

Prologue

A strange yellowish orb had appeared in the sky, trailing the pale sun. By night a crescent followed the blue moon and the stars shone brighter. From her high turret in the west, one sister peered at the setting suns. In the icy stillness of the east, one sister gazed at the rising moons. The air shimmered: many in the forests and within the walls felt that something was about to happen. But only one watched the spark rip through the star-specked mist into the other world, now so close, and saw where it landed with a small clunk.

Part I: Morath

The beginning of all magic is resolute imagination.

—*Paracelsus*

Chapter 1. In Which Kayla Makes an Odd Discovery

Kayla skipped a flat rock one-two-three-four times. It sank in the murky water as a car rumbled and echoed on the bridge overhead. A breeze sprang up, dank and fishy.

Kayla's hand trailed across the ground for another rock, ending on a gray stone that just fit within her palm. She started to skim it across the river then noticed a curious tracing of crystals: a triangle within a triangle. She folded her fingers on the cool, smooth stone and held it tight, closing her eyes.

“Well?”

Out of the corner of her eye Kayla thought she saw a little old woman wearing gold patent sandals standing in the middle of the road, with a paisley scarf tied round her hips.

“Oh h-hello,” Kayla stuttered. “I was just—” She was suddenly splashed with cold water as if she’d blundered into the path of a sprinkler. She turned to see a Labrador retriever giving one last convulsive shake. He trotted toward her and slobbered at her hand in friendly fashion.

When Kayla looked back at the road, she saw no sign of anyone. She looked up and down the road: no one. Had she really seen an old woman? Kayla turned back to the Labrador. “Hello, dog,” she said, rumpling the damp fur on its head. “Are you alone?”

“Nope.” A boy in jeans approached, grabbing at the end of the trailing leash. “Sorry about the shower. He’s mine. Or I’m his, depending on how you look at it.”

The dog glanced back and forth between the boy and Kayla, tongue lolling, eyes glistening, as if he had just done something clever.

She recognized both of them now. The boy was in her English class: Joe Lepic, the president of the Future Scientists Club.

“Kayla, right? I don’t know if you remember me.”

“Joe—sure.” Who could forget someone who always had pencil lead poking holes in his shirt pocket or ink seeping through it? His hair was black and unruly, like the dog’s fur.

“Rutherford’s not supposed to run free by the river. He jumps in. But we still come this way even though it’s such a long walk—or run. He loves it.”

“That’s okay. He’s a nice dog.”

“He’s named for an old-time British physicist, Lord Rutherford. He said that if an atom was the size of a cathedral, all the matter in it would only be as big as a fly buzzing around.”

“Ah,” said Kayla politely, as her mind started to shut off: Science Guy time. When she pictured the cathedral, though—that lonely fly—she could see that would be a lot of emptiness.

“Right,” said the boy, grinning. It didn’t seem to take much to encourage him. “Of course everything’s made of atoms, so I started wondering: if I was mostly empty space and the wall was mostly empty space, couldn’t I slip through without the flies bumping?”

The canine Rutherford flopped down in the grass and sighed, peering up at Joe.

“It never worked though. Our views of the atom have changed a lot since then. But I still think—” The Lab rolled his eyes at Kayla.

Joe laughed. “Oh, I guess I’m going geek, as my sister puts it. Rutherford and I come here a lot. We like the river.”

Kayla nodded. “Me too.” Across the water the sun had almost set, flattened on the horizon.

Rutherford glanced up at Joe, who was gazing at the sunset. “The color’s odd,” he said. Kayla noticed that the sun looked as if someone had started to outline it in green then gave up halfway. “And the moon looks strange too,” Joe added.

“What do you mean?”

Joe shrugged then turned back toward the sun. “Well, just look for yourself later. I’d like independent confirmation.”

Kayla felt the stone in her pocket, so comfortingly smooth. Independent confirmation. Her hand closed on the stone. The old woman had appeared so suddenly. Go for it, Kayla thought: at least she’d find out if the old woman was a figment of her imagination. She clenched the stone, closing her eyes.

“Well?” came an exasperated voice from the road behind them. Kayla turned to see the same old woman.

Out of nowhere, a big red squirrel appeared under Rutherford’s nose and streaked up the hill. The Lab dashed after it, dragging Joe along. “Bye,” he yelled. When Kayla turned back, the old woman was gone again. Had Joe seen her?

Kayla blinked, alone again under the bridge. Forget the sun and moon: something very peculiar was going on right in front of her eyes. As she walked up the hill to her house, she saw no sign of the woman in the road or in the yellowish stubble of the cornfields. The gray house next door, the only other one in the area, seemed deserted as usual. When Kayla’s family first bought their house six months ago, only burnt-out ruins lay on the lot next door. But a house stood on the lot by the time they moved in, though they’d never seen anyone coming or going. Her mother had knocked on the door to introduce herself, but no one answered. And the house had no garage or driveway.

For the first time it struck Kayla that the house didn’t look new, as if it had recently been rebuilt. It was dingy gray, with a dilapidated air. Just the place for the strange old woman to live. The front porch creaked as Kayla gingerly stepped up on it. She peered through the screen door. “Hello?” Silence. She could see a few pieces of furniture, but no sign of the old woman. Maybe she didn’t live there after all. But in that case, where did the old woman come from—and where did she go?

Kayla knocked on the door as hard as she could and waited. No answer. She hesitated a moment then pushed open the creaking door and stepped inside. “Anybody here?” The house was furnished, but only just: a huge clock with no hands, an empty silver birdcage, and a heavy oak table in the living room, but no chairs. No place to sit at all. The kitchen was also minimal: an old-fashioned Franklin stove and bare shelves, with no pans and no dishes.

On the windowsill by the stone sink sat a jar that looked like face cream or wrinkle remover. Kayla picked it up and read the spidery ink label: *Glamour Remover*. Weird, she had never heard of anyone wanting to be *less* glamorous. She unscrewed the lid and sniffed: no smell at all. Kayla dabbed a bit on her temple and found herself staring down at withered grass. The room was gone: no sink, no shelves, no floor—no nothing.

The gray house had vanished completely! Kayla was outdoors on the hill, with charred timbers lying like pickup sticks all around her. She turned and saw to her relief that her own house was still there, with the Prius in the driveway. She ran to her yard, her breath catching sharply as she stumbled over a log. This couldn’t be happening!

Kayla sat down on a stump and closed her eyes, breathing as slowly as she could, until she couldn’t stand it anymore. When she opened her eyes and looked around, the house next door was good as new, without even a scorch mark. That wasn’t really reassuring, though, because she knew that it had disappeared a minute ago.

Kayla stared at the jar. The cream looked ordinary. But even if it was some experimental drug or something, why did only the gray house look different? Her own house looked the same as usual. She was sure that it had something to do with the old woman.

As Kayla tried to figure it out, her mother came out on the porch and glanced at the jar in Kayla’s hand. “What’s that, dear? Vanishing cream?”

“You might say that,” Kayla said grimly.

“I hardly think you need that yet. You have very pretty skin.”

Kayla wanted to shout, “It’s not my skin I’m worried about!” But she’d have a hard enough time explaining why she’d gone into the house next door and taken the jar, let alone that there apparently wasn’t really any house next door.

Mr. Kane looked down at his watch as he came out. They were probably late as usual. Although they went out to dinner once a week with the same friends, they still managed to be late every time.

Should she tell her parents about the odd woman—or the lack of a house next door—or the vanishing cream? Maybe one of them could try the cream, for independent confirmation as Joe called it. It didn't seem to have hurt her—except for possibly making her insane, of course.

“Dad—” Kayla could just see him standing there with a dab of cream on his face looking at a perfectly ordinary house next door. She hesitated then asked, “Does glamour mean anything besides Hollywood stuff?”

He peered over his glasses. “Well, I seem to recall—”

She knew what was coming next. “Okay—I'll look it up.” It would be better to think things through and tell them later—if at all.

He nodded approvingly.

“We'll be back by eleven or so,” her mother said. “Don't forget to eat something.”

“Okay, bye.” Kayla waved as her parents drove off then went into the house, hurried into the study, and googled “glamour.”

The first definition was “an exciting and often illusory and romantic attractiveness.” That wasn't it.

The second definition was “a magic spell.” Better but vague.

Kayla added “witch” to the search and came up with lots of hits on *Glamour* magazine as well as a plaintive query: “Just asking: any Wiccans, Satanists, or other practitioners of witchcraft here ever successfully thrown a glamour?” The aspiring witch got some bizarre replies, but they didn't seem apropos. There were also lots of “glamour witch” costumes.

The jar of cream, the house, and the old woman herself seemed too old-fashioned to be on the internet. Kayla pulled down her tattered dictionary, thumbing to the Gs. The first definition again was the Hollywood kind: “compelling charm, allure.” That was no use.

The second was “Enchantment, magic spell; Scottish variant of ‘grammar.’” Except for the grammar part, the definition seemed to fit. Kayla had found the jar in the odd house—which wasn't a house at all, at times, but a pile of burnt wood. Did that mean that the old woman was a

witch? Or maybe the old woman had nothing to do with it and had just wandered off from somewhere (but where?).

Kayla microwaved a Chicken Philly sandwich and turned on the TV for company but could find no news stories on witches or glamour or the odd-looking sun. Then she remembered a weird old book that her grandfather had given her. She ran up to her room and scabbled around, finally finding it under the bed: *A Guide to the Old Ones or Little Folk, Being a Compendium of Knowledge of Their Ways*. She looked in the index under “Glamour” and turned to the first page listed: “Often the magnificent dwellings of the faery folk are mere illusion, produced by a glamour; but when the mortal visitor rubs his eyes with the faery ointment, he sees that he is standing in a lowly hovel or cave, the glamour being dispelled.” An exclamation point in green ink marked the passage. That was more like it!

Kayla lay down and turned on the bedside light. The book was hard to read: curly black type with hardly any margins. Apparently, the Little Folk were particular and easily riled. It was, after all, a lot like grammar: rules upon rules with qualifications and variations:

1. Stay away from mushroom rings.
2. Be polite to crones and helpless woodland creatures.
3. Avoid all food and drink.
4. Don’t join in the dancing . . .

Kayla awoke with the feeling that someone was poking around inside her head. She had been dreaming about walking down a long stone corridor, she remembered, when she felt cold bumping at the edges of her mind, like a black cloud spreading over her. It was dark. She didn’t remember turning off the bedside light, but she must have. What time was it?

Kayla sat up, noticing a silvery pool of light in the corner of the room. Where was it coming from? The curtains and shades were shut. She crept over to the dresser. In the middle of the glow lay the stone: the double triangle of quartz glimmered.

Kayla pulled up the shade: the gray house was still there. It was already dark, and the crescent moon was rising. What had Joe said? At first the moon looked perfectly ordinary, then she noticed a turquoise shadow: not a ring, but a bluish glow just along one edge.

Kayla wanted some answers. She put on her jacket, stuffing the book in her pocket—although the woman didn’t seem *that* little or *that* old. Outside, though, she lost her nerve. The

lopsided moon illuminated the house next door, making it look almost blue. She shivered. If the woman answered the door, what could she say?: “Are you a bad witch or a good witch?”

Anyway, the old woman probably wasn’t in the house. In fact there probably was no house at all.

But Kayla was almost sure that she had seen the old woman—twice! She took the stone out of her pocket and clutched it tight.

Kayla was startled by the harsh laugh but not really surprised to see the woman standing beside her again, gray eyes glinting. “Third time’s a charm,” the old woman said. “You’re a bit slow.”

“Who are you?” Kayla asked. “And how—”

“Call me Morath. Let’s go.” Kayla flinched as Morath grabbed her wrist and dragged her along. Kayla felt queasy for a moment as green swam before her eyes.