his mother back safely.

“Tell me you understand,” Alan ordered.

“I understand,” Max replied, his voice low.

“Max.”

“Yes?”

Knock. Knock.

Max started at the sudden thumps on the door. “Hello? Alan?” he said into the receiver, but there was only silence. “Who is it?” Max hollered as he hung up the phone.

“This is the police,” a gruff voice answered from the other side of door.

###

Grandpa Joe arrived at the police station early in the evening to retrieve Max. He approached the front desk where a heavyset, balding officer was answering a ringing phone. Joe waited for the officer to finish his call. Max's grandfather was an elderly man with a thin build. His thick wavy-white hair and mustache caused people to think he resembled Mark Twain.

"May I help you?" The officer put down the phone and looked up.

"I'm here to pick up my grandson, Max Rigdon," Joe replied.

The officer moved to the computer on his desk and tapped in the name.

"Max Rigdon," he paused, reading the screen. "He's no longer here. He's been released."

"What? Where did he go?" Grandpa ruffled his mustache.

"You say you're related?" the officer asked.

"Yes! I am his grandfather. I told him I'd be here to pick him up in an hour." Joe felt uneasy and small beads of sweat began to form along his brow.

"I'm sorry, sir, but he isn't here anymore."

"Can you tell me where he is?"

"I am sorry, sir, I can't release that information."

"But I'm his grandfather!" A sense of dread poured over him like cold water. "I told him I was coming."

"I will need some proof of your relationship before I can give out any information. You must understand we need to protect him."

Another officer, apparently concerned with the ruckus approached the desk, peering at Joe with a questioning eye.

"May I help you, sir?"

"I'm just trying to find my grandson." Joe sighed in frustration. "He was supposed to be here, waiting for me."

"What's his name?"

“Max Rigdon, but apparently he’s already been released and I just want to know to whom.”

The new officer stared at the computer screen and then exchanged a look with the first officer. “Do you have any proof that you’re Max’s grandfather?”

“Ummm, no,” Grandpa stated, taken aback.

“We’re going to need to see some identification,” the first officer said.

Grandpa extracted an old ID card from his wallet and handed it to the officer. He had an uneasy feeling Max was in trouble and that he was about to have some difficulties of his own. Max should have been waiting for him and since he wasn’t here, it meant something had gone very wrong. He put his fingers to his temple and tried to rub away the beginnings of a headache.

“Sir, this driver’s license is over twenty years old! We can’t accept this as a valid ID.” The second officer edged around the desk to stand next to Joe. “Do you have another form of identification?” he asked as a third officer moved in behind Joe.

“No! I haven’t driven a car for years, so I’ve never bothered to renew my license.”

“Well, we need some *current* form of ID. We’ve had a very unusual day with strange sightings and such. A lot of people are very frightened. This could somehow be connected with your,” the officer made quote signs with his hands, “grandson’s” mother’s disappearance. Reports from people in the apartment building reported seeing some very odd things.”

“Do I look like some sort of pitch-black life form that hisses when I speak?” Joe said his palms starting to sweat.

“How do you know what they look like? And sound like?” asked the officer behind the desk.

“Just a guess,” Joe swallowed. A sharp pain exploded in his chest as the officer behind him forced him into the desk. The other one seized him by the arm and yanked it up behind his back in a painful position.

“We also had a report of a white-haired man matching your description, fleeing the Rigdon’s apartment complex.” the officer behind breathed in his ear.

“Arggg,” The officer’s blow pushed the air from Joe’s lungs.

“Don’t fight it old man,” the officer behind the desk said as he reached forward and grabbed the back of Joe’s neck to help hold him in place.

“*Zaspite!*” Joe called out before the officers could put handcuffs around his wrists. The room went silent. The officers and the people in the lobby went limp. Those standing fell to the ground while others slumped over in their seats, everyone was asleep.

Joe glanced around to make sure the spell had worked on everyone but his gaze brought him right into the security camera. His heart almost stopped. He needed to hurry out of the city. Worse than the prospect of fleeing, he didn’t know where Max was or what was happening to him. He snatched up his ID and put it in his pocket.

“*Unichi,*” he called pointing his fingers at the camera. Sparks and pieces of broken camera flew everywhere before crashing to the ground. Joe exited the police station as fast as his old legs would carry him.

“I’m in real trouble.” He rushed down the steps shielding his face with his hand as he passed a couple of cops entering the station.

###

An officer dropped Max off at his Uncle Frank’s house. His Aunt Donna and cousin Martin waited for him on the sidewalk in front of their

house. It was a modern, rambler-style home in a small suburb a short distance outside the city. As the police left, Max's Aunt trembled as she embraced him. She was a short, plump woman with curly brown hair.

"Oh Max, we've been so worried!" Aunt Donna hugged him close. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," he snapped. Max ordinarily liked his relatives, their house being the place where he and his mother spent most of their holidays. Today, though, seemed different. He couldn't hide his suspicions about his aunt, uncle and cousin. Alan sent him here for a reason. Max wondered if one or all of them worked for the enemy.

"Hey, Max," Martin attempted to reach out to his cousin but Max shot him a keep-your-distance glare. Martin was two years younger than Max, a quiet boy with brown hair and a friendly face. Max always thought his shyness was a result of his height, which was small for his age. Now, Max considered that Martin had been playing him all along.

A pungent, rotting odor stung Max's nose, tainting the air he breathed. He could actually taste the bitter aroma on his tongue. "What's that smell?" he asked covering his nose and mouth with his hand.

"I wish I knew," his aunt added, eyes watering. She waved a hand in front of her nose and pulled a face. "I've been wondering if the city opened a dump nearby. The smell has been getting worse for over a month now. Let's go inside and get you settled. It usually doesn't stink as bad inside the house.

Max followed them up the sidewalk, his senses working overtime. Something was going on at this house and he wanted to know what. His aunt and cousin acted the same as they always had, but today Max didn't trust them.

Once inside, Max's misgivings grew even stronger. His aunt's personality changed suddenly and a harsh presence seemed to squeeze all

happiness from the place. Martin's behavior remained mostly the same, though he now looked fearful of something.

"Do you want anything to eat?" Aunt Donna vented angrily.

"I-I'm not hungry," Max stammered, shocked by his aunt's tone of voice. He had sensed the change in her attitude immediately upon entering the house, but he was confused. Max had never before heard her use such a sharp tone.

"Well, then you can spend the rest of the evening in your room," she snarled, her round face twisting with lines of anger.

Max sat on the bed in the guestroom with the lights out. He wondered where his mother was and if she was all right. He decided she must be safe because Alan wanted something, but that didn't make him feel any better. Hospitality and comfort for hostages weren't high on the enemy's list of priorities. "Grandpa, what are we going to do?" he whispered to the room with a sad sigh. Just then, a car drove up, followed by the opening and closing of the front door, announcing his uncle's arrival.

Max crept over to the bedroom door so he could hear.

"Where is the little brat?" The muffled sound of his uncle's voice reached him.

"In the guestroom," his aunt fired back.

Max listened for several more minutes but he didn't hear anything that hinted at what was happening with his mother. He was convinced his relatives weren't willfully working with the enemy but rather under some sort of spell. His aunt seemed genuinely concerned out in the yard. After they entered the house, she had turned into another person.

###

It was past midnight and Max hadn't managed to fall asleep. Shortly after lying down on the bed, he thought he heard a scream outside, followed by some strange growling noises. Something just felt wrong in this house and he knew he wasn't safe. He lay in the dark trying to figure out how to help his mother when someone or something moved outside his bedroom door.

Max's heart jumped into his throat, but he tried to calm his breathing so he could listen. He pulled the covers tight around his shoulders feeling somewhat safer than he would out in the open. The doorknob twisted and the fear of what may come next turned Max's blood cold. *This is it*, he thought as the door creaked opened. Max brought his hands forward to cast a spell when Martin appeared in the doorway.

"Max," Martin whispered.

"What do you want, Martin?" Max asked with annoyance tinged with fear as he sat up in his bed.

Martin entered the room closing the door as quietly as he could behind him and then moved to the edge of the bed. He eyed the door nervously as if expecting someone else to come in and catch him there.

"What do you want?" Max asked again.

"Max, we're in danger," Martin said still keeping watch on the door.

"Danger!" Max exclaimed with too much volume for Martin's comfort. Martin put a finger to his lips to quiet him.

"Yes," Martin emphasized his eyes stuck on the door. "Didn't you notice the way my mom changed when we came in the house?"

Max nodded. He couldn't deny the difference. It reminded him of the transformation Larry and his father went through after Yelka had put a counter spell on Cindy's house last summer. Max believed he couldn't trust anyone in this house, but here was Martin acting like something was terrifying him.

“It started a couple of months ago,” Martin paused as a noise from outside caught his attention. Seemingly satisfied that no one had heard, he continued. “My mom is different when she’s in the house. Her temper and moods are completely the opposite from the way she used to be... the way she is when she’s outside.”

“I noticed that too,” Max said flatly not wanting to let his cousin know what he was thinking or feeling.

“That’s not all,” Martin said. “My mother is herself when we’re not in this house, but my father isn’t my father.”

“You mean he’s acting different too?”

“No, I mean he isn’t my dad. He looks like him, but that man isn’t my father. I don’t even think he’s human.”

“What? What do you mean? How do you...?”

“I think he is some kind of alien or creature. Every night, he leaves when it gets dark. I don’t know where he goes but when he returns, he always goes into the shed out back.”

“You *have* seen him!”

“Yes and no. Because it’s dark I can’t say for sure, but he doesn’t look like my dad. And he sometimes brings things back to the shed with him. I’ve seen him carrying or dragging what look like bodies.” Martin swallowed, his eyes darting back and forth from the door to Max.

“What?”

“That stinky smell is coming from our shed. When he was gone I tried to open it but I couldn’t get in. We need to get help.”

Max softened a little towards his younger cousin. “Go back to bed, Martin. I’ll think of something.”

After Martin left, Max remained wide-awake. Martin’s words kept repeating over and over in his mind, “*that man isn’t my father.*”

Who or what could he be? Max had no doubt he had only scratched the surface of strange and frightening creatures with his gateway adventures last summer.

###

The next day, due to his lack of sleep, Max awoke late. He really wanted to stay in his room and sleep longer but hunger forced him out. The house was empty, so he fixed himself something to eat. He was happy to be alone, even though he felt there was something wrong in the house.

After breakfast, he went outside where he found his aunt and cousin working in the front yard. The change in his aunt's indoor personality to outdoor personality was like night and day. Out in the yard she was kind and genuinely concerned about him and his mother, but inside she was hateful and downright mean.

"How are you feeling this morning?" She asked with a sad smile.

"A little tired."

"Well, I'm sure the police will come up with some leads soon," she added. "You will be back with your mother in no time."

Martin gave him an "I-told-you-so" look as he continued plucking weeds from a small flowerbed.

"Do you need some help?" Max offered.

"No, you just take it easy." Aunt Donna smiled at him. "We've got it covered."

Max sat on the porch steps and watched his aunt and cousin plant some ground cover. He wondered what Grandpa was doing. *He must be worried sick about Mom and me.*

Martin stopped working and stared up the street. He had a look of fear on his face and the color disappeared from his cheeks. Max followed his line of sight to an approaching car and recognized it as his uncle's.

"Dad's coming," Martin said in a shaky voice. "He has that weird man with him."

"Shh," Aunt Donna warned. "That's not nice."

Max watched as the car drew near. It pulled up to the curb and his uncle got out of the car followed by his passenger. Max's heart sank as he recognized the second man.

"Hello Max," Alan said with a wicked smile.

3

Not One Hair

Max glared at Alan as he sat across the kitchen table from him. He seethed and wished with the heat of his stare he could melt the horrible man. The constant pacing from his uncle, or rather the impostor who had replaced his uncle, only added to the already unbearable tension.

Alan was a tall, strong man and except for the gray mixed in with the brown hair, he would look younger than his years. He wore a business suit, which Max assumed he wore to portray himself as having an important status.

Max knew he would see Alan at some point this summer when he went to visit his grandfather, but he had hoped it would be under different circumstances. Sitting across the table with the man who had tried to kill him and his friends last summer was not what Max expected. Not only had Alan tried to murder him, but he is the main suspect in his father's death.

“What have you done with my mother?” Max spoke through gritted teeth, his hands balled into fists, nails digging into his palms, under the table.

“She’s safe for now,” Alan responded pleasantly. He had an air of complete control and Max could tell he was enjoying the situation. “But, that could change at any moment. You see, your mother is in a prison, in a very dangerous world and I don’t know how long I can protect her.”

“Well, then just bring her back here!” Max’s blood pounded in his temples.

“Oh, she will never be returning home,” Alan cackled. “I could, however; be persuaded to move her to a more pleasant situation.”

“I don’t know what all you want,” Max said, “but I won’t do it just so my mother can be moved to another prison. I will only do it if you release her. Here, in our world!” Max rose out of his chair and was almost yelling.

“Max, Max,” Alan sighed and shook his head. He uttered some garbled word and the spell drove Max back down through the chair, smashing it to pieces.

Max convulsed on the floor as excruciating pain erupted in every nerve of his body. He clenched his teeth, holding back the cry that wanted to escape his lips. When the pain finally subsided, Max couldn’t see. A loud ringing in his ears blocked out all other sounds. The darkness before his eyes gradually faded and he saw Alan and his uncle standing over him. Fear and the lingering results of the spell left him shaking.

“The time for games is finished,” Alan spat, towering over him as he lay gasping on the floor. “We are at war, Max Rigdon! A war in which people will die. Our victory will place Hudich in control of countless worlds. So, Max, you are going to do as I say or your mother will be a casualty of war instead of a prisoner of war. Do you understand me?”

Max debated his response a moment too long so Alan hit him with the spell again. This time, Max screamed as he thrashed about the floor as if he

had been set on fire. He closed his eyes to hold back the tears and it seemed as if Alan wasn't ever going to release him.

"Do you understand me?" Alan repeated.

Max could barely hear him over the sharp stabbing sensation in his ears. "Yes," Max gasped as he struggled for air, "yes."

"Good, I want to make sure everything is perfectly clear. I'm in control and you will do as you're told," Alan smiled. "Now, are you ready to listen to what you must do in order to keep your mother alive?"

Max nodded hazily as he tried to get control of his limbs. There was a deep, throbbing ache in every part of him and the incessant ringing in his ears made him dizzy.

"Grd, give Max another chair," Alan said to Max's uncle, who yanked Max up off the kitchen floor and slammed him into another chair.

"First and probably the most important thing is that you will tell no one about our little conversation. Second, you will give me your communicator."

"My communicator?" Max stammered, it felt like all the blood drained out of his body. This was the one item he possessed that gave him any comfort. It was his only link to his grandfather.

"You didn't think we forgot about that, do you? After all, it is how you managed to escape the world of the Zeenosees. I do not trust you with it. Hand it over." Alan held out his hand.

Max took the communicator out of his pocket and stared at it.

"Now! It will be returned when we're done with you." Alan grinned.

Max's hand shook as he extended it across the table.

Alan grabbed the device and placed it in his pocket. "The third thing you will do is steal the key to the collar your grandfather placed around Hudich's neck. We'll remove the collar from Hudich, you will place it on

your grandfather's neck, and then you will give me the key. You will do these things, or your mother will die."

"How do you expect me to accomplish all that?" Max glared at Alan. He gently rubbed his arms and legs to help relieve the pins and needles from his limbs.

"Grd, give Max some water," Alan ordered.

"Grd?" Max raised his eyebrows as his uncle filled a glass with water and placed it on the table. Max's eyes about popped out of his head as his uncle flashed a wicked smile and his flesh melted away to reveal a reptilian looking monster. He had smooth, silver scales almost like mercury, yellow eyes with black slits for pupils and sharp hooked teeth. A forked tongue flicked out of his mouth, flipping slimy, florescent-green saliva everywhere. A putrid, decaying smell wafted across the kitchen, causing Max to gag. A second later, the human-like form of his uncle reappeared.

"Where's m-my uncle?" Max asked with horror as his cousin's suspicion was confirmed.

"He's with your mother," Alan said. "Not only do you have your mother to worry about, you also have your uncle and his family as well. Grd," Alan motioned to his uncle, "has a hunger for human flesh that's not easily satisfied. You wouldn't want anything to happen to your aunt or cousin, would you? We are in complete control. You can't do anything without us knowing about it. If you displease us in any way, your mother and your uncle's discomfort will be increased, to put it mildly."

"I will need to go to my grandfather's to get the key," Max said. "How am I going to explain why I was here?"

"Oh, we will keep you here for a few more days," Alan stated. "Then, we will let you use your communicator to call your grandfather. You'll tell him you've been kept a prisoner. That we took your communicator but you

managed to get it back to contact him. He and his friends can perform some kind of rescue. However, let me burn into your little brain that they are never to know about any of this.”

“How will you know what I tell them?” Max’s mind raced with the consequences of doing what they wanted and also with the horrors of not doing as they demanded.

“We have ways of knowing,” Alan smirked. “Disobedience will not go unpunished. Now, in a few days I will give your communicator back so you can make your call. Grd will set it up. Tell your grandfather that your aunt, uncle and cousin now serve Hudich and held you prisoner. I will make contact with you from time to time to check on your progress. Tell me you understand,” Alan commanded.

“I understand,” Max spat.

“I don’t think you really do.” Alan sneered. “Believe me, before we are through you will. Grd, punish Max for breaking your chair.”

Grd’s approach was so quick and silent, Max had no time to react. Sharp pain burst inside Max’s head as Grd backhanded him across the face, knocking him out of his chair. Then, every inch of his body burned as if molten metal scoured his skin. He wanted to scream as he had never screamed before.

###

Max lay completely drained and dispirited on his bed not wanting to move. Any little twitch caused him pain. His muscles and joints were hot and swollen; he felt like someone had thrown him into a pit of hungry rats. He listened to the eerie silence of his relatives’ house as if death waited in the shadows. Nothing moved and only the occasional creak of the old rambler

broke the stillness. Max's lip quivered so he bit down on it and took a deep breath. He hadn't cried in three years and he wasn't about to start now.

A twinkling of light outside his bedroom window caught his attention. He slipped out of bed onto the hardwood floor and crept to the window. He paused as a floorboard groaned in protest under his body weight. In the back yard a small shadow approached the house. The way it jetted in and out of the limited light and used objects to shield it from view suggested it wanted to avoid detection. It hesitated several times and ran in a hunched position. The cautious figure hustled from one place of hiding to another. Max's heart rate increased as his senses went into high gear, magnifying the footfalls of the approaching shadow.

It can't be one of the enemy? If it were, they would come through the front door as a welcomed guest.

Suddenly, the small figure turned and sprinted right towards Max's bedroom window. The corner streetlamp cast a light onto the figure, showing Max that it was Yelka. For the first time since the Night Shades had kidnapped Max's mother, a smile crossed his face. He quietly slid the bedroom window open, his eyes shifting from the door to Yelka.

Yelka, Max's magic instructor and friend from the world of Svet, was a short elfin woman. She had long, blond hair, which she always kept braided. Tonight instead of her usual work dress, she wore a black velvet cape pulled tight about her shoulders. The hood to her cloak hid her soft pixie face with her tan skin, pointed ears and blue eyes.

Her head swiveled back and forth as she delicately picked her way across the neatly trimmed lawn toward Max. "Hello Max," she whispered as she stopped below his window, craning her neck to look up at him.

"Yelka, I'm so glad to see you," Max said in a hushed voice. "How did you get here?"

“Through the gateway, of course,” she responded. “You didn’t think it only opened doorways into other worlds, did you?”

“Actually, yes!”

“Never mind that. Are you all right?”

“Yes, but they have my mother,” Max said. The emotions he fought so hard to restrain pushed their way to the surface and a tear rolled down his cheek as he choked down the lump in his throat.

“We know,” breathed Yelka, a look of sympathy and worry crossed her brow and briefly darkened her features. “And we’re doing everything we can to help her. We have been trying to reach you on your communicator. We must get you out of here. Take out the screen and come with me. The gateway is just a little ways away.”

“They have my communicator and I can’t leave, at least not yet.” Max’s mind raced. He wanted to tell her everything but didn’t know where to start and also didn’t know if he should. Trusting Alan was something Max would never do, but he was also terrified of doing anything that might jeopardize his mother’s life.

“I have to stay—for awhile,” Max said in a hushed voice.

“What? Why?”

“If I stay, I may be able to find out more about my mother and where they’re keeping her. I’m sure I can get more information, if I stay a little longer,” Max offered. It was a partial lie but it did have some truth to it. He did want to learn more about where his mother was being held captive, but he knew Alan well enough to know that he couldn’t simply leave with Yelka without putting his mother’s life in grave danger. “I’m going to stay—a few more days. I think I can get a message to you if I’m in trouble. I just need more time.”

Yelka stood below his window staring up at him. Max could tell she was thinking about what he had said. “Are you sure...?”

“Please, Yelka! Tell Grandpa I’m alright,” he pleaded.

“Max, there is an evil curse on this house and something dreadfully horrible has been going on in that shed. I don’t think you should stay here very long. It’s not safe. After prolonged exposure the curse will start to affect you,” Yelka warned. “Without your communicator, how will you reach us if you’re in trouble?”

Max looked at the shed with a shudder and remembered his cousin’s tale. “I’m pretty sure I could get to a phone to call Grandpa if I need to,” he said, his eyes still on the shed. “Can you use a counter curse on this house like you did last summer at Cindy’s? It is affecting my aunt and cousin.” A creak in a distant part of the house caused Max to glance at the door.

“Remember, I gave Cindy that charm before the enemy had cast their spell. It may already be too late for your aunt and cousin. The spell on this house has been working unhindered for who knows how long and the damage may be irreversible. As for the shed, it is filled with darkness and stinks of death. I fear an extremely evil creature is near. It is probably guarding this house.”

“I don’t believe it’s too late. My cousin knows something is happening to his mother and father but it hasn’t seemed to affect him as much. And, and when my aunt is outside, she’s her old self again. We must do something.”

A light clicked on in the hallway and filtered under the bedroom door.

“Yelka, you have to go!” Max urged.

Yelka hesitated a moment. “Very well. I will have something figured out when you call. I do not believe Joseph will be happy about you staying, but if it will help your mother, I understand. However, I’m only giving you a

couple of days and then I'll be back to fetch you," Yelka cautioned before she turned and hurried off into the darkness, glancing in every direction.

Max jumped into bed and endured several anxious moments as the sound of footsteps reverberated in the hall. Whomever it was, passed his door a couple of times before the light in the hall finally clicked off again.

I have to tell Grandpa. He felt desperate. Giving into Alan's demands was out of the question. *But I can't sacrifice my mother or relatives.* The weight of the situation made his head throb more than the wounds left by Grd's beating and Alan's spells.

The night seemed to press in on Max as if the darkness could penetrate his mind. Even his dreams were gloomy, full of dreary places and horrible monsters. Death surrounded him with its eerie claws and Max tried to run. His heart raced and he struggled to breathe. As his doom appeared sealed and he wanted to give up, a light appeared. Out of the light a familiar voice called. "Don't give up. Fight! Fight them at every turn."

"DAD!" Max called as he sat up in bed.

It was late morning and the light of the sun filled the entire room with a warm hazy glow.

"Dad," Max sighed, the pain of his two missing parents strangled his heart. He lay back down in the bed as the words his father spoke spread through his mind like the wind whistling through the tall grasses of an open field. "FIGHT!" It gave him new life as it spilled out of his thoughts and through his body, reviving him.

He climbed out of bed to find the house empty once again. He stepped out the back door where, to his surprise, he found his aunt and cousin playing catch. Not only was his cousin small for his age but he was uncoordinated. Max's aunt gave Martin encouraging words despite his fumbling of the ball.

Seeing this made Max yearn again for his own parents, and for the simple time of summer's past when baseball had been his only concern.

"Good morning, Max," Aunt Donna paused as she noticed Max on the porch.

"Morning, Max," Martin added with a smile, waving his glove in the air. "One day I'm going to be as good a pitcher as you are."

Max couldn't stop the smile from crossing his face. "Not throwing like that you won't," he said as he went down the steps towards Martin. "You're not using your legs. All your power comes from your legs."

After a little coaching, Martin could throw the ball with more accuracy and power. Max was so focused on Martin that, for a short time, he forgot his own problems.

"Good job," Max said.

"Nice throw," added Donna and shot Max a wink.

Martin beamed with pride.

Max's bliss lasted until the paperboy rode by and threw the daily newspaper at his feet. The headlines jumped out at him, as Max picked up the paper. "Woman Abducted after Strange Sightings."

Donna hurried to Max and read over his shoulder. "Who's hungry?" Aunt Donna gave Max a sympathetic look. "What do you say I fix a nice big lunch? Martin, why don't you give me a hand?" she said and they hurried into the house.

Max couldn't take his eyes off the paper as he staggered over to the porch. He sat on the steps feeling momentarily lost and wondering what to do. Once again, he battled with his emotions like a swimmer against the riptides. Tears stung his eyes and he wanted to just scream as loud as he could; scream out the pain, terror and helplessness. *I must do something, but what can I do?* He flipped blindly through the paper, not really reading, but vaguely looking

for anything to take his mind off his mother. As he turned a page another headline caught his attention, "Citizens Fight Back with Anonymous Tips." Max scanned through the article describing how everyday people had helped solve crimes by giving information to the police.

Max used the back of his hand to wipe the tears from his eyes as a mischievous smile spread across his face. *I can't help Mom at the moment, but I can help Martin and Aunt Donna.*

"I've been slaving away fixing your lunch, so get your lazy hide in here and eat it you little brat. If you don't come now, you can go without lunch for the day," Aunt Donna screamed furiously through the screen door.

The only thing that kept Max from going to pieces was his plan to help his aunt and cousin. After lunch he went to his room, took out a piece of paper from the small desk in the corner and began to write. He jotted down an elaborate note tying his mother's and other disappearances to the shed behind his uncle's house. *Don't know what I'll do if I get caught?* Max decided the risk was worth it and folded the paper and tucked it into an envelope addressed to the information provided in the paper for giving anonymous tips. After placing the envelope in his pocket he went outside to escape the oppressive feel of doom prevailing in the house and to scout out a place where he could mail his letter.

###

Late into the night, hoping that everyone was asleep, Max slid out of bed and tiptoed to the bedroom door. After a short pause to listen, he crept to the window and popped the screen out. As quietly as possible, he climbed out the window, dropped down to the grass and went in search of the mailbox he

had spotted earlier. *Take that, losers!* Max thought with delight as he dropped the envelope in the slot.

He hurried back to his uncle's house and scrambled back through the window. He just replaced the window screen when the hall light clicked on.

Max dove under the covers to make it appear as if he had been sleeping when the door exploded into splinters. Several shadowy, twisted shapes poured into his room. Max's heart jumped into his throat as he flung back the covers. "*Premaknite.*" His spell threw two attackers into the closet. Before Max could cast another spell multiple hands seized Max's body pinning him to the bed, while several blows from all directions hammered him like a meat tenderizer.

"Let me go!" Max twisted and squirmed as they lifted him off the bed. His body screaming in pain as the attackers' continued the assault.

"Quietssss." The familiar speech of a Night Shade rang in Max's ears and the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end.

The Night Shades forced Max's hands behind his back and wound a rope tightly, painfully around his wrists. He continued to struggle as they stuffed a gag in his mouth.

"That shouldss silence the little bratss ups."

Max kicked and flopped as the attackers dragged him into the hall where a crack of bright light filled the hallway. The light stretched and grew as if it was a living, breathing entity. They forced Max towards the light as several dark, muscular arms with sharp yellow nails reached out. Max screamed into his gag as the disembodied arms grabbed him and pulled him into the light.

The light seeped in around him and he felt a sharp pain erupt at the base of his skull. Thousands of tiny white flickers popped in front of his face and then he lost consciousness.