

MAC

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Henrietta Sharp and the Magic Lunch Box

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Henrietta Sharp and the Magic Lunch Box

Summary: A chubby 12-year-old deals with mean girls at school, a brand new super power, and an intergalactic villain who wants to take over the taste buds of humanity. With her two best friends and a most unusual guide, Henrietta Sharp must overcome her self-doubt and learn to wield her power without losing her humanity

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Book design by Susan M. Bachman

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www.MarketArtsCreative.com

www.HenriettaSharp.com

This book is for

My husband Jesse

My best friend and creative partner Susan

My sister Dolly

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<http://www.BookBreakthrough.com>

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This paragraph is hard to write without gushing. Susan M. Bachman is the talented graphic designer and illustrator who made the book and its characters come alive. She is my dear friend, my colleague at Market Arts Creative, and a knitting savant. She is also the person who tells me repeatedly that pictures are more important than words. I remain silent and count my blessings that she has been making my words look good for so many years.

This one's for you, husband Jesse. Thank you for living with the book and loving its writer.

Contents

1. A Very Bad Day
2. LB
3. Back to School
4. Living Doll
5. Tongue Twister
6. Gargantua
7. The Rebellion
8. Mean Gingerbread Men
9. Lunch with the Mayor
10. Sausalito
11. The Oracle
12. The Parting
13. The Slippery Slope
14. Really in Trouble
15. The Hall of Mirrors
16. A Disturbing Turn of Events
17. The Two Travelers
18. Saved, Sort Of
19. All Things Must Change

Chapter 1

A Very Bad Day

It was a very bad day. Actually, it was the worst of all possible days. Sitting alone on the school bus, Henrietta slumped against the cool metal of the interior, staring at the cracked brown covering of the seat in a sincere attempt to become invisible.

Just like in a movie where something creepy was on the other side of a closed door Henri couldn't resist turning the knob, going to that place in her memory, hoping that things would be different. It all started in gym class.

Mrs. Silverman ended class early with a shrill blast of her shiny whistle. Her brown hair was braided and worn on top giving the illusion of height. She might have been a wrestler before becoming a teacher, at least that's what her sturdy body and thick neck caused Henri to imagine. Without the slightest sign of effort, Mrs. Silverman crashed her hands together in a thunderous clap.

"Attention everyone. I need all seventh-grade girls to line-up in front of me." Hiding at the back of the line, Henri spotted the reddish-gold curls of her best friend Taffeta.

"This can't be good," Taffy whispered.

Henri smiled faintly, noting that even in gym class Taffy's outfit was color coordinated to match her sky blue eyes.

"Girls," Mrs. Silverman continued, "There is a new school dress code for gym class." Holding up a skimpy t-shirt and extra-short shorts, Mrs. Silverman intoned with the greatest possible distaste, "Items like these are not acceptable and will no longer be tolerated. I'm pleased to announce that gym uniforms are now required."

Looking exceptionally proud, the gold fillings in Mrs. Silverman's back molars were in full view as she smiled holding up a hideous one-piece romper which caused a collective groan of dismay.

Pointing to the elastic bands at the arms and legs, Taffy whispered, "Do you think she's evil, or just doesn't get fashion?"

"Hard to say," Henri replied, just as the squinty-eyed Mrs. Silverman called, "You, Sharp, come here please."

Time slowed as her sneakers stuck and squeaked against the gym floor, reducing her motion to little baby steps. After a hundred million digital ticks that never got to tock, Henri was just a step away from Mrs. Silverman's side. At that very moment, a brilliant ray of sunshine poured in through the windows high on the gym wall. A beam of light bounced off of Mrs. Silverman's metal whistle blinding Henri with laser-like intensity.

Her body folded and fell to the floor with a funny sounding splat. No one was laughing – yet. Henri's head was screaming at her body, "Get up. Get up now!" But her bones had gone all squishy and it seemed that gravity had Henri pinned to the ground.

"Really, Sharp! Stop clowning around." Mrs. Silverman pulled Henri to her feet and shoved a clipboard into her hands saying, "We have work to do."

Mrs. Silverman barked out a series of orders. "Listen up, girls. I want you to form a single line and come to me one at a time. State your name and your size (small, medium or large) so that I can order the gym uniforms for next year. Sharp will check your name off the list and mark the box next to your size." Peering at Henri she continued, "I'd do this myself but I left my glasses at home this morning."

Henri exchanged a quick look with Taffy. *Go figure, the all-powerful Mrs. Silverman is myopic.* Henri locked down her facial muscles before even the barest hint of a smile could appear. *Even near-sighted she's still scary.*

"Sharp," Mrs. Silverman said the dreaded words. "Let's begin with you."

"Me, Mrs. Silverman? Start what with me?"

"Haven't you heard a word I've said? Start by stating your size."

"Uh," Henri replied faintly. "What if I just wrote it on the form?"

"Yes, yes," Mrs. Silverman semi-shouted. "That's precisely what I want you to do. Are you paying attention at all?"

Hunched over the clipboard, Henri's straight brown hair disguised the scarlet rise of humiliation as it traveled from her neck to noggin, rising like a thermometer in July.

"Sharp, what's taking so long?" Squinting at the clipboard, Mrs. Silverman said, "I see the problem. There's no extra-large box on the form for you to check." Mrs. Silverman lowered her voice to a whisper, which echoed off the walls to be heard by everyone. "Don't worry dear. I'll see if the uniforms come in extra-large, maybe an XXL, just to be sure."

Exhaling with the relief of someone who had just averted catastrophe, Mrs. Silverman let loose a couple of attention-getting blasts. "Let's go, people. Get yourselves in front of Sharp and state your size."

So there she stood, drowning, even though there was plenty of air to breathe. Her classmates approached one after another, an endless list of smalls and mediums, with the occasional extra-small washing over Henri in another wave of humiliation.

Bright blue sneakers came into view, causing Henri to look up from her sweaty grip on the clipboard. Smiling mischievously Taffy stated her size loud and clear, "Extra-large, please."

“Oh no dear,” Mrs. Silverman stood up from re-tying the world’s whitest shoelaces. “You couldn’t possibly be an extra-large.” Her eyes roamed over Taffy as if to discover parts previously missed, “No, you’re just not *that* large. I’ll order a medium.”

Henri started to check the M-box, when Taffy’s voice erupted like a volcano. “I don’t think so,” she said. Speaking slowly, like the ooze of red, hot lava, Taffy was now a force of nature, dangerous yet disguised.

“My mother,” Taffy said like a retail goddess, “owns the Pretty Kitty clothes boutique.” There was a shuffle and nod of affirmation from the girls in line, for all of them made the pilgrimage to Pretty Kitty with a frequency and devotion reserved for true believers in the power of fashion.

“My mother,” Taffy said, “would insist that I get an extra-large because, well, she knows a lot about clothes.” Standing extra tall, the still petite Taffy added, “Besides, I plan to grow a lot over the summer.

Mrs. Silverman had her index finger up and out, ready to dismantle Taffy’s impressive performance when the class bell rang. Shrugging her shoulders as one long conditioned to scheduled disruptions, Mrs. Silverman took the clipboard from Henri’s clenched fist and wrote XL next to Taffy’s name. With two piercing blasts of her whistle Mrs. Silverman officially ended gym class.

Beyond words and incapable of motion, Henri stood at the scene of her ordeal like a well-potted plant as her classmates migrated toward the locker room. Henri overheard alpha mean-girl Marcia Summerhill as she glided past with a supremely confident and creepy kind of grace.

“Don’t you just love Henri?” she inquired without really asking a question. “She always makes me think of Thanksgiving. It’s that perfectly round little pumpkin-head supported by her lumpy, plumpy, butter-ball body.”

Marcia’s posse flicked their eyes toward Henri snickering as they walked past, stabbing her like deftly thrown daggers.

In truth, the largest thing about Henri was her vocabulary. She was thinking about how to insult Marcia when Taffy attached herself to Henri’s side, steering her away from the Summerhill social club.

“Not a good idea,” Taffy whispered, escorting Henri in a round about way toward the locker room. “You can’t defeat a mean girl with words, no matter how many of them you know.”

Taking a deep breath, Henri forced her lips to form a halfhearted smile. “Yeah, I guess you’re right. Besides, Marcia doesn’t know that many words so she’s really hard to insult.”

Pushing open the locker room door they made their way to a remote corner in the green tiled room that smelled of sweat, soap and mildew spray. The flicker of an overhead florescent light on its last legs caused a shadowy ebb and flow across the wall.

“True,” Taffy replied. “The only way to get even with a girl like Marcia is to undermine her confidence.”

Henri forgot her locker room rule about changing clothes fast and stared at Taffy in amazement. “Just how do you go about undermining the confidence of Marcia McNasty?”

“Ooh,” Taffy said. “I like the McNasty name. And it’s kind of nice to know something you haven’t already read in a book.”

Taffy rose from the bench and rummaged through her backpack. She pulled out a barrette in hurt-your-eyes-green, caught a hunk of unruly hair and pulled it back from her face. A face, according to Henri's way of thinking, that was just right in every way, sprinkled with enough freckles for charm, but not so many as to be a nuisance.

"It's all those hours hanging out at the Pretty Kitty while my mom works," Taffy explained.

Henri pulled on her stretchy black pants and blue striped shirt while Taffy shared her retail wisdom.

"You can tell a lot about people when they shop. Marcia and her mom come in and they're so mean. They complain about everything and they make fun of the way other people look. They're even McNasty to each other."

Now dressed and bending to tie her sneakers Henri asked, "But what does that have to do with getting even with an alpha MG like Marcia?"

"I will reveal the answer at lunch. Right now we need to get going or we'll be late for social studies."

Groaning at the very thought of Mr. Farnsworth's sleep-inducing voice, Henri stuffed her gym clothes into her backpack.

"Go ahead, Taffy. I have to stop by my locker to get my social studies book so I can turn it in."

"Okay. I'm off." Taffy shrugged her backpack into place. "Don't be late. You know how Mr. Farnsworth is."

Henri nodded her head in the general direction of the door as she wrestled with the zipper on her backpack. It made a groaning, grinding, zipper-like sound as the two sides finally

joined in the middle. Just then, the intermittent florescent light gave one last flicker before going off on a permanent vacation.

Her eyes adjusted to the half-light, seeping around the corner from the fluorescent bulbs that still worked. Something wasn't right. The tile wall she had been looking at moments before was rippling like wind-blown water. She rubbed her eyes in a futile attempt to restore reality. Henri looked again. But the wall was still acting out, behaving in a way that no wall should.

Then she heard it, a voice whispering. It bounced around the room, filling the space and leaving room for nothing else.

"Henrietta Sharp," it called with diction so precise that her own name sounded utterly strange.

Henri marshaled every scrap of common sense, which in her case was considerable, and took inventory of the logical explanations for this unexpected turn of events.

"Okay, Taffy, you can come out now. I don't know how you did the waving-wall thing, but it's great. You really got me. I mean, it's incredibly freaky and I want to know how you pulled it off, but enough already."

"Henrietta Sharp." Each syllable was pulled apart and re-upholstered with extra emphasis. "It's almost time."

Yes, Henri thought. It's almost time for the poor little crazy girl who hears things to visit a certain kind of white-coated doctor. Is it possible? Did I eat my way to insanity, permanently screwing up my brain chemistry?

Henri leaned back against the beat-up gray lockers, feeling the cold metal seep into her bones as she considered the idea

“Henrietta Sharp.” Her name was spoken once again with a quiet insistence. “The need is great. You are the one, Henrietta Sharp. Prepare to travel. Hurry!”

Within a heartbeat it was gone. The wall stopped rippling like pond water and resumed its weight bearing responsibility. The locker room was silent, redefining quiet.

So Henri did what any reasonable person in unreasonable circumstances would do. She slithered down the length of the locker door like a de-boned fish and slipped into unconsciousness.

The floor was cool and hard in a reassuringly solid way. Henri’s eyes fluttered as if attempting to overcome the weight of her thick, dark lashes. The overhead light glared with unrelenting steadiness, stabbing her eyes. Pushing herself upright, Henri rubbed one cheek temporarily tattooed with the mosaic pattern of the tiled floor.

“Umph,” Henri stood on stiff legs and headed for the row of sinks with hurky-jerky movements reminiscent of a poor Frankenstein impression.

Incapable of more than grunts, Henri splashed cool water on her face, wiping vigorously at the markings on her cheek. Looking into the mirror above the basin, Henri stared at the reflection of a perfectly ordinary wall.

“Okay!” Henri said to her mirror image. “Here’s how I see it. I’m crazy, hearing things that aren’t there. Or, I’m not crazy and the wall did go all wavy while talking out loud.”

Drying her face and hands with a scratchy paper towel, Henri ended her conversation with self. “I’m not sure which is scarier. But for now, I’m going to believe that I’m not crazy. Just as soon as school is out, I’m going to investigate the whole weird wall thing.”

Henri’s brain filtered through the sentence and abruptly spit out the word that didn’t fit.

“School!”

Not sure if minutes or months had passed, Henri grabbed her backpack and threw her body out into the hallway, chubby knees knocking as she headed into who knows what.

“Sharp. So good of you to join us.” Mr. Farnsworth was being sarcastic but Henri didn’t mind. For once he wasn’t deadly dull.

She squeezed into the seat across the aisle from Taffy who raised an eyebrow. “Are you okay? Where have you been? Why are you late? Where are your books?”

Praying that Mr. Farnsworth wouldn’t call on her, Henri kept her eyes down and willed her body to be invisible. Mr. Farnsworth continued to reveal the glories of municipal government in a consistent monotone, which was oddly comforting. It was a welcome kind of normal. Lost in thought, Henri was startled by the bell signaling the end of class. Forgetting that her body was squeezed into the desk, Henri leapt to her feet and took a step or two before grasping the situation. The rush and scuffle of students flinging themselves out the door covered Henri’s mishap, except for Marcia Summerhill that is. Her glossy lips silently mouthed the word oink as she strolled past the captive Henri. Marcia’s posse followed her example and made little oinks as they walked out of the room.

Before the insult could transform itself into ill-considered action, Taffy came to Henri’s aid for the second time that day. Swinging her backpack in a wide arc as if to position it on her shoulders Taffy bumped the tail end of the McNasties, setting off a chain reaction of stumbling and tripping that cleared the room of Marcia and her mean girl wannabes. With her backpack firmly in place, a very satisfied looking Taffy turned to Henri. “C’mon. We’d better get to English class.”

They walked down the eerily deserted hall in companionable silence. The speckled linoleum floor sloped downward, connecting the original building to a new addition. The walls were painted drab beige, brightened a bit by the primary colored artwork of the first grade class. As she glanced at her surroundings, Henri was busy stuffing Marcia's latest mean attack into a dark place deep within.

They lingered next to their lockers, the kind that needed a shove or a kick to make the lock line up properly. Taffy scanned the hallway for McNasty sightings before whispering, "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." Henri formed her mouth into a reassuring, lop-sided smile. "Besides, I've got more on my mind than Marcia Summerhill."

Henri could tell that Taffy was about to ask what was on her mind but she was saved by Mrs. Marinda, the music teacher who wafted down the hall toward them. An opera singer of regional renown, Mrs. Marinda was always somewhat larger than life. She never just walked. Instead, she glided, swayed or strutted as if every floor was a stage and each gesture must carry across the void of space between performer and audience.

"Henrietta! Taffeta," Mrs. Marinda's descending inflection spanned several notes and created a faint buzzy sensation in their collective cheekbones. "I'm so glad to see you Henrietta. I was afraid I wouldn't get to say good-bye before I leave on my trip. Just imagine, girls. Three wonderful weeks of music and Italian food at the Bel Canto Academy in Rome."

With insufficient understanding of what Bel Canto actually was, Henri and Taffy nodded enthusiastically anyway, thinking that music and food sounded like a good thing no matter what.

“And when we get back from summer vacation, we’ll begin your voice lessons. Yes Henrietta? It will be so wonderful to help you find your voice.”

Henri didn’t realize that her voice was lost but finding it seemed like a good idea. Glancing at her wrist for the time, Mrs. Marinda’s face registered a catastrophic dismay more commonly seen in emergency rooms.

“Excuse me, girls. I’m late for a rehearsal. Have a wonderful summer. Arrivedela Taffeta. Arrivedela Henrietta. And remember keep on singing!”

Henri and Taffy ducked into English class just before the bell rang. It was the last day of school so Mrs. Brattleby had arranged a spelling contest just for fun. Unlike other team sports where Henri was the last to be chosen, she was sought after when it came to spelling.

After class, Henri and Taffy entered the bedlam of a minimally supervised lunchroom.

“I guess the teachers couldn’t take it any more,” Taffy said between bites of her egg salad sandwich. “Poor Mr. Farnsworth with his Hush Puppies and plaid is the only adult here.” Henri had a faraway look on her face that prompted Taffy to ask, “What ‘cha thinking about? You’re awfully quiet.”

Even though she really wanted to Henri didn’t mention the wavy wall.

Instead she brought up another troubling issue. “I was waiting for you to tell me all about mean girl management. I’d like to get all revengy but that never works out well for the person taking revenge.”

“Mean girl management *is* revenge,” Taffy said. “It’s just the kind that doesn’t get you sent to the principal’s office.” Grabbing salt and pepper packets from a near-by table, Taffy lined them up with the precision of a science project. Then, with a wave of her hand she explained, “It’s all about the pack.”

Henri leaned forward, drawn in by Taffy's conspirator-plotting-no-good voice. "Mean girls always have a pack," she said. "You know, a posse like the McNasties. Alpha MGs need followers to build themselves up. All you have to do is disturb the balance in the pack and they do the rest."

Henri looked at Taffy with the same respect one might give a venomous snake, "You seem so innocent, but you're really dangerous. I like that about you." Henri let out a sigh in acknowledgment of reality, "There's no way I could subvert Marcia's posse. They think I'm a joke because I'm so, uh, because of my size."

Taffy hissed, making a shushing sound, "Don't. Don't you dare put yourself down."

"Why not? It's true."

Taffy shrugged. "Nobody likes the way they look. You should hang out at the store and you'd see for yourself."

"Yeah" Henri interrupted, "but you're a normal size." Taking a closer look, she added, "You're girly-curvy." Embarrassed Henri muttered, "Well, you're headed in that direction. But me, there's just entirely too much of me."

"Is that why you're always trying to, you know, be invisible?" Taffy whispered. "I mean sometimes it's like you're a brain without a body. Don't take this wrong, but you're the only person I know who reads the dictionary for fun."

"I like to read," Henri paused. "Because, well, then you know stuff," she finished lamely. "Besides, if I'm a brain maybe people won't notice the way I look."

"Well, you can always change if you want to, not that I think you should. Besides, it's not like you're going to die from being, uh, well, you know, the way you are right now. I mean ..."

“Give it up.” Henri smiled at Taffy’s awkwardness. “There’s no easy way out of this one. But you’re wrong you know.”

“Wrong,” Taffy choked out around too big a bite of sandwich, “about what?”

“About being fat,” she said it almost without wincing. “It can cause all sorts of health problems.”

“Stop! You’re ruining my lunch. By the way, where’s *your* lunch? Aren’t people who want to lose weight, not that I think you should, but aren’t they supposed to eat before they get too hungry?”

“Yeah, I’ve read that too. It’s just that I’m kind of shy.”

“What in the world?” Taffy shrieked, “does being shy have to do with lunch?”

Ducking her head, Henri confessed. “I’m shy about eating in front of people because of how I look.”

Without saying a word, Taffy slid over the remaining half of her sandwich and looked sternly at Henri. “Eat this. Eat it now.”

And that’s what Henri did. Sitting companionably with her best friend, the strangest last day of school ever didn’t quite feel quite so much like the end of the world.

Chapter 2

LB

“Henri! Henrietta! Henrietta Sharp!!” A voice calls her name, pulling her back from some place she doesn’t want to leave. Feeling fuzzy and slightly faint Henri opens her eyes slowly to behold the kindly face of Mr. Watkins.

“Henri, are you alright?” He pats her arm gently with a hand that knows hard work. “The bus is at your stop. I’ve been calling and calling, but when you didn’t answer I got worried.”

The worry lines in his forehead mirror the concern in his voice. He has been Henri’s bus driver since she was six years old and now she is almost eleven. They’ve talked about practically everything during the quiet times when Henri is the first to be picked up and the last to be dropped off.

Having slid into the corner of the seat like a heap of discarded clothes, Henri pushes against the side of the bus to sit up. “I must have fallen asleep.”

Mr. Watkins folds his long frame into the seat across the aisle. “If I were to play the Observation Game, I’d say that Henrietta Sharp has had a bad day.”

Falling into the routine of the game they play nearly every day Henrietta asks, “And what is the basis of your observation, sir?”

Rubbing at his smooth-shaven face, Mr. Watkins pulls a battered memo pad and a chipped yellow pencil from the depths of his carpenter pants and begins to write. “Observation one: Henri boards the bus without saying hello, completely out of character. Observation two: Henri takes no notice of her surroundings, again most unusual. Observation three: Henri isn’t

smiling, in fact she looks downright miserable.” Looking up from his notes Mr. Watkins asks, “Shall I continue?”

“No, you win. It has been a bad day. So you’re definitely badge-worthy.”

Reaching for her backpack, Henri carefully unpins a toy metallic detective badge and holds it out to Mr. Watkins.

Before she can pin it to his shirt as she has so often in the past, Mr. Watkins cups Henri’s hand in his own calloused palm and curls her fingers around the badge. “You keep it Henri. It only took one look to see that you’re upset and something so obvious isn’t really detective grade. Besides, school is out and this is our last ride together until next year.”

The springs squeak as he stands. “Your father and I were good friends Henri until he was...” Mr. Watkins clears his throat. “If you ever want to talk about what’s bothering you, one detective to another, you know where to find me.”

“Yes, I know.” Henri summons up a smile unwilling to think about the accident. “Over the fence and through the field.”

Henri hefts her backpack on to one shoulder then says good-bye to Mr. Watkins with a handshake and a hug. As she walks up the circular drive, Henri looks around at a world that feels less familiar than it did at the start of the day. Maybe she’s the one who’s different. But one thing remains unchanged. Henri’s mom stands as she always does at the curve of the drive where it starts to lean toward home. The farmhouse sits back from the road, unpretentious white clapboard with black shutters. Red geraniums and white petunias spill out of the window boxes.

“Hey you.” Mrs. Sharp covers the distance between them in a handful of steps.

Henri wants to tell her mom about the wavy-wall episode, but she's not ready to share it just yet. Instead, she studies her mother's face. Mrs. Sharp is pretty in a non-showy way. She's slender without being skinny, and her face is almost always illuminated by a smile so radiant it feels as though unhappy thoughts cannot remain long in her presence.

Moving with an easy confidence she falls in next to Henri. "How was your day?" she asks.

Henri shakes her head. "You don't want to know."

"What's the number?" Mrs. Sharp asks, referring to their private one to ten ranking for bad personal days.

"Thirteen."

"Hmm, that *is* bad and unlucky too."

Without asking for details Mrs. Sharp takes Henri's hand in her own as they stroll up the long gravel drive in comfortable silence. In time their arms swing in an exaggerated pendulum-like arc. Henri has a nagging feeling that she is too old for such childish pleasure but she stuffs the thought into a corner of her mind and enjoys the warm, solid feel of her mother's hand.

After a few more steps Henri's tongue loosens and the humiliating gym class experience pours out of her. After hearing about Marcia Summerhill and the mean-girl posse, Mrs. Sharp shakes her head in anger and dismay.

"Mom, were you ever, well, like me?"

"If you mean smart, funny and insatiably curious, the answer is most definitely yes."

"No, that's not what I mean." Pausing to take a deep breath, Henri exhales the question in a single blast. "Were you ever, you know, my size?"

“Oh that,” Mrs. Sharp smiles. “I was exactly your size, though not quite as cute as you.”

“Yeah, right. What happened? I mean, how did you change to the way you are now?”

Mrs. Sharp hesitates before answering. “This sounds silly but I don’t exactly know. It’s as if my memories of that time are fuzzy and refuse to come into focus. But I do remember this. Everything started to change when I learned to appreciate myself exactly as I was.”

One eyebrow arches elegantly. “I see that goofy face you’re making. But you’re the one who asked. Anyway, the rest was just a matter of knowing when I was really hungry and what would be truly satisfying.”

Henri sighs, “I wish I were like you mom. You’re pretty and, you know, not at all chunky.”

“Body shape is a characteristic and characteristics are changeable, Henri. But strength of character is a deep down thing. It shines through from the inside out.” With an extra squeeze of Henri’s hand Mrs. Sharp says, “In that regard you and I are exactly alike.”

The screen door bangs and bounces shut. Mrs. Sharp picks up Kippy, their blue-eyed gray cat, handing him to Henri with a pat on their respective heads. “Why don’t you change out of your school clothes? And put out fresh food for Kippy.”

Henri heads down the hall with Kippy draped around her shoulders like a living fur collar. Her room looks just the way she left it. The Victorian village snow globes fill her bookshelf. Family pictures line the far wall, reflected in the mirror that hangs above a skirted vanity. Kippy’s neon green scratching post stands next to his food dishes on a rubberized mat. Her bedspread, the cushioned rocker and a closet best opened with caution all look exactly the same. Except for the desk. There’s a lunch box on it.

It's an old-fashioned style, rectangular in shape with a curved top and a substantial leather handle that looks like it would fit perfectly in her hand. *Where'd this come from?*

She picks up the box and shifts it from side-to-side. A 3-D effect of dancing carrots, milk swirling in a glass and celery diving into salsa appears on the lid.

With shaky hands Henri opens the metal lid. It smells faintly of lunches from long ago. Fascinated, she turns the box over and over, looking for some mechanism to explain the changing display. But there's nothing. "How's it do that?" Henri wonders out loud.

A sticky note materializes on the lid. The writing is bold with emphatic block letters. "It's nice to meet 'cha, kid. I'm the Magic Lunch Box, but you can call me LB."

Henri drops the lunch box on the desk as if it were a coiled snake. Remembering her manners, drilled into her by her mother she stammers, "It's very nice to meet you too." She mutters under her breath, "weird but nice."

"Kid, you'd better get something straight. I can see and hear everything." Another note magically scribbles before her eyes.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be rude. It's just that, well, I've never met a Magic Lunch Box before."

Henri drops to her knees. Kippy sits in her lap and she strokes his back, which he collapses and then arches at the end of each pet.

"Your mother raised a polite kid. That's good." The note angles itself so she can read the writing while sitting on the floor.

"You know my mother?" Henri can't believe it. How could such a thing possible?

“I knew your mother a long time ago. But we’d best not go into that. Not now anyway. I’m here to help you young Traveler.”

“What’s a Traveler?”

“You are kid. You can open portals, go to the far reaches of the universe. That makes you a Traveler.”

“Did the wall send you?”

“No, kid. That was The Committee.” LB’s notes appear, linger long enough to be read, then disappear.

“Who’s The Committee? And what do they want with me?”

Kippy jumps on the desk, looking at the lunch box with interest.

“Who is The Committee?” Henri repeats. “What did they mean by prepare to travel?”

If a box could sigh LB does taking a moment to reply. “Look, there’s a lot you need to know. Let’s go someplace where your mom isn’t likely to walk in.”

Remembering that she’s supposed to be changing clothes, Henri pulls out a pair of grubby denim Capri’s and a blue t-shirt that’s seen better days. With a push and a shove the hated black pants and striped shirt go to the back of the closet where all school clothes vacation for the summer.

Sliding down the hardwood hallway in socks Henri arrives at the sunny farmhouse kitchen. Her mom is chopping vegetables on a well-used wooden cutting board next to the deep double sink. The lunch box is lumpy inside her shirt like an unspoken lie. Mumbling something about going outside, Henri slips into sneakers so worn that her socks can see daylight. She flies out the screen door followed by Kippy whose tail barely misses being caught as it bangs shut.

Mrs. Sharp says something about cousin P.J., but Henri is already headed to her favorite spot, a grove of Chinese elms at the outer edge of the front yard.

With her back against the base of a tree Henri pulls out the Lunch Box. Kippy runs his rough tongue over her hands repeatedly. It's comforting, something normal in a world gone weird.

LB spits out another note. "This is going to take awhile." The low-hanging branches of the elms form a leafy shield protecting Henri from the outside world if not from the turmoil in her heart.

"The universe is a very mysterious place," he begins. "Many things remain hidden, some deliberately so, like the existence of Travelers. The world we know is only one of many realities. These other places, known as domains, are reached through doorways that only certain people can open. You are one of those people."

Caught up in a story beyond imagining Henri doesn't notice that LB is speaking directly to her mind, no longer bothering with notes. Henri's brown eyes widen. Her mouth feels lazy, unable to form the words that would free a million questions hanging out at the back of her throat.

"The Committee is responsible for the independent operation of the domains. They're hands-off in the day-to-day business of the cosmos but they get involved when one domain tries to interfere with another," LB says. His voice sounds hollow, like an echo coming from far away.

"You kid, were honored by a singular event. The Committee rarely makes direct contact with anyone, particularly a newbie." Before Henri can ask the question LB explains.

“That’s what you are as an untrained Traveler. The Committee always communicates through an instrument like me until young Travelers can tolerate their voices.”

“But they contacted you directly. They opened a portal, a doorway from wherever it is they hang out, to speak directly to you. That’s why the wall went all wavy today.”

“Oh,” Henri erupts into not-quite-hysterical laughter, “that explains everything.”

Late afternoon shadows spread across the grove reflecting the darkening landscape of things to come. “Look kid, I know this is a lot to take in but you’re part of something really important. Your ability must be immense and they’re worried that you’ll go rogue, or else something has gone horribly wrong and you have to help save the world. Maybe both.”

Henri asks, “What do you mean, go rogue?”

“You’ve got an untrained super-power, kid. Not everyone can master it without losing their humanity.”

The late afternoon drone of cicadas ceases. The sudden quiet causes the hairs on the back of Henri’s neck to stand at attention. She is hit by something wet that stings her skin. And there is no place to hide.

Though her mind feels paralyzed, Henri’s legs work with a will of their own. She runs toward the source of the blasts coming from a thicket of gooseberry bushes on the other side of the circular drive. Almost upon her attacker Henri hears the most unexpected sound in the world. Laughter. The muffled voice is familiar somehow but recognition hovers just beyond reach. “Henri, aren’t you going to say hello to your cousin?”

“P.J.,” the name explodes out of Henri’s mouth like a coughing fit. She pushes him to the ground and falls with him. Undecided if she should hug her cousin or throttle him, Henri settles for a punch to the arm and a shrill, “What are you doing here?”

“I’m right where I’m supposed to be Scuz.” He sits, wiping bits of leaves and grass off his pants. His ever-present baseball cap is miraculously in place. P.J.’s curly brown hair peeks out under the bill as he brushes off the dried grass sticking to his neck and arms. “I bet I have a million chigger bites. Hey, Scuz, you’re looking a little wet.”

“Don’t call me Scuz!” She picks up the water cannon and looks at it as if she’s never seen such a thing right before she blasts P.J. in the stomach. “Hmm. You’re looking a little damp yourself. By the way, we rented out your room. We had to have a haz-med team come in and clean it out.”

“You couldn’t pay someone to live in the same house with you! I only visit to add some class to this establishment.”

“You visit because your snooty little boy’s school shuts down for summer break and your Dad’s off on a dig. Oh, and your housekeeper doesn’t like you all that much.”

“Mrs. Brinkhof adores me, like everyone else, present company excluded. She just doesn’t have a sense of humor. I mean, how could you not laugh at a rubber snake in the dryer?”

“Oh yeah,” Henri interrupts. “She just doesn’t know how to have a good time. Who doesn’t enjoy a spider coming out of the toaster, or fake vomit on the bathroom floor? You’re pathetically juvenile.”

“Am not.”

“Are so.” Henri ends their friendly fight with a playful punch to P.J.’s arm. “We’ve got all summer to argue,” she says.

“Yeah,” P.J. agrees. “You get the pleasure of my company for the third summer in a row.” He smiles with perfect white teeth that glow against his mocha skin.

Falling silent, Henri chews her bottom lip trying to decide if she should tell P.J. what's going on. LB chooses this moment to speak directly to her mind. "I'll be up in the attic, kid, under the pillows on the window seat. Meet me there later."

Henri shakes her head to clear it. "Anyway, I'm glad you're here. There's uh, some weird stuff happening."

"Weird is what I'm all about, Scuz."

"Yeah. That's for sure. But don't say anything. I'll tell you after supper."

Gravel crunches underfoot as they walk down the drive toward the road where P.J. left his backpack and duffel bag.

Henri tugs at the neck of her damp t-shirt. "I can't believe you brought the water cannon with you."

"It was a guilt gift from dad," P.J. says. "You know, because he left earlier than planned." He mutters, "as usual."

Mrs. Sharp stands waiting in the late afternoon light where the drive loops past the back door.

"Mom, why didn't you tell me P.J. was coming today?" Henri asks.

"What have you two been doing?" Mrs. Sharp asks. "You're soaked." She gives them both a hug anyway. "I tried to tell you Henri but you ran outside like your life depended on it. Your Uncle Dash left a few days earlier than planned. Where's he off to this time, P.J.?"

"Abydos in Egypt. Then Turkey, I think." The laughter usually present in P.J.'s voice is absent. "He's kind of hard to keep track of."

“Yes,” Mrs. Sharp agrees. “Ever since your mother ... ” Her fingers press against her temple and then in an overly cheery voice she says, “But now you’re here with us for the summer. Just as usual.”

Henri can’t help thinking that the start of this summer is anything but usual. “Mom, how come we call Uncle Dash uncle when he’s actually a cousin of some kind?”

P.J. answers. “For the same reason I call your mom Auntie Sharp. It’s easier than saying second cousin something or other.”

“Good point,” Henri says. “How’d you get here anyway?” she finally asks.

Huffing under the weight of his backpack, P.J. answers, “One of dad’s graduate students drove me.”

Mrs. Sharp’s tone is disapproving. “I can’t think why he didn’t come in, or at least drive you to the door.”

“It’s cool, Auntie S. It’s not like we hang out or anything.” Henri notices P.J. shiver.

“He’s friendly enough but he sure asks a lot of questions. It’s like my life is an exam and he’s got to get all the answers.” Shrugging the backpack to a more comfortable position, “Anyway, here I am you lucky people.”

A car comes up the drive and an instant later they hear a female voice calling “Yoo-hoo,” in the descending tone of a persistent doorbell.

“Yoo-hoo,” the call comes again, accompanied by the rolling down of a car window and the urgent waving of a well-accessorized hand. “Mrs. Sharp, I’m so glad you’re home.”

“Mrs. Bloom! What a surprise. Is everything all right?”

In the breathless tone of a perpetually busy person, Taffeta’s mother replies. “I have a huge favor to ask. We’re doing inventory tonight at the Pretty Kitty and Taffy’s sitter just

bailed on me. I can't leave her alone and inventory will take forever, is it, could you, would you be willing to ... ?”

Mrs. Sharp smiles. “Of course, we'd love to have Taffeta spend the night. Henri will be thrilled. And P.J. too,” she adds.

Taffy gets out of the car and after a flurry of air kisses and reminders to be good, Mrs. Bloom drives away leaving a smoky column of gravel dust in her wake.

Henri is well aware from previous summers that Taffy and P.J. love to not like one another. She welcomes Taffy with a hug taking in her friend's red cowboy boots, black leggings and belted white shirt. *She even dresses up for a sleepover*, Henri thinks.

“It's Miss Taffeta,” P.J. proclaims. “The girl who can't decide if her name is a fabric or a candy.”

Taffy smiles and grinds her teeth. “What a surprise to see you here pajama-boy. Isn't it a little early for your summer invasion, I mean, visit?”

They go inside where bags and belongings are soon stowed as they fall into the routine of previous summers. In an unusual show of welcome, Kippy rubs himself against P.J.'s pants before deciding to climb his leg, causing a frenzy of undignified cries. “Oh! Ow! Ouch!” Kippy-cat's purr is loud and contented as he flexes his paws against the back of P.J.'s thigh.

With each loving claw prick, P.J.'s act as cool kid in a hick town begins to crack. After a round of tear-producing laughter, Henri removes Kippy from his death grip on P.J.'s leg.

“That'll teach you to call me Scuz and make fun of my friend's name.”

“But you're like a sister to me and you are my cousin, so Scuz is a brilliant, nickname.”

“Glad you think you're brilliant,” Taffy mutters just loud enough to be heard.

“Although I'm amazed that someone like you would know about taffeta, the fabric that is.”

“I know lots of stuff,” P.J. says. “Loads more than you’ll ever learn at the polka dot institute.”

“Presley James Adams you’re an over-educated, under-informed nuisance. You go to an uppity private school but you don’t know anything about people. When I finish design school and launch my own clothing line I’ll create beautiful things but you’ll still be, well, you’ll still be *you*.”

Henri’s cheeks dimple with a big grin. Taffy and P.J. are at one another’s throats just like last summer. At least some things are as usual.

“I hear talking,” Mrs. Sharp calls from the kitchen, “but I don’t see any table-setting. Get to it. There are no guests in this house, only family. And families work together.”

P.J. hands Taffy a stack of plates for the table, a lop-sided smile serving as an unspoken apology. Henri fills the glasses with ice water while Taffy and P.J. help her mom bring out salad plates, breadsticks, and a sunny yellow pasta bowl filled with steaming spaghetti.

The chatter ebbs and flows with occasional reminders from Mrs. Sharp to “use your napkin,” or “don’t talk with your mouth full.” Henri glances from face to face, thinking how nice it is to have her friends with her. She knows Taffy won’t stay every night during the summer but she often spends long weekends at the farm while her mom works at the Pretty Kitty.

After dinner and clean up, the friends go upstairs to Henri’s favorite space, the attic. Unlike like most attics it isn’t a jumble of cast offs and cobwebs. There’s a window seat with plenty of pillows, a perfect place to read or daydream while looking out the row of small barn-like windows. A no-longer-good-enough-for-the-living-room easy chair and sofa rest comfortably on a plush burgundy area rug.

“P.J. flops on the sofa. “So Scuz, what weird stuff is going on?”

“You’re here,” Taffy answers. “That’s weird enough. And if anything was going on, Henri would tell me first.”

“Okay. I need both of you to stop. I haven’t told anybody anything yet, but there is a lot to tell.” LB is exactly where he said he would be. Henri pulls the box out from behind a bunch of pillows and takes a deep breath. “This is LB, uh, short for Magic Lunch Box.”

Taffy settles in next to Henri on the window seat. “That’s so cute. You named your lunch box. I love to give my stuff names.”

“Sheesh,” P.J. says. “That’s a dopey thing to do.”

Before verbal warfare can begin LB sends a note that hangs in the air to be read by everyone. “Hello friends of Henri. I’m pleased to meet you.”

Jumping off the couch P.J. asks, “How’d you do that?”

“Are you ready to aid The Traveler?” LB asks.

Simultaneously P.J. and Taffy stare at Henri. “What’s a Traveler?”

Caught between her own confusion and the desire to be honest with her friends, Henri replies, “Well, a Traveler is someone who can open doorways.”

“Duh!” P.J. says. “I’ve been opening doors since I was two.”

“More like breaking and entry,” Taffy says smugly.

“Just stop it!” Henri shouts. “You guys have no idea what’s going on. Take a look around. I’ve got a Magic Lunch Box that sends notes or talks directly to my mind. I just found out today that I’ve got some weird super power I’m supposed to use to help save the world unless the power makes me go rogue and get all evil or crazy. So, do you think you could stop fighting for like five minutes?”

“Uh, sorry Scuz,” P.J. says.

“Me too,” Taffy says. “And stop calling my best friend Scuz.”

P.J. clears his throat, the only response Taffy gets.

LB seizes the moment of quiet to send forth a flurry of notes explaining Henri’s ability to open portals to other parts of the universe.

“Now that you know this secret and before I reveal any more, are you willing to aid the Traveler in her journeys?”

LB’s question is stern and solemn. Both friends nod yes, declaring allegiance with their eyes.

“We’ll talk later,” LB says. “Henri, do not tell your mother. She must not be disturbed.” The box vanishes.

Mrs. Sharp appears at the top of the stairs. “What are you under-age people still doing up? Off to bed with you right this minute.”

There is a flurry of pajama finding and putting on while Mrs. Sharp makes sure that P.J. is comfortably settled in the second guest room. Taffy bunks with Henri as she always does.

Henri’s mom comes in for a good night kiss. “Good night, love. It’s been a big day with the end of school, P.J.’s arrival, and Taffy’s too. Go to sleep now and sweet dreams.”

Henri hugs her mom thinking, If you only knew mom. If only I could tell you.

Mrs. Sharp blows a kiss to Taffy and gives Henri’s cheek one last loving stroke before closing the door.

As soon as Mrs. Sharp goes to bed LB appears in Henri’s bedroom. Then P.J. arrives holding a note from LB. There is an immediate uproar with everyone asking questions all at once until “Shhhhh” in dramatic black marker silences them!

“Henri must be prepared to Travel.,” LB continues. “If it weren’t urgent The Committee wouldn’t have contacted her directly. We must awaken the guide, the one who will train Henri to use her power. And to awaken the guide, we must find the medallion.”

Spitting out a rough drawing of a circle surrounded by stars sitting atop three wavy lines LB asks, “Does this look familiar?”

P.J. grabs the note. “I know this. I’ve seen it in my dad’s office at school.”

“Well then, Henri and friends, back to school we must go.”

Chapter 3

Back to School

It wasn't a good night for sleeping but by morning they had a plan. Mrs. Sharp agrees to their unexpected request to attend the Kids and the Cosmos day camp at P.J.'s school. After calling to make sure that responsible adults would be in charge, Mrs. Sharp drops them off in front of the school's looming iron gate. Even open it doesn't look very inviting.

"Have a good time," Mrs. Sharp says dispensing backpacks filled with a week's worth of lunch and snacks. "I'll be finished with my farm co-op meeting in plenty of time to pick you up. Call if you need me."

Henri gives her mom a fierce hug, wishing she could tell her everything. *I will*, Henri thinks. *I'll find out what's going on and then I'll tell her no matter what LB says.*

"Kid," LB speaks inside her mind. "You do know that I can hear what you think, right?"

Henri walks through the gate with grim purpose, forbidding LB to speak to her mind. It actually works, or maybe LB just knows when to shut up. The silence doesn't last long.

"Hey," P.J. calls out. "What 'cha looking at?"

Taffy stands just outside the gate, staring up at the gold lettering, Adams College and Preparatory School for Boys.

Tracking her gaze P.J. says, "That's right. Good old great, great grandfather started the school in 1832; or maybe it's great, great, great. I lose track."

"Humpf," is all Taffy says and runs to catch up with Henri.

The Kids and the Cosmos greeters capture them with good cheer and usher them to the registration table.

A dark-haired upper classman says, “P.J.” He waves with a gigantic smile plastered on his face. “I just dropped you off yesterday and here you are again. You just can’t stay away.” There’s something about his voice. It sounds friendly, but it feels just the opposite. “Why don’t you introduce me to your friends?”

“Oh, right,” P.J. says. “This is my scuz, uh cousin Henri and her friend Taffeta. Guys, this is Max Nightingale. He helps my dad out with paperwork and stuff.”

Max insists on escorting them to the auditorium. He is tall and lanky with the rounded shoulders of someone who sits a lot. Henri observes that he strokes his black, wavy hair nervously as if trying to slick it down. By the time they arrive at the great hall Max knows Taffeta’s life story, including the fact that she wants to be a fashion designer and that she detests the color orange. Unlike her best friend, Henri deflects Max’s repeated questions with shrugs and single syllable answers.

Just before they enter the darkened hall, Max turns to Henri. “There’s something about you. I get the feeling you have secrets and you know how to keep them.” His smile doesn’t make it all the way to his eyes. It disappears completely when Henri says, “Nice to meet you Max,” and walks into the auditorium.

Nighttime stars cover the ceiling as the instructor points out the shapes of constellations. “That doesn’t look anything like a bear,” Taffy complains. But Henri wonders what it’s like to be a Traveler, jumping from star to star.

“C’mon,” P.J. says. “Let’s go to my dad’s office.” He tugs on Henri’s arm, leading them to a side exit.

The bright light of outside dazzles their eyes. Henri sees someone turning the corner up ahead. It could be Max but she isn't sure. She watches the exit carefully for a moment, making sure they aren't being followed and then hurries to catch up to Taffy. They walk in single file behind P.J., who leads them through courtyards and past ancient ivy-adorned buildings.

Henri sees the back of Taffy's head as she cranes her neck in every direction. "I think this is the oldest place I've ever been in. It must be creepy at night."

"Oh, it's not so bad once you get used to it. We're supposed to have ghosts of long gone professors and a secret society, stuff like that, but it's a pretty normal place."

"There's nothing normal about an all boys school." Taffy shivers, "especially this one."

Heading off another disagreement Henri asks, "What about Max? What do you know about him?"

"Max," P.J. groans. "He's always hanging around my dad, well, when my dad's around. He's okay, I guess. It's just that he tries too hard to be friends. Why do you want to know?"

Henri shrugs as Taffy takes in the grand stairway that leads to P.J.'s dad's office.

"Wow!" Taffy runs up to the first landing, pausing at the window to look across at the clock tower. It's chiming the hour with a circular parade of animals, people in old-fashioned costumes, and a hooded figure you wouldn't want to meet in a dark alley. Taffy calls to the others but the march of time ends before they arrive.

The staircase is so wide that the friends can extend their arms side to side without touching. At the top of the stairs, a narrow corridor that leads to the office squeezes them together.

"This is one of the oldest buildings at the school," P.J. explains. He speaks softly. Henri notices the change in his voice and treads softly on the wooden floor.

Rounding the corner, they see a dark figure crouched at the door to Professor Adams's office. The floor squeaks, revealing their presence with a creaky groan. The man rises, stuffing something deep into his pocket.

"Oh, hello," Max says. "Why aren't you at the Cosmos Camp?"

"We took a break so P.J. could show us his dad's office," Henri says. "What are you doing Max?"

"Me? Uh, I think I left my notes inside. I was just seeing if the office happened to be open. Say, P.J., do you have a key? That would help out tremendously."

"Sorry," P.J. says. "I don't have it on me at the moment. Hey, would you mind going to the office to get the key? They'll give to you but if I go they'll lecture me about responsibility like forever and we need to get back to camp pretty soon. I'll show Henri and Taffy around the grounds while we wait for you."

With Max dispatched Taffy says, "Why did you bring us here if you don't have a key?"

"Because, Taffeta, you have it. When I saw it was Max I slipped my key into the mesh pocket on the side of your backpack. So you see, I really didn't have it on me."

"Fast thinking," Henri says, retrieving the key.

"Devious too," Taffy adds not without a hint of admiration.

The key looks every bit as old as the door it unlocks. It's hefty in the hand and big as if opening doors in the past were a more serious business. Henri hands the key to P.J. who inserts it in the lock and turns the key slowly, inviting the sluggish bolt to move aside. One shoulder shove later, they're in.

"Oh!" Henri says.

"My!" Taffy finishes.

The office is a curious mix of museum, global bazaar and library. Books are stacked everywhere, spilling out of the shelves that line the walls. Tribal masks stare at them with blank eyes. A table-size case with a glass top holds ancient looking maps and bits of manuscript written in a forgotten language. Pink and amethyst crystals ornament the windowsill, sharing the space with limestone rocks that hold the captive remains of insects from another age. Henri sees feathers, prayer beads and scraps of ragged tapestry. It's as if everything interesting and mysterious has found its way to this room.

"Pretty cool, huh?" P.J. says. "C'mon, we don't have much time. Max will be back soon. He looks for any excuse to poke around in here."

Henri climbs to the top of the sliding library ladder for a bird's eye view of the office. She sees Taffy looking around Professor Adams's desk without touching anything. There's a picture of P.J., several years younger, with his dad and a beautiful dark-haired woman.

"Is this your mom?" Taffy asks. "She's gorgeous."

"Uh, yeah. It is," P.J. says. "Dad put that picture away when she died. I haven't seen it in awhile."

"Is that the Eiffel Tower there in the background?" Taffy asks.

"Yeah," he smiles. "That was fun." He turns away suddenly and clears his throat. "We should be looking for LB's drawing."

"Right," Taffy says. "Henri, do you see anything from up there?"

Henri climbs down from the ladder. "Not sure. Go over to the fireplace. It looks like some of the stones have squiggles on them but I can't tell for sure from here."

Standing together the friends stare up at the mantle. "I knew I'd seen this somewhere," P.J. says. "But none of them look exactly like LB's drawing. What does he say?"

“What about it, LB?” Henri asks.

“Oh, so now we’re talking,” LB writes in all caps.

“Yes. We are,” Henri says. “But let’s stick to notes for now. Okay?”

“Consider it done, kid,” LB scrawls. “You’ve found the leader stones. All you have to do is touch them in the right sequence to reveal the prime.”

“What’s that?” the friends ask with one voice.

“Think of it as a compass,” L.B. answers. “The prime stone will lead us to the medallion.”

“Right,” Henri says. “And the medallion will awaken the guide.”

“Exactly. You’re a bright kid.”

“It seems like there are a lot of steps involved,” Henri says. “Wouldn’t it be easier to just contact the guide directly?”

“Yes,” LB agrees. “It would be easier but not very safe. Powerful things must not fall into the wrong hands. Now, touch the stones in the proper order and the prime will be revealed.”

“Exactly how am I supposed to do that?” Henri asks.

“Maybe it’s mathematical,” P.J. says. “Each stone could represent a prime number and you touch them in sequence.”

“What on Earth are you talking about?” Taffy asks. “I’m good at math but we haven’t covered anything like, what’d you call them, prime numbers?”

“I don’t know what they are either,” Henri says. “P.J. is kind of, uh, well really good at math. So, boy genius, what’s the prime sequence?” Henri asks.

“Look, there are thirteen stones with the squiggles on them. Touch them in this order: two, three, five, seven, eleven and then thirteen.”

Henri does it. Absolutely nothing happens.

“Okay, try reversing, P.J. says.

Henri tries. Still nothing.

“LB?” Henri asks.

“Don’t ask me kid. In some matters I’m on a need to know basis. Security, remember?”

“Great,” Henri mutters. “It’s so safe it’s going to stay a secret.”

“What if?” Taffy pauses. “What if you just tried to feel the proper sequence?”

“C’mon,” P.J. snorts. “This is math, not magic.”

“Well,” Henri says. “I didn’t know there could be a magic lunch box until yesterday. So, maybe it’s some of both.”

Henri runs her hand across the stones. Her palm feels itchy. Closing her eyes, she senses that one stone feels warmer than the others. So she touches it. Then she follows the heat, wondering if she’s imagining the whole thing. Two. Three. Two. Five. Two. Seven. Two. Eleven. Two. Thirteen. Finally she touches the second stone again. There is a whirring sound of springs and gears turning. Then a small drawer beneath the mantle slides open. It’s just like LB’s paper drawing only it’s a flat stone. The prime.

The circle and the three wavy lines are black as if burned into the stone. Gold stars shine around the edges. With great care Henri removes the prime from its hiding place. Resting in her hand, the stars twinkle for a moment as if in recognition.

“That is so cool,” P.J. says. “I told you it was based on math.”

“No,” Taffy disagrees. “It was based on Henri’s feelings.”

A screeching sound suddenly erupts from the walls. The bookcases are parting down the middle, sliding away from one another to reveal a stone doorway. There's no door handle, only a cluster of stars. Henri touches the celestial array in the same order that revealed the prime stone. When she completes the sequence the stars begin to glow, exploding into a brilliant light, momentarily blinding the three friends. When they look again the stone door is open, inviting them into the darkest dark they've ever seen.

"Well done Henri," LB's note reads. It's the first time he hasn't called her kid.

The friends stand frozen in place until the sound of a key being placed in a lock melts their paralysis. It's Max. He's opening the office door.

"Run!" LB scribbles. "Into the hiding place." Their backpacks, abandoned by the front door, go flying into the dark with Henri, P.J., and Taffy. The door shuts behind them blocking any glimmer of light.

If they could hear or see anything at all they would know that Max is inside the office, visibly relieved by their absence. There is no sign of parting bookshelves or secret passages. There is only Max standing before the fireplace staring at the stones.

"Ow!" Taffy yelps. "Get off my foot, P.J."

"Uh, sorry. It's not like I can see in here."

"Be quiet," Henri whispers. "We don't know if Max can hear us."

"Not likely," P.J. says. "We're in a tomb of some kind and you're worried about being heard. I wish someone could hear us. Even Max."

Henri turns in the direction of P.J.'s voice only to hit a wall. The rough stone scrapes her hands. It's as if her touch has awakened a million stars. They shine brightly from floor to ceiling, driving back the dark.

"Beautiful," Taffy breathes.

"How'd you do that?" P.J. wants to know.

"I, uh, don't really know," Henri answers. "I just touched the wall."

"My best friend has super powers," Taffy squeals. "I just knew it."

"Look Taffy, P.J. says. "You couldn't have known any such thing. Until yesterday we didn't know any of this stuff."

"Can we keep moving while you argue?" Henri asks. "I think we're supposed to follow the stars."

LB's handle floats into Henri's hand and together they follow the starry path. The sound of her friends bickering follows her as she rounds a corner.

"Look," P.J. persists. "There's no way you could've known about Henri. It's just not logical."

"Humpf," Taffy shrugs. "I didn't say it was logical. I've just always had a feeling about Henri. She's kind of like an iceberg. You just know you're not seeing everything that's there."

"Guess I can't change your mind since you act like you don't have one," P.J. mutters.

"What'd you say?" Taffy demands. "I know you said something mean."

"Is it getting dark in here?" P.J. asks.

"C'mon," Taffy says. "We should catch up with Henri."

Running together, they flee the darkness that swallows their every step.

They find Henri standing in the center of a large chamber glowing with an unearthly blue light. Strange marks that might be writing line the walls. A map with grids is in the center of the room overlaid with a crude drawing like the one on the prime stone.

“Double, triple, out of this world wow!” P.J. exclaims. “This is so incredibly ... ”

“Cool,” Taffy says. “Henri, are you okay? You look kind of strange.”

Henri’s face is carved by the shadows, revealing cheekbones and a determined jaw. “I’m okay, just kind of wobbly feeling.”

“And why wouldn’t you be?” Taffy pulls off her backpack and unzips it, digging into the depths for something to eat. “Whatever time it is in here, it’s time for lunch.”

“I’m starving,” P.J. says as his stomach starts to growl.

“Of course it’s all about you,” Taffy rolls her eyes. She tosses a sandwich in his general direction while setting out their lunch. It’s the first ever picnic of its kind; indoors, underground, and beneath the stars.

They eat in silence for a time until Henri asks LB, “Who built this place?”

He writes for all to see. “This is the work of the Ancients.”

“Who are the Ancients?” Henri asks around a mouthful of sandwich.

“Travelers like you, only from a long time ago,” LB answers.

“But where’d they come from?” Henri brushes crumbs off her t-shirt. “And how could they build something like this in ancient times?”

“You ask a lot of questions, kid.”

“LB,” Henri says, “don’t you think there are a lot of questions to be asked?”

“True,” LB admits in writing. “I was just trying to tell if you’re ready to hear this next bit.”

“I am,” Henri says even though her heart is pumping hard and fast.

LB’s explanation floats at eye level, extra big so everyone can see it. “Nobody knows for sure where the first Travelers came from. One day in history they just showed up. The markings of the prime and leader stones began to appear in ancient wall carvings, tombs and such. Some say that they, and this is just a theory mind you, but some say that the Travelers came from elsewhere. You know, not Earth.”

“Are you saying that Henri is from outer space?” P.J.’s eyes look at risk for popping out of his head altogether. ‘Cause like, I’m her cousin so that would make me an alien too.” This is said as if the idea is too good to be true.

“No, no no,” LB writes in bold letters. “Henri is an Earthling as all of you are. But it’s possible that the first Travelers came here from elsewhere, from another domain.”

“So you’re saying that the Ancients had the skill to build this place. They made it for me to find before I was even born,” Henri says.

“Yes. This place is for you and all the other Travelers who have come before you. Travelers like ...”

“Mom,” Henri whispers. “Mom was a Traveler but now she isn’t any more. Why?”

LB hesitates. “Perhaps the guide can tell you. I only know that your mother was much like you, bright and gifted in the ways of a Traveler. But something terrible happened and the memory of her ability was removed. For many years now she has been as you know her.”

“Cookie anyone?” Taffy asks before Henri’s world can get any crazier.

For once Henri is far more interested in facts than the food in front of her. It’s just one more change in the topsy-turvy world that has become her life.

“LB, do you think I could be a Traveler?” P.J. asks. “I mean if both Henri and her mom are ...”

“Not likely,” LB writes. “Nothing personal, it’s just that Travelers are almost always female.”

“But almost isn’t the same as always,” P.J. stands up for a closer look at the strange markings that adorn the walls. “Has there ever been boy Traveler?”

“Only one,” LB answers. “And that was plenty. But that’s for another time. Don’t worry P.J. You will have your role to play, as will Taffeta, as will we all.”

Lunch ends and they pack up the leftovers. “It’s a good thing your mom gave us so much food,” Taffy says. “You know, in case we get lost or can’t get out of here.”

“Yes,” Henri says softly. “My mom, the sandwich-maker and Traveler.” Henri wonders what terrible thing must have happened to make her mom forget. Brushing away tears before they can land on her cheek Henri asks LB, “What now?”

“Now,” he replies. “We find the medallion.”

“And how do we do that?” P.J. asks.

“We follow Henri and Henri follows the stars.”

Without the slightest idea what LB means, Henri walks down the broad stone corridor letting her fingers drag along the smooth wall. At her touch, the wall brightens with stars leading them on and on and always downward.

After descending for a long bit of forever they see a shaft of light up ahead. It illuminates a clear glass box supported by white marble columns. They stand before the platform, bathed in its spotlight. Henri steps up on a stone block that brings her eye level with the contents of the glass case. It is the gold medallion they seek but it doesn’t look particularly

powerful. The chain is delicate and it shimmers gold and silver. The medallion itself is round, three times the size of a quarter, and stamped with the same star pattern as the prime stone.

As if she's dreamed it all before and only now remembers, Henri inserts the prime into a square slot located at the bottom of the case. The stone disappears. Light from the stars on the medallion begins to shine with the fiery power of a sun, forcing the friends to look away. When Henri looks again, the protective glass barrier has disappeared. There is nothing between Henri and the medallion except her own fear. Will wearing the medallion make her instantly evil?

Henri looks back at her friends who nod encouragement through anxious eyes.

"Go ahead, kid," LB writes. "If you want to be a Traveler you must claim the medallion."

Henri takes a deep breath and then exhales slowly; the same way Mrs. Marinda tells the chorus to do before starting rehearsal. She reaches for the medallion expecting to be zapped by lightening or fried by a laser. Nothing happens except for a faint humming sound inside her head. Tracing the star sequence with one tentative finger, Henri feels a shiver run up her spine as the stars glow in response to her touch. The disc-shaped medallion rests in Henri's palm. It is large against her young fingers and weighty, pulsing with energy of its own.

"What do we do now?" Henri asks as she slips the medallion over her head.

"We make our way up and out," LB writes. "We go home to await the arrival of the guide."

Henri takes the lead. She no longer needs to touch the wall. The stars awaken in response to the medallion, lighting the wide stone path that climbs ever upward. After a particularly steep climb, the friends pause a moment to rest their weary legs. Henri looks back

at the zig-zag path they have just traveled. The stars have been extinguished, leaving a smothering darkness behind.

Their underground journey ends in the basement of a dormitory located next to the auditorium where the Kid's Cosmos Camp is just wrapping up. Stepping outside, Henri is blinded by the afternoon sunlight and doesn't see her mom at first.

Mrs. Sharp is waiting for them on an outdoor bench near the registration table. "There you are." Hugging each of them in turn she asks, "How was the camp?"

"There were a lot of stars," Henri says quietly.

"Yes," Taffy chimes in. "Beautiful stars. I still say that constellations don't look anything like the shapes they describe, except for the dippers."

"And what about you P.J.?" Mrs. Sharp asks. "Did you enjoy the day?"

"Auntie Sharp, I think it's the best day of summer vacation I've ever had."

Mrs. Sharp ruffles his hair fondly. "That's wonderful, especially when you spent the first day of vacation at school. And what about you Henri? Was it the best ever first day of vacation?"

"Um. Yeah. It was pretty exciting," Henri says. "Mom, have you ever thought about what it would be like to travel the universe?"

A spark of recognition flickers across Mrs. Sharp's face, but it's impossible to say if it's a memory or a figment of Henri's imagination. Her laugh is throaty and happy. "If I traveled the universe I'd miss out on being your mom. Besides, I've got all the adventure I need with you three around."

Taffy and P.J. doze, their heads almost touching then rolling apart as the car moves them toward home. Even Henri is droopy.

“What did they do at this camp to make you guys so tired?” Mrs. Sharp asks.

“There was a lot of walking, mom,” Henri explains from the back seat. Walking and stair-climbing like you wouldn’t believe.”

Chapter 4

Living Doll

Henri awakens, disturbed by the sound of rustling paper while Taffy sleeps curled ball-like under the covers. Even the nocturnally restless Kippy cat is enjoying a feline dream.

The moon has risen high enough to enter the bedroom window. Rubbing sleep from her eyes, Henri watches in amazement as the snow globes on her bookshelf begin to shudder. They tremble violently until blizzard-like conditions prevail inside the miniature Victorian village.

Everything on the dresser shifts and shakes; the hairbrush and comb wiggle in place, then after a period of indecision, rush madly toward one another. Even the pink feathers that adorn Henri's diary stand at attention and the pages filled with her tiny script flutter as if an invisible speed-reader is thumbing through the pages.

LB glows like a nightlight, sounding a silent alarm. Sticky notes paper the bed with a single command, "Open me!" Wondering if she's still dreaming, Henri cautiously peeks inside LB where she placed the medallion for safekeeping before going to sleep.

"Get ready, kid." A note flies in front of her face at eye level. "And put on the medallion."

Someplace between asleep and awake Henri picks up the silvery gold chain and drops it around her neck. Mist begins to collect next to the closet, growing into a funnel-shaped cloud. It whirls faster and faster attracting LB's notes, churning them into a colorful, swirling vortex. Then abruptly, like a washing machine on spin cycle, the cyclone stops. Henri sits up in bed, hugs her knees to her chest and stares open mouthed.

“My,” the female figure sniffs in a disgruntled voice, “that was a little bumpy. You’re quite powerful but there’s not much control. Of course, technique can always be learned when one has the gift.”

“Technique?” Henri echoes.

“Yes. Your technique for portaling needs a bit of tweaking, you know, refinement.”

“Portaling?” Henri says.

“Hello. I’m supposed to be here, right? It’s not like I’m in the habit of appearing uninvited. That would be so rude.”

While keenly interested in what the unexpected visitor has to say, Henri keeps getting distracted by her appearance. It’s incredible and unbelievable, but it’s right there in front of her eyes; a life-size, absolutely perfect living doll dressed in a fairy princess gown.

“Rude,” a monosyllabic Henri repeats.

“Honestly, you seem to have lost your wits. You can talk can’t you? Speak in whole sentences?”

“Yes,” Henri nods her head but is incapable of saying another word.

Sighing as one burdened by big responsibilities, the visitor straightens the gossamer fabric of her sparkly gown and pats her hair into place, all the while muttering. Henri catches an occasional phrase, “Too much power for one so young. Why do I always get the difficult cases? I’m too old for this,” and something about “The Committee must be out of their collective minds.”

Hearing a disturbance, P.J. bursts into the room but freezes when he sees the doll-like creature. He makes a run for the bed and leaps on board like the last man in a lifeboat.

An accomplished sleeper, Taffy doesn't wake up until P.J. lands on her arm, which, once free, she uses to punch him in spite of being barely awake. "P.J., what ARE you doing?" Taffy says. "I was having a really good dream."

"By the way Henri," the guest says in a breathy voice, "you should let LB take care of the medallion now."

Henri doesn't think about not obeying. She lifts the chain over her head, noticing that it feels heavier than when she first put it on. Before she can return the medallion to LB, it slithers out of her hand and across the covers, slipping into the box.

Knuckling her eyes toward wakefulness Taffy mutters, "I'm still asleep." Catching a glimmer of something across the room, Taffy scrunches her cat-like eyes to confirm that what she's seeing is actually there. Experiencing Henri's multi-syllable deficit, Taffy can only point and say, "Who?"

Like a single syllable chorus, P.J. echoes, "How?"

A series of claps coming from two plastic hands reintroduces a weird reality to the situation. "Honestly," the visitor sighs. "Is everyone in this domain dull-witted? Children do speak nowadays, don't they?" A look of joy manages to move across her permanently rosy cheeks. "Don't tell me. Is it possible that children are seen but not heard?"

The three friends nod negatively in unison but remain speechless. She shakes her head and takes a leisurely seat in Henri's rocking chair, giving her knees time to bend.

Time passes quietly except for the rhythmic creaking of the rocker. Looking at LB for help, a sticky note pops up and lands on Henri's nose. "It's okay, kid. Ask the doll some questions. That outfit she's wearing looks like it belongs on top of a wedding cake but she's your guide. You can trust her."

Reassured, Henri scoots to the end of the bed and begins the most extraordinary conversation of her life. “May I ask your name?”

“Now, that’s more like it,” the guide says. “Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Olive. I no longer use a last name. They’re such a bother.”

“I don’t mean to be rude,” Henri says, “but how can that be, uh, a bother?”

The doll straightens her tiara, the finishing touch to her sparkly fairy princess get-up. “Just as soon as you give a last name people start to look for some connection between you and their idiot cousins. I find it much simpler to be Olive.”

P.J. nods in agreement, “She’s got a point.”

“Oh P.J., what would you know about it?” Taffy says.

Interrupting the perpetual bickering between her two best friends Henri asks, “Miss Olive, are you here to train me?”

She smoothes her blonde ringlets before answering, “You’re needed to help with the rebellion so your training will be on the job, so to speak.”

“Exactly what rebellion are you talking about Miss Olive?” Henri asks.

“Good gracious, child. Haven’t you been told anything?” Olive exclaims through pursed ruby lips. “As to the rebellion, that’s a very long story and there isn’t time for the history lesson you so obviously need. But cozy up on the bed, that’s right, get comfortable, and I’ll tell you the short version.”

Henri, P.J., and Taffy settle in for a bedtime story unlike any other.

“Once upon a time, which is a good way to say so long ago it is beyond human understanding, there was a cosmic event, something so catastrophic that the universe was sliced like a loaf of bread. Each slice became a separate domain, like the Earth you know and

Grymvald, which is where you're needed, Henri." As Olive talks, the rhythmic creak of the rocking chair is the sole accompaniment to the breathy squeak of her voice.

Her doll's mouth barely moves as she speaks. "When the universe got sliced and diced something awakened. No one knows exactly what it is, or how it came to be, but this consciousness, The Committee, came into being. They began to act as a mostly hands-off observer of the domains. They're in charge of keeping the domains in balance, not allowing one to interfere with the functioning of another."

Henri shivers, but not from the mild air of early summer. "What about the Travelers?" she asks. "Where do they come in?"

"Ah yes," Olive sighs. "The Travelers. The cosmic always comes down to the personal, doesn't it? Your family was among the chosen Henri, although I think your mother would say cursed. Anyway, a very long time ago, your distant ancestor was one of those selected to serve a great purpose."

Olive glares at Henri, forbidding more questions. "You're going to ask me who and when and why, and I don't know the answers. Legend has it that The Committee put many people to the test but only certain women, particularly those of your line, could reliably channel The Committee's power to open portals. And, with a lot of things left out, that brings us to the present moment and the reason I am here."

Taffy and P.J. look dazed, like they've been on a roller coaster and their stomachs haven't caught up with the rest of their selves. But Henri feels oddly calm. Determined to understand even more she asks, "What about the rebellion, Miss Olive?"

"Don't call me Miss Olive. It makes me feel positively matronly. Just Olive, plain and simple, will do." Carefully unbending her knees Olive extends her legs, sticking them straight

out so the soles of her see-through Cinderella shoes are plainly visible. Her doll eyes make an unnerving little click when she blinks, as if sorting through several lifetimes of memories to find the right one. “Ah yes, the rebellion.”

“For years beyond telling, Earth and Grymvald developed along similar paths. Both had human and animal life forms. Both needed the same things to survive — air to breathe, water to drink, food to eat, and shelter from the elements. Neither knew of the other’s existence. But that changed when one of the Travelers betrayed his purpose.”

Never one to miss a personal pronoun Henri repeats, “His purpose?”

“You’re very attentive, Henri. That will serve you well. Yes. This particular Traveler was male, one of the few capable of opening the portal doors. He was powerful but undisciplined, willful and arrogant.”

Olive’s voice drops a tone as if recalling something unexpected. “He was not without charm though, not at all without charm.”

Blinking her eyes again with unnerving clicks Olive continues. “But he defied the will of The Committee and opened portals to domains that were forbidden, unleashing untold horrors. With each abomination he released, the Traveler claimed a small amount of its power for his own. In time, he was strong enough to open portals himself without channeling power from The Committee or one of their instruments, like LB.”

Olive pauses thoughtfully. “Hmm. It didn’t occur to me until now, but this isn’t a very suitable bedtime story, is it?”

Henri gives Olive a lopsided smile. “Believe me, after the wavy wall experience this isn’t all that scary. Uh, I hope you don’t mind me saying so, but it doesn’t seem like you’ve been around kids all that much.”

“Oh, goodness me,” Olive exclaims, “I’ve been around thousands of children. It’s just that they happened to be adults at the time.”

Taffy, P.J., and Henri exchange puzzled looks, but Henri decides to stick with the subject at hand. You were telling us about the rebellion.”

“Ah, yes. The Faux Food Rebellion.”

“What foe are you talking about?” P.J. asks. “Was it a rebellion of unfriendly food or something?”

“You idiot,” Taffy says as she punches P.J.’s arm. “Faux is a French word that means fake. Haven’t you heard of faux fur?”

She looks at him in disbelief until P.J. bellows, “That’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard of.” Followed by a muffled, “Whatever it is.”

Henri interrupts, trying desperately to get everyone back on track. “Okay. It means fake, but what exactly was the Fake Food Rebellion?”

“Your two friends are quite a handful,” Olive observes. “But then friendship does require some effort, as I recall. Ah well, the rebellion then. It’s quite a tragic tale. Now that I think of it this story isn’t suitable for children either. But then you’ll be grown-ups someday, so I suppose it will be alright.”

Olive resumes her rhythmic rocking. “Grymvald was a place of gentle beauty; rolling hills and deep forests peppered with thriving farmsteads nurtured by fresh spring water running freely on rock-lined beds. But pastoral settings held no great appeal to Oziander, the only Traveler to be sanctioned by The Committee.”

“Sanctioned?” Henri asks.

“Ah yes,” Olive sighs and ceases her rocking. “It’s so strange. When I first knew Oziander he was young, not yet come into his full power as a Traveler. He was filled with an extraordinary desire to experience everything, though without much thought for the consequences. He was headstrong but not inherently evil; at least not until she left.”

“She, who?” Henri prompts.

“Goodness gracious child,” Olive blinks. “How do you expect me to tell this story if you keep interrupting? She shall remain nameless for now, but Oziander loved this girl beyond reason. In spite of that, or perhaps because of it, he continued his quest to accumulate power. Finally, he could open any portal at will. As you’ve yet to learn Henri, power takes as much as it gives. Oziander began to change in his appearance. He changed on the inside too. Though no one knows for sure, it is rumored that his human face was horribly burned, scarred by the cold fire of the star power he held within.”

“Wow,” Taffy exhales.

P.J. says, “But what about the Fake Food Rebellion?”

“I’m coming to that,” Olive snaps. “Goodness, mercy, me. I’d forgotten how impatient young people are. Now, where was I?”

“Face burned away by the stuff of stars,” Henri says as she hugs a pillow even tighter to her chest.

“Ah, yes. Very bad business that,” Olive sighs making a wheezy whistling sound in whatever serves as her throat. “Before the ill begotten power could destroy him utterly, Oziander called upon the cruel wisdom of the Venai. a bloody-handed group he encountered at the farthest reaches of his travels. They practice the dark arts.” Olive leans forward and whispers. “It is said that they perform human sacrifices.”

Henri, P.J. and Taffy listen with wide-eyed attention as Olive continues. “The Venai made a maledictus for Oziander, a thing of such beauty that its vile purpose was not apparent, not at first anyway.”

Pointing to Henri she says, “Would you be so kind as to open LB, please?”

Henri removes the medallion from the box. The white gold chain shimmers in the dimly lit room.

“How strange to see it again,” Olive murmurs.

Henri hears a low sound like the humming of an old refrigerator. It seems to resonate in her cheekbones just the way Mrs. Marinda describes good vocal production to the choir. Without noticing it, Henri’s breathing synchronizes with the hum until she and the sound are almost one.

“Don’t do that!” Olive’s voice smacks the inside of Henri’s mind. Then as if nothing has happened Olive asks, “Would you be so kind, LB?” And in the next instant the medallion is back in the box with the lid firmly closed.

Henri’s cheeks are aflame with two bright spots of anger. “Why did you do that? Why did you hit me?”

Taffy and P.J. look from Henri to Olive and back again. How could a life-sized doll have hit Henri from the across the room?

“I’m just doing my job, Henri. And that job is to keep you safe.”

Filled with a rage she has never known Henri snaps, “Safe from what? I’m right here in my own bed.”

“Yes, right here in your own bed you have the bane of my existence and your great burden. The medallion that LB now holds was once Oziander’s maledictus. It lay in the palm of

your hand and it sensed your power, Henri. So yes, I gave you a little mind tap to break the connection.” In a gentler tone Olive says, “I’m sorry. I’ve had a very long time to live with this. It must be rather overwhelming for you.”

Henri’s face is now paler than the setting moon, “I’m sorry too.” She falls silent, struggling with the flood of unfamiliar feelings when Taffy chimes in.

“Overwhelming,” Taffy says. “I’d say so! But why did you put the necklace, uh, maledictus away so soon? And where exactly did you hit my friend?”

“Yeah,” P.J. says. “Nobody hits Henri except me.”

“Nice, P.J.,” Taffy grimaces. “So you admit you hit your cousin.”

“Well,” Henri tosses the pillow at her arguing friends, “Some things are getting back to normal.”

Olive’s lips are permanently upturned so it’s hard to say if she is smiling. “For many years,” she says, “I have been charged with monitoring the activities of Earth’s neighboring domain, Grymvald. It’s a rather odd place where the pursuit of excess, especially of food, is now considered normal. Rebels, who want to save Grymvald from its obsession with more of everything, have reported troubling news. Oziander, once vanquished, is growing in power again. We suspect that Oziander now controls much of Grymvald and is preparing to extend his empire to Earth.”

Abruptly, Olive shifts in the rocker and cocks her head, listening intently to something no one else, not even Kippy the cat, can hear.

“We have to leave,” Olives says with quiet authority. “Things are not going as planned on Grymvald and we are needed. Pack your things. Quickly.”

“I can’t leave,” Henri cries, “Not in the middle of the night and not without telling mom.”

“Henri,” Olive’s tone allows no room for argument. “The rebel leader, our ally in the fight against Oziander, has been taken captive on Grymvald. We cannot allow his knowledge to fall into enemy hands. As for your mother, she made the choice to leave behind her life as a Traveler. She has no memory of it now.”

Softening a bit, Olive pushes against the rocking chair to stand. “If it makes you feel better, time does not run true between the domains. We can be on Grymvald for many months and return here to almost the present moment. Your mother will not even know that you are gone.”

Henri hesitates and then gives a small nod in agreement.

“Good,” Olive says. “Perhaps now that you understand it’s a life and death situation you’ll get out of bed.”

“If Henri’s going, so am I,” Taffy says, sounding determined.

“Me too,” P.J. hooks his elbow around Henri’s neck in comradeship before running to his room to get ready.

“Bring a change of underwear,” Taffy mutters, making Henri smile in the face of whatever doom lies ahead.

There is a flurry of pajamas being shed, backpacks being stuffed, and footwear being retrieved from under the bed. Kippy looks on with interest from the comfort of Henri’s bed.

P.J. returns dressed in jeans and a t-shirt with his backpack and baseball cap in hand. Olive inspects them like a sergeant reviewing the troops. “Well then, are we ready?”

“Pick me up kid,” LB says. “You can’t leave me behind.”

In the most ordinary tone Olive says, “Now, Henri. It’s up to you. It’s time to open your first portal.”

Chapter 5

Tongue Twister

“What?” Henri yelps. “I don’t know how to open a portal. I didn’t even know there were portals until yesterday.”

Olive sighs. “Of course you don’t know how. That’s why LB and I are here. But just because you haven’t done a thing doesn’t mean that it cannot be done.” She smooths the sparkly chiffon layers of her skirt. “First, it’s important to know that every portal operates on the same principle of space time displacement.”

A note from LB appears. “The doll doesn’t know a thing about the quantum world.”

“Of course I don’t know about quantum thingies. I’m not a physicist. But I do know how to help Henri open a portal if you’ll just, how shall I say it, ‘stuff your sticky notes LB.’”

Olive straightens her tiara, “As I was saying, every portal operates on the same principle, but every Traveler creates a portal that is unique in appearance. As your ability develops, Henri, you’ll be able to shape the portals as you wish. Now, close your eyes and clear your mind.”

Olive paces back and forth, her gown making little swishing sounds. “Henri,” Olive says, “You have to stop staring at me in order to close your eyes.” Olive exhales a breathy sigh. “Think of something easy for you to picture in your mind.”

“I like tractors,” P.J. suggests. Henri knows he is fascinated with machinery, the bigger and louder, the better.

“Duh,” Taffy shakes her head no. “Do you want to go through space time on a tractor? I don’t think so! How about a changing room?” she suggests, “like the ones at the Pretty Kitty?”

“Duh yourself,” P.J. glares at Taffy and crosses his arms. “I’m not going anywhere in a girl’s changing room.”

Henri speaks with a confidence she doesn’t really feel. “Okay, I’ve got it,” she says. Closing her eyes Henri concentrates on making the picture inside her mind become real.

“Yes, yes,” Olive says encouragingly. “That’s exactly right. Keep steady. You’re doing fine.”

In the next moment a toothless mouth appears where the door to Henri’s bedroom closet is customarily found. Taffy and P.J. take a step closer to one another, staring in disbelief.

“What?” Taffy begins and P.J. finishes the sentence, “is it?”

Henri can’t believe it. She did it! She opened a portal. “Remember the fun house at the carnival last summer? It had a mouth for an entrance so I just thought about it and, well, here it is.”

Approaching cautiously, Henri pokes the squishy tongue-like surface with her sneaker. Near the entrance, a hangy-down thing drips moist droplets just like in the back of a human throat.

“Well done,” Olive says while her hands attempt something like clapping.

“Yeah kid,” LB adds. “Good job. But did you have to make it so much like a human mouth?”

“Yeah,” Taffy says, craning her neck to peer inside. “I mean it’s incredible, but it’s kind of icky too.”

“Oh get over it,” P.J. says. “It’s exactly like the fun house entrance only more like a real mouth. It’s totally awesome. You’re awesome scuz.”

Henri murmurs, “Thanks,” and asks Olive, “What next?”

“We enter the portal,” Olive says. “You should add some seating and restraints. Portal travel can be a little bumpy at times. Oh, and a view window would be nice. It helps relieve the boredom.”

Wondering how anything so utterly fantastic could ever be boring, Henri complies, thinking of bucket seats and shoulder restraints that magically appear. As an afterthought, she imagines the seats bolted to the floor and, with a mental flourish, adds a cup holder next to every armrest. Deep inside the portal mouth she conjures up a view screen modeled after the picture window in the living room.

Thinking of home reminds Henri of her mom. With tears obscuring her vision she asks in a wobbly voice, “Olive, are you sure I can’t even say good-bye?”

“I know it’s difficult,” Olive says with a hint of sympathy, “but you are faced with an impossible decision. If we are to rescue the rebel leader we must act now.”

Looking back at the bedroom door, Henri whispers, “I love you mom.” Then she steps on to the moist surface of the portal, extending her hand to each of her companions in turn. Her brown eyes flash hints of gold, as she looks at Taffy and P.J. “You don’t have to do this, you know. I’ve no idea what will happen and I don’t want you guys to get hurt.” Her heart flutters against her chest. “We’ll still be best friends if you decide not to come with me.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Taffy says with an imperious wave of her hand.

“I have to go Scuz,” says P.J. “Compared to this, a summer on the farm would be beyond dull. Besides, you ladies need a man around for protection.”

Taffy limits her response to a toss of her reddish-blond curls as she straps herself into the well-cushioned seat. “Ooh,” she sighs delightedly, “comfy.”

P.J. buckles in next to Taffy. Seeing that LB needs a safe place, Henri thinks up a bench seat with cargo webbing around it. She places their backpacks next to him.

“Thanks, kid,” LB writes. “This is better than most of my accommodations.”

Olive sits in a chair with the footrest elevated to support her stiff legs. She nods at Henri to take her place. “Now Henri, just think the words ‘destination Grymvald.’”

A panic-stricken Henri screeches. “How can I do that? I have no idea where, or even when, Grymvald is. How can I think us to someplace I’ve never been?”

“Don’t worry, all you have to do is keep the portal construction active in your mind and think about where we want to go,” Olive says.

Henri chews her lower lip. “What if I forget to think about the portal or where we’re going?”

“Heavens to Betsy. Don’t do that! If the portal collapses we would all be lost in the killing vacuum of space-time. And without the destination beacon in your mind we would not arrive at the correct domain.”

Henri’s face freezes into a mask of fear. “I don’t think I can do this,” she says.

“It’s really not that difficult,” Olive says. “You don’t always think about your name to know that you’re Henri, do you?”

“No,” Henri answers.

“It’s exactly the same thing. The portal and its destination are in your mind. You don’t have to think about it every single moment to keep it intact.”

“But, Olive,” Henri pleads, “Why can’t you do this? You’re a guide and you travel the portals. I’m not ready for this. And what if I kill us all and ruin the rescue of the rebel leader?”

Olive pats Henri’s hand with her plastic fingers and shakes her head no. “Henri,” she explains, “I travel the portals as a passenger. The Committee sends me where I’m needed, or a Traveler, like you, summons me. But I do not have permission to open a portal.”

“You don’t have permission,” Henri repeats. “But that means you can open a portal when it’s really, really important, like now,” she adds hopefully.

“That isn’t an option,” Olive says. The tone of her voice makes it clear there is nothing further to be said on the subject. “I’m sorry, Henri,” Olive apologizes. “You are untried, but that does not mean you are unable to do this very important thing. You must be bold and daring. Ignore the voices in your head that say you cannot. Instead, look within. Believe in yourself as your friends, LB and I do.”

Henri replies with a slight nod of her head and a determined look in her eyes. In an instant, the mouth begins to move, almost imperceptibly at first. Then it begins to build speed like a roller coaster on the downhill side of gravity. The mouth and its occupants start to twist around unseen corners, diving then soaring over invisible terrain. It’s terrifying and yet fun in an amusement park kind of way, except for the uncomfortable sensation that they’ve been swallowed by something that might not ever spit them out.

In the shortest of little whiles, Taffeta and P.J. adjust to the incredible circumstances of their journey.

“Hey,” P.J. swallows thirstily, “There aren’t any drinks in these cup holders.”

“Honestly, P.J.,” Taffy rolls her eyes in disgust. “Do you have to bother Henri about snacks when she’s in the middle of space time travel?”

“I didn’t say anything about snacks,” he says. “But now that you mention it, all this adventure business has made me really hungry.” Seated just short of arm-punching reach, Taffy contents herself with an aggrieved sniff.

A flurry of sticky notes comes their way like darts headed for a bulls-eye. “That’s my department boys and girls,” LB writes. “Drinks and snacks coming up.” Before either P.J. or Taffy can comment, which is to say immediately, they are holding peanut butter and jelly sandwiches on whole grain bread. Glasses of ice, cold milk appear in the cup holders.

P.J. mumbles around the peanut butter on the roof of his mouth, “This jelly is good. It’s really, I don’t know, thick and kind of fruity.”

“That’s because it *is* fruit all mashed up without extra sugar,” Taffy says as she peels back the bread to look inside. “It’s what my mom uses to make PB and J at home. But it’s not as good as yours LB.”

Henri ignores the sandwich on her lap. Her fingernails dig into the steering wheel in front of her as she stares fiercely at the dark view screen.

Olive pats Henri’s clenched fist. “It’s alright. The steering wheel might serve as a visual aid, but it’s not at all necessary. You can let go.”

A sticky note hovers right in front of Henri’s face. “You’re doing great kid,” LB writes in all caps. “Have a sandwich. We can’t have a Traveler operating with low blood sugar. And while you’re at it, turn on the view screen. It’s a little dull back here.”

Staring at the sandwich in her lap, Henri lets go of the wheel. The familiar smell of peanut butter makes her realize that she’s starving. “Mmm,” Henri exhales around a big bite of sandwich. “I don’t think anything has ever tasted so good. Thanks.”

If a sticky note could be strident, this one is. “View screen!”

“Oh,” Henri looks over at Olive puzzled how to comply with LB’s request. She sees a strange expression flash across Olive’s fixed features, bitterness and longing perhaps, disappearing before Henri can assign a word to catalogue the fleeting impression.

“It’s really quite simple,” Olive says in her breathy way. “Just think the view screen on. Or, if it’s easier for you, think up a big red ‘on’ button and then push it.”

P.J. yells from the back, “Do the button. That’s cool.”

A substantial red button appears next to the steering wheel. “I’m kind of busy eating my sandwich now,” Henri says. “Why don’t you punch the button P.J?”

“Really?” P.J. wipes his hands on his t-shirt in spite of the napkin provided by LB. He unbuckles the restraint and heads for the front of the portal mouth. “Way cool.”

Within two steps he loses his footing on the squishy floor. It’s moist just like the inside of a mouth and it ripples in a swallowing kind of way. “Awesome.” Wiping his damp hands on the much-abused t-shirt, P.J. lurches toward the front.

“Now that’s really gross,” Taffy scrunches her face in distaste. It’s unclear if she is referring to the floor or to P.J.’s lack of regard for his clothes.

Stepping carefully between the swallows, P.J makes it to the red button. “Okay, I’m not going to blow us up or anything bad when I push this, right?”

“P.J., it’s totally fine,” Henri says confidently. “Nothing bad is going to happen.”

At the very moment he pushes the button the portal begins to bounce from side to side. “Flingers,” Olive says in the matter of fact tone of someone who has encountered this before.

“Flingers,” Henri squeaks. “You didn’t say anything about flingers before.”

“I believe this is what is meant by on the job training.” Olive’s gown rustles as she shifts in her seat. “Flingers are nothing to worry about.”

A particularly large jolt sends milk sloshing out of the cup holders. “Unless,” Olive says, “there are a lot of them, which seems to be the case.”

LB floods everyone with written instructions. “Check your restraints kids. It’s going to get a little bumpy.”

“You think?” Taffy mutters. “And don’t you dare tell me not to cry over spilt milk.” She dabs at the spots on her favorite red cowboy boots.

The view screen shows the blackest black Henri has ever seen, populated with dots of light that appear from nowhere, clump together, and then ram the portal. “A little guidance from my guide would come in handy right now,” Henri says. “What am I supposed to do? What are these things?”

“Just keep on doing what you’re doing,” Olive says, “and I’ll explain everything.”

“Uh,” Henri says hesitantly, “what exactly am I doing?”

“You’re not scared stiff,” Olive says. “And that’s good because freezing up would collapse the portal and that would be, well, let’s just say that wouldn’t be a good thing at all.”

“Okay,” Henri tosses the sandwich and puts both hands back on the oversized steering wheel. She whispers, “I can do this,” over and over again.

P.J., who is gripping the back of Henri and Olive’s seats, asks, “What exactly is a flinger?”

“I think of them as portal dust bunnies,” Olive says.

“Eew,” Taffy shrieks. “We’re being battered by dirt balls?”

“Well,” Olive shrugs, “If it makes you feel better you can call it space time trash.”

“Totally outstanding,” P.J. says.

“Big ick,” Taffy shouts.

“Quiet!” Henri yells. Pointing at P.J. she says, “Get back to your seat and buckle up. I don’t need you breathing down my neck.”

In between silent repetitions of *I can do this, I can do this* Henri turns to Olive. “It would be really helpful to know more about the flingers.”

Smoothing the unruly layers of her gown once again, Olive acknowledges the request with a stiff nod of her head. “Of course. Flingers are little bits of portal material that flake off during transit.”

“Just like dead skin,” P.J. yells from the back.

Henri ignores him and leans closer to Olive. Her doll eyes blink heavily. “When enough of them accumulate they try to go home, so to speak, by rejoining any open portal, like the one we’re traveling in now.”

“So we really are being attacked by dirt,” a horrified Taffy cannot comprehend such a fate.

“Oh, don’t be such a clean freak,” P.J. fastens his restraint with a satisfying metal click. “If it makes you feel better, it’s not like Earth dirt. Flingers are probably more like microscopic bits of energy. Right, Olive?”

“I don’t trouble myself with operational details of the universe,” Olive says. “But yes, it would be more accurate to think of the flingers as particles or some such sub-atomic matter. They are the stuff of stars in search of a new form.”

“The stuff of stars,” Henri repeats. “You said that before when you were telling us about Oziander. But what exactly does it mean?”

Managing a stern look in spite of her immobile face Olive speaks in a hushed voice. “Travelers, particularly young ones, should not speak his name while in transit.”

Henri insists, “But I want to understand. I need to know my part in all of this craziness so I can help the rebels and protect my friends.”

Olive sighs. “It is good that your desire to know is tied to concern for others. But understanding is a life long endeavor. Be patient Henri. We have to make it to Grymvald first.

Henri’s lips press together in an obstinate line, but she nods her head in agreement, for now. It’s only when the next round of flingers hit that Henri realizes she has been making the portal work without consciously thinking about it. *Maybe she can be a Traveler after all.*

“Incoming,” P.J. shouts as the next round of flingers hit, tossing them like salad.

LB sticks a note on the view screen, “Anybody feeling queasy?”

“Not me,” says Taffy, dabbing at the sheen of sweat on her upper lip.

“Well,” Olive sniffs, “It’s time to do something about these little devils before they knock us off course.”

Henri’s newfound sense of ease evaporates immediately. “Uh, what actually happens if we’re knocked off course?”

“If the flingers accumulate enough mass they can redirect the portal to any place in any time,” Olive says with an edge to her wheezy voice. “Frankly, I don’t feel like finding my way back from some dismal place forgotten by time.” Her doll head squeaks as she turns to Henri. “You’re wasting a lot of energy in the portal connection. Shut down everything except minimal life support.”

Henri can feel the blood drain from her cheeks, leaving behind a ghostly reflection of her face.

“Don’t look so distressed,” Olive pats Henri’s cheek. “It’s not at all uncommon for new Travelers to use more power than needed. And you have more power to control than most. It’s

unfortunate that you have to master a more advanced technique on your first journey, but it can't be helped."

Craning her head to look at her friends, Henri's mouth goes dry. *Their lives are in my hands*. P.J. and Taffy nod encouragement and give her a thumbs-up.

From deep within the recesses of her gown, Olive pulls out a scrap of paper worn thin along the fold lines. Her lips move imperceptibly as she reads the spidery writing on the page. She smiles reassuringly at Henri, "Oh, yes. It's coming back to me now."

"I don't mean to be disrespectful, Olive but don't you already know what to do?"

"Good grief, " Olive says. "I can't hold everything in this little doll's head. Now don't distract me with nonsense unless you'd like to end up so far away from anywhere that none of us ever get back. Hmm?" Silence follows. "Right then," Olive continues. "Let's lose these little flingers once and for all."

"First things first," Olive says. "You must reduce the energy output." She glances down at the paper again. "In order to reduce the energy level you must stop trying so hard to run the portal and simply let the portal run."

Seeing the mystified look on Henri's face, she tries another explanation. "You've already given the portal its destination, now you must relax. Our lives depend on it."

"That's not a very relaxing thought," Henri says.

"You must quiet your mind," Olive says. "Close your eyes and go to a peaceful place."

Henri nods her head.

"Good," Olive sounds relieved.

Henri sees a narrow, Earth-worn trail made by tractors and cattle. Walking past rows of corn, she feels the mid-summer sun on the top of her bare feet as a delicious powder of dust

builds up between her toes. Henri turns down a narrow path overlooking a ravine where the sound of rushing water fills her ears. She scrambles down the dirt path and sits on a flat rock, dipping her feet in the cool creek.

“Very good,” Olive’s voice is coming from very far away. “Keep the feeling of that place in your mind and, slowly, open your eyes.”

“It’s alright,” Henri murmurs. “I mean I’m alright.” Exhaling, she asks Olive, “What do I need to do?”

Smoothing the paper in her hand, Olive gives Henri an appraising look and a nod of approval. “Just think of the portal being smaller on the outside but not on the inside,” she says.

Henri straightens her shoulders and calls up an outside view of the portal on the screen. Then she studies the image of the wide-open fun house mouth and imagines the lips closed. Amazingly, it works. Eyes narrow with concentration, Henri continues to stare at the outside image of the portal, watching as it grows smaller and smaller. It feels a bit like yawning with your mouth closed, keeping the outside shut and the inside open.

“Excellent, Henri.” Olive says. The flingers begin to fall away, taking their points of light with them as the portal continues its journey in inky blackness.

Taffy suddenly asks, “Why aren’t there any stars?”

“I bet it’s because we’re not in outer space P.J. says. “If we’re traveling between domains it must be more like a worm hole.”

Turning her head all the way round, Olive looks back at P.J.

“Whoa,” Taffy chokes out. “That’s creepy.”

“P.J., are you a student of astrophysics?” Olive says and then swivels her head to face forward.

“Uh, no,” P.J. stammers. “I mean, not really. My dad and I put together a telescope one time and I like reading about science and math, but I’m not an astrophysicist, at least not yet.”

Henri hears Olive’s breathy murmur, “Remarkable. I wonder if he’s Guardian material?” Before Henri can ask what she means, the portal begins to heave in a motion rather like convulsive swallowing.

Taffy and P.J. scream in unison, but whether it is in abject fear or the delicious terror of riding a one-of-a-kind rollercoaster Henri can’t tell.

“Quiet,” Olive bellows. “If it were possible you’d give me a headache. This is perfectly normal. We’re in the approach zone, which is always a bit bumpy. Henri, this is a rather sensitive maneuver. Keep your wits about you.”

“As if I have any left,” Henri says. “How do I land a portal?”

Olive’s doll mouth hints at a smile. “It’s just like landing a plane only you don’t have any controls. You use your mind.”

“Thanks Olive. That’s really helpful considering I’ve never flown a plane.” Henri thinks a stick shift control into place between the two front seats. She puts the lever into gear and throttles back, thankful that her dad used to let her ride on the tractor with him. *No*, Henri thinks. *Don’t think about dad and the accident. Not now.*

The portal immediately plunges downward. Her stomach lurches into her throat. *This must be what it feels like to fall off a cliff*, Henri thinks.

With her index finger crooked like a question mark Olive says, “You might want to slow down a bit and even out our descent.”

Henri imagines the big foot pedals on the tractor and pushes down on the brake. The portal slows abruptly, flattening everyone against the backs of their bucket seats.

“Sorry about that,” Henri says to her passengers. Coordinating the clutch pedal with the stick shift, Henri levels the portal. *Next time*, Henri thinks, *I’ll add a dashboard even if Olive says I don’t need it.*

The portal continues its swallowing action, each ripple stronger than the last. Unable to stop the convulsive motion, a worried Henri looks at Olive. “Is this normal?”

“Well, it’s normal for you at this stage of your development,” Olive says. “The portal mimics your biological state. Stomach feeling a bit jumpy?”

“What do you think?”

“It’s unpleasant,” Olive agrees, “but I’ve experienced far worse with other new Travelers. Just think soothing thoughts, keep us steady, and for heaven’s sake don’t let the portal collapse.”

Nervous laughter bubbles up in Henri’s throat as the portal gives a final convulsive ripple. Everything goes dark as she tumbles through the air.

Chapter 6

Gargantua

Someone is poking her with a stick. Henri's eyes flutter open to see that she has landed on a dead branch. Her very next thought is of her friends. "Taffy, P.J.," she calls. Her voice is shrill and panicky. "LB, Olive! Where are you?"

"Hush," Olive answers with an edge to her voice. "Did you forget that our presence here is a secret? Now come over here and help me up. And try to remember that we're not in your back yard anymore."

Henri tugs at the thorny branches that hold Olive captive. After tearing through yards of gossamer fabric, Olive is finally free. Messages from LB come flying toward them from the direction of a rocky outcrop. Henri runs, following the sticky note trail with an awful vision of her friends lying hurt or worse.

When she arrives there is only LB shooting a stream of notes straight up like a fountain. Looking up, Henri sees Taffy and P.J. sitting on a bench-like branch of a gnarled tree.

"Hey over here," P.J. calls. "We climbed up to see if we could find you."

Scrambling down, Taffy dusts off her pants. "Are you okay?" she says. "I was so worried when I didn't see you."

P.J. drops awkwardly from the branch, knocking Henri and Taffy to the ground as he falls beside them. LB joins the reunion with a spew of silly notes, causing the friends to laugh uncontrollably.

Walking toward them with a strange dignity in spite of her tattered gown, Olive makes a chirp-like sound. Shrugging her shoulders she says, "There's a knack to laughter, isn't there?"

Obviously, it's a thing in which each of you excel. And LB, I certainly expected a bit more gravitas from you."

A note loops through the air landing gently in Olive's hair next to a tangle of briars.

"Lighten up, doll. A box has got to have some fun every couple of centuries."

Olive picks at the troublesome briars. "So you say. But now, if you've had your fun, it's time to set up camp."

"I'm on it," LB notes.

Seeing Olive struggle with her hair, Taffy jumps up and asks, "May I help?"

"Oh my yes," Olive says. "It may be synthetic, but a girl does care about her hair."

Digging into her shoulder bag Taffy pulls out a wide-toothed comb and starts removing the stubborn briars one by one.

"I wonder where our backpacks are?" P.J. says as he looks around. The sky is smudged with the pink rose and purple of early evening. A light breeze stirs an ivory crystalline dust, piling it at the base of worn out looking trees.

Henri's legs appear willing to cooperate so she rolls to her feet, following P.J. to look for their missing stuff.

"Olive, Taffy," she calls, "we're going to look around for the backpacks." Sensing concern in Olive's look Henri says, "Don't worry, we won't go far."

As they walk away, P.J. says, "Wow Scuz, that was some ride. Very impressive for a girl."

Henri lets her elbow answer, giving P.J. a good, stiff jab in his ribs.

Taffy turns her attention to Olive's hair. "It's a very lovely color, your hair I mean."

Not knowing what else to say, Taffy decides to give Olive an up-do with soft ringlets around

the face and base of the neck. Satisfied with the effect, Taffy retrieves a hand mirror from her bag and holds it up so Olive can behold her handiwork.

“Ah, that’s very nice. Thank you, Taffeta.” Olive pauses to find the right word as a dreamy look softens her immobile face. “It reminds of something quite pleasant from before.”

“Before what?” Taffy asks.

“Before now my dear,” Olive replies as if her answer makes perfect sense. “Now there, I’ve quite lost track of time. Let’s see if LB has arranged our accommodations.”

Stuffing the brush and mirror back into the deep recesses of her bag, Taffy follows Olive down an overgrown trail, carefully avoiding the thorn bushes that grow along both sides. The path ends abruptly at a rocky ledge, sheltering the area from all but the most watchful of eyes. Nestled against the protective wall, Taffy sees a tent with pointy tops and scalloped edge trim. “Wow!” she says.

With backpacks in hand, Henri approaches from a stand of scrubby trees. “We found the” Her eyes bulge as she sees the tents. “Awesome. It’s like something out of medieval times. Only, where are the knights and jousters?”

Standing by her side P.J. adds, “Don’t forget the ladies in the cone hats handing out hankies or whatever it was they gave to the knights.”

“They weren’t cone hats,” Taffy says. “They were called henin, a style of hat worn in the early part of the 15th century, mostly on the continent.”

“Hmm,” P.J. scratches his head. “That’s really obscure. How do you know that?”

Taffy glares at P.J. “Why shouldn’t I know that? Just because you don’t know a hat from a hedgehog doesn’t mean it isn’t worth knowing.”

P.J. looks helplessly at Henri who shrugs her shoulders. Smiling at Taffy she says, “I don’t know a hat from a hedgehog either, but I’m glad that you do. And now, thanks to you, I know a new word.”

“Uh, me too,” P.J. adds. “Anyway it’s good to know weird stuff.”

Before her friends can really start fighting, Henri changes the subject. “Let’s check out the tent.”

Stepping inside, Henri’s feet sink into the plush layers of oriental rugs that cover the ground. Large windows, invisible on the outside, bathe the wall tapestries in the last light of day. Amber and crimson floor cushions are stacked around a low table as if awaiting guests. “How in the world did you do this, LB?”

A note lands in Henri’s free hand. “I’d love to tell you, kid. But The Committee likes to keep their secrets. Just enjoy. You earned it after today.”

Taffy calls from the inner recesses of the tent, “I can’t believe it. There’s a bathroom.” The sound of running water follows, “And a shower too.”

P.J.’s head appears around the corner of a doorway, “Check this out. These bedrooms look just like the ones at your house, Henri.”

Henri’s heart leaps at the mention of anything like home. “It’s so weird.” She walks around a replica of her bedroom, touching things and peering into the jumbled-up closet. Staring at P.J. and a tidied-up Taffy, Henri wonders aloud, “How can this be?”

Olive’s breathy squeak of a voice startles them. The absence of her swishy princess get-up gives no warning of her presence. She is dressed in an ankle length brown robe with a low-slung leather belt and a pointed hood that frames the curls around her face. Seating herself in the white rocker as she did at their first meeting, she gestures for them to sit.

Taffy says, “Why have you changed clothes?”

As if she’s momentarily forgotten that her outfit is different, Olive replies with a distracted, “Hmm?”

“You know,” P.J. points to Olive’s outfit, “What’s up with the monk’s robe?”

“When in Grymvald, it is wise to dress as Grymvaldians do.”

Henri rubs her eyes, wondering why Olive’s answers always lead to more questions.

Taffeta kicks P.J.’s leg.

“So,” he grimaces rubbing his shin, “Now that we’re here, what’s our plan?”

“Ah yes. The plan.” Olive sighs as if she hasn’t given it a thought.

P.J. looks over his shoulder before whispering, “Are we undercover? You know, like spies?”

“Since our presence is unofficial, I suppose we are spies in a matter of speaking,” Olive says.

“Well then,” Taffy wants to know, “What’s our mission?”

Henri sprawls on her bed, hugging a corner of the familiar striped comforter to her chest.

With a deliberate opening and closing of her eyes Olive glances at Henri, “That’s a very good question, Taffeta, but one that will have to wait until tomorrow. Now it’s time to go to the main room and have supper. Then you must all rest, especially Henri. She has made her first journey as a Traveler look easy. But believe me when I tell you that it comes at a cost.”

P.J. and Taffy roust Henri out of the bed and walk on either side of her into the main room. LB is comfortably positioned on a plush cushion at the table. If it is possible for a box to look smug then LB most certainly does.

The low table is laden with food that smells so delicious Henri is surprised by a growl from her stomach. The friends seat themselves and begin to sample from the variety of dishes. Speaking for LB Olive explains, “We thought a little comfort food was in order after such an exciting day.”

“Ooh,” Taffy makes a contented sigh, “French fries.”

“Yes,” Olive continues, “but they’re baked not fried.”

“Umm,” P.J. mumbles around a mouthful of baked chicken fingers. “Now this is good stuff.”

A slightly miffed LB spits out a note, “What were you expecting? Cafeteria food?”

“I don’t know,” P.J. says. “I’ve never met a lunch box that does all the things you can do.” He dips a carrot stick into bean dip. “I wonder how it works.” He glances at his bedroom door. “Excuse me.”

Henri grabs a handful of green beans, chewing carefully. The spicy seasoning makes her mouth water for more. Looking at the selection, she chooses red and yellow pepper slices topped off with ranch dressing.

Taffy glances at LB while piling her plate with fresh pineapple wedges and three chocolate-dipped strawberries. “I don’t know how you do it LB. But that doesn’t change the fact that what you do is incredible.”

A Valentine pink note flutters through the air like a beating heart. “Thank you, dear. You’ve made an old box blush.”

P.J. flops down, spilling a stack of comic books next to the table. Eating with one hand and flipping through the pages with the other, P.J. calls out phrases of interest. Things like molecular reconsolidation, energy matter redistribution, and temporal displacements.

“What in the world are you talking about, P.J?” Henri says.

“This,” he replies, pointing with a chicken finger to a place on the page.

“I didn’t know that comic books were a source of scientific know-how,” Taffy says.

“These are *not* comic books,” P.J. glares at Taffy. “They’re amazing stories about real scientists and weird stuff that nobody understands about the universe. You won’t find articles about faux fur in here.”

Before her friends can start arguing again Henri says, “What are you looking for?”

“I’m looking for answers to, well, everything,” P.J. shrugs. “How does LB conjure up the food and tents and stuff, what exactly is a portal, where are we, and most of all, when exactly are we?”

“I’ve been wondering about that too,” a weary Henri yawns. “But I have a feeling the answers aren’t in those books, or any others for that matter. Olive, how long have we been gone in Earth time?”

“You needn’t worry about your mother,” Olive says softly. “With the time distortion between portals only minutes have passed on Earth.”

“LB,” Olive prompts. “As Henri’s Magnus, don’t you have something for her?”

“What’s a Magnus?” PJ interrupts.

“It means great, kid,” LB writes. “Not great like terrific, but more like a thing of power. I am Henri’s Magnus, sworn to protect and aid her.”

“That’s quite enough LB,” Olive says. “It’s time to give Henri what is rightfully hers.”

LB opens slowly. Henri’s hand hovers over the box, tingling as it did when she touched the leader stones to find the prime. Within a heartbeat the feeling changes to the familiar hum

as she picks up the medallion. Dropping the chain around her neck, Henri looks up to find everyone staring at her.

Hastily, she tucks the medallion inside her shirt. “What’s wrong?”

Exchanging a quick look with Taffy, P.J. answers, “Uh, nothing’s wrong. You were just humming that’s all.”

“You and the necklace were both humming,” Taffy says. “It was pretty.”

“Yeah,” P.J. agrees. “In a strange kind of way.”

Olive stares at Henri. Her gaze is fierce and unblinking. “Now that we have arrived on Grymvald you must never remove the medallion. Do you understand?”

Too tired for words Henri nods.

In a voice that allows no room for disobedience Olive says, “Enough now. It’s time for this particular Traveler to go to bed.”

Henri’s eyes are already fluttering toward sleep. “C’mon,” Taffy says, “let’s get you to bed.”

Walking shoulder to shoulder the three friends are soon swallowed by the shadowy interior, leaving LB and Olive in the dimly lit main room.

“What do you think, doll?” LB speaks directly to Olive’s mind. “Are the two friends Guardian material?” 

Olive answers as if her thoughts are coming from far away. “It’s too soon to say. But it would be most helpful.”

“Does it bother you that we are lying to Henri?”

“My dear LB,” Olive answers aloud. “You are overly sensitive. I suggest that we have not lied at all. We simply haven’t revealed all that we know. Is that not the wiser path?”

“I wouldn’t know,” LB says, “for I am not wise. But I do know that it is cruel.”

Turning her steady gaze toward the box Olive adjusts the belt of her robe. “Henri will be cruelly used on this journey no matter what. I should like to think that what we do is a kindness by comparison.”

Falling silent, the two remain watchful, staring into the darkness where Henri lies sleeping.

P.J. cautiously pokes his head into the room shared by Henri and Taffy. Seeing that they are still asleep in their burrow of blankets and pillows, he walks to the main room. Finding it empty he steps outside, eyes blinking in the clear light of morning. He must not be truly awake. For there, not ten feet away, Olive is talking with two human-sized vegetables. The broccoli-looking one stares at P.J. with droopy basset hound eyes. Even more astonishing, a girl with a cauliflower head strolls over to him on stem-like legs.

Stumbling backward, P.J. lands on the plush carpet at the entrance of the tent. The cauliflower girl stares down at him with large opaque eyes.

“This eez most odd,” she says in a giggly voice. “Eez this how first greetings are exchanged in your domain?”

Speechless for the first time in memory, P.J. sees the pajama clad legs of Henri and Taffy approach.

Scrambling to his feet, P.J. points to the cauliflower girl and then in the direction of outside, shrugs his shoulders and flails his hands without saying a single syllable.

“My thoughts exactly,” Henri says. Acting as if conversation with a vegetable before breakfast is an everyday occurrence, Henri walks forward to make introductions. The

cauliflower girl promptly straightens, appearing to grow by several feet. Henri takes a step back and the vegetable girl shrinks to her original height.

Glancing at Taffy for interspecies communication advice, Henri sits on a bench just inside the tent and invites their guest to do the same. “Hello,” she says. “My name is Henrietta Sharp. I’m from the domain known as Earth. May I ask your name?”

“Ooh wonderful,” says the vegetable girl. “I was worried that your kind may be too limited for speech.”

P.J. erupts with sputtering choking sounds that Taffy silences with a discreet kick to his ankle.

“Oh, the poor mute one. Things are difficult for him, no? Pleez permit me to introduce moi. I am McCauley Flower of zee Cruciferous Clan of Grymvald. But mes amis, as I am certain we will be, they call me Mac.”

Lowering her voice to a whisper Mac points at P.J., “That one, he says me nothing. Does he speak with zee tongue or only make with zee hands?”

A disgruntled P.J. plops down on a cushion next to Taffy, crossing his arms. “I am Presley James Adams, but my friends call me P.J. Believe me, I usually have plenty to say.”

“Sadly true,” Taffy affirms. “I’m Taffeta Bloom, but you can call me Taffy.”

P.J.’s eyes narrow as he glares at Taffy before turning to Mac. “You just caught me by surprise, that’s all. I’ve never met, well, uh, I’ve never talked with anyone like you before.”

Henri gives her friends a look, willing them to get along. “What he’s trying to say Mac is that we’ve only recently arrived and you’re the first Grymvaldian we’ve met.”

“Ah, that is so? Then you are most welcome here. She leans in. “The times they are, how do you say, dangerous? Always the friends are important, now especially so.”

“Getting acquainted I see,” Olive enters the tent as the stalk of broccoli holds aside the opening for her.

Henri leaps to her feet, as do P.J. and Taffy. Mac rises with a loose-limbed grace.

“Pleez, I will make zee introductions, no?”

All is silent except for the swishing sound of Mac’s form fitting leggings as she walks to the green man. Pointing with pride at Henri, P.J. and Taffy, she speaks their names. With great reverence she says, “And this is Sir Brocco Lee, my great uncle twice removed, and the leader of the Cruciferous Clan.”

“We are very pleased to meet you sir,” Henri replies graciously. Taffy and P.J. nod and bow in turn.

“It is I who am most pleased to meet you.” Sir Brocco Lee’s voice is low with a buzzy undertone like bees on a summer afternoon. “I have great respect and affection for the Travelers who have come to our aid during the dark times. I am most pleased to make the acquaintance of one that possesses your great skill and courage.”

“Thank you, sir,” Henri says. “I don’t know about that last part, but I do want to help. Do you know where we’ll find the captive rebel leader?”

“That is a matter best discussed on a full stomach,” Olive says moving with brisk small steps. She leads everyone to the low table heaped with cereal, fruit, toast and eggs. Never a big fan of breakfast Henri stirs her cereal waiting for the milk to make it mushy. Sir Brocco Lee and McCauley Flower sip a steaming pale green liquid as Olive and LB sit quietly.

Turing to Olive Sir Brocco Lee says, “Does the Traveler know of the rebellion?”

“Yes sir,” P.J. says as he mashes the egg on his plate to make the yellow run. “We know a little about the Fake Food Rebellion.”

“Faux Food Rebellion,” Taffy interjects.

Smearing butter on his toast P.J. ignores her. “Olive started to tell us about the Fake Food Rebellion but her stories have a way of never getting to the end.”

LB spits out note, “You got that right, kid.”

Hoping Sir Brocco Lee will answer her questions Henri says, “Would you tell us about the rebellion?”

Sir Brocco Lee nods graciously. His green flowerets brighten as he inhales the steam from his cup before beginning. “In the long years before we were awakened, my ancestors lived as part of the land, arising out of it in one season and returning to it in another. Our roots grew deep and strong in the rich soil of Grymvald, marking the cycle of sun and shadow for years beyond human counting.”

“Excuse me, sir,” P.J. interrupts, “but where we come from vegetables are, uh, well, they’re considered food by some people. I don’t mean to be, uh, rude but is that how it is on Grymvald?”

“It eez the way things used to be,” McCauley Flower says. “Before the soil of Grymvald was poisoned our kind were cultivated and consumed by the people.”

“But,” Taffy squirms, “Does that mean you were eaten by the people? I mean, people eat vegetables on Earth, but sitting here and talking with you it doesn’t seem right somehow.”

Sir Brocco Lee’s drowsy eyes crinkle around the corners as he considers the matter. “And what,” he asks, “does The Traveler have to say in this matter?”

“I never really thought about it before,” Henri sets down her cereal spoon. “There are so many new things to consider I don’t think I even know what I thought I knew before.”

Running his stalk-like fingers through the flowerets that crown his head, Sir Brocco Lee looks at Olive. “She is very wise for one so young.”

Looking at Taffy and P.J. Sir Brocco Lee says, “Your questions are worthy of an answer. Before The Committee awakened my kind our existence was part of a larger cycle of life. We simply went on being from one season to another. The harvest was a natural part of that being, arising and returning.”

“Yes,” McCauley Flower adds, “It eez our porpoise to nourish life just as sun and rain and soil nourish us.”

P.J. can’t stop himself from correcting. “Uh, I think you mean it is your purpose. A porpoise is a kind of water-dwelling mammal, back home anyway.”

Taffy murmurs, “Mute boy speaks.”

Henri wonders if anyone will ever answer her question. “Please Sir Brocco, I need to know how I’m supposed to help the rebellion.”

“Ah yes. I did wander a bit, didn’t I? We Animates have trouble keeping focused on one thing at a time.”

McCauley Flower says, “For us it eez not one thing after another, but all things in connection with each other. Since the awakening, we can think single thoughts but we remain, how do you say, essentially vegetable in nature, no?”

“Sir Brocco Lee and McCauley bring news of the rebel leader’s whereabouts,” Olive says. “He is being held somewhere in Gargantua, Grymvald’s capital city, and we are going there to rescue him.”

Henri stands as if ready to begin the journey. Then she sits quickly, feeling an oppressive weight on her chest where the medallion has hung forgotten until now.

Olive exchanges a knowing look with LB murmuring, "It has begun."

"Henri, are you okay?" Taffy pats her on the shoulder. "You look so pale and kind of sweaty." Turning her attention to Olive she says, "What exactly has begun and what are you doing to my friend?"

"I am doing nothing to Henri," Olive says. "The medallion has awoken. It seeks the companion that our enemy possesses. It desires to be made one with it."

Sir Brocco explains, "It is the responsibility of the Cruciferous Clan to protect Henri and prevent the medallion she wields from falling into the Star Lord's possession."

"Wait a minute," P.J. demands. "Who's this Star Lord person?"

Turning her cauliflower head at an unnatural angle, Mac looks around the room for hidden enemies. "You may know this one as Oziander, the Traveler who broke his vow to protect zee domains. Eet eez zee very one who defiled Grmyvald and was defeated who now grows in power once again."

"That is why we are here," Sir Brocco says. "The Cruciferous Clan is preparing to do battle with the Star Lord. We must stop the poisoning of Grymvald's food and water once and for all. If we do not, Oziander will bring the contagion of fake food to your domain as well."

"First things first," Olive says. "We must recover the leader of the rebellion. His knowledge must not fall into enemy hands."

"Oui," Mac says, pacing around the eating area she intertwines her fingers like overgrown vines. "Gargantua eez a most dangerous place. But we are not without friends."

"Yes," Henri agrees feeling more accustomed to the weight of the medallion. It beats in rhythm with her heart as if it has always been so. "We must go to Gargantua," she says, "and do what we can."

“Well,” LB says with an oversized note, “We’d better pack up.”

“No, wait!” Taffy shrieks. “I haven’t taken a shower yet, or changed clothes, or anything.”

Noting that her friend’s attachment to good grooming is exactly the opposite of P.J.’s more casual approach, Henri reluctantly agrees. “Okay. We’ll clean up. But then we’re off on our rescue mission.”

A short while later the three friends emerge, well scrubbed and with backpacks more thoughtfully stuffed than on their first departure. Olive directs them to step away from the tent as LB double checks, “Everybody out? Alrighty then.”

The walls of the pointy-top tent start to quiver as if whipped by a great wind. The fabric begins to fold itself up end over end as if nothing were inside – no beds, rugs, tables, clothes – nothing. In no time at all, a small square envelope that was their tent flies inside LB’s open lid. Just before it closes a banana and an oatmeal bar head for Henri’s hand. “Kid, you’ve got to eat breakfast,” LB’s note says. “Didn’t anybody ever tell you it’s the most important meal of the day?”

Henri smiles, shaking off her worry about the rescue mission. “I might have heard that somewhere before.”

“Hey, I could use a snack too,” P.J. says with his hand stretched out.

“Of course you could,” LB says. “But until you ask politely the box is closed.” LB snaps shut with a resounding click.

Adjusting the hood over her curls Olive says, “Shall we? The path lies just ahead.”

Looking around the clearing as if a ride is just out of sight P.J. says, “So, how are we getting to Gargantua? Is Henri going to open a portal for us?”

“Are you quite mad?” Mac says. Her white head shrivels as her stem-like spine extends several inches.

What?” P.J. tugs at his cap. “What’d I say?”

In a voice somewhere between a boom and a rumble Sir Brocco explains, “It is very dangerous to open a portal when traveling from place to place within a domain.”

“Oui,” Mac says, “there is zee danger of tearing a hole in zee space time continuum so that zee domains collapse together in a big kaboom.”

“And,” Sir Brocco says, “portal travel within a domain will alert the Star Lord of the Traveler’s presence. Something, I assure you, we want to avoid as long as possible.”

“Okay, okay,” P.J. says. “Portal travel is out.” Running a few steps ahead to walk next to Olive he asks, “How are you going to get us to Gargantua?”

Olive glares at him. “Young man, do I look like a bus?”

Waiting for Henri to catch up P.J. says, “I guess we’re going to walk.”

“Looks like,” Henri says.

Chapter 7

The Rebellion

The friends walk in companionable silence with Olive leading the way. Sir Brocco covers their rear flank making a solid thrumming sound with each step, while Mac flits in and out of sight, her neck extending and lowering like a periscope in search of danger.

Henri takes in her surroundings, thinking that Grymvald is a lot like Earth. The sun is yellow, the sky is blue, and the dirt is brown. It is unnaturally quiet though. There is no bird song, not even the chirp of an insect.

Pausing for a moment to snug the straps that secure LB to her backpack, Henri falls into step next to Sir Brocco. He looks down at her with knowing eyes but remains silent. In the distance, insults fly between Taffy and P.J. Henri breathes in the quiet, enjoying the moment.

The path winds in and out of malnourished trees, their leaves pale with a coating of white dust. Henri looks up at Sir Brocco, wondering how it can feel so normal to walk next to a creature so strange.

As if reading her thoughts, Sir Brocco Lee strokes his chin with leafy fingers. “I to have experienced many strange things. It’s enough to make my poor head sprout.” As if to prove his words, Sir Brocco points to the yellowish clumps of flowerets peeking through his dark green head.

Henri laughs, a spring bubbling up from deep inside. The hard and heavy feeling in her chest dissolves, washed away by a flash flood of tears.

“Good for you kid,” LB’s note reads. “I always say laugh in the face of danger, especially life and death situations.”

Looking up at Sir Brocco Henri asks, “Is this is a life and death situation?”

Sir Brocco’s eyes close for a moment and then he looks ahead at Taffy and P.J. Henri follows his gaze as the steps tick by. Finally he speaks. “I do not know if it is precisely life and death. But I do know that many lives will be touched by the decisions we make. I sincerely hope that none will be lost because of what we must do.”

“And exactly what is it that we must do?” Henri says.

“That will be revealed in time.” Henri jumps at Olive’s squeaky voice, unaware that she has circled back behind them.

LB produces another note, “She’s sneaky, huh kid?”

“Yes she is,” Henri agrees. “Sneaky and secretive.”

With a determined look Henri plants herself in Olive’s path. “I may be a child and I may not be a very good Traveler yet, but I need to know how we’re supposed to pull off this rescue mission and what happens after that?” Surprised at her boldness, Henri stammers to an end. “I, I don’t mean to be rude. I just need to know, that’s all.”

Olive’s immobile face somehow produces a glare. “Of course you need to know Henri. It’s just that some things must be told over time.”

Dropping back to walk with Henri, P.J. asks, “Is that why you never actually finish telling a story?”

“Yeah,” Taffy takes her place at Henri’s side. “Why is that?”

Olive blinks. Her eyes click shut and linger before clicking open. “Is no one in this group interested in getting to Gargantua?”

“Of course we are,” Henri says. “I just want to know, well, everything actually. But I’d settle for knowing about the Fake Food Rebellion and what that has to do with the Star Lord.”

“Really,” Olive says. “Why not ask for the history of the cosmos before luncheon?” Fixing her impenetrable gaze on P.J. and Taffy she says, “You two are not helping.” She sighs, looking down at her monk sandals for inspiration. “I’m a reasonable being.” When no one chimes in to agree she straightens her shoulders. “This is what we shall do.” We shall walk *and* talk.”

“What eez it we are talking?” Mac says as her head swivels down to her shoulders.

Sir Brocco’s voice rumbles. “The Traveler and her companions wish to learn more of the events that have brought them to Grymvald.” He inclines his head toward Olive, “With your permission, I will oblige by telling the story of the rebellion.”

“By all means,” Olive says. “Just as long as everyone is talking *and* walking.”

In a low undertone like the drone of insects Sir Brocco begins the story from a long ago time. “What I tell you now is from the mouths of those who were awakened many generations before me.” A sudden breeze kicks up a fine dust that causes the friends to cough and sneeze.

Sir Brocco twists his stalk-like neck in all directions. Henri wonders what he’s looking for. He extends his arms upward, sprouting leaves that curl and climb on new nubs to create a dense canopy. Satisfied that they are safe from spying eyes, Sir Brocco continues in the voice that reminds Henri of her music teacher, except that it buzzes in her toes rather than her cheekbones.

“When The Committee learned that Oziander sought to increase his power by dealing with the Venai, he was punished.” The leaves on Sir Brocco Lee’s arms stand on end just as fine hairs on the back of the neck do at the thought of something creepy.

“The Venai are priests who practice the darkest arts. It is they who created the vile maledictus, a receptacle for much of the Star Lord’s power. After his judgment by The Committee his powers were channeled into the medallion that Henri now wears. The taking of a Traveler’s power is called a sanction.”

His eyes narrow as he looks at Henri. “After the sanction the Star Lord was confined on Grymvald, his prison. Confinement is the worst of all punishments for a Traveler who has freely roamed the cosmos.

Henri can’t help thinking that her life had been much happier before becoming a Traveler. But she sets the thought aside. “How was Oziander stripped of his power?”

“Hmm,” Sir Brocco winces. “None of my kind knows the particulars of that wretched event.” Dropping his voice again to the rumble of distant thunder Sir Brocco shivers, causing the canopy to retract. He rubs his pod-like hands together as if washing away what knowledge he has.

“It is said that Oziander went quite mad, speaking vile curses one moment and screaming that his soul was not his own in the next. To sanction a Traveler is to burn away their power with the icy fire of the stars themselves. It can be agony for both Travelers.”

“Both Travelers?” Henri says.

“Ah me yes,” Sir Brocco shakes his sprouted head. “The Traveler who cleansed the maledictus, transforming it into the medallion you now wear, would have suffered horribly if Oziander resisted. All accounts say he did resist with great ferocity.”

Henri’s heart pounds, amplified by the medallion’s twin beat. *Mom*, she wonders, *was that you? Did you sanction Oziander and then lose your memory?*

Sir Brocco sighs and his shoulders stoop. "I know no more of such terrible things," he shudders. "Nor do I wish to."

Passing clouds dim the morning sun, reflecting the darkened mood of the companions as they walk in silence.

Taffy links arms with Henri. "Sir Brocco, what about the necklace, uh, maledictus that he still has? Olive said that the Star Lord possesses a companion to the one Henri wears. Where did that come from?"

Kicking a small stone down the path before him P.J. mutters, "Just like a girl to ask about jewelry."

Returning to the group from her patrol Mac says, "Ah no, monsieur P.J. Zees thing he wears eez not, how do you say, an adornment, no? Eez a talisman; a zhing of treachery from the Venai."

Sir Brocco's baggy eyes look sadder than usual. "It was not known, even by The Committee, that the Venai had created a second maledictus. Though much of the Star Lord's power was stripped away during the act of sanction we now know, to our great sorrow, that some portion of his will was channeled into the companion maledictus. It is rumored that much of his former power has returned. With an unwavering malice for all living things he prepares to crush Grymvald. If we cannot defeat him, I fear that your world will be next, Traveler."

"That kind of explains why we're here," P.J. says. "But what about the Fake Food Rebellion? You still haven't told us about that."

"Faux Food Rebellion," Taffy hisses.

Two red spots appear on P.J.'s cheeks. "Look here, Taffeta, fake is just as good a word as faux and I'm tired of hearing about it. Okay?"

Taffy is all innocence. “If that’s what you prefer,” she says sweetly.

“How satisfying to see that you two get on so well together,” Olive says. She points in the direction from which she has just arrived. “I found an abandoned farmstead up ahead. We’ll stop there for lunch.”

LB flies through the air into Olive’s outstretched arms and she walks away. Soon they are both out of sight. A sticky note hovers within Henri’s grasp, which she reads aloud. “See you in a few minutes, kids.”

“You know the weirdest thing of all?” Henri says. “A magic lunch box doesn’t seem all that strange anymore.”

“Yeah,” P.J. says. “Even that field of giant sunflowers that turned to follow us as we passed didn’t seem crazy like it would at home. But I still wonder how it’s done. I mean, how can a box read minds and propel itself through space? And how does Olive move so fast with those little doll steps?”

“And where do LB’s sticky notes go?” Taffy wonders aloud. “Have you ever noticed that they never stick around?” She giggles.

“Eez amazing, no?” Mac agrees. “What do you say grand uncle?”

Yellow and green flowerets shower the ground as Sir Brocco scratches his head. “I agree with The Traveler,” he says. “What was once strange is now normal. It is wondrous, but I do miss the simple ways of being vegetable.”

When they arrive at the abandoned farmhouse there is no sign of Olive or LB. Mac and P.J. go in first. Mac’s neck stretches through the front door then retracts as she smiles giving the all clear. Sir Brocco takes Taffy’s hand and they walk through the door together, with Henri right behind.

The inside of the house is spooky, as if the people who lived there had just stepped out. A loaf of bread lies stone-like on a long trestle table with wooden bowls ready to receive food that was never served.

The back door creaks open flooding the room with light. Mac's hand wraps vine-like around P.J.'s arm pulling him toward a corner. The figure stands in the doorway casting a knife-like shadow that slices across the room.

A familiar voice calls, "Ah, there you." Olive moves into the room adjusting her robe as if flicking away the shadows that had shrouded her a moment before. "Come along," she says. "We're eating outside. This house is really quite depressing."

Mac unwraps her grasp on P.J.'s arm quickly as if it never happened. She shrugs and follows Olive.

P.J. mutters, "Human or vegetable, girls are weird."

Outside everyone gathers around a red-checked cloth spread beneath a gnarled oak. A bright red plate is piled high with turkey sandwiches right next to a bowl of salsa surrounded by blue corn tortilla chips.

"What's this grass stuff on the sandwich?" Henri says.

"It's not grass," LB slaps the note on her nose. "These are spicy alfalfa sprouts. Try 'em."

Henri takes a small bite and chews cautiously. "Hmm. Not bad," she says.

"Wait'll you taste dessert," LB writes. "My apple oatmeal cookies are to die for."

In between bites, Henri toys with the chain at her neck feeling a wave of weariness wash over her. Whether it is the medallion or the morning's walk she cannot tell.

They eat in silence for a time as Sir Brocco and Mac sip their green drink and talk quietly with Olive.

“LB,” Taffy asks, “Where did the people go? It’s as if they just walked away.”

A pink note lands gently next to Taffy’s plate. “That’s exactly what they did. Went freaky and left, headed for Gargantua most likely.”

“But why?” Taffy adds a glob of mustard to her sandwich. “Why would they leave their home and all of their things?”

“May I?” Mac sets down her green drink. “It eez one of the, how do you say, tragedies of Grymvald.” Her voice is barely more than a whisper. “When Oziander was confined here he unleashed his anger on zee whole of Grymvald.”

“What did he do?” Taffy and P.J. ask in unison.

Henri says, “He poisoned the land.”

Mac’s arms coil around her body, wrapping the way ivy clings to a tree. “Yes. Zees is so. But how do you come to know this Traveler?”

“It’s just a feeling,” Henri shrugs. “But I don’t know exactly what Oziander did. I hope you can tell us that bit.”

Olive clears her throat. “It is time to resume our journey. Please step back so that LB can clean up.”

“Why is it,” P.J. grabs a handful of cookies, “that every time we’re about to hear something interesting she makes sure we don’t?”

“P.J.,” Olive says sharply, “The satisfaction of your insatiable curiosity is not the reason we are here.” Her fixed smile seems to show more teeth than usual. “Now, everyone step back

please. Unless you would like to experience LB's inter-dimensional reality in a very personal way."

Scrambling to P.J.'s defense Henri asks, "What do you mean by inter-dimensional reality?" Taffy's lips are fixed in a thin, determined line as she stands shoulder to shoulder with Henri.

"Now kids," LB's note explains, "Olive has an unusual sense of humor. Nobody is going to experience inter-dimensional reality."

"That's good," Henri says. "But what exactly is it anyway?"

"Hmm," LB scribbles on a piece of paper. "The simplest questions often have very complex answers. For now, let's just say that I have the ability to manipulate matter, compliments of The Committee. So when I clean up after a meal I'm squeezing that which remains into something very dense and small."

"Kind of like a trash compacter," Taffy says.

"Not exactly dear girl," LB says. "But it's close enough for now."

Henri persists, "But what would happen if we were caught up in your, uh, matter compacter?"

"I don't know for sure," LB writes. "I've never condensed a person. Theoretically you could be reconstituted in your original form – with the possibility of a few molecular variables."

"Young people and your questions," Olive sighs. "How do adults get anything done on Earth? We have many miles to go before nightfall. Sir Brocco if you will be so kind as to act as rear scout, perhaps Mac will talk with these walking question marks."

With the compromise in place they leave the abandoned farm and resume their journey. Mac begins to speak without prompting.

“Grymvald, eet eez a rather sad story, best told on a sunny day like this when despair is not so close, no?” Mac says. The three friends can’t help smiling. At last, their questions will be answered.

“Grymvald was once a jewel of indescribable loveliness,” Mac’s pale cheeks brighten at the memory. “The sun was brilliant exactly when it should be but stepped gracefully into shadow when it was time for rain. Flyers, crawlers, slitherers, plants, trees, and legged creatures of every kind flourished. All things, from the least to the mightiest, were part of a larger reality, the sacred spirit that connected all life on Grymvald.” Mac’s French accent disappears as she channels the voices of her ancestors.

“Alas, after the Star Lord was sanctioned and could no longer travel the cosmos, he directed his wrath and his quest for power toward Grymvald. He was determined to destroy what had become his prison and that is exactly what he did.”

Mac presses her crimson lips together and her wide eyes crinkle almost all the way shut as if to hold back tears. Henri can’t imagine the power a Traveler must possess to destroy a world and its inhabitants.

Towering trees shelter the rutted county road but a granular dust, like fine white sand, dulls their leaves. Farmland lies partially plowed and unplanted. Other fields show scraggly vegetation barely able to push their heads above ground. More of the fine dust collects in the furrows and blows upward in spirals at the least breath of wind. Stooping to dip her index finger into a pile of the white powder Henri brings it toward the tip of her tongue. Before one can touch the other, Mac’s hand wraps around Henri’s wrist.

“No, Traveler,” she cautions. “Do not taste the doom of Grymvald.”

“Doom of Grymvald,” Henri repeats. “What do you mean Mac? What is this stuff anyway?”

P.J. says, “It kind of looks like sugar.” He too dips his finger into the white stuff, but after a fierce look from Mac, hastily rubs it off on the side of his pants.

Mac scratches her head causing a shower of flowerets to fall. “You have something on your Earth domain called sugar, no?”

“Well sure, we have sugar,” P.J. says. “But it tastes good and it doesn’t hurt anybody.”

Henri keeps quiet but thinks about her nighttime pantry raids for anything sweet.

“Zees is not a, how do you say, condiment? Eet eez a plague, a poison that almost destroyed Grymvald before and is doing so once more.” Mac’s eyes fill with pale green tears.

Taffy puts her arms around Mac, leaning in close until their heads touch. “I am so very sorry Mac. I can’t imagine how hard this must be for you.” She pulls out a tissue and blots Mac’s eyes while speaking softly. “You really do have the most wonderfully long eye lashes.”

Laughing, Mac says, “You zhink zo?”

“Oui,” Taffy says. “Certainment.”

“Oh, mademoiselle Taffeta you make me feel zo much more happy. Eet eez a sad story and even more the sadness because eet eez happening again, non. But, I continue.”

“The Star Lord was patient in his anger and his revenge was well planned.” Mac walks around a pile of the crystalline dust. “He began to seduce the greedy on Grymvald with the promise of wealth and more of everything.”

“It began innocently enough with the mining of Suchronos. Zhis is a leetle bit like rock candy in your tongue.”

Henri arches a questioning eyebrow at Taffy and P.J. to see if they have noticed the return of Mac's accent.

“Zhees substance eez plentiful in the westernmost mountains and though not so nourishing for zee body eet eez not harmful in its natural state. But zee Venai, they use their arcane knowledge to alter the Suchronos. They make it irresistible, delicious beyond belief but not satisfying, no? To eat some is to desire more and still more until sadly one eez changed into a Suchronyte.”

“Wow,” P.J. says. “Is that like being a sweet freak?”

Mac shrugs. “I am not knowing about what you call zee sweet freaks. But to become a Suchronyte eez to lose everything precious, health, loved ones, freedom. Eet eez the worst kind of slavery.”

“What happens to someone who becomes a Suchronyte?” Taffy asks.

A single tear shimmers on Mac's cheek as she whispers. “Zhey are empty shells, shadow people of skin on bone with malevolent amber eyes. Burned up by their desire for the substance the Star Lord eagerly supplies, they are his tools, his eyes and ears and, worst of all, they are no longer truly alive. The Fake Food Rebellion happened before I was a sprout. But Sir Brocco, he tells me that a few of the humans were resistant to the Suchronos. They banded together with the Animates of The Cruciferous Clan to halt production of zhees poison. With the help of Aduwanae it was done.”

“And who,” Henri asks, “is Aduwanae?”

“Ah,” Mac inhales sharply, “Aduwanae eez not a who. Eez more a somezhing that dwells in the sacred mountain.” She touches her forehead and then the place where her heart must be.

“You zee,” Mac says, “Aduwanae caused the great torrent that washed the poison from the land. The rebels, plant, animal, and human, fought valiantly, and with Adwanae’s help, defeated zee armies of zee Star Lord. Alas, zee rebellion did not vanquish our enemy for all time. So now we must fight again.” She makes the same head to heart motion. “May Aduwanae come to our aid once more.”

What, Henri wonders, could Aduwanae be? Maybe it’s something like Mother Nature back home. “Why would you think that Aduwanae might not join our fight?” Henri asks.

“Zee ways of zee sacred one are mysterious. We shall see.”

“Mac,” Taffy asks, “What happened to the people who became Suchronytes?”

“C’est terrible,” Mac sighs. “A very few were saved, those whose dependence on the Suchronos was not zo great. Others were either killed in battle or washed away in zee great floodwaters. Many more retreated to the Star Lord.”

The grating sound of velcro makes Henri jump. P.J. pulls a pair of miniature tweezers and a small plastic bottle from his backpack. “Chemistry set,” he says as if that explains everything.

Crouching next to a clump of the white stuff, P.J. extracts a sample and places it in a small specimen bottle. Henri watches him closely.

“What?” he says.

“Are you sure that’s safe?” Henri asks.

“Actually, no I’m not sure,” P.J. says. “But then until yesterday I’d never traveled to another domain. So my sense of what’s safe isn’t very clear.”

“What do you plan to do with the sample?” Taffy says as she peers at the tiny vial in P.J.’s hand. “Analyze it with your junior chemistry set?”

“Exactly,” P.J. says. “It’s more of a boy genius chemistry set. And if you’re nice, which I’m not sure is possible, you can be my assistant, maybe even wear a pink lab coat.”

Henri looks at P.J.’s backpack. “You brought it with you?”

“Uh huh,” he says. “Actually LB brought it. It was in my room at your house and now, well, it’s here.”

“What exactly is here?” Taffy says.

“Uh, well” Henri stammers, “It’s a bunch of chemistry stuff that P.J.’s dad got for him. He’s super smart in math and science.”

Taffy rolls her eyes but Mac says, “Eez zhis so?” Mac’s collar changes shades of green in rapid succession. “Eez eet possible you can, how do you say, take away zhee poison?”

Chewing his bottom lip with uncharacteristic caution P.J. admits, “I don’t know. But I’ll certainly try.”

“Is this a scientific expedition or a save the world mission?” Olive asks.

Henri jumps for the second time. How does Olive manage to sneak up on them without a sound?

Henri rubs the chain at her neck and returns Olive’s unblinking gaze. “It may be a little of both.”

Olive silently points to the path ahead. “We should walk,” she says.

Their journey continues until nightfall when P.J. asks, “Isn’t anybody else hungry? Because I’m starved.”

Henri tilts her head thinking. It hadn’t occurred to her until P.J. brought it up but she hasn’t thought about food all afternoon. “Strange,” she murmurs.

“What’s strange?” Taffy asks, blotting her face and neck with the end of a long scarf.

“Uh, nothing,” Henri says. “I just hadn’t realized I was hungry until P.J. said something.”

As if they have been conjured up by hunger alone Olive and Sir Brocco appear and beckon the group to follow them into a wooded thicket. After several moments of being slapped by whip-like branches and tripping over roots that appear from nowhere they arrive at a small clearing. Surveying the area like a sergeant setting up camp, Olive asks LB to set up the tents at the base of a tumbled down rock wall.

“Off you go,” Olive dismisses the three friends. “Go clean up and when you come back we will dine.”

P.J. groans, “I’ll die of hunger by then.”

“Not,” Taffy says, “if you wash the way you usually do.”

Pushing ahead of her friends Henri calls over her shoulder. “I’ll let you know when I’m done washing up.” *Why do they always fight so much? It would be nice if just once I weren’t caught in the middle.*

The quiet of the bathroom is refreshing. Accustomed to the strange familiarity of a place that looks like home but isn’t, Henri lies soaking in the tub

“Oh mom if only you were here,” she sighs. For a time Henri tries to think a message to her mother hoping that her ability to travel the portals might work in this way too. But if her thoughts go beyond the beating of her heart she cannot tell.

“What about portals?” she says to herself. “Who or what made them?” She puzzles through the question as she often does with homework. Henri tries to remember something that Olive said. It hovers just out of recall. Submerging under the water Henri enjoys the feeling of lightness; a weightlessness she wishes could be real. Even the medallion feels lighter against

her chest. *This is nice.* Accidentally inhaling she comes up sputtering, splashing water over the rim of the tub.

“You okay in there?” Taffy asks.

A wheezing Henri replies, “Just fine. I’ll be out in a little bit.” Now I remember. Time doesn’t run true between portals. So mom probably doesn’t even know I’m gone yet.

Hurrying to dress, Henri feels better than she has since, well, since walls started talking and everything started changing. Just knowing that her mom was home in a time before Henri had left made everything better. *Though it’s weird too.* She struggles into a clean t-shirt. *I wonder if time is stretching out like taffy and if things are happening faster and faster here compared to home.* Without bothering to comb her cropped hair, Henri opens the bathroom door resolved to talk about this with P.J.

“Oh no you don’t,” Taffy says. “You’re not going anywhere until you run a comb through that hair.”

Henri rolls her eyes and smooths her hair with her hands.

“Oh for cryin’ out loud. Let me do it.”

Henri winces as Taffy digs her comb through the tangles. “Don’t you use conditioner?”

“Uh sometimes,” Henri mumbles. She tries to ignore the yank of Taffy’s brush. *If time moves slower back home and faster here what does it mean for the rebel leader? Has he been missing for even longer?* The time paradox makes her head hurt; almost as much as the scalp-ripping tug Taffy gives to the last clump of her snarled hair.

“Sorry about that,” Taffy says. She rattles on about the importance of hair products; conditioner, shiner, paste, wax, texturizers and voluminizers while Henri wonders about the rebel leader.

“Henri, are you okay?” Taffy says.

“Sure why wouldn’t I be okay? There’s portal hopping with a doll that’s kind of scary, we’re on a planet where vegetables can talk, and I’ve gotten my friends involved in a battle with the Star Lord. But I’m okay. You?”

“Me?” Taffy arches one delicate eyebrow. “Never better. I’m a little freaked out sometimes. But this is so extra extraordinary.” She grabs Henri’s hand. “You’re extraordinary. I mean I always knew you were cool in a smart, funny kind of way. But your ability as a Traveler is so amazing. And I’m your sidekick.” She chews her bottom lip as if swallowing an unhappy thought. “Well, I guess P.J. is a sidekick too.”

“Yes he is,” Henri says “But you are my girl sidekick and my very best friend for ever and ever.”

Never one to wallow in emotional moments, Taffy shoos Henri from the bathroom with a hug and a truly happy face.

Feeling hungry Henri heads for the kitchen where P.J. sits in clean clothes, his damp hair drying in springy ringlets. Before Henri can ask, P.J. points to the master bath saying, “It’s a good thing your house, uh tent, has more than one bathroom. What do girls do in there that takes so long anyway?”

A smug little smile tugs up the corners of Henri’s mouth. “You’re smart, but you’d never understand.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” he says. “It’s nothing a rational mind can comprehend.”

Thinking of her new friends Sir Broco and Mac, Henri hesitates a moment before taking a handful of raw vegetables. Recalling their passionate belief in the cycle of life, she shrugs off the funny feeling and sits across from P.J. “We need to talk,” she says. Henri shares her

concerns about the flow of time between domains and how long the rebel leader has actually been missing.

Before P.J. can answer Olive and Sir Broco come into the tent with Mac. They do not bring good news. “We have just heard scouting reports from members of the Cruciferous Clan,” Olive says. She adjusts her hood forward as if to hide from what must be said. “Henri, we’ve learned that the leader of the rebel network will soon be moved from his prison in Gargantua. We must get to the city immediately, but we are at least three days away on foot.”

Henri stands before the words fade away. “Then we must leave now,” she says. “I’ll open a portal.” She hesitates. “If you’ll show me how.”

“No, no, no,” Mac cries. “Zhees eez too dangerous to even consider.”

“Dear Traveler,” Sir Brocco’s deep voice is drenched in sadness and fear. “There has to be another way.”

Henri touches the medallion at her neck. “We don’t have three days. I don’t know how I know.” She glances at her friends. “But I do.”

“Nonsense,” Olive snaps. “You couldn’t possibly know what will happen in three days.” But something in her voice leaves the door to uncertainty open. “Anyway, I do agree that we need to make haste.”

“Make haste to where?” Taffy says, her skin glowing from a good scrub.

“Gargantua,” Henri says. “The rebel leader is imprisoned there for now but he’s going to be moved soon. We have to hurry but it isn’t safe for me to open a portal.” She kicks the table leg in frustration. “What good is it to be a Traveler if I can’t use my power when it’s really needed?”

Olive stares at Henri with as much compassion as her doll's eyes can show. "Power is a responsibility," she says. "It is also a great burden, for having power does not mean that the wisdom to use it is also present." Her words are hard, a knife cutting into Henri's heart.

"Traveler, do you have the wisdom? Can you bear this responsibility?"

Henri bows her head. "Yes," she barely whispers. "I can bear it."

"Good," Olive says. "Then let's discuss our plans over supper."

A note from LB appears on Henri's plate. "Don't worry, kid. The doll has got something up her sleeve."

Bowls of hearty mac and cheese and tossed salads are served compliments of LB's kitchen-in-a-box. As before, Sir Brocco and Mac sip their steamy green drink from delicate porcelain bowls. In spite of Henri's worry the food tastes really good. The whole-wheat macaroni has a nutty taste that is deeply satisfying. Even the salad is something special, tangy dressing over crunchy vegetables topped with tart dried cherries. And dessert, always Henri's favorite, is a slice of carrot cake that makes her feel better all over.

Pushing her plate away, Henri looks at Taffy and P.J. who have been unnaturally quiet during the meal. Seeing her friends, old and new, around the table gives Henri the same indefinable feeling as the meal she has eaten. She feels stronger somehow, sustained by their visible concern and affection. Sensing that it's up to her to break the silence Henri asks the question on everyone's mind. "Olive, what's our plan?"

Chapter 8

Mean Gingerbread Men

“We will leave tomorrow,” Olive says, then changes the subject abruptly. “You may have noticed that I have a doll’s body.”

P.J. looks her up and down. “Uh, now that you bring it up, I have been curious about that. I mean have you always been like this?”

“P.J.,” Taffy hisses. “That is so rude. Don’t you have any feeling for, well, feelings?”

“She brought it up,” P.J. shrugs. “I only asked because I’m interested.”

“Yes, you have many interests Master P.J.,” Olive says. “Let us hope that your curiosity isn’t lethal as it was for a certain cat.”

Henri gives P.J. a look that says *keep quiet or else*. Turning her attention back to Olive she says. “We’ve noticed that you are, uh, unique.”

“Precisely,” Olive’s spiral curls bounce up and down as she nods her head. “You may also have noticed that I can walk rather briskly for someone whose knees do not bend all that well.”

Olive shuffles her feet under her robe. “Because my condition presents some physical challenges, The Committee has provided me with certain abilities to compensate for my limitations. Think of it as a personal moving walkway. The faster I walk the faster it moves along. In this way we shall reach Gargantua tomorrow.”

“You’ve got to be kidding,” P.J. says. “Why haven’t we been doing this all along?”

P.J. shrinks back from Olive's withering look. "Have you heard nothing I've said young man? To have a power does not mean it is used for personal convenience."

"Yeah sure," P.J.says. "I get the whole responsibility thing. But a personal walkway is just so cool. I mean, how does it work? Will we all be on the walkway? Where does the power come from? Is anti-gravity involved somehow?"

"Enough!" Olive shrieks. Her plastic lips tighten in anger. "Unless of course you would like to personally experience another power at my disposal – the ability to silence inquisitive children."

P.J.'s mouth snaps shut.

"Why can't we leave tonight?" Henri asks.

"Because," Olive says, "I may have the ability to move us along quickly but that doesn't mean I can see where we're going in the dark."

"Oh," Henri says. "I hadn't thought of that."

Sir Brocco Lee shifts in his seat. "I have observed that it is difficult for humans to be patient." His rumbling voice comforts Henri. "Let us go outside for a time. I find it soothing when I am sorely vexed."

"Yes." Henri smiles. "LB," she says, "Do you need help cleaning up?"

The note flutters into her hand. "You've got good manners kid. But no thanks. I'll give everything a good sonic scrub before I dematerialize it."

Stepping into the night air Henri is struck by the strangeness of a place that looks nothing like her family farm when inside it looks like home. She longs for her favorite spot, the grove of Chinese elm trees, but pushes away the yearning as she walks around the clearing. The

stars cluster in unfamiliar ways around the twin moons. They shine bright and hard, indifferent to the problems of people below.

Henri can hear P.J. talking to Taffy, trying to explain the science behind LB's sonic cleaning of tableware. She lingers at the edge of their camp, staring into the shadows. But not all shadows are equal. Some are moving while others are not.

Running swiftly toward the tent Henri shouts, "Taffy, P.J. get back to the house. There's something out here."

"LB, to me." Just like that, they are together hand and hand. "Light, LB. We need light." Spotlights illuminate the clearing and the crumbling rock wall, but it's hard to believe what the light reveals. There they are, row upon row of gingerbread men marching in lock step. They look about four feet tall, and they have down turned icing mouths with angry eyebrows.

Sir Brocco and Mac hover protectively next to Taffy and P.J., who look more dumbfounded than afraid.

"LB," Henri says, "Suggestions?"

"They're mostly flour and sugar kid. To bad we can't march 'em into an oven."

The first wave is almost upon Henri. *They're big for cookies.* "No, LB. This is no time to bake. We need water, a lot of it. Fire hose, please."

As the first line leaps for Henri, a high-powered hose is in her hands. The force of the spray knocks her to the ground and the swarm of the gingerbread men fling themselves toward her head. Before they blot out Henri's vision she gets control of the hose and blasts them to base ingredients.

Gripping the hose securely with both hands, Henri calls to LB. “We need water cannons. One for everybody.” With weapons in hand P.J., Taffy, and Mac join the fight, bringing down hundreds of the enemy with each liquid blast.

In a very little while the gingerbread militia has been washed away, a few sugary lumps the only evidence of their attack.

“Wow!” Taffy and P.J. exhale at the same time. “That was cool.”

Did we really kill off a bunch of cookies?” P.J. sets his weapon on the ground and it disappears instantly, recalled by LB. He flops down on a dry patch of ground near the tent.

“Yeah, we really did,” Taffy sits next to P.J. After a deep breath she says, “I don’t like to think of myself as a cookie-killer but it was self defense.”

Henri sits down next to her friends with LB cradled in her arms.

“Zee water cannon c’est se bon,” a delighted Mac says as LB takes back the remaining weapons. Her eyes bright and fierce, Mac joins Sir Brocco and Olive on a perimeter check.

“Scuz,” P.J. says, “You may have a future as a fire fighter. I didn’t know you could work a power hose like that.”

“Me either,” Henri smiles while brushing crumbs from her damp shirt. Patting LB she says, “You’re the real hero.”

“Thanks kid. I can do some stuff. But thinking and knowing what to do, that’s all you.”

“Is this wrong?” Taffy says as she looks at the battlefield of cookie crumbs. “I’m hungry again and I’d really like some cookies and milk. Not gingerbread though.”

Everyone laughs, a contagion that flares up again every time it starts to quiet down. They sit together for the longest time as the distant stars shine with benevolent indifference.

Henri wakes early the next morning. Full of questions about the cookie attack and eager to begin their journey she slips out of bed where Taffy lies buried beneath rumpled covers. She dresses quietly, and with LB in hand heads for the kitchen. Setting LB on the counter, she looks out the window and sees Olive, Sir Brocco and Mac talking together.

Slipping outside Henri can just make out Mac's protest. "But zee Traveler and her friends cannot go to Gargantua without us. Eet eez not safe."

Olive looks at Sir Brocco. "My dear McCauley, you and Sir Brocco are needed elsewhere. And save one, no place on Grymvald is safe just now. If all goes as planned we will meet in Aduwanae's valley soon."

"Where is Aduwanae's valley?" Henri asks, forgetting that she's not actually part of the conversation.

P.J. joins Henri, his hair sticking out every which way. "Yeah, I thought we were going to Gargantua."

Olive glares at them, causing Henri and P.J to fall back a step where they bump into Taffy still in pajamas.

"Hey look out," Taffy cries.

"Eavesdropping is not an admirable quality." With a dismissive wave of her hand Olive shoos them toward the tent house. "Get ready. We leave soon." She attempts to cross her arms with elbows not built for bending. "And if you don't interrupt, which I doubt is possible, I'll tell you about our plans."

Henri dresses quickly then helps Taffy stuff their backpacks with assorted paraphernalia. They join P.J. in the kitchen where a breakfast of cereal and fruit is already laid

out on the sturdy oak table. Helping themselves, they sit and eat without saying a word. Henri squirms on her cushion, impatient to hear what Olive has planned.

Olive finally breaks the abnormal silence. “We must part ways with our friends Sir Brocco Lee and McCauley Flower.” Her doll eyes blink twice, slowly. “They must return to rally the Cruciferous Clan at Aduwanae’s Valley.”

“This is the home of the great one I have spoken of before,” Mac says.

Olive blinks again. “It is not safe for our Animate friends to enter Gargantua. It is not a safe place for anyone just now but at least we can blend in.”

Henri wonders what kind of place Gargantua must be if a living doll can pass for normal.

“We are at war,” Olive says. “And it has come sooner than expected.”

P.J. waves his hand in the air. Olive nods, granting him permission to speak.

“You haven’t said anything about last night. What were those gingerbread things? Will we be fighting cookies or something else?”

“Indeed,” Sir Brocco’s voice rumbles. “One must know the enemy. But it is of equal important to know oneself.”

“Grymdish,” Mac says. “Zee cookies we fought last night zhey are called Grymdish,” Her green collar spins and her flowerets quiver. “Unlike the Animates whose life force has been awakened to zee conscious state, Grymdish are inanimate. Their false life is given by zee Venai, zee dark priesthood who create zhem for zee Star Lord. We face far greater enemies than zee Grymdish.”

“Yes,” Olive says. “But that must wait for another time.”

Taffy and P.J. issue a collective groan but Henri nods her head, agreeing with Olive for once. “I would like to learn more,” Henri says. “But like Sir Brocco and Mac we are on a mission and there’s no time to waste.”

“The Traveler speaks truly,” Sir Brocco stands and stretches to his full height of seven feet.

Everyone gathers outside the tent to say farewell. “It troubles me to part from you Traveler, but we will meet again in the valley of Aduwanae.” Sir Brocco’s droopy eyes leak green tears.

“Oui,” Mac’s collar curls limply around her neck. “Often I shall think of you my new friends.”

A manly handshake serves as P.J.’s farewell to Sir Brocco and Mac, as Henri and Taffy embrace them both in turn.

“Zhis hugging is, how do you say, an odd custom. But I find it pleasing,” Mac says.

With shining eyes and a vine-like hand squeeze for each of the friends, Mac follows Sir Brocco, disappearing into the dusty woods as if they had never been.

“Well,” Olive says briskly. “We must be going too. Are we ready?”

“No,” Taffy cries. “Not yet. I haven’t brushed my teeth. I’ll just be a moment LB, okay?” A Taffeta trademark pink note flies through the air. “Remember to floss,” LB adds helpfully.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” P.J. groans. “We’re ready to go on the adventure of a lifetime and we’re putting dental hygiene first.”

“Come on, P.J.” Henri trudges after Taffy. “I don’t know of any heroes who have bad teeth. Do you?”

He follows, grumbling all the way. Sharing the sink with Henri, Taffy speaks around a mouthful of foam, “Do you think P.J. is really brushing his teeth?”

“More like gnashing,” Henri smiles causing a glob of toothpaste to trickle down her chin. Things feel almost normal. Not at all like they’re headed for someplace they’ve never been to accomplish something they’ve never done for someone they’ve never met.

As soon as they’re finished, Taffy pulls Henri into their room. “Look,” Taffy says. “I know we don’t have much time but I want to give you this before we go.” Holding up a charm bracelet of mirrored glass, heart-shaped lockets, and tiny keys, Taffy fastens it around Henri’s wrist. Only then does Henri notice Taffy is wearing a matching bracelet.

“See,” Taffy says, “They’re companion bracelets. The keys open the heart lockets to reveal secret messages inside. And the mirrors are supposed to reflect your true friends. “Aren’t they cool?” she holds her wrist next to Henri’s. “My mom is introducing them at the Pretty Kitty but these are the very first to arrive. Now we’re bracelet buddies too.”

Henri has never been interested in jewelry. It’s hard enough being the biggest person in class without wearing extra stuff that calls attention to how much space you occupy. But this is different. The bracelet hangs nicely on her wrist without biting into the skin. Thinking of uncomfortable jewelry, Henri touches the medallion where it chafes against the skin below her collarbone.

“Thank you,” Henri says. “It’s beautiful.” She turns her wrist so the small shifting mirrors catch the light, splashing rainbows around the room.

Taffy gives Henri a fierce hug. “You’re welcome.” Giggling she says, “They are cool, aren’t they?”

Before Henri can agree, a note from LB appears. “Time to pack up,” it says. Grabbing their gear they run for the door.

“Finally,” P.J. says. “How do girls get anything done?”

“Oh, we have our ways,” Olive answers on their behalf. “LB, if you would, please.”

Once again, the tent house folds itself neatly like a well-ironed handkerchief.

P.J. inches ever closer to LB’s open lid trying to see how the process actually works.

“Really,” Olive says. “Are you determined to die young?” She grabs P.J. causing him to yelp. “What’d I do now?”

“It’s what you almost did,” Olive says. Adjusting her robe as if shifting an invisible burden she blinks at P.J. “Young man, it’s your responsibility to stay out of the way when LB is in active mode. You could be caught up in the compression stream and reduced to a mere molecule of your present self.”

P.J. jams a baseball cap, recently resident in his back pocket, as far down on his head as possible. “Okay,” he grumbles, picking up his backpack.

“Now then,” Olive says, “line up please: Taffeta behind me, then P.J., then Henri and LB. All you have to do is walk normally. I’ll take care of the rest. Shall we?”

They begin walking as usual but something quite unusual happens. For every step they take they advance a mile. The scenery on either side is a blur of forest and farmland. “You may want to look straight ahead,” Olive yells over her shoulder. “It’s easier to keep your balance.”

Henri calls to Olive from the back of the line, “While we’re walking why don’t you tell us more about the gingerbread, uh, Grymdish?”

“Ah yes, Grymdish. There are several different breeds.” Olive says.

Henri can barely hear over the roar of wind that accompanies the moving platform. LB obligingly provides a set of headphones and Olive's voice comes through loud and clear.

"There are the Sweet Teeth. They're not at all nice as their name implies. Their bite is very sharp and they can inject Suchronos, venom that is quite deadly. Then there are the Snackwackers, the same family group as the Gingerbread Militia you fought last night. Their name is amusing but they are not at all funny, especially when they force feed victims to the point of choking."

Henri thinks about her favorite snack, potato chips, the saltier and crunchier the better. *At least they're not lethal.*

"There are platoons of tableware," Olive says. "Knives, forks and spoons that march in lockstep ready to stab, stick and beat their opponents. Almost anything can be made into a Grymdish if the Venai have the resources to complete the conversion."

P.J. says, "What do you mean by conversion?" Thankful for the headset, Henri notices she is hearing P.J. not with her ears, but inside her head.

"Red-robed mumbo jumbo pure and simple," Olive sniffs. "Conversion is simply a matter of transferring energy from the Star Lord into the inanimate objects. The Grymdish aren't very bright. They can't think for themselves as the Animates can. In fact they wouldn't be a threat at all except that there are so many of them."

"Why don't they create a warrior class?" Henri says. "If they have that kind of power it seems like they could have formidable fighters instead of a cookie militia."

Olive cocks her head at the question. "It takes far more power to awaken a living thing to consciousness than to channel malice into an object. Even evil has its limitations."

“But,” Henri says, “If the Venai can channel power from the Star Lord why can’t we do the same? Why can’t his power be burned away as it was when he was sanctioned?”

“That’s a good question kid,” LB writes. “There are very few Travelers, and fewer still who have enough power to fight the Star Lord.”

“Goodness, LB,” Olive says. “You mustn’t alarm the children.”

Henri’s mouth curves upward into a smile. It’s usually Olive who says the most alarming things. She lets the matter drop.

P.J. walks with his head bent over a note pad, scribbling furiously. *It’s a good thing there are no obstructions on the moving walkway*, Henri thinks. Otherwise P.J. would’ve fallen off with consequences best not considered.

“P.J.,” Henri adjusts her headset, “How do you think the walkway actually works?”

Copying his dad’s response to things uncertain he says, “That’s an open question.”

“I see,” Henri says. “That’s boy genius talk for ‘absolutely no idea.’”

“Precisely.” P.J. turns around to face Henri and walks backwards. “See how the scenery on either side of our walkway is a blur? That just shouldn’t happen. I can’t believe that we’re going faster than the speed of light, but I don’t know how else it could be.” P.J. scribbles furiously for a time before continuing. “Unless Olive has the ability to fold space time just like LB can compress matter.”

Henri rubs her temples. “You’re making my head hurt. And I’m pretty sure that yours is going to explode if you keep trying to figure everything out. Let’s just agree that we have no idea how this is happening. Okay?”

Rubbing the back of his head as if Henri’s prediction might just come true, P.J. turns around and says no more.

Henri stares at the smudge of scenery on either side of the walkway thinking that it looks like a watercolor left out in the rain. She touches the medallion and feels its low hum, first in her fingertips then all the way to her toes. Without thinking she matches the tone then quietly sings a note two-steps above it. It feels nice, like singing in tight harmony when the resonance is just right.

“Kid,” LB’s note appears as a scrawl. “What are you doing?”

Olive shrieks, “Stop that.” But it’s too late. The walkway is moving with such velocity that everyone falls in a heap. Taffy wails as they are thrown forward. Pinned to the floor by an unseen force, Henri catches a glimpse of the landscape condensing from its smudgy smear into a thin vertical line. The force of acceleration causes her skin to ripple as if it might fly off her face. And then everything goes dark.

Henri awakens to a circle of worried looking faces peering down at her. Struggling to sit up she asks, “What happened?”

“That’s exactly what I’d like to know,” says Olive. “Who taught you how to use the medallion’s harmonics?”

“Harmonica?”

“Harmonics,” LB repeats the word in writing.

“I don’t know what you mean,” Henri says. “All I did was hum with the medallion.”

“Goodness, gracious,” Olive says. “What you call humming is in reality harmonic alignment. It is a rare thing among Travelers.”

LB dispenses water bottles and asks if anyone needs a bandage.

P.J. says, “What exactly is harmonic alignment?”

Olive fiddles with the belt of her robe. “It’s the stuff of legend. At least I thought it was until a few moments ago.” She blinks slowly several times and looks at Henri. “Travelers have the ability to channel power from The Committee. This is how they open portals and journey between domains. But Henri has somehow managed to align her ability with the medallion. By doing so, Henri has bypassed The Committee.”

“How is that possible?” Henri asks. “I don’t even know what I did.”

“You don’t understand,” Olive’s plastic face manages to look worried. “Henri, you have the same ability as the Star Lord.”

Taffy takes Henri’s hand. “But that doesn’t mean Henri is going to get all evil or anything like that, right?”

“This particular situation isn’t in my Traveler’s Guide Handbook,” Olive says.

“You have a handbook?” Anger flickers in Henri’s eyes. “Why haven’t you had me read it?”

“Because it’s a handbook for guides not for Travelers,” Olive says. “Besides, it’s my job to train you.” Olive mutters something and Henri wishes she still had the headset on. “I have observed that character has a lot to do with how people use power. Let’s hope that Henri’s nature isn’t inclined to evil.”

“Henri is not evil,” Taffy shouts.

“Yeah,” P.J. agrees. “Nobody calls Henri evil unless it’s me.”

Olive shrugs. “I didn’t say Henri is evil. I merely said ‘let’s hope she isn’t inclined to evil.’”

She looks at Henri, a long unblinking gaze. “Don’t do that again unless I say so.”

Everyone is unusually quiet as LB produces mud brown robes that look like smaller versions of the one Olive wears. Henri pulls hers on quickly and ties the rope belt in a simple knot. She scrambles out of the ditch they landed in, still close enough to hear Taffy complain about the icky color of the robes. At the top there's a scrubby hedge coated in the white dust of Suchronos. Just beyond, an empty road stretches to the horizon, revealing a wide treeless plain on the other side.

Thinking of her friends Henri is suddenly afraid. Her heart stumbles for a beat or two and starts to race. For the first time, Henri realizes the most dangerous thing they face may be her.

Henri jumps when Taffy touches her shoulder. Coming close, Taffy adjusts Henri's robe as if preparing for a fashion show. "Look here, Henri," Taffy whispers. "Your face says everything before your mouth even opens. So just cut it out. You are a good person. You don't have an evil bone in your body. And even if you did, you're still my best friend." Taffy reties the belt in a loopy bow, copying her own. As an afterthought she adds, "P.J.'s awfully dumb for a smart boy or he'd tell you the same thing. Okay?"

Henri can't help smiling. Giving Taffy's arm a squeeze Henri mouths, "Thank you."

"You're entirely welcome," Taffy says squeezing back.

P.J. joins them with Olive right behind. She motions for the three friends to come close. "We're just off the main road that leads to the Gargantua. When you approach the city gate, tell the guards the reason for your visit. Say that you are pilgrims from an outer province seeking the wisdom of Gargantua. Then make your way to the mayor's palace. It towers above all of the other buildings so you can't miss it. Your job is to listen and overhear what you can. We will meet back here in two hours."

“I don’t have a watch,” Henri says.

“I do,” Taffy and P.J. wave their wrists as proof.

“Aren’t you coming with us?” Henri says. “I thought we would all be together.” Henri’s hand trembles as she wipes away the sudden sweat on her brow.

“No,” Olive says. “LB and I must try to find other members of the rebel alliance. We won’t be entering the city through the main gate.”

“But how will you get in?” P.J. says.

Olive stares, unblinking. “Never mind that. Be alert and for heaven’s sake, be careful.”

“Good luck, kids,” LB writes on a large note. “Don’t worry about your backpacks. I’ve got ‘em for safekeeping.”

The friends make their way up to the red-colored paved road.

“I’m glad it’s not yellow brick,” Taffy says. “That would be too weird.”

Henri is overcome by a laugh attack followed by wheezing and hiccups. “Don’t do that to me.” Catching her breath she says, “Here we are on a dangerous undercover mission and you’re making me laugh.”

P.J. sticks out his chest. “All heroes laugh in the face of danger.”

“Hmm,” Henri says, hoping that real danger doesn’t come anywhere close.

Chapter 9

Lunch with the Mayor

Henri and her friends make slow progress toward Gargantua. Their feet simply forget to walk as they stare upward at a sky filled with people on flying pogo sticks. Each carries a single person standing on the cross bar, controlling the stick with bicycle-like handlebars. It's an open-air personal elevator. The sky is filled with them, bobbing up and down.

"Let's get moving," Henri finally says. "We're supposed to be pilgrims from an outer province not people from another planet."

They walk in silence as P.J. continues to crane his neck upward staring in fascination at the sky sticks. Minutes later they see the city walls, if walls are what they really are. The city hides behind a towering red and white striped barricade. It looms upward to a dizzying height crowned by low-lying clouds. There is a wide walkway at the top patrolled by uniformed guards. They wear candy colored helmets adorned with lethal looking spikes.

Taffy squints against the morning sun. "I can't tell for sure," she says. "It looks like they combined a jawbreaker with a porcupine to make those helmets."

P.J. mutters, "It's always about the clothes."

"Of course it's about the clothes," Taffy says. "But it's not *only* about clothes. I'm observant that's all. Kind of like you, only more practical."

P.J. looks at the walls again. "I wonder how they made the upper edge look like a wave." No one knows the answer so they walk in silence.

As they approach the city's main gate it's obvious that it has been built to intimidate. Half a dozen oxen stand in a turnstile, having opened the massive outer doors for the day. A second gate of licorice black iron, topped with peppermint pointy things stands open, looming over all who pass through.

The tide of people entering the city carries them inside. There is all manner of dress; billowing robes in brightly patterned silks, elaborate gowns with ballooning petticoats and brown-robed pilgrims. A few official looking people clutching clipboards are in black knee britches, vests and ruffled white shirts.

"Stick together," Henri says. This is not an easy task for the crowd ebbs and flows down a broad avenue, sweeping them one direction and then another. If not for the momentum, the three friends would have stopped to stare at the strange city.

The buildings are made of smooth stucco with thick walls that offer shelter from the unrelenting sun. A chef must have designed the city's architecture. Every striped awning, rooftop and wall is a celebration of food. Some buildings have delicate columns resembling stacked potato chips, others are round and layered like cakes. Other buildings sit on licorice-like sticks with mounded muffin-shaped rooms on top.

The air is intoxicating, filled with smells that cause Henri, who has just eaten, to think eagerly of her next meal. In the central square, at the base of a raised platform, a pinch-faced official stands. He makes a few dull announcements all the while smoothing back greasy gray hair that couldn't move if it wanted to. He fiddles with his clothes, touching the buttons on a fine brocade vest when not adjusting his ruffled neckerchief. Each official proclamation is punctuated with self-important lip smacks and his deep-set eyes skewer those not paying sufficient attention.

“What a disagreeable person,” Taffy whispers. “He kind of makes my skin all crawly.”

“Yeah, me too,” Henri whispers back. “He reminds me of Jimmie Clawson, the boy in our class who licks everything. But there’s something else about him ...” Henri’s voice fades away, lost in the crowd’s sudden uproar. Apparently this is luncheon lottery day. Three lucky people will be chosen to dine with the unfortunately named Mayor Hamhands.

“I’m starved,” P.J. says. Henri nods feeling a bit weak in the knees too. But it’s not from hunger. It’s the medallion doing that humming thing again. Henri tenses every muscle, resisting the urge to hum along. Climbing steps at the side of a gigantic wooden barrel the official extracts the names of the winners and announces them, showing little interest in the process.

The crowd starts to ebb away as the disappointed return to the business of daily life. Looking around to see what they should do next, Henri is startled to find the obnoxious official standing very close.

“Pilgrim,” he says. May I have a word please?” Without waiting for permission he continues, “Allow me to introduce myself. I am Neevil Nightlark, First Administrator to the beloved Mayor of our city.”

He stands uncomfortably close but Henri fears it may be rude to back away. “It is an honor to meet you, Administrator,” Henri says. “As a lowly Pilgrim to your glorious city I am flattered to receive your attention.” She inclines her head slightly for a deeper bow would cause their foreheads to touch, a thought so distasteful that Henri shudders.

“You are young to be a Pilgrim are you not?” The Administrator’s intense stare makes the question feel like an interrogation.

Henri sidesteps the question. “May I have the privilege of introducing myself and my fellow Pilgrims?”

“Ah yes,” Nightlark says. His lips form a smile but his eyes do not participate. “Please do.”

Henri takes the opportunity to put some distance between herself and the Administrator. “I am honored to introduce Pilgrim Taffeta, Pilgrim P.J., and myself Pilgrim Henrietta; visitors who hope to learn the ways of your wondrous city and share the knowledge with our humble and backward province.”

Henri prays Nightlark won’t ask the name of the province, and obligingly, he does not, appearing more interested in the Pilgrims themselves than their place of origin.

He gives a stiff nod in greeting. “We are very pleased that you have come to learn the ways of Gargantua.” His tongue sweeps around his lips causing all three friends to cringe.

“This is most unusual,” the Administrator says. “We have made a decision. We shall invite you to the Mayor’s Luncheon.” Without bothering to ask if they accept, the Administrator marches off, arms pumping and rusty black tailcoat flapping. An ebony walking stick topped with a silver bird’s head is in his hand. He points it forward with the expectation that the Pilgrims will follow. They do.

Henri looks at Taffy and P.J. Their eyes are bright and Henri can feel the questions they long to ask. For the first time since their arrival the streets have cleared enough for Henri to get a good look at their surroundings. The red brick road, now a broad avenue, runs through the city. The buildings facing the thoroughfare share the same eye-popping color and food-like architecture as those near the city gate. Doorways are broad in the base reaching upward to a

triangular point. This seems odd until Taffy points out a person on one of the sky sticks entering without the need to duck.

Everything is appealing to the senses right down to the fountains spewing colored hard candy into shallow basins of water. It's a side street empty of color that catches Henri's eye. Two wraith-like figures in hooded black robes walk in the dim, ill kept alley, hugging the walls like rodents.

P.J. whispers, "That's odd. Very un-Gargantuan."

Henri looks back to see one of the hooded strangers staring at her with glowing amber eyes. The hood obscures every other feature, but Henri sees the pupils flare with malice before the amber light is extinguished.

Unconsciously Henri touches the medallion beneath her Pilgrim's robe. Her pounding heart keeps pace with the medallion's throb.

"C'mon Henri," Taffy tugs at her arm. "Administrator Nightlark is almost out of sight."

As they continue down the city's main thoroughfare Henri scans the side streets for more black-robed figures, but sees nothing. The city feels oddly empty as if it is a stage and all of the actors have left. The Administrator never looks back to see if they are following. He charges ahead confidently. The red brick road widens and Henri's breath catches as she sees what lays ahead — a palace built for giants. The entrance is an imposing diamond.

P.J.'s jaw drops. "It's as big as a baseball field."

"Maybe bigger," Taffy says.

Henri doesn't ask how she would know.

Countless columns, taller than the biggest trees on Earth, support the structure. The walls are studded with candied fruit in reds, yellows and greens, glowing in the afternoon sun.

The friends clamber up oversized steps, each level giving Henri the feeling that they are being consumed by the building. Administrator Nightlark awaits them at the uppermost level.

“Come, come my Pilgrims. We must press on or we will be late for luncheon. The Mayor waits for no one, not even honored guests.” He snickers a bit as if to imply that they are neither honorable nor welcome. “Are you familiar with our mode of travel?”

“No sir,” Henri answers for the group. “I thought we had already arrived at the Mayor’s palace.”

“Yes, we have most certainly arrived but we’re not there yet.”

They are inside the palace, looking down a broad avenue flanked by columns and side rooms beyond counting. Pointing to a roped-off area the Administrator says, “You may select your own sky stick.”

“Cool,” P.J. exhales sounding most un-Pilgrim like.

“Ooh look,” Taffy exclaims. “They come in pink.”

Grasping the handles of a red one Henri says, “Pardon me, Administrator, but we have never ridden sky sticks before. Would you show us how to use them?”

Nightlark rolls his eyes in disgust. “Push the power button here in the middle of the guide bars. Now, step on to the cross-bars. When the stick is on it will do all of the balancing for you.”

Henri and her friends climb on and push the power button.

“Move the guide bars and you’ll go in whichever direction you chose. Rest your hands lightly and you’ll hover.” He watches Henri. She feels unnerved by his stare, but forces a faint smile. Nightlark mounts his own sky stick, tailcoat flapping as he pulls away. “Follow me.”

The friends follow obediently at first. But soon they are playing tag, weaving in and out of the columns. They zoom up to the ceiling hovering nose-to-nose with life size figures in colorful banquet scenes. Then they drop to the ground, tilting the sticks so far to one side that they can drag one hand along the plush floor coverings. If Nightlark is aware of their un-Pilgrim like behavior he gives no sign of it, assuming that he will be followed in all things.

They pass by doors with long departmental names. Other officials come and go on administrative missions of their own, hovering respectfully until Administrator Nightlark passes. Holding his walking stick overhead, The Administrator points to the massive doors before them.

“This is the great hall,” he says. “Few Pilgrims are privileged to dine at the Mayor’s table.” The Administrator looks them over from head to toe.

There is something about him that makes Henri think of the amber-eyed strangers in the black robes. Before she can finish the thought the doors swing open, revealing a chamber the size of an arena.

“This way,” Nightlark says.

The friends exchange a wide-eyed look before following his clacking footsteps into the cavernous space. Chattering voices fall silent as the friends make their progress past long tables flanking a raised platform.

“No wonder the city is empty,” Henri turns to Taffy and P.J. “Everyone is here. Well, hopefully not the scary people,” she whispers.

Appearing as if on command, long lines of the black-robed people step out from behind the curtained archways running along each wall. They bear huge platters heaped with drumsticks, pork chops, roasts and hams. Some carry meat pies emitting steam from beneath

their perfectly crimped crusts. Hoods obscure their faces as they wheel out carts laden with whipped, mashed, sautéed, and double deep-fried side dishes.

Henri tries not to stare at the black-robed servants. It impossible to tell if their eyes are amber or even if they have faces at all. Barely moving her lips she says, “Is anybody else creeped-out by the creepy people?”

“You’d make a good ventriloquist,” P.J. says keeping his eyes forward. “They look like floating robes without bodies underneath, but it’s probably nothing. Don’t worry.”

“It’s not nothing,” Henri says. “But we can’t talk about it here.”

The Administrator stands in front of the platform. He bows deeply from the waist.

Tucking a napkin under his multiple chins the Mayor says impatiently, “Be quick, Nightlark. Luncheon is about to begin.” He sits on a throne-like chair, his complexion almost as red as the velvet upholstery.

“Your most gloriously magnificent Mayorness, I bring very special guests before you,” Nightlark says.

The Mayor barely glances at Henri and her friends. “What makes them so special?”

“Ah,” Nightlark fiddles with the buttons of his vest. “You see exalted sir, they are Pilgrims come to learn the ways of Gargantua.”

“I can see that they are pilgrims from their robes.” The Mayor smooths the lapels of his gold silk jacket with sausage-like fingers. “Do you take me for a fool Nightlark?”

“No one would dare call our most esteemed Mayor a fool,” he replies. Henri has the feeling the Administrator would call the Mayor far worse if he dared.

Nightlark straightens. “Your magnificence, these particular Pilgrims are so very young. Knowing of your desire to bring the wisdom of all things Gargantuan to our youth, I bring them to you for instruction. During lunch, perhaps?” he suggests.

“Luncheon, splendid idea!” the Mayor agrees. He looks at Henri for the first time. “Great Gargantua! These are the smallest Pilgrims I have ever seen.”

“Your majestic Mayorness is observant,” Nightlark says.

“Since they are so very small they may sit here next to myself and the first lady.” The Mayor inspects them closely. “Make the introductions, please.”

The Administrator moistens his lips with a tongue swipe. “Pilgrim guests Henrietta, Taffeta and P.J., I have the pleasure of introducing you to the right honorable, most supremely wonderful, and utterly beloved leader of the Gargantua city state, Mayor Bartholomew Alexander Hamhands.”

The three friends make their bows and wait. The Mayor nods his head graciously. “Young Pilgrims, you must meet my wife and Gargantua’s first lady, the remarkable Honey Sugarbaby Hamhands.” Clasp ing her plump hand in his beefy palm the Mayor beams like an infatuated schoolboy. The First Lady’s hair is huge, sculpted into a beehive fortress stiff enough to withstand a hurricane.

“And now we eat,” he bellows.

The people sitting next to the Mayor move over, making space for Henri, Taffy, and P.J. to sit.

“Thank you for the honor of dining with you sir,” Henri says.

“Yes, yes of course,” the Mayor answers. “You must tell me all about yourself.” But a progression of dishes, finger bowls, cutlery and plates prevents Henri from answering.

P.J. says, “Sir, these platters are awfully nice. Are they always this big?”

“Oh no,” the Mayor answers around a mouthful of food. “These are luncheon platters. The evening meal is served on supper ware, which I prefer.” He ducks his head whispering, “The supper dishes have raised edges so nothing falls off.” He laughs a bark-like hah-hah while signaling the server to add another slab of prime rib to his plate. “The First Lady likes to invite lots of people for luncheon but the supper platters take up so much room we can’t seat as many people.”

Patting the First Lady’s jeweled hand the Mayor says, “Isn’t that right my dear?”

“Oh Hammy,” she coos. Her round face is heavily made-up, with bright blue eye shadow and dark cherry lipstick. “You’re just the silliest man ever.” Long, dangling earrings slap against her neck as she turns to Taffy. “Are men folk silly where you come from?”

Taffy glances in P.J.’s direction. “Based on my experience, I’d have to say that yes, they *are* silly.”

The First Lady laughs, sounding like a toy xylophone. Her butter blonde beehive shakes as if it might topple off her head at any moment.

“You must call me Honey,” the First Lady says. Leaning in close she whispers, “I can tell that you have a sense of style.” A dismissive sniff follows as she confides, “So few people here have any sense at all.”

Taffy nods her head. “First Lady, uh Honey, tell me about Gargantuan culture. Food seems to be very important.”

“Hammie,” she grasps the Mayor’s arm raised in mid bite. His fork hovers dripping gravy as Honey brays in his ear, “Taffeta asked me about food. Isn’t she smart? You must tell the Pilgrims all about our glorious revolution.”

The mayor looks ecstatic though whether it's from sopping up spilled gravy with a dinner roll or the thought of talking about the revolution, Henri can't tell.

He swallows and takes a drink from his goblet. "The revolution came to me in a revelation." He looks at Honey who blows air kisses from her red talon-like fingernails. Gnawing on a chunk of smelly cheese Mayor Hamhands explains in between bites. "It came to me in a dream."

"How did you remember the dream sir, since you were asleep and all?" Henri asks.

Stabbing the air with his fork he explains, "Nightlark wrote it down. I'm far too busy for such things. But when he presented the revelation in written form I remembered dreaming it."

Henri's brow wrinkles. "Please pardon me Mr. Mayor but I'm not sure I understand. "Are you saying that Administrator Nightlark wrote down the dream that you had forgotten and then told you about it?"

"Yes, yes exactly so." He smiles at his wife around a mouthful of mashed potatoes. "They grow 'em smart out in the provinces, don't they dear?"

"Oh yes, Hammie they do," says the First Lady as she hugs P.J. and Taffy to her ample chest. "And they're so cute too."

"Can't breathe," P.J. croaks.

Honey laughs. "You sweet thing. I could just eat you up." After planting a greasy kiss on the top of P.J. and Taffy's respective heads she gives one last squeeze before letting them go.

"What about the dream sir?" Henri says.

It is Administrator Nightlark who answers, appearing silently out of the shadows. "It is my privilege to write our esteemed leader's dreams which he then remembers. The Mayor's revelations are the basis of our most glorious revolution and the inspiration for the new Gargantua." The Administrator inclines his head with humility but his voice is hostile. "I hope that answers your question, Pilgrim."

Henri sighs. "Yes Administrator," she says. "You've told me a lot. But answers lead to more questions, don't you think?"

"She's got you there, Nightlark." The mayor barks out another laugh and spears a plump chicken breast. He smiles rather fondly at Henri. "That's why I don't ask questions," the Mayor says. "One leads to another and that leads to still more questions." The Mayor mops his brow with a greasy napkin. "Take my advice young Pilgrim, wanting to know things is an exhausting business." He reaches for the gravy ladle. "Nightlark takes care of the details so that I may lead by example. More gravy, my dear?"

Declining the offer Henri asks the Mayor "What exactly were you revolting against in your dream?"

Nightlark glares at Henri. "We revolted against the most terrible scourge to ever afflict our city. We fought for and demanded freedom from want. We ended the plague of not enough and claimed our just reward, more of plenty."

"Here, here," Honey raises her glass.

"Right-oh," the mayor adds swilling from a jeweled goblet.

Henri dares to ask another question. "Forgive my ignorance sir, for I am a lowly Pilgrim, but exactly how did you get more of plenty?"

“We became efficient,” Nightlark’s eyes glow with a grand vision. “Small farms were seized and we gave people the opportunity to work in the factories that produce our food. We can make anything,” he says puffing out his puny chest. “And we make it taste far better than food that grows in the ground.”

“What about the black-robed people?” Henri asks. “They look very thin. Do they have enough of plenty?”

“Suchronytes,” the mayor rouses himself to speak. “Most unfortunate.”

“Yes,” Honey says. “Most unfortunate.”

“You see,” says the Mayor, “Some of my subjects, mostly farmers, did not embrace the revolution. A few resisted relocation and fled to who knows where. Others who were brought to our glorious city did not adapt. In their difficulty they became addicted to Suchronos, a byproduct of our food production process. We employ them as servers here at the palace and care for them as best we can.”

Shrugging off the sad state of his citizens, Mayor Hamhands cleans his plate with remarkable efficiency and awaits the arrival of dessert. The guests begin speaking louder and faster as each person is served a personal tower of sweets. A round of delighted applause is followed by the silence of dedicated eating.

Henri looks down at her clenched fist. She is angry and horrified that the skeletal wraiths serving the mayor’s table were once normal people. Suchronos is a poison, and though she has no idea how, its production must be stopped.

After a few half-hearted bites, Henri drapes her napkin over the dessert tower.

“Why do you not eat your dessert, Pilgrim?” Nightlark stares at her napkin.

“It’s the most wonderful dessert ever,” Henri says. “But I’m too full to eat any more.”

“Whaaat?” Nightlark extends the single syllable into an accusation. “Traitor!” he cries. “It is heresy to say you are too full. And yet you dare to say it in the company of our beloved Mayor.”

“I mean no disrespect sir,” Henri says to Mayor Hamhands. “My fellow Pilgrims and I are new to the ways of Gargantua.”

“Yes, yes,” the mayor says. “It takes time to grow into the more is plenty way of being.” He pats his bulging belly as a fine example of what the friends can become.

The Administrator bends close to the Mayor’s ear. “Sir, their presence sets a bad example for the others. Since they will not eat allow me to escort them from the hall.”

“Perhaps that is best,” the Mayor says between bites. Seeing Honey’s look of disappointment he continues. “Don’t be unhappy dearest. It isn’t long until supper and they may dine with us again and grow in the ways of Gargantua.”

“Oh goodie,” Honey claps her hands. She gives the Pilgrims a collective hug, holding them for a long moment against her thick waist. Before they have even left the platform Honey and Mayor Hamhands are exchanging forkfuls of chocolate cake.

Nightlark leads them from the great hall. Several black robes fall in behind to escort them out. It doesn’t feel like an honor guard. Henri cannot see their faces but she feels the burning amber eyes scorching the back of her neck. The towering doors open silently as if moved by an unseen hand.

Once they are on the other side Nightlark turns to Henri. “I brought you here and it is my responsibility to see that you end up where you belong.” He fluffs the ruffles at his neck and smiles this time with genuine delight. “Guards, escort this rebel scum to the dungeon.” His

eyes are bright with malice. “I shall call on you soon and we will have a long talk.” He snarls, “Pilgrim.”

The guards herd them through endless corridors and down steep stone steps. Flaming torches provide light along cobweb-covered walls. Water drips, a dismal echo to their footsteps. When it couldn’t possibly get any darker, damper, or scarier the guards unlock a grilled door. They push Henri and her friends into the dark room and turn the key with a menacing click.

Chapter 10

Sausalito

“Nobody move until we can see where we are,” Henri says. She never used to be bossy. Now it seems perfectly natural. As their eyes adjust to the dim light they see unlit torches lining the wall just beyond reach. P.J. digs into the pockets of his pilgrim robe and pulls out a box of matches. Motioning to Taffy he says, “C’mon, I’ll give you a boost up.”

Taffy puts her red-booted foot in his cupped hands. “Higher.”

“Easy for you to say,” P.J. grumbles. With Henri’s help, the extra inches are achieved and Taffy retrieves the torches.

Armed with a smoky flame Henri leads the way down a flight of slippery stone steps. *Don’t fall.* Air rushes up from below, licking her ankles.

“At least we’re not locked in a tiny cell,” Taffy says with practical optimism.

P.J. shudders. “I don’t like this place.”

“I’m not too keen on it either,” Henri says. “Let’s look around and see if there’s a way out.”

Some of the doors are locked, impervious to their collective kicking and shoving. Other rooms are open, stacked with wooden barrels and opened crates littering the stone floor with packing straw. *There’s no way out.* Henri leads her friends to a room farthest away from the stairs to consider their fate.

“How did Administrator Nightlark know we weren’t real Pilgrims?” Taffy says, sitting on a crate.

“Good question,” P.J. says. “I’ve been wondering about that too.” He unloads all the stuff in his pockets and lines it up on the floor: matches, sturdy string, paper clips, a multi-gadget knife, a miniature magnifying glass, several smooth stones, and wrapped hard candies looking a little worn around the edges.

“I mean,” P.J. says, “How could he know unless someone told him? And if someone did tell him then there’s a spy in the rebel alliance. What do you think Henri?”

Henri shrugs. “We don’t have any way to know if there is a spy. But I had a feeling the Administrator could sense the medallion.”

P.J. looks at her hopefully. “The medallion. You could use it to transport us out of here.”

“Hey, boy genius,” Taffy says. “What about the very real possibility of tearing a hole in the space time thingy?”

Henri sighs, dusting cobwebs from her hands. “I can’t believe I’m saying this but I wish Olive were here.” She resists fiddling with the medallion and twists the bracelet on her wrist instead. “If we stay put we stay alive at least for now.”

A skittering sound from the hallway gets their attention. Henri and P.J. peek out the doorway with Taffy close behind, swinging her torch in a wild arc.

“Be careful with that,” P.J. shoos her away with his hand. “Do you want to set my head on fire?”

Taffy grimaces. “Sorry, I just don’t like rats and spiders.”

“It could be a life form we’ve never seen before. A rat-spider with slimy fangs, a billion arms and legs, and bad breath,” P.J. says.

“P.J.!” Henri applies her elbow to his ribs. “Stop torturing Taffy and let’s find out

what's making that sound." The underground hall is wide enough for them to walk side by side as they search for the source.

"Remember to look up at the ceiling," Taffy says. "The really scary creatures always drop down behind you before they do something bad."

They are just about to give up when they hear the scratching sound again. It's coming from behind one of the locked doors. As they draw near, the door swings open with a long creak. The room is black cat dark. Touching their torches together, the friends shove the light into the darkness. They huddle close together. Henri reaches for the medallion, her heart ready to leap out of her chest.

"Lower those torches," Olive says. "If I had real eyes I'd be blind already." She is dressed once again in a full-skirted fairy princess gown.

Henri steps back, pushing P.J. and Taffy out of the doorway.

"Olive points a stiff finger accusingly. "You're supposed to be spying. How did you end up in this place?"

"It's kind of a long story," Henri says. "Where's LB? Is everything okay?"

A note flies out from the room Olive has just left. "Thanks for asking, kid. I'm fine. The doll knows how to pick a lock. Go figure?"

"How did you get here?" Taffy glances nervously at the darkened room behind Olive.

"The old fashioned way," Olive says. "I walked, well crawled actually, through an abandoned tunnel that the rebels use."

Taffy stares at Olive's gown. "Where's your Pilgrim robe and how did you get another princess outfit?"

Olive fluffs the puffy sleeves. “One does try to keep up appearances. The robe was disgusting after tramping through the underground tunnel. It had to go. LB was kind enough to whip up this little confection.”

Olive twirls once and Henri can tell that Taffy is dying for a new outfit of her own. “I don’t care if it’s a long story,” Olive says. “How did you start out as Pilgrims and end up in the dungeon?”

Henri answers. “I think Administrator Nightlark knew we were coming. He picked us out of the crowd and invited us to the Mayor’s luncheon for no good reason. Could there be a spy among the rebels?”

Olive’s painted lips tighten a bit, but her expression is unreadable. “I will think about this later,” she says. “Right now I want to introduce you to someone special. You may come out,” Olive says looking toward the pitch-black room.

The friends hear footsteps scraping on the stone floor and the sound of LB being picked up. A creature with spindly arms and long fingers that don’t add up to five emerges from the darkness. Its two legs are also thin, like starving exclamation points. But the body, well, the body is a bottle of green chili hot sauce wearing a colorful poncho and a wide-brimmed sombrero.

Olive nods graciously. “Allow me to introduce the leader of the Fake Food Rebellion and a loyal friend, Sausalito.”

He bows genially as Olive introduces each friend in turn. But his eyes, big to begin with, grow even wider as he meets Henri. “It is an honor, Traveler. We have much to speak of but it’s best to leave Gargantua first.” He hands LB to Henri. “The box should be with you. And now, I think Olive is going to ask you to do something remarkable.”

Everyone turns expectantly toward Olive whose eyes flicker, then roll up in her head leaving an unnerving white stare behind.

“She is communicating with The Committee,” Sausalito explains. “It won’t take long.”

As predicted, Olive’s eyes return to normal in a few moments. She stares at Henri. “We need to leave immediately. The Administrator is on his way with Suchronytes. Is the medallion humming?”

“Yes,” Henri says cautiously.

“Very good,” Olive says. “I want you to hum along with it.”

“What about the danger of a space time rift?” P.J. says.

“Or making the universe disappear, or collapse, or whatever?” Taffy says.

We could all die. “What about the danger to all of you?” Henri says.

Olive studies her nails. “It’s up to you of course. If you want to be held down by Suchronytes while the Grymdish force themselves down your throat I won’t stand in your way.”

Receiving affirmative nods from Taffy and P.J., Henri pulls the medallion from beneath her robe. She gives LB’s handle an extra tight squeeze for moral support. “Okay, Olive. How do I do this?”

“It is much as before,” Olive says. “But you must use far less power. Imagine the portal as a small space, like an elevator, a closet, or even a bathroom.”

“Taffy would like a bathroom,” P.J. suggests helpfully. “That way she can spend all the time she wants in front of the mirror.”

“Humph,” Taffy’s eyes are the dark blue of storm clouds. “As if I want to be in a small space with you.”

Sausalito's dark eyebrows lift in surprise. "Don't pay attention to them," Henri says. "They're friends who enjoy not liking one another."

"Curious," he says. "I must hear more of this when danger is not so near."

"What's our destination?" Henri asks.

"We are going to the valley of Aduwanae," Olive says.

Henri calms her mind, grasps the medallion and listens for its music. Catching the full-throated hum she matches the tone while imagining the portal into being. This time it's a car, a shiny red convertible.

"Most suitable," Olive says settling into the front passenger seat with LB.

"Cool," Taffy and P.J. jump in the back seat.

"What is this mode of portal travel?" Sausalito asks. "It is unknown to me."

"It's called a car," Henri says.

Sausalito leans back against the headrest as Taffy fastens the seat belt around his stiff bottle body.

The car faces a solid wall but the stones begin to shiver as Henri channels the medallion's music. She hears footsteps descending the stairs to the dungeon as the wall ripples. The door to their prison is unlocked, swinging open as the wall goes liquid. An ordinary tunnel with rounded walls appears. Just beyond the entrance it is completely dark. Henri turns on the headlights and grips the steering wheel.

Olive murmurs. "Now would be a good time Henri."

"I'm going, I'm going," Henri says. The rearview mirror reflects her face, pale and tense. "It's just that I don't know how to drive a car."

"Don't know how or never have?" Olive asks.

“Never have,” says Henri.

Nightlark shouts something as the Suchronytes run toward the red convertible, amber eyes glowing.

“But Dad used to let me sit in front of him and drive the tractor.” Her mind is racing. It’s the first time since her father died she’s mentioned him without bawling like a baby.

The Suchronytes are only a few feet from the car. Olive twists her head to look, yelling, “Henri, go!”

Henri stomps on the gas pedal and the car vaults through the portal as if launched by a rocket. The portal entrance slams shut behind them but not before Henri sees Nightlark in the rearview mirror. He is smiling like someone who has gotten exactly what he wants.

“Remember to keep your energy signature small,” Olive says. “Stay focused on our destination. Keep repeating it – the Valley of Aduwanae. It doesn’t matter that you’ve never been there. Somehow the saying of the name is enough.”

Feeling more comfortable with her second portal Henri calls over her shoulder to Sausalito. “If you don’t mind my asking, are you an Animate like our friends Sir Brocco Lee and McCauley Flower?”

“Ah,” he says. “You have met my good companions. Let us hope that they join us in the Valley of Aduwanae. To answer your question, yes, I am also an Animate, but of a different family.”

“What family is that?” Taffy says.

Sausalito removes his sombrero and smooths the brim. Unlike the Cruciferous Clan who are organic, I am an inorganic Animate.”

“Are you saying that you’re living but not alive?” P.J. says.

“It is perhaps more accurate to say that I am animated yet not alive.”

P.J. snorts. “How is this possible? I’m sitting here talking with a bottle of hot sauce who isn’t really alive?”

Sausalito gives a pleasant gurgling laugh. “I have existed a long while and yet I still have more questions than answers. Perhaps we will have the opportunity to consider our questions together.”

Henri listens intently. The world is stranger than she ever imagined yet her own ability remains the strangest thing of all. The small hairs on her neck and arms feel like antennas, sensing the medallion’s steady hum. In every other way it feels like she is sitting in the car at home pretending to drive. Glancing at Olive she asks, “Why does this portal journey feel so different from the first?”

“You are a Traveler, Henri. Though this is only your second portal, and intra-domain travel at that, your technique is much improved.” Sighing Olive says, “I hope you are level headed enough to manage such a gift.”

“Why wouldn’t I be, level headed that is?” Henri says.

Looking beyond the headlight’s narrow beam Olive whispers, “Not everyone can manage remarkable abilities and the power that accompanies it.”

“So we’re back to whether or I’ll be a force for good or evil,” Henri’s jaw muscles clench. “Why are you so worried? Do I have a character flaw or something?”

“Henri, you haven’t many flaws at all that I can see other than the usual complications that arise from being a person. But your character is being formed. As your guide it is my responsibility to train you in the ways of a Traveler, and to help you use the ability with restraint and wisdom.”

P.J. calls out, “Hey, why is it so dark outside the car?”

“Because,” LB writes, “Henri is thinking it dark.”

P.J. removes his hat and rubs his head in puzzlement. “Are you saying that Henri is like creating reality?”

“Not in the deepest sense,” Sausalito says. “Travelers can shape perception within any portal they create. But they do not have the ability to change what you call reality outside the portal.”

“Wow!” P.J. turns to Sausalito. “How do you know this?”

Sausalito brushes a speck of dirt off his sombrero. “I am the first Animate, you see. Though perhaps it may be more accurate to say I am the result of the first accident.” He gives another of his gurgling chuckles.

“When The Committee decided to awaken us they intended to raise up a box of golden raisins, a shelf companion of mine. Unfortunately, each raisin had a consciousness of its own and they couldn’t agree on anything. So they were returned to their original state and The Committee elevated my consciousness. And here I’ve been ever since.”

“How old are you?” P.J. says.

“That’s so rude,” Taffy says. “You don’t ask people how old they are!”

“It’s quite all right with me,” Saucy replies. “I’m well past my original expiration date that’s for sure.” His fingers twitch. “Let’s see, in human time I must be around 150 years old. Anyway, long enough to pick up a few bits of information about portal travel.”

P.J. mumbles something, pulls out a battered notepad and starts scribbling furiously.

Taffy says, “You must have seen some amazing things, Sausalito.”

“Oh yes, quite amazing. Why I remember one time when Olive and I were on a mission to learn more about the Venai. She dressed in the most remarkable native costume.”

In a dead fish voice Olive interrupts, “We have under age children here Sausalito. They don’t need to know about ... that.”

“Ah yes, forgive me. I forget sometimes how young humans can be. But this story is quite harmless. You see, Olive had to glue plumage from the crimson Norka bird to her costume and the adhesive made her, how shall I put it, quite giddy.”

“That’s enough,” Olive says through tight lips.

With a conspirator’s wink at Taffy, Saucy says, “Oh yes, I’ve seen amazing things.”

“Olive,” Henri says, “The medallion is barely humming. What does that mean?”

“It means that we’re almost there,” Olive says. “Imagine that the car is gliding to a stop. When you see light at the end of the tunnel, tap the brake gently.”

Henri presses lightly on the brake pedal and the car stops. But they are still engulfed by darkness. A familiar panic crawls up Henri’s spine. “What’d I do?”

“It’s what you didn’t do,” Olive sighs. “You didn’t give the portal sufficient energy to drop out of the space time fold. You’ll have to give us a nudge.”

“A nudge,” Henri repeats.

“If you don’t understand, say so,” Olive scolds.

“I don’t understand,” Henri says.

Olive looks truly exasperated. “Simply say the name of our destination and synch with the medallion, but only for a moment. Too much energy will bring us all to an undesirable end.”

“Let me make sure I get this,” Henri says. “We’re trapped in a dark somewhere that’s in between everywhere. I need to synch with the medallion or we’re trapped but don’t use too much power or I might kill us all.”

“Don’t forget that you could accidentally tear a hole in the space-time thingy,” Taffy says.

“Thanks, I feel all better now,” Henri wipes fine beads of sweat off her forehead. As if on cue the friends start laughing at their ridiculously dangerous circumstances. *I can’t fail my friends. Not now.*

Instead of grasping the medallion Henri lets her hand hover just above it. She feels a faint thrumming that she mimics while thinking the name of their destination.

They are flying.

No. They are rolling down a large hill in bright sunlight which, if it weren’t so scary, would be kind of fun. Like bowling pins they tumble down one after another landing in a heap at the bottom.

The light dazzles Henri’s eyes but she can just make out a large orange fence that appears to be moving closer. Only it’s not a fence. It’s a ring of fierce looking warriors wielding spears and shields, each wearing a green headdress of intricate design.

“Stay very still,” Olive whispers. “And say nothing.”

Chapter 11

The Oracle

They are trapped in a circle of pointed spears. Henri blinks once, twice but there's nothing wrong with her eyes. Carrot people are holding them captive.

Remarkably, Sausalito's glass body did not break in spite of their bumpy arrival. With sombrero in hand he approaches the tallest of the guards who immediately drops to one scarred knee. The others kneel in rapid succession giving the impression of dominoes falling one by one.

"These are trusted friends," Sausalito explains pointing at the recent arrivals. He looks at Henri. "And this is a Traveler come to aid our cause." A murmur arises as the carrot warriors whisper and nod, their green plumed helmets stirring the air. The spear circle closes around Henri until the tallest guard raises an iron-gloved hand, restoring order.

"We must speak with Aduwanae on urgent business," Sausalito says. "Please escort us."

It is clear that Sausalito is held in the highest regard. As they walk through a meadow flanked by fluttering poplar leaves and blue firs, Animates of every kind come out to welcome him, staring shyly at Henri and her friends.

The air tastes clean on Henri's tongue as if she is the first person to ever breathe it. Mountains loom protectively in the distance, keeping the valley safe from harm. Wildflowers splash color among fragrant pine needles and the grass is easy under foot. Some of the younger Animates dance around Henri, coming just within reach only to dart away.

The valley of Aduwanae is a place of delight but Henri's legs are weary, unused to long walks. There is another burden that she dare not share. The medallion sings. It sings all the time. She is surprised no one else can hear. The music is not at all like a melody. It's a deep humming throb that resonates through skin and bone playing Henri like an instrument.

"You're awfully quiet," Taffy says falling into step next to Henri.

"Mmm. Tired I guess," Henri says.

"You do look kind of tired," Taffy gives Henri's hand a quick squeeze. "If you don't mind me saying, you look thinner too. Those Capri pants are getting baggy."

"You think so?" Henri pulls at the loose waist of her pants. "That's nice." Her reply is unlike the giddy delight with which she would've claimed such a compliment in the past. She can feel it. She's changed since becoming a Traveler. P.J. provides a welcome distraction, bursting in on their conversation uninvited.

"Look who's here?" P.J. shouts. Sir Brocco Lee approaches with his measured stride while McCauley's spindly legs devour the distance between them.

"Oh la!" Mac says. "I am zo happy to zee you my friends."

"I too am most pleased to behold your young faces," Sir Brocco's droopy eyes crinkle in delight.

Hugs are exchanged except for P.J. who remains just out of reach until Mac's vine-like hands unfurl to clasp him in a long distance embrace.

"We have zo much to tell and zo much of your adventures that we are wanting to hear," Mac says. "First we are to make zee visit to Aduwanae, no? Let us be walking together."

Henri walks in silence finding it difficult to block out the music that only she can hear.

"So kid, how ya doing?" LB asks. This time there's no sticky note.

“Between you and the medallion it sure is crowded in my head right now.” Henri summons a feeble smile.

“Thought so,” LB says. “I’ve seen that look before on your mamma’s face.”

Henri is so relieved she nearly falls to the ground. “You mean this, what I’m hearing, is normal?”

“Well kid,” LB says, “there’s nothing normal about being a Traveler. But given that it’s an extraordinary thing to be, you’re normal enough.”

“How do I make it stop?” Henri is weary, a headache lurks right behind her eyes.

“Sorry kid, you can’t make it stop. It’s part of who you are. You’ll learn to manage it in time so the music stays in the background.”

“It’s just really hard right now,” Henri rubs her eyes with a bunched fist.

“I know it’s tough. But if there’s one thing this box has learned it’s that now is not forever.” LB’s lid opens. “Snack?”

Realizing that she’s genuinely hungry Henri accepts the small plate of peanut butter and crackers with apple slices. This leads to demands for equal opportunity snacking from Taffy and P.J. Opening his mouth wide to reveal a wad of partially chewed food P.J. tries to gross everybody out. It’s stupid but it makes Henri laugh. She spews crumbs everywhere causing Taffy to roll her eyes in disgust. Suddenly everything is better and Henri thinks a silent *thank you LB*.

P.J. wipes his mouth on the back of his hand. “Are we there yet?”

“I don’t know,” Henri says. The late afternoon sun leaves part of the valley in shadow.

“That opening up ahead looks like the entrance to a cave. Maybe the oracle is inside.”

Henri looks around for confirmation and is astonished to see that the Cruciferous Clan and their Animate friends are kneeling.

Olive and Sausalito, who have been in deep discussion during the walk, approach. The tension between them is thick as gravy. Olive motions for the friends to kneel as she plops down, her legs splayed out straight with the princess dress billowing around her.

“What?” she says to no one in particular. “My knees don’t bend well. This is the best I can do.”

“Of course my dear,” Sausalito says. “Your best is nothing less than extraordinary. Would you like to do the greeting or shall I?”

“I expect you’d better,” Olive sniffs. “Aduwanae is easily angered and though I can’t imagine why, she doesn’t seem to care for me very much.”

Sausalito merely clears his throat and begins to address the mountain. “Aduwanae, great protector of all things, we seek your wisdom. We humbly ask that you appear before us. Your children face great danger. The one who was once vanquished now returns. In the name of all that you preserve, we humbly beseech your guidance.”

“Really,” Olive whispers. “For a mountain Aduwanae has quite an ego.”

“The oracle is a mountain?” Henri looks at the peaks crowned with clouds.

Taffy whispers, “Do you mean that the mountain talks?”

P.J. snorts. “Ridiculous. Mountain’s don’t talk.”

“You are an impudent youngling,” a sonic boom voice says. The mountain rumbles, “Who awakens me?”

“We did sir, uh ma’am, uh Aduwanae,” Henri says. “We need your help to defeat the Star Lord who wants to destroy Grymvald and my home called Earth.”

The ground shakes. “Who dares to ruin my valley, the garden of my children?”

“The one called Oziander grows in power again,” Sausalito says. “The fools who follow him have already defiled Gargantua’s food supply and enslaved its citizens.” Sausalito holds his sombrero, twisting the brim. “The natural cycles of plant and harvest are no more.” He bows his head. “We seek your guidance, Aduwanae and your aid in the coming battle.”

“Oziander,” Aduwanae sighs sounding like a distant avalanche. “Troubling.” A long silence follows. “You may camp in my valley this night. Words weary me but there is much to consider. Return when my children have supped.”

Olive’s lips attempt a frown. “I detest being bossed around by a mountain.”

“It could be worse,” Henri smiles. “You could be bossed around by an opinionated doll.”

“I am not opinionated,” Olive says. I merely speak my mind, an entirely different matter.”

LB scrawls, “Let’s go set up the house.”

They head toward a clearing, leaving Olive alone in the fading light. Henri motions the others on and steps into a shadow, watching. Olive’s dress sparkle like early fireflies. Henri can just make out the words she mutters aloud. “Will the Oracle’s prophecy support what must be done? It is a terrible thing to betray a Traveler,” Olive sighs. “But what was begun long ago cannot be undone.”

What does this mean? Henri clutches her throat, trying to swallow. *Can Olive be the traitor?* She feels sick, poisoned by what she has overheard. *Breathe.* Henri exhales. She turns

blindly and bangs her head against a tree. Resting her cheek against the rough bark she considers what to do next. *Nothing*, she thinks. *Do nothing for now. And act normal.*

“There you are,” Henri wipes her mouth with a crumpled napkin. “Where have you been, Olive?” Henri’s cheeks are flushed but her gaze is steady.

“Hmm?” Olive says. “Oh, I’ve been talking with Sausalito. His trust in Aduwanae is so annoying. Finish your supper. I’m certain we will be summoned soon. So, what have I missed?”

Talking around a mouthful of food, P.J. says, “Sir Brocco and Mac have been telling us about Aduwanae and how the mountain became alive, kind of.”

Olive sits in a chair, legs poking straight out “Oh? What have they been telling you?”

“A really, really, really long time ago when the elemental energy of the universe changed that’s when The Committee came into being. But something else came into existence too. Aduwanae is kind of like what we call Mother Nature back on Earth. So that makes Aduwanae kind of unpredictable. She’s not really a force for either good or evil, just a force. You know?”

A polite knock sounds at the door. Sir Brocco Lee introduces Veritas, the captain of the carrot guard.

“My pardon,” Veritas says. “Lord Sausalito asked me to tell you that Aduwanae calls.”

“Sit down everyone,” Olive’s voice stings like a whip. “Children, you should brush your teeth and clean up before the audience. After all, we want to show Aduwanae the respect she deserves.”

Animates and humans trade a collective shrug.

Henri stands, “We won’t be long.”

Stepping outside, Henri and her friends take in the ever-widening arc of campsites the Cruciferous Clan has set up around the house. Torchlight blankets the valley. A faint grassy scent tickles Henri’s nose. It is the warm green drink of which the Animates are so fond.

Henri asks Captain Veritas, “Do you visit Aduwanae often?”

He shakes his head, “No, not often. We come to Aduwanae with the change of each season to honor her with festivals and contests of skill. But few of us have ever heard her speak. She is removed from our understanding as one who lives the long slow time known only to mountains.”

“I don’t understand,” Henri says. “I thought Animates lived outside of time like that too.”

The captain’s green plumed helmet shivers as he chuckles. “We live long in years, unlike our brothers and sisters who remain in their natural state.” A white-toothed smile contrasts with his deeply orange skin. “Our sense of time seems slow to humans and it is challenging for us to think in the small slices of time that your kind are so fond of. But all of us are less than a day in the long passage of time that is Aduwanae’s existence.”

They kneel atop a small hill that affords a view of the valley. The night is adorned with flickering torchlight all the way to the horizon. The evening breeze is hushed as if it too is waiting reverently for the oracle’s appearance.

A silvery mist collects at the mouth of the cave as if smoke is settling there. The cloud swirls gently growing ever taller until a towering form appears. A giant figure sinks to the ground as trails of mist hover around her head like a crown. Her robes shimmer, made of moonlight, matching the pale ivory of her skin. Like a goddess, her oval face is perfect with

wide set eyes, high cheekbones and a strong nose. Her lips are full and stern. Only her bare arms and feet are remotely human.

“It pleases me to see you my children.” Her voice is the roar of white water rushing over rocks.

“Though I dwell as one with the mountain I have left my long sleep to consider the peril of a vanquished enemy now returned.”

With a graceful sweep of his sombrero Sausalito bows. “May I speak wise mother?”

A breeze stirs the air. “I remember you. Yes, oldest one, you may speak.”

“I fear my lady we must go to war again,” Sausalito says. “The Star Lord is determined to reclaim the token that was stripped from him so long ago.” He glances at Henri. “If the Star Lord joins his maledictus with the Traveler’s medallion no force will be able to stop him. We implore you, oracle of the mountain, untangle the web of our possible futures. Grant us your guidance for the protection of our world.”

“Your words are grim,” Aduwanae says. “I feel the Traveler’s presence among us.” Her voice thunders, “Come forth.”

Henri takes a small step forward and says faintly, “I am the Traveler.”

“You are small to have such power.” Aduwanae points a giant finger at Henri.

“Closer.” She turns her palm upward including P.J. and Taffy. “You as well.”

Aduwanae looms above the tallest of the fir trees. Her energy captures the friends and pulls them to nest-like chairs, indicating that they should be seated.

“It seems that Guardians are among us.” The sound of Aduwanae’s laughter fills the valley making the poplar leaves dance for joy.

“I will read your possible futures,” the oracle says.” Pointing at P.J., “I shall begin with you.”

P.J. sits still as stone. Aduwanae’s mouth opens and mist envelopes him. “You have the abilities of a mentalist.” Her voice is strong and without mercy, the piercing cry of a hawk. “Take care that your mind does not lose touch with your heart. If you succeed in this you will be brilliant, more importantly, you will be wise.”

Aduwanae stirs Taffy’s curls in a breathy caress. “Interesting,” the air itself seems to whisper. “You have the makings of an aerialist. If you are true to your dreams and to your friends, you will fly far.”

The mist swirls around Henri. It tastes like sweet clover. Evening shadows creep down the mountainside as she waits for Aduwanae to speak.

An icy wind causes Henri to break out in goose bumps. “You have the cosmos at your fingertips.” Aduwanae’s words echo in Henri’s mind for her alone to hear. “But you do not have the power save everyone you love.” Her voice is the relentless roar of a waterfall. “There are complications and secrets, great trials and greater triumphs. Find what is true, Traveler. It is your only hope.”

Aduwanae’s voice rides an evening breeze as she speaks to P.J. and Taffy. “The fate of many depends on you. Bring the reflection to the Traveler. Without it she cannot find what is true. If the Traveler fails in this Grymvald will fall. Oziander will rule this domain and, in time, all others.”

The oracle vanishes. As they stand up the chairs disappear too. Henri and her friends walk back to camp in the company of Olive and their Animate companions. The air is hushed as members of the Cruciferous Clan bow one by one as they pass.

“Why are they doing that?” Taffy whispers

“It is a sign of respect,” Sausalito says. “They honor you because you have been honored by Aduwanae.”

“I don’t see how we’ve been honored,” P.J. grumbles. “It feels like we’ve been looked over and found wanting. What’s a mentalist, anyway?”

“Yeah,” Taffy wonders. “What’s an aerialist? It sounds like I’m a trapeze artist. That’s just weird.”

P.J. nods in agreement for once. “It’s all weird. How are supposed to bring a reflection to Henri?”

Sir Brocco gently touches Henri’s shoulder. “And what of you, Traveler? What do you make of the oracle’s prophecy?”

Rubbing at the medallion beneath her shirt Henri shakes her head. “I don’t know what to think except that ... ”

“Except that, ... ” Olive says.

“Except that everything is complicated. That’s the only thing Aduwanae said that I can understand.”

“Exactly,” Olive sniffs. “I could have told you that.” She looks crossly at Sausalito. “It’s just as I said. This detour to the oracle has been a colossal waste of time. And what did we hear? Gibberish. Absolute gibberish.”

Sausalito stops in mid-step. “I hold you in the highest regard Olive. But I fear that your history with Aduwanae has blinded you to her ability as an oracle. We do not understand her prophecy but that does not mean she is without wisdom.”

He marches forward, causing his serape to billow and snap as he outpaces the others with Olive close behind.

Sir Brocco's leafy arm wraps around Henri's shoulder. "Aduwanae speaks only truth. This I know from my elders." His bushy eyebrows knit together in recollection. "I was told that her words must be heard with the ears, contemplated with the mind, and understood with the heart." He gives Henri a leafy pat on the head. "Understanding is complicated, Traveler, but not impossible."

Mac walks backwards in order to face Henri. "Yes. We shall consider zhees together, no? Zhees is what friends do."

Looking at her companions one by one a smile creeps onto Henri's mouth. "Yes," she says. "That is exactly what friends do."

Olive and Sausalito are huddled at the dining table in deep conversation when the others return.

"There you are," Olive says in her cheeriest voice. "We have been discussing what should be done next. Haven't we Sausalito?"

"Actually," his mustache twitches, "You have been telling me what should be done though I am not convinced it is the wisest course of action."

Olive snorts like a bull about to charge, annoyed at any questioning of her authority.

LB sends out a flurry of notes. "Snacks anyone? It looks like we're going to be up awhile."

Chapter 12

The Parting

Sitting at the table, Henri glances at Sir Brocco wondering if she should speak. An almost imperceptible nod of his flowery head says that she should. Claspng both hands together to keep from touching the medallion she takes a deep breath. “What are you arguing about?”

Sausalito answers as Olive studies her permanently painted red nails. “I was imprisoned in the dungeon where you found me because I had learned that Administrator Nightlark is a disciple of the Star Lord.”

“Oziander,” Henri whispers. The medallion stirs at the mention of his name.

“That’s just great,” P.J. frowns. “Now we have to save the world from two super villains.”

Taffy nudges him. “You sound too cranky to be a hero of any kind.”

“Nightlark does not have super powers,” Olive sniffs dismissively. “His evil is entirely human. But he is capable of doing great harm.”

“Olive and I disagree,” Sausalito says, “because I believe that we must face the greater threat with all of our resources. If we vanquish the Star Lord, Nightlark will fall.”

“But what if we bring everything to bear on the Star Lord and fail?” Olive’s plastic hands squeak as she rubs them together. “Then we have nothing left. Grymvald will be the first of many domains enslaved.”

Sir Brocco sets his green drink on the table. “Either path is perilous. My clan will abide by the Traveler’s decision.”

“What?” Henri squeaks. “You want me to decide?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Olive says. “Henri is a child and an apprentice Traveler. As her guide I should decide.”

“But will the Cruciferous Clan follow you?” Sausalito asks, a slim smile streaks across his face.

Sir Brocco looks at Henri. “We follow the Traveler as we have ever done.”

“Oui,” Mac says. “Eet eez up to you Henri. Our fate eez in your hands.”

Holding her head as if it might go flying off her shoulders, Henri’s voice comes out louder than expected. “Enough! Sausalito, please talk me through this again.”

“I am honored, Traveler.” He does a little hop-skip that shakes the green contents of his bottle. “Sediment,” he explains. “It needs shaking up from time to time to keep my thoughts clear.”

“Neevil Nightlark has fled to a plateau in the Maga Mountains known as La Dolce Vista. He mines the mountain for Suchronos and uses it to poison Grymvald’s water supply. Those who become addicted turn into Suchronytes, the living dead you encountered in Gargantua. Nightlark delivers these poor souls to the Star Lord who uses them for his own dark purpose. In return, Nightlark grows in power and wealth. As the Star Lord’s servant he will rule all of Grymvald as he now rules our capitol city.”

“What about Mayor Hamhands?” Henri wonders.

“And his wife Honey?” Taffy says. “I like her.”

“Weak-minded fools both of them,” Olive waves her hand dismissively.

“Yes,” Saucy sighs. “It is sad that their goodness has been overwhelmed. But the Mayor and his wife have been seduced by excess and the unrelenting desire for more. They are blind to Nightlark’s conspiracy.”

Olive shakes her head in disagreement causing her neck to squeak. “The Cruciferous Clan is better suited to the task of capturing Nightlark,” she says. “This is not without danger, but if they succeed we are free to focus on the Star Lord without Nightlark’s minions getting in the way.”

All eyes focus on Henri. “We know where to find Nightlark,” she says. “Do we know the location of the Star Lord?”

“We believe that he is also in the Maga mountains, somewhere deep within its underground caverns,” says Olive.

“At least it’s narrowed down to one mountain range,” P.J. says with more than a hint of sarcasm. “That’s helpful.”

Taffy sighs. “We can’t search an entire mountain range to find one man.”

“We don’t need to search,” Olive says. “We have Henri.”

Henri snorts. “So now I’m a decision-maker and a homing beacon?” Why aren’t there any written instructions on how to be a Traveler? Just once I’d like to know what I’m supposed to do.”

“You are many things Henri, most of which you have yet to discover.” Olive stands on stiff legs to pace around the dining table. “The medallion has a resonance of its own as does the Star Lord’s maledictus. It’s based on harmonic convergence, something too complicated for my doll’s head to understand. But as a Traveler, you can sense the resonance. So you should be able to find the Star Lord. In a manner of speaking you are a homing beacon.”

“Won’t he be able to find me the same way I can find him?” Henri blurts out. More questions pour out of her. “How can we plan a surprise attack? What if he’s luring us to the maledictus? What if it’s a trap?”

“Enough,” Olive bellows. “We must trust that he does not yet recognize your signature.”

P.J. says, “You mean Henri’s energy signature, right?”

Olive inclines her head. “Every portal that Henri opens leaves behind an echo. In time, he will be able to trace the echo back to the source. Something we must avoid until it’s time.”

Henri’s jaw drops. “You want me to sanction Oziander. You want me to take the power from his maledictus. Don’t you?”

Olive clicks her eyes several times, calculating the answer. “It may not come to that.”

The medallion thrums, sensing Henri’s anger and confusion. “How long have you known Olive? How long have you known that I would have to sanction the Star Lord?”

Olive looks away. Sausalito hops around, clearly upset. He removes his sombrero and hugs it against his chest. “I am sorry that Olive and I did not tell you. We thought it best to speak only when we were certain.”

Henri isn’t angry at Sausalito but she glares at Olive. “You should’ve told me. I’ll never be more than an apprentice in your eyes, someone who can be molded to achieve a purpose without knowing the whole truth. Now I have to make the biggest decision of my life and, thanks to you, I have to make it alone.”

Henri heads for the door, cautions Taffy and P.J. with a fierce look not to follow, and steps into the night air.

Blinded by her anger Henri stands on the porch, shoulders heaving. Eventually she notices Captain Veritas who stands guard just beyond the glow of the porch light. She acknowledges his presence with a brief nod then begins to walk without a destination in mind. Captain Veritas and two other members of the Cruciferous Clan follow her at a discreet distance.

Henri ends up on the narrow path that leads to the oracle. She finds a large flat rock close to the mountain's entrance and lies down, enjoying the feel of cool stone against her back. She looks up at the night sky that is nothing like home. There are no familiar animal shapes or human hunters among these stars. Beyond counting, the stars are cold torches that cannot help Henri find her way. And yet, the vast remoteness overhead soothes her troubled heart. She is part of something infinitely greater, an existence in which Henrietta Sharp and her concerns are very small.

"Oh mom," she says softly. "What should I do? How will I know I've made the right decision?" Henri's eyes flutter toward sleep as a blanket of mist settles around her. It is a dream. She knows that. But the feeling of her mother's presence is comforting.

The twin moons of Grymvald have risen high when Henri stirs. Her body is stiff from the night chill but she is reluctant to leave. "Well, mom, you always said that growing up is about growing into responsibility. I guess this is what you meant." Sitting up cross-legged she whispers. "I just didn't know how hard it would be."

Standing, she stares at the entrance to Aduwane's cave. Henri honors the oracle with a small bow and then begins the trek back toward camp. She knows what must be done. Somehow she has the feeling that her mom approves. With the clan warriors and their captain close behind she makes the journey back with a lighter heart and surer footsteps.

The house is dark when she returns except for the recessed light above the kitchen sink. Olive sits across the room, the sparkles in her gown glowing. Her voice is neutral. “You should go to bed. “It’s been a long day.”

“Yes it has,” Henri says. “Good night, Olive.” Without speaking aloud she wishes LB a good night then disappears down the hall to her room.

“The kid is getting tougher,” LB writes. “Are you happy?”

Olive manages to look down her pert nose without appearing cross-eyed. “I do not have emotions.”

“Right,” LB speaks to Olive’s mind. “You may be synthetic, doll, but inside you’re 100% human.”

“If that is so then being human is something I no longer care to remember.” She walks to the picture window on stiff legs and stands staring until the first pink streaks announce the start of a new day.

When Henri gets up everyone is already at the kitchen table. She says good morning and then the questions start. Taffy and P.J. want to know where she went, why she went alone, and most of all, what did she decide? Their concern lifts her spirits but it doesn’t make what must be said any easier.

LB writes an oversized note, “Let the kid eat some breakfast.”

Henri tries taking a few bites but it’s impossible to swallow with everyone looking at her. Sitting up straight Henri tells them her decision.

“No,” P.J. and Taffy shout in one voice.

Henri explains again. “I’m not leaving you behind. I’m sending the two of you with Sausalito and Mac to spy on Nightlark. Sir Brocco will remain here until the rest of the

Cruciferous Clan has rallied. Then he and Captain Veritas will march to Nightlark's stronghold and put an end to his evil ways."

Flexing his skinny biceps P.J. says, "You need a man by your side if you're going for the Star Lord."

Taffy's nose wrinkles in disgust. "Do you see a man around here? Besides, Henri doesn't need a man's help and she certainly doesn't need yours."

"Hel-lo," LB writes in all caps. "Magic lunch box, remember? I've got the kid's back."

"Yes," says Henri, "I'll be fine with LB." She pauses, "And Olive."

Olive has been strangely quiet since Henri's declaration to travel with all speed to the Star Lord's realm in the Maga Mountains. Sausalito is about to protest when Henri silences him with a small shake of her head.

Olive's pursed lips soften into a smile as she issues orders to prepare for the two expeditions. Henri and her friends are sent to wash and pack before LB deconstructs their lodgings yet again. The Animates seek counsel with one another outside, leaving LB and Olive alone in the deserted kitchen.

"Well, doll," LB scrawls, "Are you happy now?"

"You are very impertinent for a box."

"Never mind my attitude. You're getting what you want."

"I get nothing from this," Olive says. "I simply do what must be done." She gives a sharp little sniff to change the subject. "Remind the children to hurry up." With that she steps outside to stand statue-like in the shadow of a gnarled tree.

The clan, dressed in rainbow colored skirts and weskits, gathers to see Henri off. Her heart is lighter for their presence, but sad farewells soon follow. Sir Brocco Lee gives each of

the friends a leafy hug then turns away to hide the tears flowing freely down his cheeks.

“Remember the words of Aduwanae,” he says. “Her meaning is difficult to understand but her wisdom is without fault.”

Henri gives a fierce hug to McCauley and Sausalito in turn. Then she shakes hands with Captain Veritas who bows his head, brushing her cheek with the green plume of his helmet.

“When will we see each other?” Taffy sniffles.

“Forget about when,” P.J. says. “Where will we meet? How will we find one another again?”

Henri’s fingers twitch above the medallion. “I don’t know exactly,” she says. “But LB and even The Committee are on our side.” She doesn’t mention Olive. “Maybe I’ll just open a portal and come right to you. But this I promise. We *will* find each other.”

Sausalito tosses his sombrero into the air and shouts, “Viva La Traveler.” The Cruciferous Clan joins the cheer, their voices echoing across the valley to bounce off the mountains. A chill breeze whispers against Henri’s cheek. “Find your strength in the reflection that is true.” Aduwanae’s voice fades away in the morning sunlight.

Henri gives her friends one final hug. And then it is over. Olive leads the way as Henri clutches LB, determined not to look back. But she does anyway only to find that Taffy and P.J. follow her with their eyes until their paths are truly parted.

Chapter 13

The Slippery Slope

Henri takes little notice of their surroundings, blurred by the speed of Olive's moving walkway. Swatting away a swarm of iridescent-winged insects she tugs at the loose waist of her Capri pants and smiles.

LB sends her a note. "You're just like your mom was at your age."

"Yeah, right." LB's comment makes the corners of her mouth curl upward even higher.

After moving along in silence for several minutes Henri says, "Why can't I just open a portal and get us to the cavern in the Maga Mountains immediately?"

"You know the answer," Olive says. "Your energy signature is too big and as we get nearer the Star Lord will most certainly sense it. We need the element of surprise."

"So why can't the Star Lord sense your energy signature, Olive?"

"Mine is not so easily tracked."

"Then do you channel The Committee's power like LB?"

"No. I am more of an agent, acting as The Committee commands and dependent upon the power they provide." Olive frowns as much as her plastic face allows. "I am no longer a Traveler, and unlike LB, I cannot draw upon their power as I will."

The sun beats down on Henri's fair skin, making the back of her neck tingle. "It's hot."

"Heads up, kid," LB writes. A bottle of sunscreen flies into Henri's hand. "You're looking a little crispy."

“There’s some shade up ahead.” Olive points to a dusty cluster of trees. “Let’s rest for a moment.”

Henri eagerly agrees. She is weary from imagining all sorts of dangerous situations her friends might be in. Now that it’s too late to change her mind, she can’t help feeling that it was wrong to separate from them. Henri studies the place where they have come to rest. A dusty green vine has grown over the gray tree bark, covering every inch.

The trees provide some relief from the sun in spite of the grit of suchronos that bleaches color from the leaves.

“This is Nightlark’s handiwork.” Olive shakes the dust from her skirts.

Henri shivers in disgust at the memory of Nightlark’s crabbed face and greasy hair. “I don’t understand,” she says. “He’s kind of creepy but he doesn’t look powerful enough to be so destructive.”

“Men with little souls and big ambition can do great harm,” Olive says. “Now that he is a pawn of our greater enemy, Nightlark has free reign to ruin Grymvald. Only the areas protected by the Cruciferous Clan are beyond his reach.”

Henri sits on the rocky ground, rubbing her weary legs. “Is there a reason why I’m so tired? I feel like I’ve been carrying rocks uphill all day.”

Olive steps closer to Henri, blocking out the sun. “Now that we are close to the Star Lord I cannot reveal our presence by channeling from The Committee. I’m operating the walkway by using a small bit of your power as a Traveler.”

“So *you* can use my power but I can’t. Is that what you’re saying?” Anger flashes in Henri’s eyes and her sunburned cheeks flame scarlet. *What is Olive not telling me and how can she use my power without permission?*

There is something in Olive's tone, maybe bitterness, most certainly regret. "You have immense power, Henri. Perhaps the greatest potential I have ever seen. You are not yet trained in its use and that makes you dangerous."

LB plops a note on top of Henri's clenched fist. "If it makes you feel any better kid, The Committee gave the doll permission to siphon a small bit of your power. Just enough to speed up our journey."

Henri swallows back a flood of anger but her gaze is fierce and unblinking. "Well then," she says, "we should get moving." Securing LB to her backpack Henri asks politely, "May I have a snack please? Something with a lot of energy in it."

A banana appears. Henri peels it and takes a bite as the walkway begins to move. They travel in silence for a long while.

Henri slips again banging her knee on a rock. "Why is this hill so hard to climb?"

"It's called the Slippery Slope for a reason," Olive says.

"Yeah. But what exactly makes it so slippery?"

"Always questions," Olive sighs. "Your curiosity must surely be exhausted by now."

"Getting up this hill is exhausting. Asking questions is easy." Henri mutters, "It's getting the answers that's hard."

"Don't mutter, Henri. It's not polite. Keep climbing and I will tell you what I know."

Sweat drips from the ends of Henri's hair. "Are you sure we can't use the walkway?"

"No way, kid," LB scribbles. "This close to the Star Lord we can only channel enough of your power to keep the doll moving. Even that's risky."

Henri picks her way carefully over the rocky ground. “Having a super power isn’t any fun. It’s all rules and responsibilities, and you can never use it when it would make things easier.”

Olive walks next to Henri with the advantage of floating a few inches above the rough ground. “That is the lesson all Travelers must learn.”

“Doll,” LB writes. “You need to lighten up. Things are hard enough for the kid.”

“Yes,” Olive says. “Let us speak of other things. I shall tell Henri why this particular slope is so very difficult to climb.”

“Finally,” Henri says.

“We are above the Maga Caverns where the Star Lord dwells. The greasy substance that covers the ground is a strategic advantage, making it impossible for a large army to approach. But this substance serves a more terrible purpose.”

Olive’s painted eyebrows arch a bit higher. “You have seen the Grymdish, tools of the Star Lord and the Venai. Their numbers make them dangerous but they are of limited intelligence. Now our enemy breeds a class of warriors so loathsome and deadly that Grymvald will surely fall if they come to be. The mountain is slick with the residue of their making for this substance is what nourishes them to maturity.”

Slipping as if on cue Henri tumbles halfway down the hill she has just climbed.

“Ow! And ick.” Henri rubs her greasy palms but a faint sheen remains. “What kind of creature can come from stuff like this?”

Olive floats down the hill, hovering next to Henri. “They are called Flyfur, engineered horrors, equal parts eagle, lion and human.

Henri's round eyes narrow. "Now, I get it. We're here to stop this army of Flyfur before it comes to life."

"You are very bright." Olive sounds almost proud. "But recovery of the maledictus, the Star Lord's corrupted medallion, comes first. Without it the Venai cannot unleash these deadly creatures to other domains."

Henri grimaces, dabbing at a scrape on her knee. "How are we going to destroy a whole army of awful if they're not alive yet?"

"A plan is in development," Olive says.

"In other words," Henri grimaces, "we don't know what we're doing."

"I wonder how Taffy and P.J. are getting along," Henri says, her foot sliding on the greasy goo that covers the mountainside.

"Don't worry about them, kid. I gave Sausalito a little something that will make their journey easier."

LB explains that he loaned them a necessity cube, a smaller and less powerful version of himself. "Like all instruments of power," LB says, "the cube is useful but dangerous if used improperly."

Henri applies more sunscreen while stumbling up the slope. "Is there any power that isn't dangerous?"

"No," Olive says. "Not really. There are always consequences."

"What about you Olive?" Henri says. "You said you were a Traveler once. Did you end up in your particular situation because of consequences?"

Olive's eyes are dark and dead, making the hair on Henri's neck prickle. "It is not a story for children. Are you sure you want to know what I have learned of consequences?"

Henri nods her head yes, not trusting her voice to give the same answer.

"What do you say, LB? Shall I tell the story of how I became a life size doll, alive but not living?"

"It's time to tell the kid," LB writes.

Olive sighs, remembering. "My power did not awaken until I was fourteen," she says. "I was delighted to learn that my best friend Dee 'Ora was also a Traveler and had been from an early age, much like you, Henri. We were inseparable, traveling the universe as The Committee commanded until she met him."

Henri bites her tongue hard to keep from asking him who?

"Dee 'Ora found the love of her life and he loved her above all else, even more than his responsibilities as a Traveler. And yet he ruined everything."

"You don't mean," Henri interrupts, "you aren't talking about the Star Lord, are you?"

"The very same." Olive's eyes click as she blinks. "My best friend and Oziander wed in secret. They defied The Committee who feared that their marriage might produce offspring possessing uncontrollable power."

"Determined to become so powerful that The Committee could not force them apart, Oziander traveled to forbidden domains. But the more power he possessed, the more he desired. When he joined forces with the Venai, Dee 'Ora knew that Oziander was lost to her. Only the Star Lord remained. She left him, near death with grief and regret. If I had not nursed her back to health we might never have suffered what came next."

Henri slips on the impossible slope again but Olive's story is so fascinating she barely notices.

"He traveled beyond the Rim, a place forbidden to Travelers, seeking Dee 'Ora with only the cold light of stars as his companions. Such extreme travel extracts a great cost. Consequences Henri. Terrible consequences. His human form began to fade, replaced by the dark nothing that makes up most of the universe."

"The stuff of stars," Henri whispers. "That's what you said about him when we first met."

"Did I now?" Olive sounds surprised. "That's a bit romantic considering what happened next."

"What did happen next?" Henri works her way up the slope, stepping from one rocky outcrop to the next.

"The Committee happened," Olive says. "They observed Dee 'Ora's power to resist his seeking so they commanded her to do the impossible. The Committee sent Dee 'Ora to sanction the Star Lord."

Rocks skitter down the hill as Henri turns to stare at Olive. "She went alone?"

"No, not alone. I was with her."

Oh, no, Henri thinks. *Did Olive betray her friend? Does she plan to do the same to me?*
Henri sits down, hard but Olive doesn't seem to notice.

"We made our way to the caverns as you and I are doing now. Dee 'Ora pleaded with him to leave the Venai. He could not. He begged her to stay. She would not. And so they fought, a battle beyond time. Her golden flame battled his blue black light. They were evenly

matched until he grasped the maledictus and, uttering vile words of power, overwhelmed Dee ‘Ora with the deadly light of stars.”

“When I saw Dee ‘Ora fall I defied her command to stay back. I ran straight toward Oziander. There was no pain but I was frozen on the spot by his dark light. In a single movement he was at Dee ‘Ora’s side, wailing as no animal could. The last thing I saw was Dee ‘Ora in his arms being gently placed on a great carved block.”

“What about you, Olive?”

“I awoke to find myself as you see me now, a prisoner in this artificial body. I lost my dearest friend, my true self and the ability to Travel. These are the consequences I live with. I hope you never have to.”

Henri drops her head to her chest. “I can’t do this,” she whispers. “It’s too hard.”

“Nonsense,” says Olive. “It’s just a hill.” She surveys their progress. “Look how far we’ve come.”

“I don’t mean the hill,” Henri says. “I can’t sanction the Star Lord. I don’t have the power.” *And I don’t trust you.* Henri’s face is gray reflecting their bleak surroundings. “I’m afraid.”

“Of course you’re afraid. You’re a smart girl and only idiots are without fear.” Olive stares at her. Henri feels like she is being x-rayed. “You are stronger than you know, Henri. The Committee would not have sent you if this were not true. And unlike Dee ‘Ora, you have a medallion that will channel and focus your power.”

“But Oziander has one too.”

“Yes. That’s true. But you also have me. When the time comes The Committee will channel power through me, tipping the balance of power in our favor. I will be there for you as I could not be for Dee ‘Ora.”

“But why? Why didn’t The Committee just give you and Dee ‘Ora the power you needed to defeat the Star Lord?”

“Have you heard nothing I’ve said? Power is dangerous. The Committee does not interfere directly because the balance between light and dark is the business of mortals. They did not dare help us before but now they have no choice. The Star Lord and the Venai have disrupted the balance between good and evil. The Committee must help restore it.”

Olive raises her right hand as if to take a vow. “I swear you will come to no harm, Henri. Do you trust me?”

I don’t know, Henri wails inside. She forces her mouth to say the words, “Yes, I trust you.”

“And what about me, kid?” LB dashes off a note. “You trust me, don’t you?”

“Yes, LB. I do. How could I not? You make me laugh and it sounds weird to say it, but you’re one of my best friends.”

Olive looks at the path that lies ahead. “Henri, you must climb faster.”

“Oh, I can climb fast enough. It’s just that I slide down even faster. Let me think. What is it that mom always says? If you can’t go over, go around. If you can’t go around, go under. And if you can’t do that, find another way.”

“Up and over is what you’ve not been able to do,” Oliver reminds her.

“Yes, but I have a different kind of up in mind. LB, I’d like a sky stick, like we used in Gargantua. And make it red, please.”

Chapter 14

Really In Trouble

P.J. rubs the back of his neck. “I don’t know why you can’t see it.”

Taffy stares at the map P.J. has drawn on a sandy patch of ground. “I see it, P.J. I just don’t agree. Your way takes too long. And who knows if it’s really any safer. Not even Mac and Sausalito know for sure.”

P.J. goes over his plan again, using a stick to point out the important parts in the dusty powder at their feet. “We’re here, at the eastern edge of Aduwanae’s valley. In order to get to Nightlark we have to cross this open plain and skirt around the geo-thermal activity that Mac and Saucy have described. If we cut straight across there’s a good chance we’ll be par-boiled by a geyser, or deep-fried in a hot pot.”

Taffy paces back and forth. “I get it. But remember what Aduwanae said. We have to bring the reflection to Henri. If we don’t do that she can’t defeat the Star Lord. We need to do our spying for the Cruciferous Clan, then find the reflection and get to Henri as soon as possible.”

“I’m worried about Henri too,” P.J. says. “But we can’t help her if we get killed on the way to Nightlark’s hideout at La Dolce Vista.” He tugs at the brim of his cap again. “Maybe we can figure out how we’re supposed to find a reflection the journey.”

Taffy’s boots make ski-like tracks in the fine dust until she commands her feet to be still. “Okay,” her shoulders slump. “We’ll take the longer path.”

P.J. tries not to show it but his mind is racing out of control again. He can sense the air temperature, the wind velocity, the continuous incline of the path they must follow, even the sound of the scrubby grass pushing its way to the surface. *This is crazy. I'm crazy.* But what comes out of his mouth is, "You're pink."

"What?" Taffy studies the skin on her arm.

"You're getting sunburned. We should find some shade until the sun goes down then travel at night." He asks Sausalito and Mac, "What do you think?"

They nod in agreement and Mac leads them to a cluster of tall bushes, sheltered from the wind by a scattering of large boulders. Sausalito pronounces it suitable and they crawl inside a small opening, arranging the knobby branches so they can sit.

"I shall scoot for a bit," Mac says.

"Scoot?" P.J. laughs.

"Oui," Mac says. "Eet eez my job to, how do you say, keep an eye out?"

"Oh, I get it. You're going to scout."

Mac gives Taffy a questioning look, "Eez what I said, no?"

"Exactly," Taffy says, conveying that all boys, P.J. in particular, are idiots.

Mac shrugs her shoulders and leaves their hiding place.

Wiping her face and hands free of the day's grime, Taffy gently dabs sun block over her face, paying special attention to the area around her eyes.

"Why do you do that little patting motion instead of just rubbing on the sun block?" P.J. says.

"Because I want my skin to look young even when I'm really old, like 30." She looks at P.J. "Your neck is grimy. Do you ever wash?"

“Do you see a magic bathroom around here?”

“No I don’t,” Taffy sighs. “That’s one of many things I miss about LB.”

Sausalito reaches into a pocket beneath his serape and pulls out a silver cube. “I have a gift for you from LB.” He hands it to Taffy. “Wave your hand over it, young miss, and say ‘bath.’”

She does and a white tub large enough to sit in appears. Taffy turns the faucet and water gushes forth at just the right temperature. “Oh Saucy, this is perfect.” She looks skyward and whispers, “LB, I love you.”

“A bath tub?” P.J. snorts. “What a waste of magic.”

“It is not just a bath tub,” Saucy says. “It is a necessity cube.”

Suddenly more interested P.J. asks, “What’s a necessity cube?”

“It is what you need it to be, a source for water, food, and shelter. Anything necessary for your journey.”

P.J.’s eyes are bright with possibilities as he reaches out to touch the bathtub.

“Oh no you don’t,” Taffy stands in his way. “Not until I’ve washed. Now go away, both of you.”

Saucy and P.J. sit in the shade of a nearby boulder. “The necessity cube,” Sausalito explains, “operates on the same energy to matter conversion process that LB uses.” He waves his sombrero back and forth, stirring the hot air. “But unlike LB, the necessity cube is a tool. It has no consciousness, no sense of self.”

“Wait,” P.J. says. “How can LB know that, well, that he’s LB?”

Saucy shrugs. “No idea.”

P.J. scribbles furiously, jotting down questions and possible explanations for the mystery that is LB.

In a shorter time than expected Taffy calls, “C’mon back.” P.J. and Saucy return to see a freshly filled basin. Taffy points at P.J. “Now it’s your turn.” It is not a request.

Taffy and Saucy step outside the bushes to wait. Finally, P.J. yells that he’s finished.

When Mac returns from her scouting mission a steaming cup of green liquid is waiting for her. “Oh la, for me?”

“Yes,” Saucy says. “The young ones have a gift for using the necessity cube.”

“Ooh,” Mac’s eyes grow larger. “Zhees eez a powerful gift. Have you told my friends zee story of how zee cube came to be?”

“Please tell us Saucy,” Taffy says. “Would you like something to eat first?”

“No thank you. I don’t require food.” Saucy leans his bottle back against the soft cushions that populate their hideaway.

“So much is lost in time,” he says. “Even for one of my years I only repeat the legend as it was told to me.” He tucks a pillow beneath his legs, sighing contentedly. “After The Committee came into being it was discovered that certain people had the ability to travel. Unfortunately, a great number of the potential Travelers went quite mad when they were contacted mind-to-mind, too much power for them to withstand no doubt. That’s when The Committee began to use aids, like LB, to channel their power safely.”

He shifts on the cushions. “That’s why Henri is so remarkable. She received The Committee’s communication directly without losing her mind. Well, at least we hope so.”

Sausalito strokes his moustache as an aid to memory. “That’s how the necessity cubes came to be. The Committee provided each Traveler with one to provide for their needs while

traveling. In the beginning, the cubes could be used for anything, necessary or not. Sadly, a few of the Travelers began to use the cubes for personal gain. Some created gem stones and palaces, others made weapons and fortresses.”

Sausalito looks directly at the young humans. “Have you been told it is not a good idea to displease The Committee?” P.J. and Taffy shake their heads.

“Well, now you know. As you might imagine, The Committee was not pleased by the misuse of the cubes. The offending Travelers were punished, sent to the Sectoid domain it is said.”

“Oh moi,” Mac says. “Zhat is a most horrible place. I have heard my grand uncle speak of it. The insects they are very large there and,” she lowers her voice, “zhey attack vegetables.”

“It sounds terrible,” Taffy says.

“And what about the Travelers who got sent to Sectoid?” P.J. asks. “What happened to them?”

“No one really knows,” Sausalito says. “Legend has it that they were stripped of their memories, left to scrape a living from the soil with no knowledge of their lives as Travelers. The Committee reclaimed the cubes, forbidding their use by Travelers for all time.”

Sausalito rises to shake his contents. “A very few of the oldest aids, a magnus like LB, are allowed to keep one in their possession for emergencies. You have been given a very rare gift and I caution you, as a friend, to use it only for its intended purpose.”

Running her fingers over the soft rug Taffy says, “How do we know if what we’re asking for is a necessity?”

“Yeah,” P.J. mutters. “How do we know when Taffy’s gone too far with the bath tub and all her girly stuff?”

Sausalito's moustache twitches. "If what you ask will aid and sustain you on this mission it is necessary. That includes the use of a bath tub."

"Good grief," thoroughly disgusted, P.J. curls up in a far corner and slams his eyes shut.

"Yes," Mac says. "Eet eez good to rest. We continue our journey at moon rise."

The twin moons of Grymvald light the way as they leave their resting place.

"I've been thinking," Taffy says, twirling a strand of hair.

"That's disturbing," P.J. says. It's a joke but like everything he says it's not well received.

"I'm serious," Taffy stomps her foot. "I've been thinking about the necessity cube."

"What about it?"

"Henri, Olive and LB have the moving walkway to speed up their journey. They could be days ahead of us by now. I was wondering if we could use the cube to create our own walkway and get to Nightlark a lot sooner. After our spy mission, Saucy and Mac can report back to Sir Brocco as the clan marches toward La Dolce Vista. Then we can find the reflection Aduwanae told us about and get it to Henri. That's a necessity, right? Not something that will get us sent to the insect planet or some other horrible place."

"That's actually a good idea," P.J. says.

Taffy digs a headband out of her bag, pushing her hair back off her face. "You don't have to sound so surprised."

"I have seen many strange things in my life," Sausalito says. "But I hope that I am granted enough years to learn if you two are mortal enemies or the best of friends." His eyes crinkle around the edges and there is laughter in his voice. "It is good that you are cautious

about the use of the necessity cube. But the purpose you describe is well within the guidelines of our mission. Let us make it so.”

“Uh, Taffy, do you think I could use the cube this time?” P.J. says. “I mean, you’re already good at it and I’d like to try it out, okay?”

“Okay,” Taffy nods. “Just hold it in your palm and think *walkway*. I always say please too, just to be nice.”

Mac and Sausalito hold glow globes overhead, casting enough light to see P.J. as he follows Taffy’s instructions. Something is terribly wrong. All manner of things pop into being, littering the desert with the contents of P.J.’s mind. There’s a blackboard with notes on the chemical elements of Suchronos, sketches of a pyramid city, caped comic book characters who look a lot like P.J., hieroglyphics, and flying tractors. Things keep coming faster and faster until Taffy grabs the cube.

Sausalito peers at P.J. “You have a very active mind.”

Mac nods her head in agreement. “Eet eez a wonder zee head eet does not explode.”

You have no idea, P.J. thinks. “I guess it’s harder than I thought. You make it look so easy.” He points at the cube in Taffy’s hand. “You’d better ask for the walkway.”

P.J.’s creations disappear as Taffy calls the walkway into being and they continue their journey. Barely a minute goes by before she asks, “Is your mind always that busy?”

P.J. clenches his fists inside the pockets of his shorts. “I guess so. It seems like my thoughts have a life of their own nowadays.”

“Obviously so.”

“Very funny, girl wonder.”

“Yeah, ha, ha.”

“What about you?” P.J. glances at Taffy. “It seems like you’re always in motion, like you can barely keep your feet on the ground.”

“It does feel that way,” Taffy says. “I think it started after we talked with Aduwanae. Does it seem like that to you?”

“Hmm. Now that you mention it, it does. She said I was something weird, like a mentalist.”

“She got the weird part right.” For once there is no sting to Taffy’s insult.

“And she said I was an aerialist. P.J., what’s happening to us?”

“I don’t know, not yet anyway.”

Their fingers touch briefly, confirming friendship or something like it.

They cross the desert in comfortable silence, following the map of stars overhead. As the moon begins its descent into day the walkway carries them across a muddy-looking river.

“Taffy,” P.J. yells, “You’d better add some guardrails.”

A strong wind carries away his words as Taffy’s red boots start to skip and twitch with a will of their own. Taffy’s feet float above the walkway. She’s walking on air. And then she’s falling, headed for the murky water far below.

P.J. grabs Taffy’s wrist and holds on tight. He doesn’t feel the buddy bracelet cutting into his palm until much later. Scouting up ahead, Mac and Saucy do not see their predicament.

“Don’t let go,” Taffy screams.

“Never,” he says. And he doesn’t. But he is being pulled ever closer to the edge. “Walk your way back up to the bridge.”

“What?”

“Walk,” P.J. shouts. “You’ve been practically floating for days.”

“Yeah, but there was ground underneath. Now there’s nothing.”

“Trust your ability,” P.J. yells. “The oracle said you’re an aerialist and now’s a really good time to act like it. If you don’t start walking this very minute we’re both going for a swim. And I’m not a very good swimmer.”

Taffy scrunches her eyes shut and starts moving her legs back and forth. It’s terrifying to think about walking on air, but she does it anyway. In an instant she is floating as if lifted by a magic carpet. She rises to the level of the walkway then steps daintily off of nothing to stand on the bridge.

“Are you alright?” Sausalito pats her hand, breathless from running back across the bridge

Mac’s green collar twirls madly. “Zhees is remarkable. The Guardians, zhey are very rare.”

P.J. has a death grip on Taffy’s wrist.

“Uh, P.J.,” Taffy says, “You can let go now.”

He drops her hand immediately, surprised that he is still holding on.

Taffy rubs her wrist where the bracelet has left an imprint. “You saved my life.” Freckles stand out against the pallor of her face as she stares at P.J. and searches for what to say. Her mind feels numb but her tongue manages to say, “thank you.”

“Oh, it was nothing,” P.J. studies his sneakers, embarrassed. “You did most of it. I just held on.”

“Yes you did.” Taffy looks down, fascinated by the steady drip of red that matches her boots. Finding the source she shrieks, “P.J., you’re hurt.” Taffy pulls ointments and sprays from

a zippered pocket inside her bag and applies them with painful precision until P.J. jerks his hand away.

“Ow! That stings.”

“Stop whining. I’m saving you from a skin-eating infection.” She takes back his hand, applies a bandage and then carefully repacks her first aid kit.

“Is there anything you don’t have in that bag?” P.J. says.

“Don’t be stupid,” says Taffy. “I only carry what’s essential.”

“But how do you know what’s essential?”

Taffy shrugs her shoulders. “Retail teaches you what’s wanted. What’s really needed is something you just ... know.”

P.J. flexes his fingers gingerly. “Anyway, thanks for fixing my hand.”

Sausalito and Mac return from another scouting expedition.

“Bad news,” Mac says. “I listen to zhee ground.” She points at her head. “Zhee cauliflower ear is hearing very good.”

Sausalito sounds calm but he hops nervously from side to side. “Grymdish approach. From the sound of it they are many. There is not enough time to cross the river.”

“What about the necessity cube?” P.J. motions to the cube sitting on Taffy’s bag. “Why can’t we use it to zap a few Grymdish?”

Taffy rolls her eyes. “For someone so smart you can be awfully dumb. We can’t use the cube as a weapon. Do you want to end up like those Travelers on Sectoid planet?” She turns to Saucy and Mac “Can we use the cube to help us escape?”

Mac shakes her head no. “Zhee Grymdish are not bright but as they come closer zhee cube’s power will attract them. I am not knowing what to do.”

Sausalito stares thoughtfully in the direction of the approaching Grymdish. “I have an idea.” He looks directly at Taffy. “We must take flight on the red boots express.”

“Red boots what?” Taffy shrieks. “I can’t carry us across the river. I don’t know how.”

“I really hate to sound like Olive,” P.J. says, “but just because you don’t know how doesn’t mean it can’t be done. Besides, we don’t have a choice.”

A cloud of dust reveals the Grymdish are almost within sight. “Oh boy,” Taffy says. “Now I know how Henri feels.” She takes a deep breath and steps up, resting one foot and then the other on an invisible platform. After the others line up behind her Taffy allows the necessity cube’s walkway to disappear. The maiden flight of the red boots express begins.

As Taffy’s confidence grows she strides out faster, finally breaking into a run, carrying them quickly over the river. Landing is another matter. The platform crumbles before touching down, dropping them into a scrubby hedge.

The air is oven hot and everything feels sticky, but they are in one piece. P.J. gives Taffy a punch to the arm in admiration.

They stay under cover, waiting for the Grymdish to pass. Row upon row of gingerbread militia are followed by a legion of fierce-looking knives and forks. Strangest of all are the human-sized bodies that have one giant tooth where the head should be. The molar-heads appear to be in charge, setting the pace with long staffs that make sparks as they strike the ground.

“They don’t have mouths,” Taffy whispers.

P.J. leans closer to answer. “No talking back I guess. They don’t have ears either. So how do they get their orders?”

Taffy shrugs and they fall silent, but one of their questions is soon answered. The place where a mouth should be, if teeth had mouths instead of the other way round, opens to reveal a speaker with an amplified voice issuing commands.

“Faster Grymdish, faster,” the cruel voice says. “Beware of spies. Return to the mine. Guard the suchronos, our glorious sweetness.”

Marching double time the Grymdish soon fade from view. Sausalito fidgets with his sombrero. “This is not good,” he says. “The Grymdish are growing stronger. They will be more difficult for the clan to defeat.”

“Oui,” Mac’s green collar spins in distress. “Zhees worries me too. We must learn more before we report to the clan.”

Mac leads the way and they follow the Grymdish until darkness dissolves the trail. In the grayish purple of morning, they rise stiff and chill from their rough camp. First light reveals towering columns in the distance as Mac leads them ever upward, following a faint track made by some nimble-footed creature.

Taking cover in a gully at the edge of the plateau, the companions are dismayed by what they see. Mounds of suchronos are everywhere. A work crew of giant-sized Grymdish, the spoon and ladle kind, are filling huge containers with the white stuff. Muscular looking molars strain against ropes, pulling the load to the plateau’s edge where they dump it into the river below.

Sausalito peers over the edge of the gully. “Nightlark’s mining operation is much bigger than I thought. What to do? What to do?”

After a hasty, whispered discussion the companions decide to follow P.J.’s suggestion. They wait until the dark-robed Suchronytes on guard duty walk to their next post. Making use

of an abandoned tent awning, the companions cover themselves, hiding inside an empty freight container headed back inside the mountain.

They are deep into the mine when their ride ends abruptly, spilling everyone to the ground. At once, they are surrounded by a legion of mean-looking molars. Looking up, they see an ocean of black-robed Suchronytes parting down the middle to make way for a white-robed figure.

“How nice to see you again.”

“Administrator Nightlark,” P.J. says. “It looks like you have a new job.”

“Ah yes,” Nightlark wrinkles his nose. “I no longer work for that idiot, Mayor Hamhands. This is much more suited to my abilities.”

“What abilities would that be?” Taffy says. “Evil spawn? Arch-villain’s assistant?”

“Spunky,” Nightlark sniffs. “It’s refreshing, for now.”

Taffy shivers. His voice is creepy, fake-nice and familiar somehow. There’s no time to think about it for Mac and Sausalito are suddenly taken by the Molar Heads and marched away.

“Don’t you dare hurt Mac,” Taffy shouts.

“Or drop Sausalito,” P.J. says.

“You’ve always been too clever for your own good P.J.”

“That’s it,” Taffy points her index finger like a weapon. “Max Nightingale.”

“What?” P.J. chokes. “He doesn’t look like ... Max isn’t a ... He can’t ... Oh boy.”

“Very clever,” Max looks at Taffy with malice. “There’s more to you than red hair, freckles and fashion.”

“What are you doing here?” P.J. says. “And how’d you change the way you look?”

“In good time. All you need to know is that you’ve chosen the wrong side. There’s a force far more powerful than The Committee. I’ve been expecting you.”

P.J. and Taffy exchange a panicked look. If Max knew they were coming there’s a traitor in their group. Who could it be?

Chapter 15

The Hall of Mirrors

“This is so fun,” Henri shouts as she rides the sky stick. The wind whips her hair, lashing first against her cheeks and then her eyes. It doesn’t matter. She’s soaring over the miserable slippery slope, taking the Gargantua-style sky stick higher and higher.

Olive points to a valley up ahead. “Land this flying pogo stick.” Henri doesn’t know if they’ve arrived at their destination or if Olive simply wants off the infernal machine.

Free of the rope that secured her to the sky stick’s center bar, Olive wobbles toward a narrow trail. “Thank goodness, solid ground.”

Henri sees the opening. It’s a small, dark hole that promises to deliver every kind of creepy, slimy, skin-crawly creature imaginable. Olive enters, the sparkles on her gown casting a faint light in the darkest dark Henri has ever seen. With a firm grip on LB, Henri crawls into the narrow passage.

As usual, Olive defies the laws of physics, walking upright in a space where that should be impossible. Henri belly-crawls her way into the unknown as drops of something thick and icky hit the back of her neck.

Henri’s knees and elbows are scraped and bleeding by the time the tunnel empties out into a large well-lit cavern. Relieved to be upright, Henri stretches and notices a gazillion little oily globs hanging from the ceiling. Before she can ask what they are, her mom is there, smiling with open arms.

In spite of LB's insistent tugs in the opposite direction, Henri runs to her mother. Her joy is short-lived. Instead of a loving embrace, she finds herself engulfed by a lattice of black licorice-like strands. They weave themselves into a cage, and a loose end throws itself over a rocky outcrop to suspend Henri's prison far above the cavern floor. Just before things go dark Henri hears a man's voice saying, "Well done, Olive. You've earned your reward."

Henri awakens to strange shadows cast by the flickering torchlight below. The globs still hang from ceiling, pulsing with a red heartbeat she hadn't noticed before. Testing the bars of her prison, Henri discovers that they're sticky to the touch but strong as steel. *Now what?* "LB," she calls softly, "are you there?"

"He's with me," Olive says.

"Olive!" Henri's face is purple with rage. "You *are* the traitor. "How could you side with the Star Lord? When I get out of here ... "

"You'll what?" Olive says. "You'll use your power in anger? Do you really want to become just like the one you're here to sanction?"

"I, I don't understand." Henri stares at Olive. Her face reveals nothing. "He said ... "

"Henri, it's been a very long time since I've been able to tell the whole truth to anyone. But that will soon change. Will you trust me just a little while longer?"

The medallion pounds against Henri's chest, or is it her heart? Olive *must be* the enemy, but her feelings don't agree. Henri rises to her knees in the cage. "LB, should I trust her?"

"Sorry, kid. I can't help you this time. You have to decide."

Do I have a choice? "Alright, Olive. I need your help so I'll trust you for now."

Olive nods her head in unspoken agreement. "Move away from the bars, Henri."

Olive's eyes begin to glow, emitting a crimson beam. She aims at the black rope suspending

Henri's prison, causing it to ooze and stretch until the cage reaches the ground. Soon the bars are soft enough for Henri to pull apart and squeeze through.

"Listen closely," Olive says. "Before we can do what we've come to do you must make your way to the Hall of Mirrors. We cannot stand against the Star Lord if you are filled with doubt. Seek your true self there. Find it and nothing can stop us."

Henri makes it to a row of columns just beyond the chamber of her imprisonment. Her legs simply stop working. Peering around the carved base she sees the Star Lord for the first time. He is terrifying and beautiful. A silver mask covers half of his handsome face.

She shivers, remembering that Olive described Oziander as burned by the stuff of stars. *The other half must be horribly scarred.*

The medallion hanging from her neck feels alive as if she too will be consumed by the same fiery cold. It throbs against her skin and she runs as if her life depends upon it.

Poised at the entrance to an even larger hall, Henri is confronted with infinite reflections of herself. She cannot imagine how she will ever find the one that is true, the source of power so strong even the Star Lord cannot withstand it. A faint rustle teases her ear, the swish of a ridiculous fairy princess gown only Olive would wear.

Henri barely notices. She is surrounded by endless distorted images of herself. Marcia Summerhill and her mean girl posse close in. Their voices are cruel, cutting deep. Henri struggles to look away but she is paralyzed, a captive of the reflections. She is nothing, a big, fat zero. Her last conscious thought is, *Olive, what have you done?*

"Come now, Henri. You're stronger than this."

Henri can just make out Olive's voice. It sounds very far away.

“These are only reflections from inside your mind. Break just one mirror and you’ll be free.” Olive’s voice drones on, an insect in high summer and just as impossible to understand.

Marcia is pointing at Henri, making fun of her as she stands in front of the entire seventh grade class wearing Mrs. Silverman’s horrible gym suit. Everyone is laughing.

Henri feels faint but some power other than her own keeps her upright. Shame, guilt, doubt, and fear wash over her in great waves. She’s a freak unworthy of love and worst of all she is alone. A small voice inside her head insists the reflections are only that, ghastly projections of a twisted reality.

“Think Henri,” the voice insists.

She closes her eyes, blocking out the images that hold her prisoner. “Think,” she whispers. “Okay.” She takes a deep breath.

Henri remembers waking up in her own bed with her mom smiling down at her. That memory leads to others. They’re walking up the driveway after school or soaking each other with the garden hose when they’re supposed to be watering plants. Henri remembers the feeling of doing homework at the kitchen table, her mom doing goofy dance moves while making dinner. She remembers people have said she looks like her mom, and her mom is beautiful.

Henri’s eyes pop open at the sound of breaking glass. One mirror has cracked, but countless reflections remain, projecting their half-truths and twisted images.

“Keep thinking.” It’s a little easier to hear the voice inside her head.

And that’s what Henri does. She remembers her kindly neighbor and school bus driver Mr. Watkins. She remembers Mrs. Marinda, the music teacher, telling her she has a voice worthy of being heard. She remembers her English teacher Mrs. Brattleby saying there is nothing weird about reading the dictionary for fun because she did it too.

There is another cracking sound, louder this time. Several mirrors reflect splinter lines but they remain intact.

“Think,” the voice shouts.

Henri tries until she is attacked by the worst reflection of all.

Olive stands watching Henri as the Star Lord approaches.

“Do you enjoy this?” he says.

“I’m not here to enjoy myself,” Olive answers. “I’m here to honor our bargain.”

“Yes.” His eyes flicker red for the briefest moment before returning to green-flecked brown. “A bargain made so very long ago. You have been patient.”

“As have you,” says Olive.

“You will do this thing to another Traveler, a child?”

“I will do as I promised. Have you not noticed Henri is now a prisoner in this hall of mirrors?”

His mouth, the part not covered by the mask, turns up at the corner in a cruel smile.

“How much longer do you think?”

“Are you late for an appointment Oziander?”

He arches one eyebrow. “Impertinent as always. You may attempt to try my patience but do not think you can do the same with the Venai. “How long?” he repeats.

“Not long,” Olive sighs. “Henri is powerful but she is weakened by self doubt. I will bring her to you when the mirrors have done their work.”

“Do so and you will no longer be trapped inside a clumsy doll’s body.” His last words echo in the air for he is already gone.

Olive's unblinking stare remains on Henri. "I will be free."

Henri has no way of knowing if she's been held captive for a heartbeat or half a lifetime. She is overwhelmed by the worst reflection of all. The Star Lord mocks her from his throne where he rules the universe. She is weak and powerless and she has failed everyone.

Chapter 16

A Disturbing Turn of Events

They're imprisoned in a cell with solid rock walls. "Taffy?" Sausalito says, "Perhaps you should confine your pacing to the floor instead of on the ceiling."

"Oui," Mac agrees. "Your abilities as Guardians must be kept secret. It is a rare thing, no?"

P.J. tugs on his baseball cap as if that will contain the flood of thoughts inside his mind.

Dropping to the floor Taffy says, "What exactly is a Guardian?"

"Yeah. How'd we get like this anyway?"

"This is not a good place to discuss secret things," Sausalito whispers behind cupped fingers. "But Guardians are very rare. They only arise when a Traveler of great power awakens."

"Henri," Taffy and P.J. say their friend's name in one voice.

"Oui," Mac extends her spine looking for eavesdroppers. "Guardians are gifted with special talents that will aid the Traveler."

"But above all," Sausalito says, "It is The Guardians' duty to keep the Traveler human."

One of the molar guards rattles his staff against the bars of their cell. "No talking," his microphone mouth says.

Mac flutters her eyelashes at the guard. "Come closer. I do not want zee others to be hearing."

He stands close to Mac; only the prison bars are between them. Sausalito seizes the opportunity to spew hot sauce, blinding the guard and two others nearby.

Mac extends her fingers, releasing a wiry green vine that cocoons the guards from tooth to toe. She then touches her green collar, which begins to rotate like a circular saw, cutting through the prison bars as if it's no big deal. "This eez a good time to be leaving, no?"

"A most excellent time," P.J. says. He turns to Taffy with a lopsided grin. "The red boots express is now departing."

"All aboard," Taffy smiles. More confident in her ability to walk on air, Taffy carries them to the safety of an abandoned mineshaft with P.J. acting as navigator.

"How did you know this was here?" Taffy says.

"There was a map of the mines on the wall in the guard room."

"But, we were only in that room for a second."

"Twenty-one seconds to be precise."

Taffy shivers in the chill air. "How do you know this stuff?"

P.J. flexes the fingers of his bandaged hand. "I don't know exactly but it must have something to do with being a Guardian."

Drawing a rough map on his notepad, P.J. shows Mac and Sausalito how to find their way through the mine. They will seek the Cruciferous Clan and show them the secret way into the caverns.

Taffy retrieves the necessity cube from her bag and hands it to Sausalito. "We don't want this to fall into the wrong hands."

Sausalito tucks the cube away beneath his serape. "I am troubled to think of you without it, but perhaps it is wise." He holds out his spindly arms for a hug that Taffy gladly returns.

P.J. says goodbye to both Animates with a handshake. At his touch Mac's eyes grow large with worry. "You are warm to the touch. Do you zee fever have?" she asks.

"Uh, no," P.J. says. "I don't think so. Just this cut from Taffy's bracelet."

Mac wraps P.J.'s wrist in one of her vines and squeezes a plant gel on top of the bandage.

"Ow!" P.J. pulls his hand back. "That hurts, even more than Taffy's first-aid. And that's saying something."

"You are welcome," Mac smiles. She turns to Taffy and gives her a hug. "Farewell, dear friend."

"Farewell," Sausalito repeats. "Till we meet again at the final battle."

Taffy lifts them upward on her anti-gravity platform while P.J. guides her to the suchronos refinery. They hover high above the machinery, courtesy of Taffy's red boots.

"Hey, look over there." P.J. points to a mechanical claw that scoops up the suchronos powder and dumps it into empty containers. "If I could change the direction of the arm it would dump suchronos all over the gear works. Bet that'd gum things up."

Pacing, P.J. takes one step too many, falling off of the platform. Diving with the fierceness of a hawk going after lunch, Taffy grabs for P.J. but she comes up short, rescuing the backpack but not the person.

Kneeling on the platform, Taffy fights back the tears that threaten to flood her eyes. "Think," she says. "Think like P.J." She pulls one of his caps from the backpack and puts it on. Something incredible happens. She can hear P.J.'s thoughts. Taffy tosses the cap into the air, laughing out loud. Silence. No P.J. Not quite believing, Taffy grabs the cap and plunks it on her

head again. His voice is back, loud and clear. He has a plan but there's not much time. The Molars are force-feeding him suchronos.

"Hang on!" Taffy shouts. "I'm coming." She nosedives downward, knocking the two biggest Molars out of the way. Held firmly in place by her red boots, Taffy causes the platform to whirl like a cyclone, dispatching the remainder of the Molars. P.J. sits up. His face is caked with the white, sticky substance but he looks like himself. Remarkably, his baseball cap is still on.

"Go," he shouts. "Do that cyclone move again. It was cool." He jumps from the platform onto the control deck of the mechanical claw. With flying fingers, P.J. enters commands, directing the shovel to release load after load of suchronos into the gear works.

P.J. leaps back on board the platform and Taffy takes them a safe distance away. Looking back, they see columns of black smoke billowing from the machinery. Leaderless, the Grymdish fight with one another in the suffocating smoke, accidentally igniting a freight container of suchronos that engulfs the cavern in flames.

Laughter echoes off the rock walls as if destruction is a thing to celebrate. Max Nightingale has cast off his Administrator Nightlark disguise. He stands high on a ledge dressed in red robes, a loyal servant of the Venai.

"You've complicated things a bit," he shouts. "You and your flighty girlfriend. But it's a minor inconvenience. You'll both be dealt with."

"What's wrong with right now, Max? You feeling outclassed?" P.J. taunts.

"Patience," Max says. The Venai have taught me that."

"What does a schoolboy know of the Venai?" Taffy hisses, cheeks still flaming from the flighty girlfriend remark.

“Sorry to disappoint, little girl. But I can’t go telling family secrets to outsiders.”

“I thought you were an orphan, Max.” P.J. tries to keep him talking.

“Ah yes,” he shrugs. “My sad beginning.” Max laughs, truly unhinged. “Some losses are necessary to fulfill a greater destiny. Just like your cousin Henrietta.”

P.J. swallows around the lump in his throat. “What about Henri?”

“It’s an elegant plan,” Max licks his lips, reminiscent of Administrator Nightlark. “She is here to sanction the Star Lord, but she cannot see how powerful she is. Even now, she is a prisoner to the false reflections in the Hall of Mirrors.”

Max studies his fingernails as if nothing could be more important. “Don’t worry, P.J. She might still complete the sanction, or at the very least weaken Oziander. Sadly, her self-doubt will destroy her. Two Travelers will be neatly disposed of and the Venai will take another step toward absolute power.”

“No!” Taffy lunges toward Max, but P.J. grips her arm holding her back.

“What’s your part in this, Max?” P.J. says.

“You’ll have to wait and see. But know this. Unlike the Star Lord, I am no pawn of the Venai. I am a willing partner.” A cloud of red smoke fills the air. When it clears seconds later, Max is gone.

Taffy returns them to the mineshaft where they last saw Mac and Sausalito. Sitting in silence, they wonder what to do. Taffy fidgets with her friendship bracelet. The small mirror charms cast rainbows on P.J.’s grimy t-shirt, reflecting Taffy’s furrowed brow.

Blinking at the light reflected from the mirror Taffy shouts, “Stupid!”

“What? I didn’t do anything,” P.J. says.

“No, no. Not you. Me. I’m the stupid one for not seeing it sooner.”

“See what?”

“We’re the mirrors, P.J. Henri needs to see herself the way we see her.”

“Why didn’t I think of that?”

“Probably because you haven’t spent as much time watching people as I have.” Taffy can’t keep help sounding just the littlest bit smug. “Now it’s up to you, Mr. Map Memorizer, to find Henri.”

“Let me think.” He rubs at the remaining suchronos smudges on his face. “We’re here in the mine shaft.” He marks the spot with two pebbles. “Henri is in the lower caverns on the other side of the mountain. Hmm. The guardroom map showed rail tracks that run straight through the mountain. That’s how they must’ve delivered suchronos to the Star Lord when they weren’t dumping it in the water supply.” He smiles in triumph showing every tooth. “That’s how we’ll get to Henri.”

“Hop on board,” Taffy says. “It’s time for some sidekick heroics.”

Taffy and P.J. fly fast and low, careening around corners. They follow the rail track, their path illuminated by dim glow globes mounted on the craggy wall. Flying blind in the space between the lamps, the platform hurls them through the dark.

“Look out,” P.J. yells.

In a heartbeat, Taffy stalls the platform and they hover inches away from a wall of stone.

“Nice stop,” P.J. says. “I thought we were bugs on a windshield for sure.” He twists his cap, bill to the back. “This wasn’t on the map.”

Her stomach, now back where it belongs, Taffy stares straight ahead. “What if?” she wonders aloud. “What if the wall isn’t really there?”

P.J. gives the wall a once over. "It looks pretty real to me."

"Sure," Taffy says. "It *looks* real but we're trying to get to a place called The Hall of Mirrors. Maybe this is just another reflection, a way to keep people out."

"Hmm." P.J. grunts. "Very smart."

They walk side by side with their arms outstretched, allowing their palms to make contact with the wall. At first their hands feel all crawly and then they disappear altogether.

"Whoa." P.J. snatches his hand back from the other side of somewhere.

"Wow," Taffy does the same. "This is ... " words fail her.

"Freaky," P.J. says. "But we have to go through."

"D'uh. Of course we have to go through," says Taffy. "We have to get to Henri."

"We should hold hands," P.J. says.

"What?"

"We should hold hands so we don't get separated," P.J. explains. "That's all."

"Oh. Okay then."

Taffy places her hand in P.J.'s warm grasp. They both hold on tight staring straight ahead as they step into the unknown.

They are in a cavernous room filled with fun house mirrors.

"It really was a reflection." P.J. says. He squeezes her hand in celebration holding their joined arms overhead in triumph.

"P.J.?" Taffy says. "Are you okay? Your hand feels really hot."

Suddenly aware that they're still holding hands P.J. pulls away. "N-no," he stammers. "I mean I'm okay."

Spotting Henri on the opposite side of the cavern Taffy yells, “Henri.” No answer. “Henri,” she calls again. “We’re here.” Again nothing. Taffy’s cheeks are white, her lips red against their pallor. “We’ve got to get to Henri.”

They run until they’re out of breath without ever getting any closer. The mirrors cast thousands of reflections creating a maze that leads them back to where they started.

Eyes full of tears Taffy shouts, “P.J., think!” She wipes her eyes. “How can we get to Henri?”

“Let’s try the platform,” P.J. says. “Maybe we can go above the mirrors.”

P.J. barely gets on board before Taffy starts moving upward. The vertical climb beats any roller coaster P.J. has ever ridden. When it looks like they’re about to crash against the roof, Taffy levels off the platform. They hover, seeking the real Henri among the endless line of reflections.

“Now what?” Taffy turns to P.J. For perhaps the first time in his life he has to say, “I have no idea.”

“You’re the mental-guy.” Taffy twists her bracelet. “You have to know what to do.”

“The word is mentalist.”

“Great. Let’s have a vocabulary lesson instead of helping Henri. Stop staring at me and start thinking.”

He *is* staring but not at Taffy. “Give me your bracelet,” as an after thought, “please.”

“Great,” Taffy shrieks. “Suddenly you’re interested in accessories.”

“If you want to help Henri stop shouting and give me your bracelet.” P.J. digs deep into his pockets, down where the lint hangs out, and retrieves a small tube of glue. “We’re going to

make a mirror of our own,” he explains. “We’re bringing the reflection to Henri just like the oracle said.”

They descend to the cavern floor, gluing the bracelet bits and broken shards from the mirrors close at hand into a big reflective surface.

“It’s a good thing you’re into the way you look,” P.J. says.

“What that supposed to mean?” Taffy narrows her eyes to small slits.

“Arrgh!” P.J. whips off his cap. “I only meant that you carry around a lot of mirrors. That’s what gave me the idea. It’s not like I think you’re stuck up or anything. Wait. That didn’t come out right. I mean not everyone would have that many, uh ... look, I’m trying to say something nice.”

“Well, why didn’t you say so?” Smiling at his discomfort, Taffy lifts one side of the mirror and together they pick it up. “Let’s go help Henri.”

Henri can hear the voice whisper. “Listen,” it says. There are other voices now, familiar ones.

“It can’t be,” Henri stares at the mirrors as if looking will set her free. She sees her friends P.J. and Taffy. Her heart pounds out the words over and over again. *They’re alive. They’re here.*

“Henri,” her friends shout. “Over here.” They stand in front of the makeshift mirror, reflecting an endless line of Taffys and P.J.s, an army of friends come to battle the images that hold Henri captive.

“See what we see,” Taffy yells. “You’re smart.”

“And funny,” P.J. adds.

“And kind.”

“And powerful. Super cool powerful.”

“Henri, you’re my best friend and I’m telling you true,” Taffy says. “You’re beautiful. You just don’t know it. See for yourself. Look in the mirrors on your bracelet.”

Henri can barely move her head. It’s hard to look away from the false reflections but somehow she does. Henri sees her face in the mirrored charms of the bracelet. It’s her all right but there’s something different. It’s the Henri that her friends see. For the first time in her life Henri feels the strength of her whole self. She *is* chubby but that is only one of the many things she is. She is one of a kind. The things that make her different don’t make her a freak. They make her Henri.

“I can do anything when I’m not afraid of being me,” Henri whispers. She touches the medallion, feeling it buzz on her fingertips. She hums in perfect unison. A gold flame leaks from Henri’s hand. She opens her palm releasing a towering column of sunlight. It illuminates the cavern ceiling to reveal thousands of pulsing red globs.

Taffy looks up at the ceiling. “I don’t have a good feeling about this.”

“Yeah,” P.J. sighs rubbing his arm. “I’m pretty sure those blood blobs are trouble.”

“Ick, that’s gross.”

“What?” P.J. shrugs. “That’s what they look like.”

“C’mon Henri,” Taffy shouts. “Break the mirrors. Use your power.”

With both friends yelling encouragement, Henri dares to face the endless reflections. She sees P.J. and Taffy, rows of them standing by her side. She sees her true self, everything that makes her Henri, everything that makes her powerful. Tiny cracks race across the mirrors,

competing to cover the surface. Henri closes her hand around the column of light and aims it at the mirrors. They shatter and Henri smiles. The sound of breaking glass has never been so fine.

Taffy lands the platform close to Henri who stands among the shards of glass.

“That’s seven years of bad luck.” P.J. thumps Henri on the back in celebration.

“Seven years times about a thousand,” Taffy says. “If you believe in that sort of thing.” Henri gives her friends a bear hug, sighing in relief. What would she have done without them?

“Nice to see that you children are having a wonderful time in the face of almost certain doom.” It’s Olive.

Henri stares at her with dark, unreadable eyes. Taffy goes on the attack.

“Why didn’t you help Henri?” It’s an accusation, not a question.

Stepping to Henri’s other side P.J. stands ready to fight. “Yeah. You’re not much of a guide. I wonder if you’re even on our side.”

“I’ve wondered that myself,” Henri says. “You haven’t told me everything, have you Olive?”

“No,” Olive’s eyes do not blink. “I haven’t told you everything. I have only told you the things it was time for you to hear.”

Taffy and P.J. pepper Olive with questions and accusations but their voices seem far away. Henri alone can hear Olive’s voice inside her head.

“It’s time, Henri,” Olive says. “The Star Lord awaits. You’ve learned to trust yourself. Now I ask you to trust me just a little longer.”

“You’ve never felt like a friend,” Henri says. “But you feel even less like a enemy. So yes. I will trust you.”

“Atta girl,” LB says.

“LB,” A smile splits Henri’s face wide open. “It’s good to hear your voice even if you weren’t included in this conversation.”

“Included?” LB sounds offended. “I’m the one who made this mind-to-mind chat possible.”

“That’s quite enough out of you, box,” Olive says.

LB ignores her. “The doll has always been a bossy pants.”

Henri laughs out loud puzzling Taffy and P.J. “It’s okay,” she reassures them. “It’s time.”

They walk to the entrance of a great chamber, the same where Henri was imprisoned in the licorice cage. Blue-black shadows creep along the dusty floor and up the walls. It takes a moment for Henri’s eyes to adjust to the flickering light. Then she sees him.

He stands atop a flight of stairs next to a block of white marble. A breeze ruffles Henri’s hair as the Star Lord turns toward her. His gunmetal gray hair brushes the top of his shoulders. A smile plays at the side of his mouth not covered by the mask. The medallion gleams against the black of his clothing. Henri hears a familiar hum but the tone is lower. It’s a man’s voice, one of supreme power.

“Welcome,” says the Star Lord. “You defeated the reflections, Henri. Most impressive.”

Her voice trembles but sounds determined nonetheless. “You know why I am here.”

“Yes. I know why you have come. But I have not had the company of a fellow Traveler in a long while. I thought we might talk together for a time.”

“Henri!” his voice whispers inside her head. “I have waited for you patiently, painfully. Now it is time to tell you what Olive could not reveal.”

“Get out of my mind,” Henri yells. Doubt inches in but she shrugs it off.

With one hand clasping the medallion Henri matches its hum and summons the power. Her other hand turns palm up, inviting the power of his cursed medallion to return to its source. She hears an unearthly harmony, something the stars might sing. He stands with arms outstretched, receiving Henri’s golden light.

“Henri.” He’s inside her head again. “Your power is very great. But we haven’t much time. My ability to resist the Venai weakens. You must take my power and destroy the maledictus. Now!”

She shakes her head, trying to dislodge the voice. “It’s a trick,” she cries. “You’re evil. You’ve done horrible things.”

“Henri!” His voice makes her head hurt. “You must perform the sanction. I will tell you everything if you act now.”

Henri is doesn’t know what to think. The Star Lord isn’t supposed to welcome her sanction. He’s the enemy. And yet he does nothing to stop her. Henri’s golden light spans the distance between them and returns carrying a ribbon of blue.

“Excellent.” His voice is rough around the edges. “You remind me of Dee ‘Ora.”

“If you loved her why did you destroy her?” Henri shouts over the music wailing inside her head. “Why did you resist her sanction?”

The human half of his face contorts in pain. “I gave myself to the Venai thinking that with their power I could overcome The Committee’s objection to our marriage.” The Star Lord’s power surges, slamming Henri against the cavern wall.

“I am sorry, Henri. I didn’t mean to do that.” His head drops to his chest. “It’s difficult to control myself when remembering the day I lost my only love.” His whisper is the sound of despair. “I have been a slave of the Venai ever since.”

Henri releases the medallion uncertain of what to do next.

“No!” he shouts. “Do not stop the sanction. You are the only one who can set me free.”

“What do you mean, set you free? I’m here to sanction you, to take your power.”

“Exactly,” says the Star Lord. “You must take my power and you must take it now. I made a promise to Dee ‘Ora on that day and I intend to keep it.”

Henri’s hand hovers above the medallion but she doesn’t touch it. She can feel its deep thrum in every bone. “What promise?”

“It is the promise he made to my sister long ago,” Olive says. She stands next to Henri with P.J. and Taffy just behind. “I am here to help him keep it, as are you.”

“What promise?” Henri repeats.

“Hurry, Henri. I cannot withstand the Venai for long. Complete the sanction and Olive will tell you everything.”

“That’ll be a first,” P.J. mutters.

Henri smiles and allows the medallion’s hum to buzz along her bones. Its honeyed light drips through her cupped fingers until she stretches out her hand to hurl the sunshine of a thousand mornings at the Star Lord. His blue-black light gushes forth, mingles with Henri’s brilliant beam and explodes in a cloud of rainbow colored sparks.

“Very good, Henri,” says Olive. “Continue and I will tell you that which I could not speak of until now.”

Henri nods, unable to shout over the medallion's music in her head. Olive speaks to her mind and talks aloud for the benefit of Taffy and P.J. who press against her full-skirted gown to better hear.

"My sister's power was greater than mine," Olive says. "As was her beauty. I was jealous but I loved her in spite of this ugly feeling."

Henri listens intently but her eyes are locked on the Star Lord. He is giving up his power freely, releasing it with a sense of urgency.

"The day that Dee 'Ora and I were to sanction Oziander she made me take an oath. She made me promise to help her free Oziander from the Venai while leaving him with enough power to live. That is what we did. We transferred his power into the medallion that you now wear, Henri."

Dreamy eyed and drenched in memory Olive sighs, "I can still hear the wild music of the medallion and the howl of a wind that came from nowhere. The sanction was successful for Oziander yielded to his love for Dee 'Ora. But our victory was brief and bitter."

As Dee 'Ora and Oziander embraced, the Venai struck her down with a power we did not understand."

Olive hobbles up the stairs to the platform and walks toward the woman who lies on the marble block. "Since that day she has remained as you see her, lingering in the place between life and death." Her doll's eyes cannot weep but Olive makes a brushing motion as if her cheeks are wet. "I made another promise that day, this time to Oziander. I swore that we would destroy the Venai no matter what the cost."

The music grows wilder, exploding inside Henri's head.

The Star Lord falls to his knees. He now speaks to Henri's mind too. "Tell your mother that I love her, that I'm sorry for everything." His brown eyes devour Henri as if she is his last meal. "You are strong." His eyes shine with pride. "Stay true to the goodness within you, Henri." He slumps to the ground. "I wish ... ". His blue light gathers into a thin horizontal line and explodes, knocking Henri and her friends to the floor.

Chapter 17

The Two Travelers

Henri's sits up, relieved to see that Taffy and P.J. are unharmed from the Star Lord's energy surge. She stands on shaky legs and walks to Olive, who is removing the maledictus from around the Star Lord's neck. His face is smooth and peaceful except for a single bloody teardrop running down his cheek. Henri kneels next to him, not daring to wipe it away.

"Why did he ask me to tell mom he's sorry?"

"How would you have me answer, Oziander?" Olive says.

"Oz ... Oziander," Henri stammers. "You mean he's not ... "

"No, Henri. I'm not dead." He stands looking dangerously alive. Thanks to you I am free from the Venai and the foul medallion they have used to control me. I owe you my life."

"But, but I thought the whole point of the sanction was to destroy you."

"If I had resisted the sanction it could have been lethal for both of us." His face, at least the part Henri can see, looks softer, more human.

"You are powerful, Henri. It is possible that you could have overcome me even if I had resisted."

He kneels with terrifying swiftness, grabbing Henri's hand. He holds it to his good cheek then cups her fist in his spacious palm for two pounding heartbeats. He kisses her hand and reluctantly lets it go, as if releasing a small bird.

Henri cannot look away from his ruined face. It is no longer frightening. It feels familiar in a way she doesn't understand.

“Now what?” P.J. says, wiping a splatter of blood from his arm.

“They’re about to hatch.” Olive says.

“What’s hatching?” Taffy’s face is pale and sweaty. Henri wonders if her friend is about to be sick.

Oziander looks grim. “Flyfur,” he says. “The Venai’s army, bred to conquer every world, entire universes. Imagine the head and wings of an eagle paired with the claws and hind legs of a lion, attached to a human torso.”

“Don’t forget,” says Olive, “They also eat what they kill. If they wait that long.”

Henri sees Taffy’s panicky look but Olive reassures her. “We are not going to be anybody’s lunch, dear. I prefer to look at a menu, not be on it.”

“Where are the Venai?” Henri looks around. “There’s no one here.”

“They are always present,” Oziander stands taller, shrugging off an invisible weight. “They will be here soon.”

Henri is thoroughly confused. “Present but not here? That doesn’t make any sense at all.”

Olive explains. “The Venai exist outside of space time. They have kept the secret of their origin, but we believe they are space time dimension travelers.”

“Wow!” P.J. says. “Alternate dimensions. That means they could be standing right next to us.”

“Yes,” Olive nods her head stiffly, squeaking a bit. “That is their great power and fortunately for us their weakness too. They cannot stay, oh, what’s that word LB?”

“In phase.” The answer appears in bold block letters.

“Yes. That’s it. The Venai can only stay in phase with our dimension for short bursts of time.”

Oziander’s mouth is set in a grim line. “The day they struck Dee ‘Ora they took her out of phase. Her body remains here but her essence is ... elsewhere.”

His voice grinds on, a stone shaped by sorrow. “They bound me to their will with the threat of Dee ‘Ora’s existence. I was forced to do their bidding even when they were not present.”

Oziander looks at Henri. “You have saved me from the worst task of all. The Venai would have used my own power to open portals, carrying Flyfur armies to every part of the universe, starting with Earth.”

“We must destroy the hatchlings,” Oziander says. He turns to Olive. “Will The Committee allow you to channel power for this purpose?”

“It’s all been arranged,” says Olive. “I have kept my promise to see you sanctioned and free of the Venai. In exchange, The Committee will allow me to channel on this occasion.”

Oziander still wears the half mask but a more human smile plays around his mouth.

“Olive, you’ve plotted with everyone, the Venai, The Committee, even me. How ever do you manage?”

“Because I am much smarter than you ever give me credit for. And I know where my loyalties are.”

“Where do your loyalties lie?” Henri says. It is a question she has wanted to ask for a long time.

“With family, dear. My loyalty has always been to my family.”

“To Dee ‘Ora you mean.”

“Yes, and to her daughter.”

“She had a daughter?”

“Yes, child. She has a daughter and a granddaughter too.”

Henri knows something important is being said but her mind cannot grasp it.

“Think about it,” Olive says. “You’re smart Henri, even though you’re not acting like it at the moment.”

“Mom is ... I’m Dee Ora’s ...”.

“Yes, Henri. Your mother is the child of Dee ‘Ora and Oziander, and you are their granddaughter.”

Henri’s stomach lurches up to the back of her throat making it difficult to speak. “Then that makes you my, my ...”.

“You do know you’re not speaking in complete sentences, don’t you?” Olive might be smiling but it’s hard to tell with her plastic mouth. “That makes me your great aunt, but if you ever call me auntie I’ll wash my hands of you. I am only ever to be called Olive. Is that clear?”

“Wait,” P.J. waves his arms wildly. “Henri’s my cousin. What does that make you to me?”

“It makes *me* troubled to have such an impertinent boy as you for my grand nephew.”

“But exactly how are we related?”

“This is why I avoid family trees,” Olive says. “It’s all so confusing.” Seeing the eager look on P.J.’s face she gives in. “Oh alright. Let me sort this out. Dee ‘Ora and I had a brother, Dennett. He married and died young but not before your father Dashiell was born. And then there was you.”

Taffy pats P.J.’s arm and gives him a small smile until a blood blob lands at her feet.

The ceiling is alive with creatures clawing their way to life. Even new born, their shrieks stab the air.

“Come Henri,” Oziander says. “We have work to do.”

Henri stands like a block of stone. *What just happened? My enemy is my grandfather, my grandmother is right here but not really, my great aunt is a doll, and my mom doesn't remember any of this. Nothing makes any sense.*

“Kid.” LB speaks directly to Henri’s mind. “I’m sorry I couldn’t tell you any of this before. The Committee demanded my silence, Olive’s too. And a box, even a magic lunch box, can’t go against their orders. But kid, you’ve got to snap out of it. You can think about this stuff later. Right now, you need to protect your friends.

LB tosses out an oversized note. “It’s save the world time, kid. You in?”

Henri gives her head a toss as if to clear her mind even though her heart is trying to beat its way out of her chest. “Save the world,” Henri murmurs. “I don’t know how to do that. But I’ll do anything to save my friends.” She swallows hard. “And my family.”

Henri smiles at her grandfather. He smiles back.

Without a word, they stand back to back and begin to sweep the ceiling with deadly arcs of light. The floor is soon slick with bloody globs and a stink that makes Henri swallow back the acid taste of vomit.

Some of the Flyfur manage to hatch. They are bird, beast and human without feather, fur, or skin to cover their blood and bone.

Standing guard over Taffy and P.J., Olive shoots down an incoming Flyfur with scarlett lightening that flashes from her eyes.

“Taffeta!” Olive’s voice is a verbal slap. “We need an aerialist, not a little girl who cries when things get messy.”

“I’m not crying,” Taffy huffs. “It’s just that your eyes rolled up in your head and went all white before you fried that thing. It just freaked me out a little, that’s all.” She glances at P.J. Blood is dripping from his arm. “Is your cut bleeding again?”

“Nope,” he says. “Just blob blood.” P.J. wipes it on his shirt.

For just a moment the whites of his eyes flicker red but it’s gone by the time Taffy blinks and looks again.

“C’mon,” P.J. says. “We need the Red Boots Express.”

Smiling, Taffy sings out, “All aboard.” Olive and P.J. step onto the platform. Taffy whispers, “I love saying that.”

They hover high above the cavern floor but not too close to the bulging globs. P.J. scans for hatched Flyfur and Olive dispatches them with ease.

“Creepy,” Taffy murmurs, staring at the fiery beams shooting from the whites of Olive’s eyes.

“I’m not deaf my dear. Words have the power to hurt even one such as I.”

“Oh gosh, Olive. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings. It was a stupid thing to say.”

“Sorry to interrupt your girl moment,” P.J. shouts. “We’ve got company, lots of company. Dive Taffy. Now!”

The platform rolls and tumbles toward the ground as Taffy dodges four, five, no six Flyfur who have taken flight. Their wings fan the overpowering smell of dead things as they circle the platform.

“Spin us, Taffy,” P.J. yells. “Just like the octopus ride at the carnival, only faster.”

With each turn of the platform Olive beheads a Flyfur with her lethal gaze. Only one remains. This Flyfur, more cunning than the others, dives under the platform, carrying them upward on a crash course with the ceiling.

“Make sure you catch me, Taffeta,” Olive says. She leaps off the platform, her ridiculous ball gown billowing like a parachute. Once below the beast she opens its belly with surgical precision. Guts and gunk splatter everywhere; mostly on Olive’s white dress.

“Hey,” Henri yells, as Flyfur remains slime her head and shoulders.

“Don’t let a little blood and guts distract you,” Olive says as she steps lightly back onto Taffy’s perfectly positioned platform.

Henri’s light is strong and wild, flooding from her fingertips. Oziander’s power is precise, directed with deadly focus. The cavern floor runs red with the slime of their enemies’ destruction.

“Henri!” her grandfather shouts. “You’re wasting too much energy. You must control the power. Do not let it control you.”

She stares at his hands. They are elegant and long-fingered. He plucks the light from the air, allows it to form into a fiery ball then releases it with a fluid wave.

Henri closes her eyes, copying her grandfather’s movement in her mind. Instead of being consumed by her ability, she can control it. It’s so easy. She opens her eyes eager to share this discovery with Oziander only to see him grabbed by a pair of Flyfur claws. He hangs like a rag doll.

“Oh please, don’t let him be dead,” Henri’s mind screams.

Henri runs, following the Flyfur's flight. She looks upward, blind to the gory remains in her path. She is light and strong, free of doubt and filled with purpose. No living thing, fair or foul, can stop her. Only an accident of fate can do that. She slips on the slimy floor and hits her head hard enough to see yellow sparklers behind her eyelids. Just before they burn out she smells the stench of Flyfur.

Chapter 18

Saved, Sort Of

Henri staggers to her feet. Every part of her body hurts, especially her head. Her hand comes away bloody when she touches the sore spot. *My blood or Flyfur gunk?*

Without knowing how she got there Henri is on the platform, close enough to see Dee 'Ora for the first time. "Grandmother," she whispers.

Dee 'Ora is beautiful, dressed in a long flowing gown that shimmers between silver and gray. Her forehead is smooth above lightly arched brows and her eyes twitch beneath closed lids, dreaming. Her face bears none of the marks of age but her features are too defined for the innocence of youth.

Henri hears her grandfather moan. "Where are you?" she calls softly. An angry red glow ebbs on and off in the shadowy light. Henri drops to the ground, her back pressed against the chill stone of her grandmother's resting place. Ever so carefully she looks around the corner to find the source of light. It's the Venai.

The medallion presses hard against Henri's chest as she flattens herself to the ground. Her heart feels like it's trying to leap out of her body, running from the fear that gnaws at every bone. Her mind is on fire, foretelling a million horrible fates.

The voice from the Hall of Mirrors whispers around the edge of Henri's fear, insisting she open her eyes. She does, forcing her eyelids apart. The Venai flicker in and out, almost

there but not quite. They are dressed in red, floor-length robes, standing on tiered steps that remind Henri of Glee Club.

“Yes,” the inner voice encourages her. “What’s the big deal about red robes?”

Their scarlet helmets have visors and mouth guards of intricate design. *Like knights right out of the Middle Ages*, Henri thinks.

“Just so.” The voice is louder now, more confident. “What’s so scary about tin-heads?”

Henri tries to see if the Venai have bodies beneath their robes but it’s impossible to tell. Not so much as a fingernail shows.

“You can take on a bunch of nobodies!” The voice in her head is strong and sure.

Maybe I can. She touches the medallion and feels its power. Like a fever, it burns away Henri’s fear.

Crouching at the corner of the marble slab, she scans the cavern but her friends are nowhere to be seen. Henri exhales in relief. “Keep them safe, Olive.”

Movement at the bottom of the tiered steps catches her eye. It rolls side to side before tumbling out of the shadows. *Oziander*. He is bound head to toe in heavy iron chains.

Before she can run to him, one of the Venai speaks. “Welcome, Henri. I’m delighted to see you again.” The robed figure walks toward her and removes his helmet.

“Max?” Henri steps back. “What are you doing here?”

“Oh, I get around.” His smile sends prickles up her spine.

“I, I don’t understand.”

“Of course you don’t understand. You’re a little girl, after all. I’m here to help.”

“Help? Help how?”

“I’m here to help you choose the right side.” Max looks behind him, the Venai flicker in and out of existence. He licks his lips, anticipating something delicious. “You can’t believe everything you’re told, Henri.” He steps closer and whispers, “People will try to take advantage of someone with your ability.”

“What people would that be exactly?” Henri’s back-of-the-neck hairs stand on alert.

“C’mon, Henri. We both know The Committee sent you here to stop the Venai.” His voice is harsh, no longer slick with false friendship. Max shakes his head, an actor getting back into character. “The Venai offer you friendship and freedom. No rules or red tape like The Committee who seek to control all Travelers.”

She takes a step closer to her grandfather. “What about Oziander?” Henri says. “He doesn’t look all that free to me.”

“A misunderstanding, that’s all.” Max waves his hand dismissively. “It will be resolved soon enough.” His eyes widen with an inspired idea. “Henri, you must talk with the Venai. I’m certain they will release your grandfather if you ask.”

“I don’t know, Max.” Henri pretends to be uncertain. “How did you find out about the Venai?”

His smile is dreamy, looking back on a cherished memory. “I discovered the Venai where I least expected it. The library.”

“The library?”

“I’m a bit of a bookworm, you see.” Henri feels it’s the first true thing he’s said.

“While doing research for Professor Adams, P.J.’s father, I found something in the basement archives. It didn’t look like anything special, a small, tattered book without a cover. But I was intrigued for I had never seen such writing. Symbols appeared then disappeared,

changing before my very eyes. In time, the words made themselves clear to me.” He points to his head, then his heart. “The Venai revealed themselves to me. They have chosen me for greatness.”

Max looks feverish. His cheeks are flushed the same red as his robe. “I will lead the Venai to Earth,” Max proclaims with certainty. “I will rule in the new world that will be created. And you, Henrietta Sharp, can rule by my side.”

“Me?” Henri can’t decide if he’s kidding or just plain crazy. She takes another step closer to her grandfather. “Like you said, I’m just a kid. I’m not exactly ready to rule on Earth, or, uh anywhere.”

Max peels off his red gloves. “Of course you’re not ready now. But someday you will be. Join us and the Venai will teach you just how powerful you can be. Universes await, Henri. They are ours for the taking.”

“Um,” Henri shifts from one foot to the other. “Max, if you release my grandfather I’ll talk with the Venai. Deal?”

The chains make a clinking sound as Oziander struggles to get up. Max offers his hand to Henri with the satisfied look of a salesman. “The Venai are almost in phase. You can speak with them soon.”

“Wow!” Henri pretends to be excited. “While we’re waiting, give me a hand with Oziander, will you? He looks uncomfortable.”

They shift Oziander to a sitting position. Her grandfather glares at her. She knows he doesn’t approve of the deal she has made. “How is it that you arrive before the Venai?”

Max looks at Henri in surprise. “That’s a very sharp question, Henri ... no pun intended.” He chuckles. “I am their guide, the link that allows them to lock in on a location outside of their dimension.”

“That’s amazing,” Henri says. She struggles to loosen the gag on her grandfather’s mouth. “You must be strong to bind a powerful Traveler.”

“Oh, that wasn’t me,” Max admits. “That was the Venai.”

“But how?” Henri asks. “How can they do such a thing when they’re not really here, at least not yet?”

“Oziander bears their mark. After years of wearing the maledictus the Venai can bind him any time they choose. Of course, I helped out with the chains.”

“You surprised them, Henri,” Max says. “The Venai didn’t consider the possibility that you could complete the sanction. They want the maledictus back. But what does a girl care for such things, right?”

“I don’t know Max. A lot of girls like jewelry.” *I just might be one of them.*

The gag is finally loose enough for Oziander to spit it out. “Henri,” his voice is hoarse. “You must destroy their power source. The Venai cannot complete the phase without it.”

“Don’t be stupid, Henri.” Max clutches his gloves in a tight bunch. “You can be on the winning side unlike your *loser* friends.”

Henri doesn’t mean to laugh but she does. “You don’t know anything about my friends and you don’t have any of your own.”

“I would have stood beside you, Henri,” his voice sounds like a creaking door about to shut. “I would have shown you honor in the new world that awaits.” Max pulls on his gloves, holding his helmet in the crook of his arm. “Now, I will do everything in my power to hurt

you.” He puts on his helmet and stands with the Venai who are almost solid. “Hear me, Henrietta Sharp. I will destroy you and everyone you love.”

Oziander cries out. “Henri, you must destroy the power source. NOW!”

“Where is it?” Henri spins around looking.

“The marble block,” Oziander says.

“Dee ‘Ora,” Henri shouts. “We have to move her to safety.”

“No time. Destroy it or all is lost.”

Henri grabs the medallion and hums in alternating sequence. The tonic, or first note, then a major third, followed by the major fifth and finally the seventh, hovering a half note below resolution. The musical tension ignites her hand, creating a precision laser.

Henri carves a rectangular block out of the base without disturbing the slab where her grandmother rests. The medallion fights for control. It sings complex harmonies, tempting Henri to join in. Instead, she compels the medallion to work at her bidding. A large chunk of marble finally separates from the block of stone, breaking apart on the cavern floor.

“Ah,” Henri exhales. *The power source*. It reminds her of LB, a rectangular box with a curved top, of approximately the same size. The cover is transparent revealing lots of blinking lights and pulsing beams of different colors. Cupping her hand, Henri tosses a ball of light at the box. The power source is immediately smothered in brilliant particles. They swarm in and around, out and through the box faster and faster, consuming it until nothing is left.

The Venai blink in and out furiously like lightening bugs. In the final moment before they disappear Henri hears Max howl an anguished, “No!” He is cut off in mid-wail but his vow remains, lingering in Henri’s mind.

“Grandfather!” Henri rushes to his side, unwinding the chains.

“Well done, Henri,” he says. Oziander stands on unsteady feet. Shadows cling to his cheek, carving lines of weariness on his face. “I never thought I would have a chance to say these words.” His eyes are watery, full of tears that do not drop. “I love you, Henri and I am so very proud of you.” A smile illuminates the human half of his face, driving away the shadows.

Henri’s throat is too tight to speak, so she grins a face-splitting grin and stands looking at her grandfather.

The pounding footsteps of an army marching in unison invade Henri’s moment of happiness. They mouth the word at the same time, “Flyfur.”

Chapter 19

All Things Must Change

“Our girl is in trouble,” Olive says.

“Henri!” Taffy screams. She drops the platform, heading to the floor where Henri lies.

Before they get there, she is scooped up by a Flyfur and carried away.

“Oh no you don’t,” a determined Taffy says. Her eyes spit sparks, ready to fight.

“No, Taffeta!” Olive says. “We cannot help Henri until we dispatch these vile creatures.”

“But Henri needs us,” Taffy protests.

“Yes, my dear. She does. But she needs us to stop a Flyfur invasion even more.”

“C’mon, Taffy,” P.J. says. “We’ve got incoming.”

A Flyfur hits the platform and sends it tumbling.

“I wonder why we don’t fall off,” P.J. says.

“Gravity field,” Olive says, taking out Flyfur with her deadly gaze.

“Compliments of me,” Taffy adds.

“Right,” P.J. yanks off his cap and slams it back on. “You two don’t know a thing about science and you’re telling me about gravity fields.”

“Okay,” Taffy shrugs. “Next time I’ll let you fall off.”

They swerve up to the ceiling, eliminating a dozen oozy globs before they hatch.

Swooping down to the floor Olive blasts a fully-grown hatchling. Then up they fly in a spiral arc to defend against a half dozen fully formed Flyfur.

“This isn’t working,” P.J. shouts. “There are too many of them and not enough of us.” He chews his bottom lip. “Taffy, down there,” he points to their homemade mirror. “We need that.”

Olive continues her white-eyed, red laser defense while Taffy maneuvers the platform to the floor just long enough for P.J. to lug their homemade mirror on board.

“Are you trying to leave me behind?” P.J. grumbles. “Another second and I wouldn’t have gotten back on.”

“Great idea,” Taffy says. “Let’s go back and I’ll get it right this time.”

P.J. ignores her. “Help me position the mirror. We’ve got to take out more of the globs.”

“If it’ll get us to Henri sooner I’m in,” Taffy says. “What are we doing?”

“Lay it down flat, like so. Olive, stand over here and direct your death ray at the mirror.”

“Nephew,” Olive’s nose actually wrinkles, “I do not shoot death rays.”

“Okay. Whatever. Just direct the beam at the mirror.” Olive doesn’t move.

“Hello,” P.J. waves his hand in front of her face. “Life and death stuff happening here.” Still nothing.

P.J. looks at Taffy who whispers the magic word. “Oh, for cryin’ out loud,” he yelps. “Please direct the light beam at the mirror.”

“Why didn’t you say so in the first place?” Olive says.

“What’s the plan?” Taffy says while whirling, diving, and soaring in rapid succession.

“Our mirror is pieced together from fragments so it should reflect the light from Olive’s beam in all different directions. That’ll take out more blood bags.”

“Brilliant,” Taffy says. “But don’t you mean it will refract the light?”

“When did you get all scientific?” P.J. fidgets with the brim of his cap.

“I’m the girl who’s into mirrors, remember?”

“Yeah, right.” P.J. smiles. “Okay, Olive. Ready?”

She nods and let’s her eyes roll up zombie-white, unleashing the crimson death ray.

Taffy moves the platform parallel to the long rows of twitching globs as the mirror works its magic.

P.J. jumps up and down. “It’s working.”

The biggest Flyfur yet launches itself upward. It reaches the platform in a single bound, causing it to tip like a teeter-totter. P.J. scrambles up the platform and with a pint-sized pocketknife he stabs its mighty paw. It’s a small wound but sufficient to enrage the Flyfur. With one swipe the creature knocks P.J. off the platform and sends him flying. It swoops down after him, beak open and claws ready to catch.

Olive makes the smallest movement of her head, winging the beast as it captures P.J. The Flyfur flaps its way to a rough landing, losing its prey.

Taffy drops the platform to the ground and runs to P.J.’s side. She cries out, “P.J.” No answer. “P.J.,” she calls again. He lies there like a dead thing.

The Flyfur drags its wounded wing along the floor, determined to make a meal of both friends. Its black eyes smolder with malice, inflamed by the stinging pain in its paw and wing. It towers above them ready to strike. A death shriek stills Taffy’s heart and she buries her head against P.J.’s still chest. Flyfur wings beat against the air, fanning their foul odor as a swarm descends to attack their wounded brother, clawing flesh and breaking bones.

Taffy seizes the moment. With clenched fists, she pounds repeatedly on P.J.'s chest. With each blow she repeats, "Wake up, wake up, wake up."

In the moment before her will falters P.J. makes a gasping, gulping sound as he begins to breathe again.

"Stop hitting me." P.J. sits up carefully, checking to see if all body parts are present and accounted for. He rubs his chest and grins at Taffy. "You hit hard for a girl."

"Humpf," she helps P.J. stand up. "Wait till I really hit you."

"Hurry up children," Olive calls. "We have work to do."

They climb back on board and take flight as the cluster of Flyfur finish their meal. With neither sun nor stars to mark the passing of time the battle continues forever. The friends are weary in mind and body and still the Flyfur come.

"If only LB could help us," Taffy sighs.

"Wish I could, dear girl," LB writes on pink paper. "I am not allowed to use my power in such matters."

"It doesn't make any sense." P.J. warns Olive, "Incoming, on your left." He shakes his head. "We're fighting Flyfur because The Committee wants us to and yet you can't help."

"Yes, I know." LB's bold print agrees. "It is impossible to understand The Committee and their rules. But obey them, I must."

"Listen," Taffy says. "Do you hear that?"

"Hear what?" P.J. looks baffled.

Taffy shushes him. "Listen."

Olive stops firing and cocks her head to better hear. It is the sound of footsteps, thousands of them marching in lockstep. It is the sound of an army.

P.J.'s eyes are bright as he calculates endless possibilities. "I don't think it's Flyfur. Why would they march when they can fly?"

Olive smiles as much as her plastic mouth allows. "It is our friends."

"Friends?" P.J.'s eyes are question marks.

"Look, look," Taffy squeals punching P.J. in the arm. "It's the Clan. See, there's Sir Brocco Lee and Sausalito out in front."

They are a great wave washing over the cavern floor. Green-plumed carrots march in orange armor. Brussels sprouts with bulging eyes stride out with giraffe-like legs. Leafy-topped columns of celery march next to rows of sturdy broccoli stalks. Their comrades, the snowy cauliflower heads, spin their green necks up and down, seeking the enemy.

The Flyfur continue to rip their way out of the bulging globs. There is no time for a reunion. The Cruciferous Clan joins the fight armed with weapons of water, wind and fire, gifts from the oracle Aduwanae.

Sir Brocco dispatches his troops to different parts of the cavern. They carry wooden staffs that dispense lightening and pitchforks that shoot powerful bursts of water. Earthy potatoes release fire from their many eyes and tall fruit trees trample everything in their path with root-like feet.

Their good friend McCauley Flower carries messages for the clan commanders, while Sausalito, the smartest hot sauce ever, stands on a ledge directing the troops to Flyfur hatchlings.

The air is filled with shrieks and cries. One apple tree is singed by a misplaced lightening strike, but no permanent damage is done. Taffy and P.J. contribute to the riot of sound with their own whoops and shouts as the battle turns in their favor.

Gradually, the Flyfur and their nerve-shredding calls diminish. Working with the fire-wielding potato heads, Olive and the two friends clear the ceiling of rancid globs. Under the command of Captain Veritas the carrot legion defeats the remaining Flyfur, shooting deadly lightening bolts from their spears.

“We did it.” P.J. jumps up and down.

“Young man,” Olive says. “I haven’t kept you alive this long to see you fall to your death now.”

“But, auntie, we won. It’s great.” He waves his arms overhead, “We’re great.”

“*Never* call me that again!” Olive gives P.J. the death ray look. “If you ever so much as *say* the aunt-word around me, I shall throw you off this platform or any place high enough to knock some sense into you. Do you understand me?”

“Uh, yes’m.” P.J. grins in spite of the threat.

“Hey, Sausalito. Over here,” he calls.

Taffy pulls up close to the ledge where their glass-bottled friend stands. Sausalito steps on board gingerly.

“It’s safe,” Taffy smiles and hugs him. P.J. delivers an arm-pumping handshake.

Sausalito greets them with a sweeping motion with his sombrero.

“I am happy to see you my young friends,” he says. Sausalito hops from one skinny leg to the other. “You are Guardians worthy of our Traveler.”

Taffy and P.J. stare at one another in horror. “Henri!” they yell.

Taffy’s cheeks flush, matching the color of her boots as she lowers the platform to the ground. A feeling of dread makes P.J.’s stomach churn, just like the time he ate too many corn

dogs. Unaccustomed to the ups and downs of the Red Boots Express, Sausalito wobbles as they get off to confer with Sir Brooco and Mac.

“My friends,” Mac kisses their cheeks. “Eet eez wonderful to be seeing you.” Sensing something wrong Mac takes a step back, her green collar drooping in dismay.

Before Sir Broco can greet his friends a detail of crook-necked squash, whose heads attach to their bodies at alarming angles, report in. They are cleansing the cavern with water from an underground river that has arisen at Aduwane’s command.

“What is wrong?” Sir Brocco says. “Why do my young friends have the withered faces of prunes in our moment of triumph?”

“It’s Henri,” Taffy chokes out.

“We’ve lost her.” P.J. rubs his arm across his eyes. “Allergies,” he mumbles.

The flowerets on Sir Brocco’s head shrivel to yellow before their eyes. “No,” his deep voice croaks. The Traveler is not ... cannot ... be lost.”

Olive pulls a tiny handkerchief from a hidden pocket to dab at the red muck on her face. “We do not know the fate of the Traveler.” She stares at the crumpled bit of lace and linen as if the future lies in its folds. “Let us find out before jumping to conclusions.”

Sir Brocco leaps into most un-vegetable like action. “Commanders, form your troops. We march.”

“To the Traveler,” Sausalito gives a mighty call; his eyes gleam bright and fierce.

Taffy’s feet twitch violently in her eagerness to reach Henri. P.J. gives her a stiff smile. He looks different somehow, older. The bones of his face are closer to the surface and his eyes are deadly serious.

The friends take their place next to Olive, just behind Sir Brocco and Sausalito. Mac and an advance party of scouts move from shadow to shadow, on the lookout for enemies. The thumping feet of their mighty force grip and tear the stone, leaving a trail of gravel in their wake.

“Henri,” her grandfather’s voice is low and urgent. “You must open a portal. You must travel to safety.”

“No,” Henri says. The answer springs to her lips without thought. “I won’t leave you or grand ... grandmother,” she stumbles a bit at the word. “And I certainly won’t leave Taffy and P.J.”

“Stubborn,” he smiles. “Just like your grandmother and your mother too, I imagine.” He sighs and shakes his head. “I wish I hadn’t hurt her so. I wish ... ”

The sound of marching feet is louder. “They’re getting closer,” Oziander says. “Obey me in this one thing, Henri. In the last moment before we are overwhelmed we will travel.” He holds up a stiff-fingered palm, silencing Henri before she can protest. “We will not go far and we will return immediately. I promise.”

He looks Henri in the eye, revealing his heart to her. Then Oziander does something completely unexpected. He removes his half-mask, allowing it to dangle from the metallic band that cups the back of his head.

Henri feels the contents of her stomach rushing up the back of her throat. She swallows hard, wishing she could look away. But she can’t. Her eyes try to understand what her mind cannot comprehend. “Your face is ... ” her voice is paper thin. “Where is it?”

He holds his head upright, unwilling to hide from the look of horror on Henri's face.

"Behold the consequence of my arrogance."

"What ... what happened?" Tears spill down her cheeks.

"I traveled too far, Henri. In my quest for power I became a slave to the Venai. This horror of a face is the price of dimensional travel."

"Does it hurt?"

He shrugs. "No, it doesn't hurt the way you mean. But it is terrifying to see a part of your body disintegrate, to simply be ... elsewhere."

He covers the black hole of nothing with the mask. "I show this to you Henri not to frighten you or to warn you of the consequences of power, but to earn your trust."

"Alright," Henri nods her head slowly, "grandfather."

They stand together. Henri's chest pounds, her heart beating in rhythm with the pulse of the medallion. The lockstep of marching feet adds to the roar in her head.

The army is almost upon them. Henri steals a quick glance at Oziander. His mask is there but she sees the nothing that lies beneath. She manages a tightlipped smile and is rewarded with such a look of joy that her mouth opens in a toothy grin.

"Ready?" he asks.

"Ready." She takes a deep breath, calming the wild call of the medallion.

The army comes into view. Something isn't right. Henri sees a blur of green bobbing up and down. There are no Flyfur shrieks. No aerial attacks. And something glitters in the shadowy light.

Then she hears it, her name. "Henri." Shouted by Taffy and P.J. who have broken away from the column.

“Quiet,” Olive bellows. Her gown sparkles through the grime of battle. “Would you run straight into the arms of the Venai?”

“Olive,” Oziander calls across the distance between them. “The Venai have gone. Your army can stand down.”

Captain Veritas and his troop surround the Star Lord in a ring of spears, excluding Henri from the circle. The Captain bows his head. “Traveler,” he bends down on one knee. “I am at your service.” His warriors also kneel, keeping their spears pointed at Oziander.

Henri searches for the right words. “Hello, Captain. “It’s good to see you again.”

She straightens her shoulders and raises her voice to address the vast army of the Cruciferous Clan. “I’m not very good at making speeches, but there is something you need to know. The Venai enslaved Oziander. He was not your enemy. It was not his wish to do you harm.”

The crowd stirs and grumbles in disbelief. Axes and pitchforks are waved overhead, demanding that the Star Lord be punished for his crimes.

Henri looks at her grandfather who stands, head bowed, within the circle of spears.

“Oziander was tricked by the Venai,” Henri shouts, willing the crowd to listen. “They stole his power and trapped it in a maledictus, an evil version of the medallion I now wear. He was forced to do the things he did.” Henri holds the medallion aloft for all to see, power flickering like flame in her hand. The crowd quiets and a lone voice starts the chant, “Hen-ri, Hen-ri, Hen-ri.”

Henri ducks her head shyly, then waves her hands for silence. “I just want to say thank you. Thank you for fighting bravely. Thank you for being here when you were needed most. And thank you for teaching me that friends can be found in the most unexpected places.”

P.J. and Taffy squeeze through the carrot guard to stand by Henri's side. "And now," Henri raises her fist high overhead, "the war is over." There is a roar of approval and much stamping of feet as the crowd begins to chant her name again.

Olive talks with Sir Brocco and Sausalito who stand near the front of the platform. Henri sees the shock on their faces as Olive reveals the truth about Oziander and their tangled family relationships. With reluctance, the guards obey the order to withdraw, allowing Oziander to take his place next to Olive.

Henri grabs her friends in a hug that would honor any bear.

"Sheesh," P.J. complains. "Are you trying to squeeze me to death?"

"You survived the Flyfur," Taffy scolds him. "Surely you can handle a hug."

Henri laughs loudly and long. "You two are unbelievable. I guess you haven't had enough fighting for one day."

"It is what children do," Olive says. "They fight. They bicker. They make life miserable." Her pursed doll's lips soften a bit.

"Does that include me?" Henri says. "Do I make your life miserable?"

Olive's eyes click open and shut as if the question surprises her. "I believe you do," she says. "But then, I am learning to enjoy being miserable."

"You always have," Oziander says. "Enjoyed being miserable, that is."

Olive answers with a shrug.

"Henri," P.J. pokes her in the ribs. "You're not listening to our part of the story."

"Yes, I am," she punches him back. "But it's kind of hard to follow when you and Taffy talk at the same time."

"Oh, right," P.J. nods. "Taffy, shut up."

“Me, shut up?” Taffy shouts. “You shut up.”

“Both of you, hush,” says Olive. “Unless you’d like my death ray turned in your direction.” Quiet follows. “That’s better. Now come with me. LB has set up accommodations so you can clean up before the feast.”

“A bath,” Taffy squeals.

“Food,” P.J. yells.

“First, bathe and change your clothes,” Olive glares at P.J. “Especially the ones underneath.”

“Oh for cryin’ out loud,” P.J. says.

“Will you come with us?” Henri asks her grandfather.

He smiles, looking sad at the same time. “I am not welcome. Understandably so in light of my actions.”

“But it wasn’t your fault,” Henri protests.

“That means more to me than you will ever know.” His voice is raw, full of regret.

“Henri, this is difficult to say,” he swallows. “But I must leave. I must go away, now.”

“Go?” Henri is stunned. “Go where? And why right now?” She reaches out to gently touch his arm. “We only just met.”

Oziander’s broad shoulders slump. “I know, Henri. I don’t want to leave you. But I serve The Committee now and I must travel as they command.” He kneels down and rests his furrowed brow against her smooth one. He whispers against her cheek. “I am permitted to take your grandmother with me, to search for a way to make her whole. I must go, Henri. I must make amends for all that I have done. Do you ... can you understand?”

Henri wants to shout, to stamp her feet, and pitch a fit. But what's the use? She cannot fight The Committee. She can't change anything. For all her power she is helpless.

"I don't understand anything," Henri whispers. "I want to go home."

"Yes." Oziander looks up at Olive who has returned, waiting quietly in the shadows.

"That would be best for now."

He wraps his arms around her, strong and warm as Henri imagined a grandfather's hug might be. "Will I see you again?" she asks. "You and grandmother too?"

Oziander holds her at arm's length, looking into her eyes. "I promise." He hugs her again. "I promise that we will all be together again, your mother too."

"But mom doesn't remember ... anything." Henri doesn't like the whine in her voice but she can't help it.

"She will remember someday, Henri. As surely as we will be together again."

"Someday," Henri whispers.

Oziander gives her one last hug, holding her tight enough to make up for a lifetime. He lifts Dee 'Ora from the rubble and summons a portal. Henri can sense the opening before she sees the transparent bubble cocooning her grandparents. Oziander mouths the words, "someday." And they are gone.

Henri hangs her head, falling to her knees. Great shuddery sobs shake her whole body. A swishing sound tickles her ears. It's Olive, her long gown rustling as it brushes against the floor.

"I can't kneel," Olive says. "These knees don't bend very well. But if you stand up my arms can give you hug."

Henri doesn't move. Her bones have gone liquid and her heart is broken.

“Alright,” Olive sighs. “We’ll do this the hard way.” She jumps on stiff legs and falls, landing on the squishy layers of her dress. “Most undignified.”

A chuckle finds its way in between Henri’s sobs. Suddenly she’s hiccupping, somewhere between crying and laughing.

“Really, Henri,” Olive says. “It’s unkind to laugh at my condition, especially when I’m trying to help.”

“I’m, I’m s ... so ... sorry,” Henri can barely choke out the words.

“Humpf,” Olive snorts. “Apology accepted.” She arranges her rumpled gown, pulling it over her splayed out legs. “You do know,” Olive says quietly, “that I can’t get up.”

Henri breaks into hysterical, rib-breaking laughter. Each time she begins to quiet down, Olive points to her plastic legs and another round of giggles come pouring out. Finally, she wipes her eyes.

“Better?” Olive asks.

“Much,” Henri smiles weakly.

“Good.” Olive gives an approving nod. “Just one thing, Henri.”

“Yes?” Henri’s eyes are actually twinkling.

“If you ever tell anyone about this little episode I’ll have to turn the death ray on you.”

“Understood.” A few heartbeats later Henri adds, “Aunt Olive.”

“Scamp.” Olive wags a stiff finger in Henri’s direction. “Help me up you impossible child.”

It is no easy task to get Olive back on her feet. But once done, Henri gives her a spontaneous hug. Her doll’s body is stiff and unyielding against Henri’s cheek. But when Olive pats her back and murmurs soothing words she feels completely human.

“Now,” Olive says. “We must rejoin the others. And goodness, gracious child, you really need a bath.”

Henri smiles but doesn’t speak. She is back from the edge of someplace awful. A little bit of normal, like a hot bath, is just the thing.

After a nice long soak in the tub, Henri steps out onto her front porch in the middle of a cave. It’s time to go. Somehow, Henri knows they won’t be staying for the festivities.

Sir Brocco approaches. “Thank you for saving my world, Traveler. You are always welcome here.”

Henri squeezes his hand. “Thank you, Sir Brocco. Thank you for everything. The medallion hums quietly against her chest. “I must leave now but I have a feeling I’ll be back. So let’s not say good-bye. Let’s just say ‘see you soon’. Okay?”

“I like that.” A smile brightens Sir Brocco’s baggy eyes. “See you soon.”

Sausalito steps out of the shadows to take Henri’s hands in his spindly grasp. “I too will see you soon, Traveler.”

“And moi,” Mac embraces Henri in a vine-like hug.

Henri turns to Taffy and P.J. “It’s time,” she says. “LB?”

“I’m good to go, kid.” The replica of her house is sucked into the lunchbox, then LB flies into her hand.

“Open the portal, Henri,” Olive says impatiently.

“Uh, Henri,” Taffy says. “Could you make the portal, well, uh, nice?”

“What?” Henri pretends to be shocked. “You don’t want to travel in a squishy, fun house mouth?”

“Not so much,” Taffy shakes her head from side to side.

Henri touches the medallion, imagines a perfect way to travel, and summons the portal.

“Ooh, perfect,” Taffy squeals. “A limousine.”

“Great.” P.J. murmurs. “You can pretend you’re a movie star all the way home.”

“That’s it!” Taffy shouts as she and P.J. clamber into the spacious back seat.

“What’s it?” Henri settles behind the wheel with LB and Olive next to her.

P.J. is already opening and closing all of the compartments while Taffy bounces up and down on the cushy seat.

“I have the perfect send off for our trip home.”

“Don’t keep it a secret,” Henri smiles.

“Okay. Here it comes.” Taffy clicks her red boots together. “There’s no place like home. There’s no place like home. There’s no place like home.”

Henri takes up the chant and home is where they go.

The End