

OUTLAWS OF LAAR:
A Children's Fantasy Novel

by

MARYN C. BROWN

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ABSTRACT

One year has passed since Seth Locke's grandfather Sedgewick disappeared, but the discovery of Sedgewick's research on inter-world travel prompts Seth to launch an investigation—and that investigation transports Seth straight into the otherworld of Laar. Scared and alone, Seth's only ambitions are to find Sedgewick and get home. Yet when Seth meets Nya Lunya, an escaped welvish slave girl and student of healing magicks, he realizes that Laar has problems of its own. The forests of Laar are dying, and a tyrant who calls himself the Great One rules selfishly over all. With the help of the ghost-like wolf guide Erebis, Seth and Nya embark on a treacherous journey to find Sedgewick and save Laar, and learn along the way that outlaws aren't always the bad guys.

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DEDICATION

Outlaws of Laar is dedicated to my family. For my father, Laing Brown, who showed me art and encouraged me to chase passion. For my mother, Kathleen Brown, and my grandmother, Mary Curling, who instilled within me a love of learning and literature. For my sisters Kalan and Casson, and my dog Charli, who give me undying friendship. And for my partner and illustrator Nigel Quarless, my eternal wellspring of love, laughter, support, and inspiration.

CO-AUTHORSHIP STATEMENT

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Chapter 1 – Seth



This is a waste of time, Seth thought. I'm not going to find any new clues in here.

If someone had looked through the window of Seth Locke's basement suite just then, they might have glimpsed a few spikes of his black hair. That's how high the books and papers were stacked. Even after a two and a half hour stint of sorting today, the stacks seemed as messy as ever. But Seth couldn't have cared less about the mess. He actually kind of liked it. Somehow, being among his grandfather's books and stuff, Seth could think clearer.

Seth sat in the only chair in the basement suite, hunched over the only table, flipping through a book of his grandfather's research. Sedgewick—that's what Seth's grandfather had always insisted Seth call him—was way too smart for his own good. Seth had searched that book of equations, diagrams, and theories a good ten times, each time hoping to find more clues as to why Sedgewick had disappeared.

Seth flipped back to page 37 and ran his finger down the notes in the margin.
"Treegrove Cemetery October 31st Oak Tree ~~Full~~ → Waxing moon Portal!"

Seth read aloud. There was no question: those notes were the best clues he had.

Seth glanced at his watch. 7:12 PM. There wasn't time to do more research, anyway. It was time for the investigation.

Seth threw the book of research papers into his backpack, turned off the basement light, and closed the door. *What else?* Seth rushed through the house and up to his bedroom, going over a mental list of things to take to the graveyard. *Flashlight, Kung Fu uniform, and maybe my staff—to top off the costume.*

Seth was changed and hanging over the side of his bed, snatching a flashlight from between a heap of dirty clothes and a pile of comics when his mom knocked.

“Seth? Can I come in?”

“Sure, but don't forget you said I could wait 'til tomorrow to clean up.” Unlike Seth, his mom wasn't big on the tornado-struck look.

“I think we've both done enough hard labour for one day,” she said as she poked her lion-costumed head into Seth's room and gave him one of her trying-to-look-cheerful smiles. “I just wanted to thank you for helping me organize the basement today. It was hard for me to be around your grandfather's things. I couldn't have done it without you.”

“No worries, Mom.”

She smiled for real this time. “Your Kung Fu uniform—it looks great! Your dad will love to hear you wore it.”

Seth nodded. His dad had sent the uniform from Hong Kong mere days after Seth had quit Kung Fu. His dad was good like that. He lived halfway across the world, but sometimes it felt like he still lived in town.

“Are you meeting Jeffrey to trick-or-treat?” Seth's mom asked.

“Yeah, but we’re not trick-or-treating. We’re going to, uh, go to his block party and check out some fireworks. We’ll stay in the neighbourhood.” Seth didn’t see any reason to worry her with his other plans. And besides, Treegrove Cemetery was in the neighbourhood.

“All right. I’m off to the McPhersons’ party and should be home before your curfew. Have fun and be safe.”

“Okay. You too, Mom. Have fun tonight.” Though, with it being the anniversary of Sedgewick’s disappearance, Seth doubted she would.

His mom started to leave, but stopped. “Did you get any more sorting done after I left?” she asked.

“No, I just hung out and read a book of Sedgewick’s research. Nothing I haven’t read before, though.”

“Really? Most of the books I sorted were, well, let’s just say they were beyond me. He was brilliant, wasn’t he? I should have asked him about his work more. Maybe then we could have known him better in the years before he—”

She shook her mane and rolled her eyes. “There I go again. You heard enough of my ramblings today. How about you show me that book tomorrow morning, over waffles? Have a great night, dear. Be safe, and don’t eat too much candy.” She winked at Seth and shuffled into the hallway, the tail of her lion costume trailing behind her.

Seth tossed the flashlight into his backpack and peeked inside—just to make sure the book of research papers was still there. Just in case the book had somehow managed to move itself in the past few minutes. Satisfied, Seth slung his backpack over his shoulders, dug his Kung Fu staff out of the closet, and checked his watch. 7:23 PM. He

only had seven minutes before he was supposed to meet his best friend Jeffrey Weizman at the Treegrove Park benches.

The walk felt more like an obstacle course as Seth wove his way around clusters of trick-or-treaters. He envied them, in a way. All they had to think about tonight was stuffing their trick-or-treat bags. That had been Seth just last year. Now he had a depressed mom to worry about. Nothing Seth said cheered her up. Even his jokes hardly got a smile out of her. And since Seth never knew what to say to cheer her up, he was going to do something about it. *If I could only find more clues, figure out how her dad—*

Seth collided with a waist-high dragon. Candy exploded from her orange pumpkin bucket and Seth stopped to help her pick it up.

He still beat Jeffrey to the Treegrove Park benches. Seth pressed the glow button on his watch. 7:30 PM. As usual, Seth was right on time and Jeffrey wasn't.

"Hurry up, Jeffrey," Seth mumbled, resisting the urge to peek in his bag again. A few long minutes later, Jeffrey rounded the corner and Seth let out his breath. He hadn't noticed he'd been holding it.

"Hey, Seth. Sorry if I'm late—I swear these benches keep getting closer to your place and farther from mine." Jeffrey stepped into a lamppost's flickering light and straightened his glasses. "So what's this secret mission all about? Tell me we aren't going to miss the fireworks at my block party."

Seth could not help but smile. Jeffrey was dressed in camouflage. This was the third Halloween in a row he had worn army gear. "What I want to do shouldn't take long," Seth said. He wrestled the ratty book of research papers from his backpack and walked farther into the lamplight.

“That’s your Grandpa Sedgewick’s book, isn’t it? The one you’ve always got open in the basement.” The basement was Seth and Jeffrey’s favourite place to hang out, play video games, and read comics. Sometimes they read the stacks of papers and books instead.

Seth handed Jeffrey the book of research papers. “I think Sedgewick meant to disappear,” Seth said. “I think he planned it. I mean, he sold his place and moved into our basement for a couple months. Doesn’t that seem suspicious to you? Jeffrey, I want to investigate his disappearance—tonight.”

Jeffrey looked from ‘Essays on the Possibilities of Inter-world Travel, by Sedgewick C. Mill’ to Seth, eyebrows raised high. “No offence, man, but why investigate your grandpa’s disappearance now if the cops couldn’t figure out what happened to him a year ago?”

“Because of what I found on page 37,” Seth said. “Go on, check it out.”

Jeffrey opened the book’s flimsy coil-bound cover and a newspaper clipping fluttered to the ground. “**Varsity News**,” he read as he picked up the clipping.

“**Scientist’s Other-World Theory Scorned by University.**
C.B. University’s faculty of science decried an associate professor’s lecture on the far-fetched possibilities of inter-world travel today. In addition to suggesting that other-worlds could help Earth better manage dwindling natural resources such as lumber and oil, Dr. Sedgewick C. Mill—”

Jeffrey stopped reading. “Seth, this is about your grandpa.”

“Yeah, I know. And that’s what this book is. It’s Sedgewick’s research on another world, a world he called Laar. He believed that you can get to Laar through portals—what he also called glitches in the fabric of space time.”

Jeffrey gave a sharp laugh. “You’re not serious. Is this some kind of Halloween prank?” He rummaged through the book of research papers and stopped on page 37.

“Treegrove Cemetery October 31st Oak Tree ~~Fall~~ → Waxing moon Portal!,”

he read.

Jeffrey wasn’t laughing now. “Man, you should really get this book to the police. Forget the math and portals and stuff—your grandpa’s notes prove he went to the cemetery the night he disappeared!”

“Don’t you get it, Jeffrey? The cops would laugh at this stuff just like the university did! And they’d think we were just a couple of stupid kids for bringing it to them!”

Seth caught himself raising his voice and glanced around. “Listen. I don’t know exactly what I’m looking for. Something Sedgewick dropped? A carving on a tree? I don’t know. It’s not like I expect some portal to pop open and spit Sedgewick out. But I feel like it’s important I look around the graveyard tonight, on Halloween.” Seth ran a hand through his hair. “I’m going, but I totally understand if you don’t come with me.”

Jeffrey sighed. “Well, call me a freak,” he said, “because I’m pretty sure only freaks hang out at graveyards on Halloween.”

Seth grinned and gave Jeffrey a grateful slap on the back. This was one mission he would rather not go on alone.

Seth didn't give Jeffrey the chance to back out. He pulled the flashlight from his bag and lit their way out of the park and up the street, his staff clacking the pavement as they went.

There were less trick-or-treaters on the streets than before. Excited shouts and squeals were dissolving into the welcome thunder of block party fireworks. People were up, out, that was good. Seth thought of his mom at her party and wondered if she would let herself have some fun for once. He hoped she wasn't worrying about him. *I'm not about to give her reason to.*

Seth shone his flashlight on the oversized gates of Treegrove Cemetery. "Let's see that book, Jeffrey. There's a map of the cemetery at the front."

Jeffrey slid *Essays on the Possibilities of Inter-world Travel* under the flashlight and opened the front cover. His fingers fumbled to a stop on a hand-drawn map, almost ripping the page. "There," he said. "The oak tree's labelled. Looks like it should be up and on our left."

Seth aimed his light through the iron bars. "I can see it from here—that's got to be the oak in the diagram." Seth pushed the wheezy gate open, and rolled a rock over with his foot to keep it that way. *Just in case.*

A path led up from the entrance, past row after row of gravestones. They followed it awhile before cutting onto the lawn and winding toward the old oak.

Firecrackers shrieked nearby, and Seth flinched, jerked around. *Calm down, it's Halloween*, he told himself. He shone his light around to check things out before pointing it back at the oak tree.

“This is it, all right,” Seth said. He directed his beam up the tree’s massive trunk and onto its gnarled branches. “This thing’s got to be hundreds of years old.” He circled the oak, examining its roots, its bark, its branches, looking for anything unusual—finding nothing.

“Bring that light back here for a sec.” Jeffrey was holding the book inches from his face, trying to make out its scrawl in the dark. “What’s this about a, uh, waxing moon?”

A hollow laugh escaped Seth’s mouth. “It’s one of the conditions Sedgewick believed could open the portal. I checked the internet. A waxing moon is one that’s getting fuller, just like it was last Halloween, just like it is tonight.”

Jeffrey gazed up, through the branches and toward the nearly full moon. “Right moon, right day, right place, and no portal. I guess your grandpa’s theory is wrong.”

“Well, not exactly,” Seth said, propping his staff up against the oak tree and picking up an acorn. “There’s more. Sedgewick believed that in order to get to Laar you also have to hold a fallen acorn.” Seth grinned and tossed the acorn to Jeffrey.

“Don’t go falling through any portals on me,” Jeffrey joked, tossing the acorn back.

Seth snickered and caught the acorn just before a bottle rocket screeched between him and Jeffrey. Sulphur scented the air.

Chortling echoed from the shadows and the boys spun to face it. Seth swept the gravestones with his flashlight beam, whipping it back and forth until it landed on four or five figures. The figures were getting closer.

“Get that thing outta my face!” one of them snarled.

Seth froze. He knew that voice. *Mitch Roberts*.

The day Mitch Roberts had beat up Seth in front of their whole grade seven class was the day Seth quit Kung Fu. If Mitch had come at him throwing punches, Seth could have fought back. But Mitch always had some dumb insult to throw first. And when Seth couldn't think of something to say back, he froze. Kind of like now.

"Nice costume, Sethie-poo," Mitch spat. He was almost at the tree.

"Run!" Jeffrey yelled. "Seth, run!"

But he couldn't. One second the flashlight fell from Seth's hand and the next second Mitch's hot, rank breath was wafting over him.

"You wanna fight, or something?" Mitch said. He shoved Seth. "Isn't that what those pyjamas are for—fighting?"

More chortling. Seth clenched his clammy fists, the hard shell of the acorn biting into his palm. More voices. Shouting. Seth tried to spot Jeffrey, but his vision was blurry.

"No..." Seth groaned.

"What'd you say, Sethie? 'Let's go?'" Mitch pushed Seth again.

Seth felt sick to his stomach. His head was spinning.

And then it happened.

Mitch wound up and shoved Seth a third time. Seth whacked his shoulder blades on the tree. The length of his staff dug into his spine. Then Mitch, the graveyard, everything was gone.

The next few moments washed over Seth in an overwhelming haze. Breath left his lungs and his body went limp. Then he was falling, rushing feet first into nothing.

Just colour. Colours pulsed and swirled all around him—blue, brown, green—until the flash of a bright silver orb brought darkness. Blackness and breathlessness. He needed to breathe. Winded one last time by hard ground, Seth landed and tumbled down, down, gasping for air as he went.

Chapter 2 - Nya



Nya wrinkled her nose and smiled as she awoke to Erebis's coarse tongue on her cheek. The dog never let her oversleep. She kissed his muzzle and wrapped her arms around his warm, scruffy neck, signalling for him to lift her up from their bed of hay. Nya yawned as Erebis nosed her toward the basin of water that sat in the corner of their room. She had shared the small, spare sleeping quarters with the dog for as long as she could recall.

Erebis whined in disapproval as Nya dried her hands and pulled her silvery hair into two loose braids.

"Oh, Erebis, you are the dearest creature in all of Laar, but Master Wrought is never to breakfast on time. It is nearly always cold by the time he gets it." Nya patted Erebis's head, tied a ragged apron around her narrow hips, and sauntered into the kitchen.

She had only just finished making a breakfast of lart leaf toast and marquen butter when Master Wrought lurched into the kitchen and squeezed himself between table and chair. Avoiding his girth, Nya slid a heaping plateful in front of him. *Perhaps old*

Wrought enjoys my meals a little too much, she thought with a smile. For, stout and round as the sinians of Mineraltown were, few were as thickset as Wrought.

“Four buckets of water,” he ordered through a mouthful of food and without looking up, “and you’ll want to get some things for tonight.” Wrought was Mineraltown’s most respected blacksmith and that evening he was to host a dinner for the local blacksmiths’ guild. “How ’bout you get some of those poo-larn leaves, and maybe some stern fruit for dessert.”

Nya smiled. “Loo-parn leaves and yearn fruit? Of course, Master. Anything else?”

“Yeah, make sure some of those juicy Knottwood mushrooms find their way into the stew. The big ones. I want everything to be perfect tonight, Nya—I don’t want you or the mutt messing things up.”

As cold and grim as Wrought was, his heart was not nearly as hardened and his mind not quite as dull as most sinians. Nya reckoned this was her own doing, and believed that the cooking ingredients she gathered from the forest softened her master considerably. As a result, he was not unkind to her and was inclined to overlook the occasional wrongdoing. And Nya’s most treasured of old Wrought’s leniencies was that he pretended not to hear when she called Erebis by name.

The naming of dogs was forbidden by sinian law. And although the sinians could no longer remember when or why, their ruler the Great One had commanded that dogs be slaves and slaves only. Any dog found in true companionship with its owner would be sentenced to death.

Nya finished tidying the kitchen and then swapped her apron for a hooded cloak. Erebis's big, yellow eyes chased her hand as it reached for his water-fetching harness. He stationed himself next to her, but not without heaving a soft groan first.

"I don't like these contraptions any more than you do, dear," Nya said, fastening Erebis's harness around his chest and then fetching her own. "But I refuse to take the cart so long as those brats in town make you give them rides. It's shameful how they boss you around, and I'm in no position to stop them. Anyhow, I prefer to carry my burden, same as you."

Each bearing two buckets in harnesses that balanced across their shoulders, Nya and Erebis made their way into town and toward its only well.

Nya hated going to town. Not just because of the smog that choked Minertown and tore at her throat, or because of the bustling dog-carts, noisy factory, and flashy storefronts. Mostly she hated going to town because of the shopkeepers' spoilt children. She cast her eyes at the cobblestone road as she and Erebis approached the pack of kids who met at the well on weekends. A group of girls gushed over whatever gemstone or jewellery their parents had given them this week.

"Oh look," said one girl in mock sympathy as she pointed at Nya, "if it isn't poor, ugly Dog Girl."

Being the only slave in town that was not a dog, Nya was used to such jeers. "You and the mutt were found together and so sold together," Wrought had once told her. "You were destined for prison, but sometimes gems speak louder than laws."

Nya ignored the sinian girls, as she always did. That was easy enough to do. It was the girls' jealousy that disturbed her. Nya had a gift for reading emotions and knew

that, slave though she was, those girls envied her. Envy oozed through their veins like sickness. Yet, whatever they envied her for had nothing to do with her appearance. Nya was a welf, and not at all beautiful by sinian standards. She was slender with pointy ears, straight silver hair, delicate features, and smooth brown skin. The sinians of Minertown much preferred their own plump frames, curly hair, bulbous noses, and leathery skin.

“Do you like my new bracelet, Dog Girl?” the sinian girl persisted. “My papa says the citrinus gems match my hair beautifully. Oh, but I guess even if you could afford a bracelet like mine it wouldn’t fit over your slave bands!” Quite satisfied with herself, the girl snorted and turned back to her tittering friends.

Nya loaded the last bucket of water onto Erebis’s harness and looked down at the metal bands that bound her wrists. “I would sooner wear slave bands as a noble dog than be a slave to needless trinkets,” she muttered to Erebis. “Come, let’s head off. If that is what it means to be free, then I want nothing of it.”

Back at the cottage, Nya assembled a lunch for Wrought and laid it out on the table with his root liquor goblet. She clicked her tongue as she poured. *Nasty habit. And with lunch, too.* Though she doubted there was a sinian alive who abstained from such afternoon ‘refreshment.’ Even the youngest sinians drank root beer.

“Thank you for your patience,” she told Erebis, who was wedged between the cupboards of Wrought’s narrow kitchen. Nya changed Erebis’s water-fetching harness for his food-gathering one. She then grabbed her own herb-collecting belt from its hook.

Nya knew that belt’s every crease, every stitch. She had fashioned it herself, from scraps of leather she had found lying around Wrought’s workshop. She relished the slight weight of it tied around her waist and the reassurance that its contents held.

Almost three years she had had it now. And while the belt remained as sturdy as the day she had made it, she was forever finding new uses for the herbs and ingredients she kept in its pouches.

“Let’s head off at once, dear,” Nya said to Erebis. “Or we won’t have the time we need for the woods.” She always left as much of each day as possible for their trips into Knottwood Forest.

The farther she and Erebis got from town, the easier it became to breathe. Nya took in long draughts of the rich air, feeling it mingle with her blood and enliven her spirit. And by the time they reached Knottwood, Nya’s troubles had already settled into the farthest fields of her mind.

The forest kept all of her deepest, most precious secrets. Within the shelter of its towering trees and thick shrubbery she could be affectionate with Erebis and call him by name without fear of his punishment. But there were two other things that the Great One forbade and the forest’s cover allowed Nya to do: read and learn magic.

A couple hundred moons earlier, Nya and Erebis had wandered farther into the woods than ever before, almost to the end of Knottwood and to the edge of the Forbidden Forest. Wrought had ordered that they gather a ridiculous number of yearn fruits, which were almost out of season at the time. And just when Nya had collected the last fruit, Erebis had scampered out of sight, possessed by a scent. She had found him digging around the base of a rock, unearthing a cloth-covered package. It was a book of magic spells and potions entitled, **Healing Magicks and Curative Charms**.

Nya now kept the book swaddled in layers of dry moss, hidden within a hollowed-out log. During each of her visits to Knottwood, she would practice a particular spell or potion while Erebis held watch.

“What should I review today?” she asked Erebis as she knelt on a patch of brown grass—and she could have sworn that patch had grown since yesterday. She sighed and let her fingers crawl along the inside of the log until they found a scratchy, rectangular bundle. *Still there.* Sometimes, in the moment before her fingers touched it, she worried that her book would be gone. That someone would have taken it.

But no one can take its magic from me, she reminded herself. She had read the old book many times through and knew most of its spells by heart. It was the book itself she feared losing. If she could not read its words, then there would be none to read at all. Even the Mineraltown sign was now no more than a symbol.

Nya did not know when the Great One had outlawed magic, but his banishment of books she could not forget. Not many of her days stood out from the rest, each day being so like each other, but the day the library at the Mineraltown Museum and Archives had closed, the day the sinians had carted off or burned all of the books in Mineraltown, left a sad and stubborn mark on her memory.

Nya lifted the book from the hollow and peeled away the mossy jacket. It was always a little dirty. She dusted off the cover and smiled as a thread of sunlight struck the faded gold title. **Healing Magicks and Carative Charms** was proof that books and magic were not entirely lost to Laar.

Nya opened the cover and slid her fingertip down the table of contents. Words were as delicious as food to her. She had always loved the look of them on a page, the

feel of them in her mouth, the sounds of them in the air, and their many meanings and uses. But most of all she enjoyed finding just the right words to fit within her spells and potions. When those words, magic words, flicked or floated off her tongue they always carried a small part of her with them. *Hope*. She believed magic her best hope of making a new life for herself and Erebis—and possibly her only hope of healing the forest.

“Today I’ll review **Healing the Sickly**. I do know it quite well,” Nya admitted. She had used that particular spell to treat everything from weeds to saplings. It was one of her favourites. “But I wonder whether I might be able to alter the potion so as to cure many plants at once. The forest grows sicker by the day, Erebis. Look how many of the smaller plants brown or wilt—I’ve never seen anything like it. If I could only make the serum stronger...”

Nya’s forehead creased in concentration as she removed the necessary herbs and ingredients from her belt pockets, and mixed them into a quartin nut shell in different amounts and sequences. In spite of her efforts, over an hour later the potion was still only able to cure one plant at a time. Frustrated, she restored the manuscript to its hiding spot and gathered her things.

“Just wait, Erebis,” Nya said as she plucked a yearn fruit from its bowing branch. “One day I will cure this entire forest.”



The dinner preparations went smoothly and for that Nya was thankful. The Mineraltown blacksmiths were rowdy and out of sorts—they had guzzled goblet upon goblet of root liquor since their arrival and were awaiting their meal.

Nya helped Erebis into his serving harness and loaded up his tray. "Careful, dear," she warned, "there is no room for error tonight." With that, Nya picked up her own serving tray and led the way into the dining room.

"A toast," yelled a short blacksmith with a long moustache. It was Gus Nuthammer, a man known around town for his loud-mouthed manner and unrivalled thirst for root liquor. "To the Great One," he shouted, "provider of root liquor and inventor of industry!"

"Hear! Hear!" the others bellowed in return.

Erebis at her heels, Nya made her way around the table and served the guests one by one. This was no easy task. It meant dodging large, swaggering bodies and limbs while balancing trays full of food. Dishes clinked and tottered, but she eventually laid the meal out without incident.

It was not until after dinner, when Nya served the guests more root liquor, that disaster arose.

Nya had almost topped up every guest's goblet by the time she reached Gus Nuthammer. He was bragging about a new style of broadsword he had designed, so she waited for his story to end before serving him. But the blacksmith would not be avoided that easily. He jumped up from his chair, brandishing an imaginary version of his broadsword. He lunged, lost balance, and staggered into Nya, knocking the jug of root liquor from her hands. There was a thunderous crash, and the room congealed in silence.

Embarrassment flashed within Gus Nuthammer's eyes. Then, only rage. Nya braced herself as he raised a grimy hand to her face. But before the blacksmith had the chance to strike, a fiercely snarling Erebis pinned him to the ground.

“Erebis, no!” Nya cried without thinking. She clasped a hand to her mouth, but it was too late. A chorus of outrage spread among the sinians, and Nya knew she had betrayed her only true friend. She had called Erebis by name.

Tears burning her eyes, Nya grabbed Erebis by his now broken harness.

“Outlaws!” Spit flew from Gus Nuthammer’s mouth and clung to his moustache. “Miscreants!” he shrieked as he raised himself from the floor. “You dare give name to a dog, slave child? Seize the beast! A death sentence is upon him!”

“No!” Nya surveyed the room, but there was no chance of escape. A crowd of accusing eyes closed in on her and Erebis. And then Erebis was torn from her arms and dragged through the swarm of blacksmiths. Nya heard the clang of iron hitting iron, a cheer from the crowd. She shoved and squeezed after Erebis, wishing she knew a spell to wind back time, to undo what she had done. She found Erebis by the door. The blacksmiths were loading him onto a dog cart, and he was locked in a cast iron cage.

“But I am not even sinian!” Nya cried. “Your laws should not apply to my deeds! It is not his fault!” But not a single ear would heed her pleas.

She turned to Wrought in desperation. *Do something!* she begged with a glance. But sinian law was absolute, and she knew Wrought was as powerless to change it as she was. He shook his head, sidestepped her gaze, but before he could distance himself from her in the crowd, Nya sensed sadness in his eyes.

“A dog has been named! Execution at dawn!” the blacksmiths barked as they burst out Wrought’s front door. Down the street and toward the town square the mob paraded, gathering hordes of onlookers. There was no mercy in those faces. Nya skulked

after them, her thoughts of saving Erebis swallowed by the mob's deafening wrath and her own dread of what had yet to come.

The next few hours passed in a nightmarish blur. Two archers stood guard as the blacksmiths raised Erebis's cage onto a platform for all to hiss and jeer at. Nya watched on, helpless, sickened by the crowd's blind hatred, angered by their mockery of her beloved friend and guardian. Erebis thrashed against his cage, stones and garbage pelting him from all sides, and Nya wept. She cried until no more tears would come. Until she felt withered and hollow and breathless.

It was Erebis's long, woeful howl that awakened her instincts. Sorrow turned to fury, despair to determination.

I will not let them take him, she vowed. And a plan began to form in her mind.

Chapter 3 – Awakening

Seth came to and jerked upright, his body pumping with adrenaline. He scrambled onto shaky legs, and noticed that he was still holding the acorn. He tucked it into a pocket and wiped his damp hands on his pants.

“Jeffrey?” Seth called. “It’s just me, man. You can come out. I must have—” Seth cut himself short. This wasn’t Treegrove Cemetery. There was no telling who was in shouting range.

Seth stood still and listened. Water trickling, wind in the leaves, the creaks and moans of trees. But there were no kids’ squeals, no fireworks. No Jeffrey.

He was in a forest. That much he knew. Trees soared overhead and silvery-blue moonlight shimmered over the surrounding plants. Seth reached out from the shadows and felt a slight tingle as the light jumped on his fingers as if had a life of its own. The air was different, too. It was thick and moist. With each breath, the throbbing in his heart and head dulled.

Seth took a few steps, into a clearing, and gasped. A tiny moon flooded the night sky. Just a speck of liquid silver, the moon was impossibly bright for its size. Seth felt another rush of adrenaline. The moon looked nothing like it usually did.

“Don’t panic, just think.” Seth whipped around and saw a small hill behind him. *Yes, I rolled. I came out of the portal and—*

Seth dizzyed and put his hands out to his sides for balance.

He was in Laar.

This wasn't how things were supposed to go. He had meant to investigate Sedgewick's disappearance—not disappear himself. *I have to get home before Mom realizes I'm gone. I have to.*

Seth sprinted up the hill, stumbling, searching for some sign of his fall, anything that might show him where the portal was. And when he reached the hilltop, Seth found what he was looking for. There, at the foot of a giant tree, lay his Kung Fu staff.

Supporting himself with his staff, Seth looked the huge tree up and down. It wasn't an oak tree, or any other tree he recognized, but it had to act as a portal home. It had to be a two-way portal. Didn't it?

With a trembling hand, Seth took the acorn from his pocket and walked up to the tree. He heaved a big breath, leaned against the trunk, and braced himself. He pictured the portal taking him back to Treegrove Cemetery. He pictured himself at home, in the kitchen, eating waffles with his mom.

But nothing happened.

This is bad. Really bad. If he couldn't figure out how to get back through that portal then he was stuck here, in Laar. Maybe forever.

Seth butted the back of his head against the tree, slid down its trunk, and slumped to the ground. He wrapped his arms around his knees and dropped his head. A deep and desolate howl echoed in the distance.



Nya darted past nearly a dozen villagers on her way back to Wrought's cottage. *Perfect, they return home. I have a couple hours yet before dawn.*

Her mind raced as she ran. *My herb belt—I need a potion for the guards. “Sleep for the Weary” should work. I need lilt weed, swoon leaf—but how do I give it to them? They will not trust me. And what of Wrought? Will he punish me? Careful...*

The front door to the cottage was locked, so Nya crept around back and peeked through the kitchen window. Wrought sat in his armchair in the living room, his head in his hands. She sensed his distress, his pity. *He will not try to stop me.* Or so she supposed. She had never questioned her ability to read emotions, but reading intentions was another, trickier matter altogether.

Since the hinges on the kitchen door needed oiling, there would be no slipping past Wrought unnoticed. So, with a deep breath and a loud creak, Nya entered the cottage to confront Wrought.

Wrought looked up at her, his face wet. *With tears*, Nya realized in shock. This was the first time she had seen her master cry.

“It was not always like this,” he sputtered. “We were not always like this, us sinians. There was a time when we were happier, kinder. The others cannot remember, but I cannot forget...” Wrought’s voice shook and trailed off, but when he tried again, it was clearer, louder. “Erebis’s cage is my own work. You could not force it open with the strength of ten sinians.”

Nya’s stomach churned. He was right. She could not open Erebis’s cage on her own. Healing magicks only worked on the living.

“To open the cage you would need this,” Wrought said, opening his fist to reveal a key. “But the key is not enough. The key will not get you past the guards. To give it to you would be to sentence you to death. And that I cannot do.”

“No!” Nya cried. “It is I who sentenced Erebis to death! I must save him—I must try. Oh, don’t you see, Wrought? If you give me that key, you give me freedom. Whether I live or die trying to rescue Erebis, I will be free.”

Wrought lowered his head, considering this. “And what of the guards?” he asked. “Do you know enough magic to deal with them?”

Nya gawped at her master. “Yes. But I—but how did you know?”

Wrought raised his head and did something Nya rarely saw him do. He smiled.

“These old eyes and this weary mind see more than I let on. You’ve been a friend to me, Nya. It is too late for me to be a friend in return, but it is not too late to help you.”

Wrought stretched out his hand and dropped the small, black key into her palm.

Freedom.

She stared at him through wide, watery eyes. “Oh, but you are a friend, Wrought,” she whispered, squeezing his calloused hand. “I shall never forget this.”

“Quick,” Wrought rasped. “Go, while there is still time.”

Nya was not about to quarrel. Erebis needed her. She grabbed her herb belt, a jug of root liquor, and dashed out the back door, wondering for just a moment whether she would ever pass though it again.

Nya slipped along shadowed walls and down deserted streets as she approached Mineraltown square. Silencing the soft crunch of her sandals on the road, Nya stopped and listened. *Nothing*. Her heart swelled against her ribs as she peeked around the Provision Shop wall and saw who was—or was not—in the square. No townspeople lingered to taunt her poor Erebis. Only the two armed guards remained.

Settling in a nearby alleyway, Nya rehearsed the **Sleep for the Weary** spell once in her head. In spite of her nervous hands and heart, the words came to her as though she was reading them from a page in her mind.

First a drop of lilt weed sap, then a twig of swoon, stir it thrice before you add a reflection of the moon...

She whispered the spell over the root liquor, careful to add the ingredients in the right amounts and order. She paused to let the potion absorb the magic, then dipped her finger into the jug and touched a drop of the liquid to her tongue. Her eyelids drooped ever so slightly and only for a second.

Perfect.

She set the enchanted root liquor down, knocked over a nearby barrel to attract the guards' attention, and ran behind the Provision Shop wall.

"Stay where you are. I'll go look," one guard called to the other before leaving his post to investigate the racket. As the guard rounded a corner and spied the bait, his scowl relaxed into a smile. There was nothing more pleasing to the sinian eye than a carafe of root liquor. He swooped up the jug and gave it a sharp, eager sniff. Unless he had the nose of a dog, the guard would only smell the liquor. *Sleep for the Weary is almost completely undetectable*, Nya reassured herself.

The guard chuckled to himself, surveyed the alley one last time, and strutted back to the square. "Must have been Nutty Gus Nuthammer," he said, lifting the jug. "The old Nutter left us a nightcap. I reckon he drank too much and spooked himself again."

"At least he didn't spill the root liquor this time," the second guard said, laughing and smacking his lips.

Yes, drink. Please, drink.

Sure enough, the first guard raised the jug in a silent toast to Erebis and took a big swig. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and passed the potion to his partner, who also drank from it. And so it went until, on his way to return the empty jug to the alley, the first guard dropped to the cobblestone road. Moments later, the second guard keeled over. He was snoring before he even hit the ground.

Nya did not squander a second. She raced from her hiding spot, toward Erebis's cage, and began to fumble with the lock. Erebis pressed his nose through the iron bars, licking her hand as she twisted and joggled the key. The lock was rusty from years of sitting in Wrought's yard, its gears reluctant to move. Yet several torturous seconds later, the lock surrendered a click, and the cage door screeched open.

Then, footsteps. Someone was coming. And by the sounds of those heavy footfalls, that someone was wearing Mineraltown Guard regulation boots.

Erebis leapt from his cage just as two burly sinians emerged from behind a building, their boots in full stride.

"Erebis, run!" Nya shouted. "Quick! To the forest!"

"Stop! Outlaws!" the guards called after them. "Traitors!"

Nya chanced a glimpse over her shoulder. The guards had stopped running. *Why?* Something flew by her ear, and she understood. *An arrow. The guards stopped to take aim.* She and Erebis had a good lead on the guards, but were still well within arrow's range.

The dark refuge of the forest was in sight, but it was not close enough. Another arrow zipped by, frightfully close, and Nya led Erebis behind the Great One's Gold

Emporium. But this cover was only temporary. Their only escape, the path that led through Knottwood and into the Forbidden Forest, was in plain view and open range.

“Faster!” Nya called to Erebis. “Follow me!” Her eyes fixed on the wall of trees ahead, she whipped out from behind the Gold Emporium and attuned her ears to the whooshes around her. *Miss. Keep missing*, she told the arrows. But they did not.

Nya heard the whiz of an arrow muffled by flesh, followed by Erebis’s pain-filled yowl. She reeled around and saw him stagger, fall. In the distance the guards lowered their bows. They were sprinting now—toward their fallen prey.

“Erebis, up!” Nya screamed, pulling him by the scruff of his neck. “You must run as never before!”

Erebis raised himself up onto his haunches, an arrow buried deep within his left flank. He whimpered, lurched forward, and caught himself. But then he began to run. His breathing was laboured, but his paws struck the ground in tireless rhythm. Slow at first then fast, faster, and then so fast that Nya’s aching legs strained to keep up.



Seth lifted his head and wondered how long he had been sitting there, against that tree, waiting to be sucked back through the portal—back home. All he knew for sure was that it was late morning, sometime after dawn. The mini-moon had set four or five freak-outs ago, and the forest was flooded with daylight.

Seth pressed the glow button on his watch for what must have been the twentieth time. 8:01 PM. The digital numbers were still frozen. His mom was probably a total mess by now, and there was nothing he could do about it. He couldn’t even tell what time it was.

A wailing sound rose up in the distance and jolted Seth right out of his fit of helplessness. "It's just an animal," Seth muttered. "It's normal to be scared—good, even." Scared could drown out other emotions, he figured. Scared might not leave so much room to worry about whether his mom thought he was dead, whether his dad was flying home to be with her, whether Jeffrey blamed himself for running off last night, or whether Seth would ever get out of this place.

He had to find Sedgewick—fast. There was no other option. The longer Seth was away from home, the more his mom and everyone would worry. Sedgewick would know how to get home. The guy had written a heap of research papers about this place.

But if he knew how to get home, why would Sedgewick still be here?

"Quit thinking so much," Seth said through gritted teeth. *Get up. Look around. Do something.*

Seth reached for his staff and pulled himself up. But what he heard then stopped his step and his heart.

Sad but beautiful song drifted through the trees. The voice was a young girl's, but the song was unlike anything Seth had ever heard. Soft consonants and long, mournful vowels swirled around him, drawing him closer. The words sounded strange to Seth, but not for long. As the song grew louder, its words squished or stretched into words Seth understood. His own miseries echoed within that soft tune. Lost, alone, helpless, it rang. And then the singing stopped.

Seth was suddenly aware that he had wandered into the open. He saw a foot—two feet—behind a tree and peeked around it. But he wasn't afraid. Not of the singer, this figure who knelt crying on the ground. Spikes of wet, silvery hair hung in her face.

Tears streamed off her cheeks, soaking the black fur of the dog whose head she held in her lap. Seth shifted to get a better view and saw what the girl had been singing about. Dark red blood matted her dog's fur and pooled over the dirt. There was an arrow stuck deep in his side.

A slight motion drew Seth's gaze back to the girl. Her ear twitched again and Seth noticed with a shock that it pointed to a tip. *Pointy ears*. That girl wasn't human—she was some kind of elf.



Nya knelt over Erebis, her vision blurred. She felt as though her very soul was escaping her. It seeped out her eyes, drenched Erebis. He was dying, and for some reason she could not heal him.

There must be another spell. Think of another.

Once again, Nya groped through the pages of **Healing Magicks and Curative Charms** in her mind, thoughts leaping from chapter to chapter. But she had tried all the suitable spells—some more than once.

Before she knew what she was doing, song leaked out of her. It was completely unknown to her, that song, but she lost herself in its fluid tune and mysterious words.

Magic words. However it came to her, this song was ancient magic.

She had not been singing long when the cracking of twigs tugged her out of her singing daze. She stiffened and strained her ears to listen. Nothing for a while. Then the distinct sound of shifting earth. Someone—or something—was watching her.

Not giving her observer any time to hide, Nya jerked her head to one side. Standing before her, wearing black clothes and carrying a staff, was a boy. He did not

have the pointed ears of a welf; nor did he have the rounded body of a sinian. The boy was not a native of Laar. He was human.

Nya gasped, laid Erebis's head on the ground, and bowed to the stranger. "Your majesty, please, I beg your forgiveness," she choked.

"Your majesty?" the boy said. "No, uh, I think you've got me confused with someone else. I'm not from here."

Nya lifted her head. "Yes, I see that. I—I thought you were our ruler. He is also said to have been born of another world. But you are much too young. My apologies."

Nya looked at the boy again, reading him this time, searching for lies. But his eyes exuded only confusion, caring, and worry. Not sure how to act around someone with such kindness in his eyes, she stammered, "I—I am called Nya."

"I'm Seth," he said. "I heard you singing."

Nya turned back to Erebis and watched him breathe slow, shallow breaths.

"I'm sorry about your dog," Seth said. "I had a dog once. My dog Charlie was my best friend."

"You're allowed to name dogs in your world?" Nya asked, without bothering to hide her suspicion. It was difficult to imagine such a place.

"Of course. Why wouldn't we name our dogs?"

Nya wiped a tear from her chin and shook her head. "This dog is everything I have ever loved, and he dies. He alone is my protector, my home, my family."

"I'm sorry," Seth whispered.

"I have tried every spell and potion I know," Nya said, distress and grief closing in on her, suffocating her thoughts. "'Healing the Fatally Wounded'—why does it not

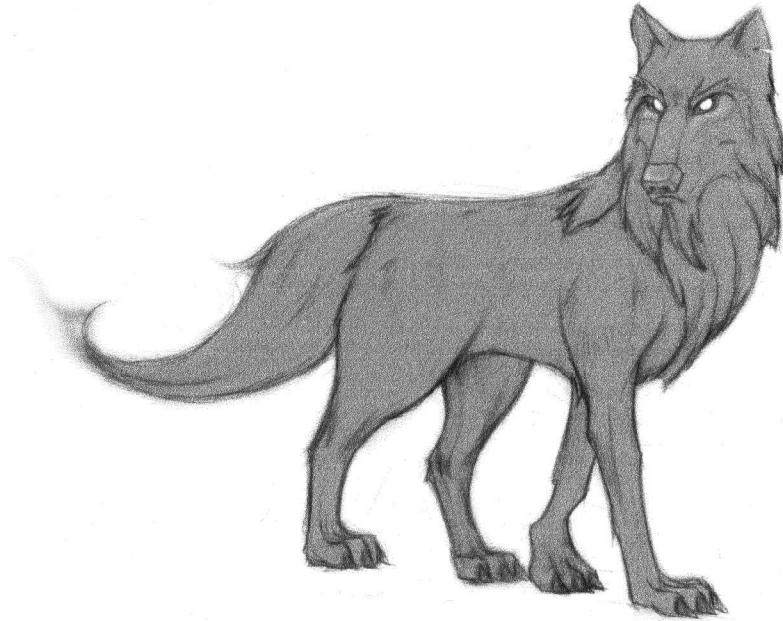
work? What else do I have to live for? Why can it not be me in his place?" Nya bent to kiss Erebis on the cheek, then jumped to her feet. The winds had begun to change.

Golden rays of sunlight burst through the trees, followed by a thunderous bang and a blinding flash of light. Nya squeezed her eyes shut and shielded her face as gusts of warm air swept over her. The winds stopped as abruptly as they had come, and only a deep huffing sound remained. A creature was breathing before them—and whatever it was, it was big.

Nya opened her eyes.

Standing where Erebis had lain was a massive, black wolf with glowing, yellow eyes. The canine growled, rumbling the earth and baring long, sharp fangs.

Chapter 4 – Erebis's Story



Seth stumbled back a couple steps, thrusting his staff into ready position. His heart revved into high gear. That was no normal wolf. It was at least as tall as him and way stronger. If it wanted to, that thing could snap his staff like a pencil.

The wolf flared its nostrils and a smoky vapour wisped into the air, snaking around Seth and Nya. Seth gripped his staff tighter, shifting his weight back and adjusting his stance. Nya, however, remained motionless.

“Do not be afraid.” Nya’s voice was gentle, but one of her hands shook as it hovered near her belt. And then Seth realized just who she was trying to comfort. “Erebis, you are safe. It is me, Nya. Do you not know your dearest friend? You are not as you were, but I know you nevertheless.”

Seth looked from Nya to the wolf in disbelief. *Erebis?*

The wolf lowered his brow, directing his eyes and their yellow glow at Nya. The light in his eyes dulled, and then he did something that no amount of portals, pointy-eared girls, or magic explosions could have prepared Seth for. The wolf spoke.

“Forgive me, Nya Lunya.” The wolf’s voice was gruff, but his eyes were wet and happy. “You are also not as I remember you. You were but an infant when I last saw you.” Then, raising one paw and stooping to examine it, the wolf added, “And I fear it has been many years since I have been myself.”

Nya motioned for Seth to lower his staff. He did so, but not without giving her an anxious frown. “Nya, h—how do you know you can trust him?”

“When I was very little this wolf came to me in a dream,” Nya said, smiling at Erebis as she spoke. “He whispered his name to me. And so I secretly named my dog companion Erebis after this wolf. I don’t know by what magic, but somehow the dog and the wolf are the same. So I beg your pardon, Seth, but I would sooner trust an old friend than a new one.”

Feeling unwelcome, Seth kicked a mushroom cap off its stem and angled his staff to let Nya by. But he kept his eyes on the wolf Erebis.

Nya ran to the wolf and checked for injuries. There wasn’t a blotch of blood on his coat. But in the dirt beside him, where the pools of blood had been, lay the metal bands that had covered the dog’s ankles and the arrow that had stabbed his side.

Maybe that wolf was her dog. Maybe wolves can talk in this world. Seth was having a hard time believing his instincts and his eyes. He watched as Nya buried her face into the wolf’s fur, and as Erebis rested his jowl on her shoulder, eyes closing in content.

Erebis was frightening and calming at the same time. He had a torn ear and a scar across one cheek—he had obviously seen a fight or two. But he had a dignity about him, like a sheriff or an old wizard, or something. And his love for Nya was unmistakable.

Seth could see that now, and Nya's last comment bothered him even more. He could really use some help in this world, and that meant having Nya and Erebis's trust.

But can I trust them?

"Well, I guess I'll be going, then," Seth mumbled, decapitating another mushroom as he turned to leave. Trustworthy people would ask him if he needed help.

But untrustworthy people might be just as likely to keep me from leaving.

"Seth, was it?"

Stunned again by the deep calm of Erebis's voice, Seth spun around and nodded.

"You are noble to try and protect Nya."

"Oh. Uh, thanks, Sir."

"Please, call me Erebis." He inhaled. "You are born of Earth, and have only just arrived in Laar. Is this true, Seth?"

"Yeah." *Okay, maybe more wizard than sheriff.*

Erebis bowed, eyed Seth's staff, and continued. "Then my Nya Lunya is in good hands, indeed. Come, let us ensure we are safe and unwatched. We have much to learn from each other. Greater matters than our own hardships are at stake."

Seth had too many troubles of his own right now to stress about other, greater hardships. What he needed to do was get home. The question was: could these two help him get there? Seth didn't see many pros to leaving Nya and Erebis just yet. In fact, the thought of being alone in these woods scared Seth way more than the thought of keeping dodgy company. So long as Erebis didn't make a meal out of him, it couldn't hurt to have a three hundred pound wolf for a body guard.

Yet the longer he trailed behind, watching, the more Seth wondered whether Erebis weighed anything at all. His large frame negotiated branches and bushes with ghostlike quiet, and his paws didn't leave tracks in the earth. Even the wolf's fur wisped into smoky tips. Seth found his eyes following Nya instead—at least she didn't seem to disappear every time she stepped into the shadows. Her hair shimmered even when shaded from the afternoon sun.

Erebis padded into the undergrowth, and Nya never left his side. She kept one hand on his ribcage—like she was afraid he might disappear, or turn back into a wounded dog if they separated. For all Seth knew, that could have happened. In this world anything seemed possible.

"I remember parts of these past years, but only vaguely," Erebis said as he held a branch aside to let Seth and Nya pass. "They come to me like fragments of a dream I cannot make sense of. I should like to know more."

"There is not much to tell about our life together," Nya said, scrunching up her face. "It is a wearisome tale—one of few joys in many moons, one of little adventure or purpose. But the ending is a happy one."

Nya told Seth and Erebis about Minertown and the sinians who lived there. She described her Master Wrought and daily chores. Seth agreed, it was a wearisome story—until she got to the part about finding a magic book and practicing spells in the forest. And when Nya reached the escape from Minertown, Seth noticed that even she seemed surprised by how exciting it was. Like she was telling her story for the first time—and liking it.

Seth walked a little closer. He imagined the blacksmiths, the guards, the town square. He pictured Erebis as he had first seen him, lying with an arrow in his side. And then something occurred to Seth.

“Shouldn’t the guards be looking for you guys, then?” he asked, glancing over his shoulder. “Won’t your whole town be after you?”

Nya shook her head. “We’re in the Forbidden Forest. It is forbidden for all sinians of Minertown, even guards, to stray here. To do so, they need permission from the sinian ruler, the Great One himself.”

Seth ran a few paces and caught up with Erebis. “The Great One? That’s worse! Won’t he be after us, then?”

“To be sure,” Erebis said, “but the Great City is far to the North. It will be at least three moons before the news of our escape reaches the Great One and a search party is dispatched. Still, we must be cautious always. There is no telling which forest creatures have sold their eyes and ears to the tyrant.”

Stooping to smell a sick plant, Erebis added, “Though we may count the trees and plants our allies. If ever Flora favoured those who tread lightly upon her, it is now.”

The last thing Seth needed to worry about was whether nature was on his side. He was still sussing out his new companions. Escaped lawbreakers or not, Nya and Erebis knew this world as Seth knew his. And something told Seth that if someone as seemingly harmless as Nya would break the law, the law was asking to be broken.

Erebis stopped abruptly, and Seth just about ran into the wolf’s backside. “This place—do you recognize it, Seth?”

Seth scanned his surroundings. Even in daylight he recognized where they were. “I landed here when I came through the portal! How did you know?”

Erebis sighed. “You are not the first person to wander into this world from another.”

“I know! My grandfather...” Seth started. Then, like he’d just pulled the trigger of an over-pumped water gun, everything came spurting out. “My grandfather Sedgewick came here a year ago. I only meant to investigate his disappearance. I’m not cut out for portals and other-worlds and stuff. I didn’t mean to come here. But I did, last night. And now I have to find him. I have to get home. Have you seen him? Sedgewick, his name is Sedgewick. Have you?”

They didn’t have to say anything. Seth knew from their faces. Neither Erebis nor Nya had seen Sedgewick.

“Come, sit, both of you,” Erebis motioned. “I may know how to find your grandfather, Seth, but I ask your patience. There is much to explain, and much to discuss.”

Thinking way too many things at once, Seth plopped onto the ground next to Nya. This was good, wasn’t it? Erebis seemed to know how to find Sedgewick. *So why do I get the feeling that things are about to get more—not less—complicated?*

The light returned to Erebis’s eyes, but it was duller this time. It seemed to shine inward, like a searchlight seeking out long hidden memories. Erebis opened his mouth and a smoky vapour wafted into the air, billowing within an invisible box that kept it from escaping.

A hazy Erebis appeared in the box of smoke, and for a moment Seth thought he was seeing double. But then there were other wolves in the vision—hundreds of them—and together their shadowy forms and flickering eyes resembled a starry night sky.

“Laar was a different place when I last took my true wolf form,” Erebis began. “I was Alpha Commander of the wolf packs that roamed the lands of Laar as guides and peacekeepers, a responsibility bestowed upon us ages ago by the elves themselves.”

The smoke box stirred to display a small figure placing both its hands on Erebis’s shoulders. *It had to be an elf.* The figure had pointy ears, just like Nya’s.

“The creatures of Laar were happy and free,” Erebis explained, “keeping mostly to themselves except when the need for trading food and goods arose. Trading disputes were uncommon and the wolves’ main duty fell to guiding other-worlders, wanderers, who happened into this world by accident. We would seek out rumoured wanderers, help them achieve their purpose in this world, and then send them back to their own.”

Erebis paused, and Seth stared at the fading images of strange creatures until they dissolved.

“So Sedgewick and I aren’t unique to this world, after all,” Seth reasoned aloud. “We’re wanderers.”

“And if Seth is a wanderer,” Nya said as she turned to Erebis, “then it is your responsibility to help him find his way in Laar?”

“Yes. All wanderers who visit our world wish an undertaking upon themselves that they must complete in order to return home. My duty now is to help Seth achieve his wish, whatever it may be.”

Seth's innards jumbled into a nervous clump. It didn't help that the mistrusting Nya kept squinting at him—like she was reading a really long word, or solving a difficult math problem. “How am I supposed to know what my wish was?” Seth asked.

“Think back to the moment before you came through the portal,” Erebis said. “What was the last thing you wished for, right before you came to Laar?”

“I don't know.” Seth frowned and combed his fingers through his hair. “I guess I wanted to find my grandfather.”

“Hmmm,” Erebis growled. “If that was indeed your heart's desire, then we must find him in order that you may return home. To pass through this portal you needed an acorn—do you have it still?”

Seth patted his pocket and nodded.

“Very good. It will glow the colour of the moon when your task in this world is complete. You should fasten it to yourself.”

“I will make a necklace of it for him,” Nya piped in. Avoiding her gaze, Seth dropped the acorn into the belt pocket she held open for him. He felt her eyes linger on him for a second before she, too, turned back to Erebis.

Erebis let out a long, foggy breath and a new smokescreen churned into shape. The outlines of several round creatures played on its surface.

“The sinian people largely concerned themselves with farming and crafts,” Erebis said, “but there came a time when they began to take uncommon interest in the wanderers we aided. A discovery made them restless. Copies of seven ancient elvish stories, known as the Scroll Stories, were found and translated. It was determined that these were neither ordinary tales of amusement, nor household histories. The Scroll Stories were

determined to be prophecies. And only six of the seven Scroll Stories had yet come to pass.”

Erebis sighed through his nose, and a smattering of strange creatures—*a couple humans, even*—joined the sinians in the smoke.

“The seventh Scroll Story foretold the coming of a wanderer who would return lost riches to Laar, and free and enlighten its peoples. The scrolls named this hero the Great One, and the sinians took it upon themselves to seek him out. Wanderers found in the forests and grasslands were entertained and questioned. Once certain that each was not the foretold Great One, the sinians would turn wanderers over to our packs.”

Erebis paused and the scenes of sinians, wanderers, and wolves vanished.

“Were there no dog slaves, then, and no towns of industry?” Nya asked.

“Certainly not,” Erebis said. “The sinians, as I knew them, lived in small farming settlements and would not have dreamed of taking any animal as slave. But in the months before I was transformed into a dog, they had already begun to change—”

“What happened?” Nya asked. Her hand flew to her mouth to excuse the interruption. The scene of sinian farms rippled, but she added, “Why did the sinians change their ways?”

“I cannot say exactly.” Erebis’s eyes were aglow once more, and the images started coming faster than before. “One night all the sinian settlements of Laar exploded in wild celebration. Whisperings of a wanderer who claimed to be the Great One spread across Laar. Thereafter, the number of wanderers found and turned over to the wolves lessened. Our friends the ravens brought news of a so-called ‘Great City’ being built in

the North and of wanderers imprisoned there. Twice I took several packs to the Great City to investigate, and twice the supposed Great One refused to meet us—”

“And the wanderers? Were any imprisoned in the Great City?” Seth blurted, rippling the images of warped and crowded buildings of the Great City.

“The Great One’s fortress did indeed have a prison,” Erebis continued, “but it was too heavily guarded to infiltrate. I trust the sharp eyes of the ravens as I would my own. Have no doubt: wanderers were, and likely remain, imprisoned within the walls of the Great City.”

Towering above them now was a huge, misshapen wall, built from the biggest tree trunks Seth had ever seen. To his relief, the vision stirred a little, distorting the rows of armoured sinians that marched into view, their spear tips gleaming.

Seth shrugged off a shiver. If Erebis and the ravens were right, then Sedgewick was somewhere behind that gigantic, guarded monster of a wall.

“Those visits to the North confirmed my suspicions that the Great One was a fake, an impostor,” Erebis went on. “I made it my business to study the copies of the Scroll Stories, and I realized how the supposed Great One had twisted their sacred words, promising riches instead of resources, power in place of wisdom. But it was not until after my last visit to the Great City that I realized the true danger that loomed over sinians and all of Laar.

“We were several moons’ journey south of the Great City and the packs in my charge were resting and awaiting the ravens’ counsel. I was strolling through the woods, renewing my mind and spirit, when the news came.”

Seth and Nya jumped. A massive bird flew into the vision, filling the smoky screen. She had sleek, black feathers, and a long, curved beak. But the great raven was soon eclipsed by flames, and then by giant, raging bonfires.

“A raven friend, Raava, informed me that the Great One had banned magic among the sinians. He burned most of their books of magic, retaining only a handful for himself. Worst of all, he ruled that only he could practice the magic arts. I did not have long to contemplate the horror of this news. I never made it back to my packs. There was a great, sudden flash, and I remember no more.”

Blinded by the flash in Erebis’s vision, Seth blinked sight back into his eyes. He and Nya sat motionless for a while. Only the murmur of a nearby creek disturbed the silence.

Nya spoke first. “Did you see the magician who enchanted you?”

“No, my enchanter must have worked his spell from afar,” Erebis said. “I would have smelled him otherwise. My guess is that the Great One wanted to take care of the wolves once and for all, that he collectively transformed us into dogs, condemning us to slavery.”

“The flash in your story was like the one that happened today, right before you turned back into a wolf,” Seth exclaimed, trying to pin down the thoughts that whizzed through his mind. “It must’ve been one of Nya’s spells that broke your curse, your enchantment, or whatever.” Only then, after mentioning it, did it really sink in for Seth: Nya knew magic.

“Except it may have been love or self sacrifice that transformed me,” Erebis said. “Why else would the Great One outlaw companionship with a dog?”

“True,” Nya said. “And even if we knew how to free one wolf at a time, it would take us forever to do so.”

“Yes,” Erebis agreed. “If we are to discover how to awaken the wolves and free the wanderers, we must muster what allies, knowledge, and magic we can. We will travel together for several moons at least, but there are places, people farther North who will shelter you if you wish. You will be under my protection until then. I do not ask your company for the whole of this journey. But this is my calling.”

“Then it is mine also,” Nya announced. “I feel I know less and less of this world. If nothing else, I know that your path is mine also.”

Without bearing his teeth or curling his lips, Erebis smiled. “You may forge your own path yet, Little One,” he said, nudging her with his nose.

Seth’s head felt more like a helium balloon than something he should be thinking with. “I—I can’t even stand up for myself, how could I possibly help you take down someone with a name like the Great One? I’m not brave and it’s not like I know any magic. I want to find my grandfather, I need to find him, I just...”

“You underestimate yourself,” Erebis said. His voice was so settling that Seth wondered if it, too, was spiked with magic. “I have seen you risk your own life to protect another. Allow me to protect you in return. You are a wanderer in a foreign land. Your chances of evading the Great One and his spies alone are slim.”

The wolf had a point.

“Seth,” Erebis continued, “I do not ask that you fight the Great One in battle or in siege. All I ask is that you open yourself to the possibility that you may be able to contribute something—an idea or knowledge, perhaps—to our cause.”

Seth glanced up at Nya. Instead of looking at him like he was the biggest wimp in the world, she actually smiled.

“Alright,” Seth said.

Erebis gave a firm nod, a salute almost. “Come, let us take rest. A long journey awaits us, wherever it may lead.”

“Shouldn’t we push on?” Seth asked. “I mean, you said we’ve only got so many days before the Great One hears you guys escaped. Shouldn’t we be travelling into the evening?”

“Rest will do more for us at this point than a night’s trek,” Erebis said. It was clear that the issue wasn’t open to discussion.

Erebis arranged a bed of leaves and Nya took to gathering some round, yellow things she called yearn fruits. Seth’s only contribution was staring into nothing. If Erebis and Nya minded, they didn’t say anything.

“Erebis, what was the second name you called me by earlier?” Nya said as she chucked her yearn fruit pit into the bushes and curled up beside him.

“Lunya. I called you Nya Lunya, your full name. It is welvish for ‘moonstar.’”

Welvish? Seth was confused. *Didn’t he mean elvish?*

“My parents are dead, aren’t they, Erebis?” she said.

“No one knows for certain, Little One. They journeyed afar in the name of peace, but only stories of their deaths returned. It is said that they died at sea, that their bodies washed ashore the Nameless Lands.”

Nya nodded and wiped the corner of one eye. "I have always known they were dead. They were the kind of people who would have come to find me, no matter where I was, weren't they?"

"They would have combed every acre of this world to find you, and would not have stopped until they had. You will see them again one day. If not in this life, then in the next."

"Yes," Nya yawned, "in the afterlife. Goodnight, Erebis. Goodnight, Seth."

"Mmm," Seth garbled back through a mouthful of yearn fruit. He wasn't going to say it if it wasn't true. It wasn't a good night.

Maybe Nya could fall asleep to the thought of seeing her parents in the afterlife, but Seth sure couldn't. Only this lifetime would do, and the sooner the better. Right about now, Seth's mom was probably on the evening news holding up his school photo, and his dad was probably going mental on a super long flight home. *And Sedgewick's probably locked in some dank cell of that freak ruler's city.* And here Seth was, doing nothing to help any of them.

Something tells me I won't fall asleep anytime soon.

The moon was bright, but Seth could barely see. Mist covered the forest floor. Long, dark shadows gripped billowing forms. He was alone. No, there was someone up ahead. A red blur bobbed along, mist swirling in its trail. Seth ran to catch up. He tried to call out, but only a ticking sound escaped him. Tick, tick, tick, tick...

The hooded figure turned. It was Nya. Erebis was beside her. They turned and ran. Seth tried to follow, but he could not keep up.

Walls closed in on Seth, a maze. Alone, but not quite. Something was watching from the darkness. Seth kept walking. He wanted to stop, to turn back, but could not. Something pushed him on. Someone called his name. Sedgewick? Seth could see him now. Closer, closer.

Shadowy shackles bound Sedgewick's wrists. A dark figure held him hostage. The figure called Seth's name. Laughed. Black body, but the face... Seth knew the face. Mitch reached out to grab him—

Chapter 5 – Beyond the Forbidden Forest

Nya hovered over Seth, wondering what the best way to wake him was. She was certainly not going to use Erebis's old technique.

"Seth," she said. He pinched his face into such a troubled expression that she figured any awakening would be welcome. "Seth! Wake up, Sleepy, we—"

Seth shot up from his leafy bed, knocking Nya backwards over a large root. She landed on leaf-cushioned ground.

"Sorry!" Seth exclaimed, rushing to help Nya to her feet. "I was dreaming and there was this dark figure and I heard my name and—"

"Seth, it's okay, I'm fine," Nya said. "I did not mean to startle you. I just wanted to give you this." Nya took Seth's acorn necklace from a belt pocket and held it out for Seth. It hung from a long, silver thread that gleamed in the morning's light.

"Oh—cool—thanks," Seth said, taking the acorn and tying it around his neck. "What's the string made of? Your hair?"

"No, no," Nya giggled. It felt terrific to laugh. "The string is spider silk, from the Wensheer Spider. The black, shiny stuff is mottle clay, and the inset stone is procetite. It'll help—" Nya paused. There was something bothering her, something she needed to say. "Seth, I'm sorry I said what I did, about not being able to trust you. I know I can."

"Why, because Erebis trusts me?"

"No." Nya took a big breath. She had never told anyone what she was about to tell Seth. "Because I read honesty in your eyes. And I want to be honest with you as well. I'm an empath, which means I can read emotions. It's something I've always been

able to do. I saw you were trustworthy, but I suppose I had a hard time believing what I saw.”

“I’ve had a lot of that lately, too. We don’t have talking wolves or magic or, uh, empaths in my world. No worries, okay?”

Nya smiled. She liked his strange expressions. “Okay, no worries.”

“At least now I know what all those weird looks you gave me were about.”

Nya slapped a hand to her mouth. “Oh, am I that obvious?”

Much to Nya’s relief, Seth laughed. “Let’s just say squinty-eyed-trying-to-read-emotions looks a lot like squinty-eyed-mistrusting.”

“That’s terrible! I’ll try to rein in the strange looks from now on.”

“Much appreciated,” Seth said, one last snicker getting away from him. Then, looking around, he asked, “Hey, where’s Erebis?”

“He said he needed to reconnect with the world. I believe that means he went to get his bearings.” Nya waved Seth over to the fire, which she had enchanted with the spell **Smoke Less Choke Less** to emit almost no smoke. There was no sense attracting any more spies than they needed to. “Today we cross into the Wild Woods.”

Seth eyed the wide, flat stone that she was cooking breakfast on and took a seat. “Wait,” he said, “I thought we were already in the Wild Woods.” His voice was still a little groggy.

“No, this is the Forbidden Forest.”

“Oh, right. Because it’s forbidden to sinians. How clever.” Seth took the loop-leaf plate she handed to him and examined its contents. “Thanks. Some kind of fried fruit?”

Nya nodded and Seth angled the leaf so that its entire contents slid right into his mouth. After a minimal number of chews, Seth swallowed and burped. His eating antics reminded her of Wrought. Except Wrought had never bothered to excuse his lack of manners with a sheepish glance as Seth did now.

Seth shrugged. "I was hungry."

"Anyhow," Nya laughed, "I didn't name the forests. The Great One did. The Wild Woods make up the very middle of Laar. They are neither east nor west, north nor south. Erebis says that they are realms governed by their own peoples and laws—creatures I have only read of, or never heard of."

Nya went to serve herself breakfast, but stopped. Over the soft sizzle of breakfast, she heard a rustling in the bushes. Her ears twitched. Something was coming.

In her peripheral vision, Nya saw Seth jump to his feet, do a shoulder roll to where his staff lay, grab it, and stand at the ready. Nya staggered backwards a few steps and stood beside him, one hand on her herb belt.

More rustling. Closer this time.

"Quite the companions I've acquired," Erebis said as he tramped into the glade. "Impressive, Seth. Tiger roll, heart away from attacker. Trained in Kung Fu, are you?"

Seth cocked his head. "How'd you know?"

"I have been a guide of Laar for innumerable years. Other martial artists have happened upon Laar. I once journeyed with a Shaolin Monk."

Nya had not a clue what a Shaolin Monk was, but Seth was certainly impressed.

"Nya, you had some magical device at your fingertips, no doubt?" Erebis asked.

“Yes, and how naughty of you to sneak up on us!” she scolded. “If I had thrown my numbing stone at you it would have been a good hour before you could move and we could depart.” Seth raised one eyebrow, giving her a sideways glance, but Nya was preoccupied with Erebis’s demeanour. “Tell us, what news, Erebis? You’re in better spirits.”

“There is no getting by her, is there Seth?” Seth grinned and shook his head.

“Yes,” Erebis said, “my strength returns to me. I have rejoined this world, different as it may be. Although the woodlands ail, they are not unlike how I remember them. I should be able to navigate the Wild Woods without difficulty.”

“So, it shouldn’t be too hard getting there?” Seth asked.

“It is not getting to, but getting into the Wild Woods that will prove difficult,” Erebis explained. “Once inside, I will be able to find our way, but there is no telling who or what will get in that way. I will explain more during our travels, but first we must clean up and leave no trace of our stay. We have a good start on our trackers, but they will have dogs to scent our trail.” Then, almost inaudibly, Erebis added, “Though we may be back this way yet.”

Nya scooped the last bits of fried wink fruit onto a loo-parn leaf and offered half to Erebis, who declined. Apparently Erebis’s new, ghost-like constitution meant greater portions for her and Seth. They shared the remaining bits of wink fruit, then smothered the fire embers with damp earth and scattered the leaves that had served as last night’s bed. Once the grounds met Erebis’s approval, they set off, heading northeast.

The morning’s hike through dewy woodlands was a quiet one. Erebis traipsed ahead in a meditative state of plotting their course, and Seth lumbered behind, emitting

the occasional roaring yawn. Nya was happy to wander into her own reflective reverie. Strange, all those years she had longed for someone to converse with, and here she was, content to converse with none other than her old friend nature.

The earthy scents, swaying trees, gushing river, and refreshing breeze all merged into a beautiful poem of the senses, an ode to her freedom. But when a brittle, brown sapling snapped against her sandal, Nya grounded her thoughts. *Freedom is still an illusion—for me and for nature.*

Before long, a wide river with fierce, whitecapped currents bent into view. Though she could not swim, Nya had always found water, in its various forms, to be calming. But this waterway was frightening. It churned and frothed, rushed and bubbled, and Erebis was leading them down toward it.

“Fury Creek,” he announced. “Its waters form the southern border of the Wild Woods. Those who try to cross its seemingly shallow waters find its centre a bottomless pool of mystical currents.”

The waters did appear shallow by the shore. Waist deep, perhaps. Still, Fury Creek deserved its name—Nya did not have to wade out to its centre to see that. Where the water’s surface was not topped by crests of frothy white, tiny whirlpools released wisps of vapour.

“Drink and refresh yourselves,” Erebis said. “Mind that you do not fall in and the water is harmless.”

Nya and Seth exchanged uneasy glances, edged themselves onto the bank, and scooped up handfuls of the cold water.

“We are heading toward one of two southern entry points to the Wild Woods,” Erebis said. “It is not far from here but is guarded by kragem toll-takers, ancient rock people bound to points of passage. They will do no harm to us so long as we do not pass them without their consent. But we must be cunning to get by them. Without precious stones or metals we have nothing to buy our passage with.”

“And the other southern entry point?” Nya asked.

“The creek narrows enough for safe crossing far east from here, back from whence we came, back past Mineraltown and farther south,” said Erebis. “That course would lose us at least one moon’s advantage over our trackers. We must try to pass the kragem. We will lose little time for trying, and much time for failing.”

Seth wiped his mouth with his sleeve. “So how do we trick these kragem guys, then?”

“I have yet to figure that out,” Erebis said as he began to walk back up the bank. “Your suggestions are welcome.”

Less than a day, now, Nya had known Erebis as wolf and guide. Yet she already believed his knowledge of Laar and its ways was limitless. *Surely, he would not lead us to the kragem if we hadn’t a chance of getting by them.*

“Nya, what about magic?” Seth said. “Maybe you could use a potion to put the rock guys to sleep like you did those guards. Or you could trick them with a spell.”

“That depends,” she said. She ran after Erebis, and Seth followed. “Erebis, are the kragem living beings?”

“Beings, yes. Living, no.”

"Then no, I cannot use magic. Rock is impervious to potions." Nya pursed her lips. Not for the first time, she felt thwarted by the fact that her magical abilities were limited to one school of magic. "All spells I know are healing magicks, which only work on living beings."

"Oh," Seth said. "Then we're screwed."

"Screwed?" Nya repeated.

"Yeah, you know: in trouble, in a jam, no hope, dead meat!"

"Nnnnot necessarily," Nya said, gathering her thoughts. "Seth, maybe you could get us through! You are born of another world, and with your strange clothes I reckon you could pass for the Great One's diplomat or herald."

"What! Nya are you crazy? I'll just—I'll just freeze up."

"Twice we have thought our lives in peril and both times you acted quickly and bravely," Nya said, crossing her arms across her chest.

"That's different! I mean, yeah, when it's a matter of fight or run I'm okay. But I can't talk my way out of stuff—I freak out and can't speak. Even my Kung Fu master told me I'm 'all instinct and no assertion.'"

Nya was sure her eyes were the size of quartin nuts. "M—master?" she managed.
Seth, a slave?

"Not like Wrought!" Seth said. "A master in martial arts is just a teacher, an experienced instructor."

Nya bowed her head. No one in any world should be the property of another. "I still have my slave bands on," she said. "The kragem would only let me through if I were in service of another. As a wolf, Erebis will be suspect. Seth, you have to try."

“Nya is right,” Erebis said. “The kragem have only ever served themselves, but they would not wish to anger an agent of someone as powerful as the Great One. Yes, I believe it could work...”

Nya searched Seth’s eyes. Even he realized it was their only chance.

Chapter 6 – The Kragem Toll-takers

Seth rode on Erebis's back, trying to seem brave and proud. It wasn't easy. The forest grew dark around them, and the path narrowed beneath them. To make matters worse, Seth couldn't shake the feeling that someone was watching them.

"That's good, Seth," Nya whispered. "Keep sticking your chin out like that."

Nya trailed behind them on foot. One end of a spider silk rope she'd made was slip-knotted around her wrists. Seth had the other end, wrapped twice around his right hand, to keep it from slipping. His staff was tied along Erebis's side. Weapons were of no use against the kragem.

"And remember," Erebis murmured, "the kragem will not punish you for deceiving them. Only if we pass them without consent can they turn us to statues."

Seth took long, thin breaths, trying to trick his body into feeling calmer. Erebis and Nya had given him advice about what to say, what to do. *Go over it in your head.* No more dress rehearsals. It was time for the big performance.

The air buzzed with magic, and rocks of every size dotted either side of the path. Seth, Erebis and Nya reached two enormous boulders, and Erebis stopped. This was Seth's cue to dismount. But what Seth saw then left him too shocked to move.

Stretching beyond the giant boulders were dozens of statues, formed in a variety of precious stones and polished metals. They might even have been beautiful if it weren't for the terror in their eyes, and the desperation of their poses. A boy with ears like Nya's, an armoured insect woman, some kind of water animal dripping with reeds—countless creatures were frozen in an attempt to escape the kragem. But the most disturbing statues of all were petrified in endless recognition of their fate. A marble yak-like beast reared

up on its back legs, shielding itself with its front hooves. And just past the two boulders, stood a sinian with one silver hand on his heart and the other raised in what was obviously a gesture of peace.

Seth turned in disgust. *Don't look at the statues. Focus on the rocks.* But before he could look away, he saw the golden statue of a human girl. She knelt facing one of the boulders, tears streaking her face, her hands pressed together. She was begging for mercy. Or praying.

Erebis stamped one of his hind legs, and Seth couldn't help but slide to the ground. *Focus.* This was it. *Game on.*

Seth forced the grisly images of the statues out of his mind, bowed, and repeated the phrase Erebis had taught him earlier. "Hail kragem. Come forth. I seek passage to the Wild Woods." Seth cringed; his voice sounded feeble and unconvincing.

Like a landslide, a loud grating noise sounded from the surrounding rocks. Their surfaces began to shift, layers of rock cracking into new ones. And when the grating and shifting died down, hundreds of shiny metal-flake eyes glared at Seth, Nya, and Erebis in cold scrutiny.

"Gggems or minerals, jjjewels or metals?" the largest of the two big boulders said in a slow, gravelly voice. "What offering do you bring to buy your passaggge?"

Seth tensed and the forest seemed to twist around him. His tongue felt fat and sluggish. If he tried to speak now he would stutter and blow his cover. Panic lodged in his throat, but a firm pull on the spider silk rope brought Nya's earlier guidance to mind: *If you find that you cannot speak, force your voice to come forth—laugh.*

“Ha ha haah!” Seth couldn’t believe he’d laughed like that. It was loud and self-important. And it reminded him of his role, his lines. “Offering? You ask a representative of His Majesty, the Great One, for an offering?” Seth anchored his shaky hands on his hips and looked right into the glinting eyes of the kragem.

The kragem went ballistic. Their eyes slid about, from side to side and back into the cracks of their craggy faces. The sound of stones scraping together returned, quieter and more calculated than before. This was their way of speaking.

And somehow Seth could understand them.

They were talking about Erebis. They hadn’t seen a wolf for years.

“Why is your wolf not enccccchanted as a doggg?” the largest kragem’s mossy beard shook as its mouth crack formed the words.

Seth exhaled quietly. He had practiced an answer to this question. “Do you expect a nobleman like me to have a dog for a steed? This beast is in wolf form, but he is enchanted to be obedient.”

“And the ggggirl?” came the grating voice of the second biggest kragem.

“I never travel without a slave.”

The kragem griped among themselves again. This time, the scraping sound was more hurried and intense. “Wolf...trophy...collection...lying...trouble...Great One.” Seth was amazed at how the kragem seemed to say hundreds of words in just a few short seconds.

So why are they taking forever?

“Gggive proof of the Gggreat One’s patronaggge and safe passaggge will be gggranted,” said the bearded kragem.

Proof? Seth was frantic. But then something flickered from below his field of vision. He blinked and the light was gone—but not before it had given him an idea. Erebis’s advice rang in his head: *Bluff. Convince them of your power and your connection to the Great One.*

“Proof! Proof? Oh, I’ll give you proof!” Seth exclaimed. The words had just slipped out, like he was someone else. He felt invincible—like nothing the kragem said could shake him. So Seth decided to shake the kragem up for a change.

“I’ll call forth the Great One himself!” Seth bellowed. “I’ll tell him how poorly the kragem of the southern crossing treat those who travel in His Majesty’s name. And when you face his wrath, remember you brought this upon yourselves!”

Without thought or hesitation, Seth raised his left arm into the air for all to see and pressed the glow button on his watch.

Chapter 7 – Lights of Passage

Nya watched a droplet of sweat roll down Seth's temple. That drip was the only evidence of his bluff—it was incredible. The kragem were scraping and jerking about, and yet Seth held his finger to his wrist, keeping the turquoise light of the machine there aglow.

There had been another light, though, before this one. Just a glint of icy blue, like the moon winking through a mask of cloudy skies. It had come from Seth's neck. *The acorn!* It had blinked. And then Nya remembered the procetite charm she had affixed to Seth's necklace.

The ground began to quake and small rock fragments broke free of each boulder, tumbled toward Seth, and piled themselves at his feet. Seth whisked his hand from his watch and held his arms out to his sides for balance. The turquoise light went out, the quaking stopped, and Nya felt the silken rope wrapped round her wrists slacken as Seth dropped his arms to his sides.

Then something strange happened to one of the rock piles at Seth's feet. As it grew higher and higher, collecting loose fragments, the pile took on the shape of a figure. Nya winced. It looked exactly like the golden statue of the human girl, except it was grey, and rocky, and had gleaming red rubies for eyes.

And it spoke with the voice of the kragem.

"Please exccuse our reccckless ways," the rock girl said with hands pressed together, mirroring the golden statue. "Cccall not the Gggreat One forth. We do not wish to anggger him."

“Then you grant me and my slaves safe passage into The Wild Woods?” Seth asked. His voice wavered.

The remaining pile of loose rock fragments began to jostle and join on the other side of Seth. Nya nearly fainted when she made out what form they took. Standing to Seth’s left was a figure with the same pointed ears and delicate features that she had. It was a twisted, stony duplicate of the greenstone welf statue. Tears shielded Nya’s eyes from the sight. She had never seen another welf, and this was a horrific first encounter, indeed.

The rock boy jerked into a rigid bow, and gestured for Seth to pass. “Safe passagge is gggranted to you and your cccompany. Forgggive us. Forgggive us.”

Nya was too weary of the sights around her to find joy in this news. She lowered her head and, in her peripheral vision, saw Seth swing onto Erebis’s back and nudge him with his heel.

Erebis steered between the largest kragem. The rock creatures bobbed submissively as Seth and his steed passed between them, but Nya received no such courtesy. The welf- and human-shaped kragem stood and glared as Nya trailed after.

Nya was a few paces past the figures when she heard them crack and crumble into a heap of rubble. A chalky cloud of dust rolled up to her ankles, and she scuffled closer to Erebis. Then the forest was still, and the kragem spotting the forest floor looked like common boulders once more.

Nya sunk her hands into Erebis’s fur as he swayed side to side, weaving their way around the many statues. Not a bird or a creature stirred. Even Fury Creek did not let the roar of its waters stray here. Yet Nya could hear—or feel—echoes of the past. Echoes of

terror and misery. As a child, she had read of spaces where sorrows of the past live on like memories. This was such a place, and Nya hoped she would never need to return.

The pace Erebis set was painfully slow, but Nya knew that to move any faster would have been more unsettling. Petrified within each statue's eyes was a longing for life, and so it seemed a longing for every step and every breath taken among them.

Nya tilted her head up, toward Seth, so that only the tips of the tallest statues were visible. Seth was as anxious as Nya was. He shifted about on Erebis's back, regarding every statue as though it might return to life, reach out, and grab him.

There could be little doubt that Erebis felt Seth squirming. "Neither of you need look," Erebis said. "Nya, keep your hand on my side and I will guide you. There is scarce a more ghastly graveyard, scarce a more piteous place."

"If I close my eyes," Seth whispered to Erebis, "will you watch for my grandfather? If you see any more humans at all, will you tell me?"

"Of course," Erebis replied.

Seth closed his eyes and hung his head, letting it bob with Erebis's stride. Nya pressed up against Erebis and dropped her gaze to the ground, twisting this way and that, seeing only the occasional metal foot or stony hoof. This place and its sadness were best seen in downward glances—if at all.

At long last, the ground softened, and there were no more statue feet to be seen. When the gurgle of water returned to her ears, Nya took in her surroundings. A carpet of moss spread out before them and, barely visible in the distance, a series of large stepping stones formed a bridge over Fury Creek.

The border-crossing to the Wild Woods. At last.

Chapter 8 – Into the Wild Woods

Feeling very much like he was waking up from a nightmare, Seth opened his eyes. *No more statues.* Best of all, Sedgewick hadn't been one of them.

"Keen eyes now, friends," Erebis said, lowering his haunches so that Seth could slide down. "Thanks to Seth we have put a significant barrier behind us. Now we must watch for those to come."

Seth hopped to the ground, grabbed his staff, and frowned in Erebis's general direction. Thoughts and feeling were wrestling in Seth's overwhelmed brain, fighting for attention. "I—I understood the kragem," he said. "Is that normal? At first they just sounded like rocks or gravel, but then I knew what they were saying. They talked about trophies and their collection. That's all those statues are to them, trophies."

"I couldn't understand the kragem!" Nya said. She undid the slipknots around her wrists and peered past Erebis at Seth. The three of them walked side by side, toward some black flagstones that crossed Fury Creek.

"All wanderers are graced with the gift of tongues," Erebis explained. "It is part of the portals' magic. Wanderers can understand all the languages of Laar."

"Then how do you understand me?" Seth asked. Nothing made much sense here.

"Whomever you speak to will hear your words in his or her own language. That is how we are having this conversation. You speak in your language and we hear you in our own."

"Oh," Seth said, drifting back a few steps, and into his thought wars.

“However it was you spoke to the kragem, what you did was amazing!” Nya said, dropping back to walk with him. “Looking those heartless things in the eyes must have been terrifying.”

“Yeah. It was more the statues that freaked me out, though,” Seth said with a grimace. “Do you think that’s why the kragem collect gems and metals—to make statues with?”

“Yes, precisely,” Erebis said. “Kragem consider themselves collectors of precious materials and rare races. But they have no regard for life. Imitate it, hunt it, make trophies of it as they might, they have no true appreciation for the value of life.”

“Fortunately they have some regard for power—or the Great One at least,” Nya said, turning to Seth. “Tricking them with your wrist machine was brilliant!”

“It’s called a watch—it tells time and the light lets me read it in the dark,” Seth said, now beaming. “Yeah, I still can’t believe I did that! And every time I thought I was going to choke I remembered the stuff I’d practiced with you guys! I’m never that cool under pressure. It was like—it was like magic!”

Then, seeing Nya’s expression sag, Seth asked, “What? Nya, what is it?”

“Well,” she said, “there might have been a little bit of magic involved. Do you recall how yesterday you said you have trouble standing up for yourself?”

Seth nodded, and Nya went on, “I remembered that when I strung your acorn this morning. The procetite stone I put on your necklace is charmed with **Courage for the Doubtful**. It only works once, though. You can’t recharge it—not like my numbing stone.”

“Oh.” Seth tried not to sound disappointed. A magic courage charm made a lot of sense, though. *As if I could have done all that on my own.* “I should have guessed something was up.”

“I was just trying to help. Please don’t be upset,” Nya said, placing a hand on Seth’s shoulder. He shrugged it off.

“I’m not.”

“Yes you are, Seth. I can tell.”

“Look, Nya, you can’t just read people’s feelings like that whenever you want—it’s rude. Do I need to stick a ‘do not disturb’ note on my forehead? And for your information, I really am glad you made the charm. There’s no way I would have gotten us by the kragem without it.”

“But don’t you see?” Nya begged. “You did get us past them. Using the watch machine was still your idea, even if—”

“Drop it, Nya. Can we please just cross this creek and get on with it already? I don’t want to talk about the kragem or my stupid necklace.”

And so they didn’t. For quite some time, none of them mentioned the kragem, the necklace or the strange light it had flashed before Seth faced up to the toll-takers.



Balancing on black flagstones, heart and feet faltering, Seth stepped over the creek. The stepping stones were taller than he remembered. Towering pillars. No water beneath him, just whirling, white mist. Just Seth, the mist, and the silence.

Not much farther, one stone to shore, but his feet felt heavy. Slow. Someone jacked up the gravity. Seth needed to stop—but only for a second. He wouldn't look down again. Not down. But he looked behind him.

He shouldn't have looked behind him.

"Mom!" Seth cried out, but she could not respond. A statue. His mom was a gold statue. He retched, wavered, caught himself. Someone else among the statues. Silver Sedgewick. In the distance, a diamond Dad. Seth screamed and it echoed laughter—bounced back to him like a punch in the gut. Mitch. Mitch was there, too. A stony, kragem Mitch laughed, doubled over, wheezing. Seth turned and went to jump. Knees knocking, he missed. Slipped on the next pillar and flew headfirst to the shore.

Everything went dark.

Lines of light seeped under his eyelids. Light buzzed around him. Fluorescent. But then there was blue and green. Hospital green. And an upside down Nya wearing an operating mask. With glinting tweezers, Doctor Nya reached out of view, behind Seth's ears. Brain surgery.

"Here's your problem," she said. She smiled, lifted the tweezers. A smashed-up wrist watch dangled above Seth.

Chapter 9 – Smoulder Quarry

The next day's trek was a quiet one. Nya took the dark patches under Seth's eyes as an indication that he had not slept well, and Erebis's step seemed to have a distinct purpose to it. Nya wondered if this meant they were approaching a familiar place. *A place of rest or of friends, perhaps.*

Their zigzagging path straightened and the trees soon grew in orderly, orchard-like lines. The branches above were full and still somewhat green, providing cover from the midday sun.

For the longest time only Erebis broke the silence, now describing the creatures of an area, now the properties of a plant. The lessons were a welcome distraction from Nya's own thoughts, which otherwise dithered between her misunderstanding with Seth, the prospect of meeting other Welves, and the twisted city that loomed in the west.

"This is the redwart fern," Erebis explained, sniffing a large plant as they passed it. "The dots of powder on its leaves can be used to close wounds and treat infections—no magic necessary."

"Hmm. I haven't heard of it," Nya said more to herself than anyone else. She snapped off one of the plant's leaves, sniffed it as Erebis had done, and tucked it into a belt pocket.

"So where do we camp tonight?" Seth asked. He yawned and tried to dust the red powder from his hands.

"That depends on where we lose the light of day," Erebis said. "But we must make a stop today. In fact, if you look straight ahead and through those trees, you may be able to make it out now."

Farther on, something stood in stark contrast to the surrounding tangle of greens and browns. A shock of white was visible through the foliage, and within it a blotch of dark.

“Smoulder Quarry,” Erebis said with a deep sigh, “a most ancient place, held sacred by the wolves. It has been in our care for many ages.” Erebis extended his forelegs and lowered his head as he used to when he was a playful dog. But this was no longer a gesture of play. It was now a gesture of worship.

They drew nearer to the quarry, and at first the place appeared no more than a pile of huge, white bricks with a fire pit at their centre. Nya glided ahead and up its worn steps. “This place is old,” she gasped, “very old. And it’s not a quarry at all. It’s a ruin.”

Though toppled and broken, each of the ruin’s giant stones was carved with detailed patterns. And a magic as aged and beautiful as those carvings still lingered within Smoulder Quarry’s columns. Like the current of a breeze, or the warmth of the sun, magic shimmered all around, welcoming them.

“Whoa,” Seth breathed, “I’ve never seen anything like this. What is it? I mean, what’s it used for?”

“Communication,” Erebis said. “The smoke from its fires we use to contact friends, those who know how to read its signals. My wolf brothers and sisters are sick with enchantment, but the ravens and many other creatures still count themselves friends of the wolves.” Erebis took a large stick in his jaws and dipped one end into a bowl held by the central column. He struck the soot-covered stick against stone, and threw it into the ashy pit.

“Now, if you would be so kind as to let me be awhile,” Erebis said, unflinching as the fire pit burst into blue-orange flames behind him. “We will fare better in these woods with the help of friends.”

Nya led Seth behind the main part of the ruin, hoping to find a place to wait. She meandered around columns and between vines until she found a stone bench on an outcropping framed by white-blossomed crickwood trees. The trees and vines around the ruins were healthier than elsewhere in the forest. It had been years since she had seen a crickwood blossom.

Nya sat upon the bench and swung her legs. Seth flopped down beside her.

“‘Fare better?’” he said. “What’s that supposed to mean, anyway? Like, if we don’t get some kind of back-up we’re in trouble?”

“We’re already in trouble. Perhaps if Erebis sends word to the right people, we shall have less trouble.”

“Yeah, maybe.” Seth plucked a blossom from the nearest crickwood tree and began pulling off its petals.

Nya had to stop herself from remarking how rare those blossoms were. She did not think such a remark would improve the impending awkward silence.

Yet, things were only awkward if she let them be. Nya had learned that during her many unpleasant brushes with the shopkeepers’ kids in Mineraltown. The moment she had stopped caring what those silly girls thought of her, she no longer felt awkward around them. But Nya cared what Seth thought of her. He was irritable at times, but Seth was nice.

“I want you to know that I was sincere when I said your watch machine trick saved us,” she said. She did not dare look him in the eye.

To Nya’s surprise, Seth laughed.

“Watch. Just call it a watch,” he said. “And I know what you’re trying to do—but you don’t need to. Like I said, I’m glad you gave me the courage charm. Honest.”

Nya twisted her mouth to one side then added, “And I’m sorry I read your emotions. I—I guess I’ve yet to learn how to treat a friend.” Her voice quieted as she said this last word. “Erebis never minded when he was a dog—and the sinians wouldn’t have known otherwise. I have to learn to turn it off. Heavens, maybe you really should put a ‘do not disturb’ sign on your forehead.”

“That was kind of a harsh thing for me to say,” Seth said, though he let a few chuckles slip. “Harsh, but funny. It just weirded me out that you were, well, in my head. But it’s actually pretty cool you can do that. It’s like a super power.”

“And cool means good, right?”

Seth burst out laughing, and Nya joined him. She had never been so pleased to have someone laugh at her—or with her.

“Yes,” Seth managed, “cool means good.” He wiped tears from the corners of his eyes and straightened up. “So, can all your people read emotions? The elves? Didn’t Erebis say your name is elvish?”

Nya smiled. “No, I’m welvish. Elves have not graced Laar for ages. Welves are descendants of elves. And yes, I have read that all welves are empaths, but I’ve never met another welf. I’ve only seen illustrations in books—and then there was that statue yesterday...”

Seth stared at her and Nya was all too glad to block out the pity that tightened his chest. "It's okay," she said. "In due time—that's what Erebis said to me yesterday, before you awoke. I will know my people when the time is right. And that time happens to be mere moons from now. The Welves live in the west, closer to the ocean and the Great City. We will stay with them on the way, but that is all I know."

"You must be really excited, then—to find out where you're from."

"Nervous, I suppose. I was too young to remember my people. I know nothing of welvish ways or manners. I can't even speak Welvish." Nya's voice fell. "I know nothing of my parents."

"What about you?" she started again. Her voice rang with hollow cheerfulness. "What of your family? You came here by accident, I know. But you travel these lands out of love for your grandfather?"

Seth became very interested in a crack that ran the width of the bench. "Uh, it's kind of complicated." His finger traced the crack, disturbing the bits of moss that grew there. "It was more for my mom's sake that I started looking for Sedgewick. Sedgewick—that's what I'm supposed to call him. He didn't like to be called Grandpa."

"But your mother was close to him?" Nya prodded.

"You know what the funny thing is? Sedgewick lived in my basement for two months before he came here, and we barely ever saw him. He was obsessed with his work. But he wasn't always like that. I remember hanging out with him when I was little and he'd show me the most amazing science tricks and help me with my science fair projects."

"What changed?"

“The other scientists at the university he worked for thought his theories about Laar were a big joke. They asked him to retire a year early, and that’s when he went all weird and buried himself in books in the basement. Then one day he and Mom got in a huge fight. She said he should care less about imaginary worlds and more about family. He said she should believe in him and the work he was doing. The stupid thing is that if they’d only talked more and fought less, they might have realized that they actually had things in common. My mom’s an environmentalist and Sedge—”

“Environmentalist?” Nya repeated, though she gathered what the term meant.

“She wants to save nature,” Seth explained. “My mom works at an earth-friendly health food store—she likes to think she’s changing the world one lifestyle at a time. You should see how she cracks down on my sugar intake.”

Nya smiled. Seth’s mother sounded lovely and caring—just as Nya had always pictured a mother should be.

“My mom would have been interested in Sedgewick’s research. He suggests that humans look to other-worlds like Laar to trade for resources like wood, oil, and metals. Stuff that my world is running out of.”

“Running out?” Nya said. “Flora is endangered in your world, as well?”

“Not just plants—animals are endangered, too. Tonnes of animals are extinct. We cut down trees, killing everything that lives in or around them. We pollute the air and water. I guess it’s all just happening slower in my world than it is in Laar.”

“That’s terrible,” Nya said. “Who does all that?”

Seth frowned, and looked down at the now petal-less crickwood twig in his hand.

“Well, we do. Humans.”

In the fairy stories of Laar, humans were sometimes benevolent, other times malevolent. Until she met Seth, Nya had thought the humans in those stories too inconsistent to be real. Now she understood why. Seth was just one of the kind ones.

“It sounds as though your world could use your grandfather and his science,” Nya said. “He disappeared a year ago in your time?”

“Yup.” Seth regarded his watch, something he did often and in spite of the fact that it never changed. “Sedgewick disappeared a week after he and my mom got in their yelling match. My mom’s blamed herself ever since.”

“You will find him, Seth.”

“Well, I better hurry up. ’Cause now my mom’s got a missing father and a missing son to worry about. I just need to find Sedgewick and get home.”

“You will,” Nya said. “And I will help. Erebis and I will do everything we can to see that you and your grandfather return home safely.”

Seth looked up and smiled a weak smile. “Tell you what,” he said, his smile broadening, “no matter what kind of back-up Erebis hooks up, I’ve got your back if you’ve got mine. Deal?”

Nya smiled. “Deal.”

“Shake on it?”

Nya stretched out her hand and laughed like never before as Seth directed her through a long series of silly hand gestures. It was a handshake so absurd she knew only friends would share it.

Chapter 10 – Friends and Enemies

So long as she wasn't giving Seth one of her strange looks, Nya was all right. She was easy to talk to, in any case. Coming from Seth, that was saying something.

"Oh, that must have been horrible!" Nya said. Somehow she'd gotten Seth talking about Halloween night—and his encounter with Mitch.

"Kung Fu isn't about fighting, it's about defending, and for some dumb reason I can't even get that right around Mitch. When he insults me, I can never think of anything to say back. And Mitch doesn't mind dishing out the sucker punches." Nya was staring at him, listening. "I felt like a phoney, not being able to stand up for myself. So I quit Kung Fu."

"I think it's noble that you wouldn't fight him," Nya said. "Though I do believe some things are worth fighting for." She said this last statement with such satisfaction that Seth didn't mention it was a saying where he came from.

And Jeffrey?" she urged. "Where was he when Mitch pushed you against the tree?"

"That's the thing. I don't know what happened to him. My vision was blurry and all I could see—or smell—was Mitch. I sure hope Jeffrey..." Seth drifted off, then snickered to himself. "You know what? Jeffrey's skinny, but he's fast. Of course he got away. He's won the 100 metre dash at district finals for three years running. Ever since he was The Flash for Halloween in grades three and four he's practiced—"

Nya's eyebrows squeezed together in a universal expression of confusion—something that told Seth he'd probably lost her back at the 100 metre dash stuff.

“Nevermind,” he said. Seth went to check his watch, but stopped himself. There was no use. “Where’s Erebis? I swear it’s been almost three hours.” And just when Seth was beginning to wonder whether the people of Laar even kept track of hours, Erebis appeared through a drapery of vines.

“That certainly took longer than it used to,” Erebis said. He padded over to the stone bench and plonked to the ground.

“Oh, look at you, dear,” Nya fussed. “You’ve exhausted yourself.” She slid down the bench and started rubbing the lines of ash off Erebis’s cheeks with her thumbs.

Erebis exhaled through his nose, a trickle of smoke escaping one nostril. “I cannot be sure how clear my message was—we must hope it will be seen and understood by friends.” His pupils traced the last puffs of his smoke signals, which drifted into darkening skies.

Dusk was coming. Clouds were rolling in. And Seth knew rain clouds when he saw them. “It’s going to rain,” he said. “Shouldn’t we cover as much ground as we can before it starts?”

Nya shook her head with annoying certainty. “Erebis is exhausted, and the dirt that covers these grounds is slick and dangerous when wet. We should rest, keep dry. News of our escape will reach the Great One by morning—there is no telling when our next opportunity to rest will come.”

Erebis, agreed and that was that. Erebis was the unquestionable authority. There was no point arguing.

Erebis steered them down a set of stairs and under the outcropping of stone. There was a dry, cave-like area there and a fireplace complete with chimney. Nya lit one

of her smokeless fires, and Seth offered to help prepare whatever small amount of food Nya had collected that day.

The rain came sooner than Seth expected. Thunder cracked. Wind yowled. Then the ground puddled with a monsoon of a downpour that wouldn't let up. *Just like home.*



Home. Seth could see it. Lights on upstairs. Smoke rising from the chimney. The front door was open.

No one in the entrance, no one on the stairs. Seth skipped upstairs, down the hall, around the corner. Corners. There were more than there were supposed to be. Seth reached his mom's room, looked in, smiled. She was cocooned in blankets, sleeping. The lump rose and fell, but Seth could not wait to wake her.

He stepped closer, went to tap her, and she stirred. She turned her head, smiled. What big teeth she had! The lump wasn't his mom—it was a wolf.

Seth walked into the hallway. The wolf followed, but Seth wasn't scared. Corner, hallway, corner, hallway, corner, stairs. Past the entrance, out the door, through the yard. He and the wolf were on the street when Seth glanced back. His house was gone. In its place was a great wall. The great wall. Behind it, the Great City.



The next morning brought overcast skies, but that was fine with Seth. The rain was gone and they could get a move on, so Seth could do without the sun. His black satin Kung Fu uniform was hardly hot and sunny day wear.

Nya was outside the overhang, hunching over the quartin nut shells she had put out after last night's dinner. Seth lifted his pant bottoms away from the evaporating puddles and sloshed over to Nya.

“What are you doing with those?” he asked.

Nya seemed pleased he’d asked. “I used a simple **Binding** spell to reseal the nutshells—all without spilling a drop of the rainwater they collected last night.”

“Like a canteen?”

“Better than a canteen,” Erebis said, stepping out from a tree’s shadow, and startling Seth in the process. “Nya’s quartin shell canteen contains rainwater, which is many times more thirst quenching than most waters.”

“It’s certainly better than the grimy well-water of Minertown,” Nya said as she inserted a plant stem stopper into the canteen.

“Well done, Nya,” Erebis said. “Hereafter, we will need to stay off the main trading paths and away from major water sources. We need to be alert, stealth, if not invisible. The less we make ourselves known, the better. Our safety and the fate of Laar depend on this.”

Like Seth needed reminding. Today was their third day of trekking. Today word of Nya and Erebis’s escape from Minertown would reach the Great City.

The day grew muggy and Seth’s clothes stuck to him like plastic wrap on Tupperware. Steam crept up from the earth, cloaking the slick, muddy earth in mist. And the mud wasn’t just slippery and hard to see, it sucked at their shoes as they walked. The trekking conditions were perfect for falling—and that’s just what Seth did.

“Arrrrrrgh!” Seth clutched his ankle in pain. It was already swelling up.

“I know it hurts, Seth, but I’m going to need you to sit still,” Nya said as she pulled a twig from her belt.

“Why? What’s that?”

“It’s a spry twig—I’m going to use it to heal your ankle, but you must sit still.”

“You’re going to use magic on me?” Seth wasn’t sure he liked the idea, but the sharp pains that were shooting up his leg said otherwise. If his ankle wasn’t sprained, it was broken. “Okay, just don’t turn me into a toad, or anything.”

“A what? Seth, don’t be ridiculous. I know what I’m doing.” Nya muttered some words and dragged the spry twig in circular motions around Seth’s foot and ankle. He was about to ask if the prickling he felt was normal when she passed him his staff. “Here. Go ahead, stand up. How does it feel?”

Seth propped himself up with his staff, and lowered his foot to the ground. But a green ball of light that whizzed by, and took his mind off his ankle. The light vanished into the bushes. “Hey! What was that?”

“A vim sprite,” Erebis said. “They are little beings of energy that—”

A boar with spikes down its spine crashed past them, and after the sprite.

“Whoa, what’s that?” Seth yelled.

“That,” said Erebis, “is the verve boar. It feeds on the energy collected by vim sprites. It is not usually dangerous unless—”

The sprite came zipping by again, followed more closely by the boar. It was like the sprite was trying to get their attention—like it was asking them to save it. “Erebis, can’t you do something?” Seth asked.

“I cannot interfere. I must let nature—”

The sprite whooshed out of the bushes again, the boar closer than ever. It didn’t seem fair: that tiny sprite against some big, snarling beast. *If Erebis won’t do something, I will*, Seth thought.

Seth threw himself into a tiger roll, landed, and did a broad sweep with his staff. The staff made contact with the boar's front hooves, sending him skidding into a tree trunk. The boar snorted, scrambled to its feet, shook its head, and hightailed back into the brush.

"I guess that means I healed your ankle?" Nya joked.

Seth had forgotten about his ankle. "Oh, yeah, thanks." Seth grinned. "I—I'm sorry, Erebis. I know what you said about being stealthy, but that sprite was just so small and helpless."

"Seth, you must act with your head as well as your heart. By challenging beasts you know nothing of you could endanger us all. And we will help many more creatures of this world if we remain discreet and safe ourselves. There is natural order and there is injustice—do not confuse the two. Our concern is injustice; the order of the land must go undisturbed."

Seth dug a toe into the ground, trying to sort this out. Erebis was right. Freeing the wolves and saving Sedgewick was a big enough mission. *We don't need any more trouble than we already have.*

A droning sound came from behind Seth's head, pulling him from his thoughts. In one motion, Seth spun around and jumped back, landing between Erebis and Nya. Hovering before them, exactly at Seth's eye level, was the sprite.

"Oh, she's beautiful," Nya gasped.

The sprite had pale green skin and hair like grass, and her silver wings flapped quicker than a hummingbird's. The sprite blurred as she buzzed closer, making Seth cross-eyed. She came back into focus a foot from his nose. The sprite held one hand

over her heart and one in the air. Seth recognized the gesture at once. It was the same peaceful pose that the kragem's sinian statue was doomed to hold forever. "She says she comes in peace," Seth said. "I think."

"We must remain cautious," Erebis warned. "Sprites are a tricky lot."

Then, without opening her mouth, the sprite vibrated a songful hum that wasn't so different from the sound her wings made—until the hum squashed and sharpened into words Seth understood. *Weird. The gift of tongues.*

"Her name's Felina," Seth said.

The sprite twirled on the spot, whizzed over to Seth, planted a kiss on his cheek, and flew backwards in a curtsy.

"Tricky, indeed," Nya said with a sharp laugh. "I suppose she's glad to have a translator."

Felina only had so much time for courtesy. She shuddered, and little energy sparks shot off her arms as she flailed them around. She directed all her mimes at Seth, and her hum grew more intense.

"Give me a second," Seth said, as much to the sprite as to Nya and Erebis. The sprite was talking at warp speed, and Seth had to force his ears to zero in, past the humming.

"She says she's spoken with the ravens, friends of the wolves," Seth translated, keeping his eyes on the sprite, "and that they have seen the wolf's—Erebis's—signals. She says the ravens could not come themselves. That they sent her to find us and bring us to safety. We need to hurry."

Felina buzzed their heads and motioned for them to follow her. Seth and Nya looked to Erebis for direction.

“Yes, we will follow,” Erebis said. “But remember, sprites are—”

“Tricky,” Nya chimed in.

“Yes,” Erebis said, “and we must remain—”

“Cautious,” Seth finished.

Following Felina wasn’t easy. She was fast. She zipped in and out of trees and plants, always keeping far ahead—except for the odd time she backtracked to buzz Nya or Seth’s ears.

“I am going as fast as I can,” Nya said as she swatted the sparks by her head. Felina buzzed Nya the most and she seemed to know better than to bug Erebis at all.

“Stay close,” Erebis said. “I think the sprite knows something we do not. The course of the winds are changing. I smell a great disturbance in the air.”

Seth stumbled as he tried to keep pace with the flashes of green light. A fierce headwind picked up, slowing his step and blowing debris into his eyes. Churning clouds eclipsed the sun, and the forest darkened. And then the sprite’s electric green was nowhere to be seen.

“Erebis, I can’t see!” Seth screamed over squalling winds. He shielded his eyes from debris, searching for the wolf’s dark form.

“Over here!” Erebis called. Two yellow orbs appeared to Seth’s right.

Seth tromped his way toward Erebis, but a screech overhead made him to stop and cover his ears. *Birds*. Cupping his eyes from the flurry of dirt and leaves, Seth saw a flock of white birds circling overhead. Even over the wind, their cries were deafening.

“Those white birds, they’re getting closer!” Nya shouted from somewhere near Erebis.

“It’s okay, I think they’re seagulls,” Seth called back. “Seagulls have webbed feet—I don’t think they can land in trees! Stick close to the tree—ahhh!”

One of the massive, white birds swooped down and hit Seth square in the chest. He collapsed, floundering and swinging his arms at the seagull that tore at his chest. Except the bird wasn’t a seagull at all. The bird pecked at Seth with its serrated beak, and clawed at him with its feet. Something was wrong with its feet. They were wrapped in brown leather boots—and extending from those were sharp claws of metal.

Seth thrashed and fought with the bird, focusing his strikes at its body, trying to keep its jagged beak and razor claws at bay. But Seth was losing strength. He was getting dizzy, drowsy. He couldn’t hold the bird off for long.

He didn’t have to. Erebis’s great jaws came out of nowhere, clamped down on the bird, and flung it into the distance.

“Wha—thanks,” Seth said, but Erebis was already grappling with another bird.

“Seth, over here!” Nya wasn’t far from Erebis. She had her back against a boulder and her numbing stone in hand.

Seth dragged himself from the ground and staggered over to her. A blur of white and grey dived toward him. He ducked, wind from the bird’s wingbeats tousling his hair. The bird missed, but Seth lost balance. He tripped and rolled down a hill, kicking up leaves as he went.

What awaited him at the bottom was worse than the swarm of white birds above.

Standing over him, dressed in scraps of leather and armed with bows and arrows, were three sinians. More savage and dishevelled than any Seth had seen in Erebis's vision, the sinians closed in on him. And hovering over the shoulder of a scraggly-bearded sinian was the green sprite.

Seth did the only thing he could think to do—yell.

“It’s a traaaaap!”

Chapter 11 – The Free Sinians

“Touch him and you’ll be stiffer than a kragem statue!” Poised to throw her stone, Nya stood uphill with Erebis by her side. Much of the wind had died down, but her aim would still need to be perfect. “Let our friend go, and I will spare you.”

Shadowed by Erebis, Nya strode closer to Seth and the sinians.

A sinian with a long beard stepped forward. He raised one hand and placed the other over his heart. “I am called Winfield and we, the free sinians of Laar, come in peace.” While the other sinians remained standing, bows and arrows aimed upwards, Winfield got down on one knee and bowed his head to Seth. “We share common goals,” Winfield called up to Nya and Erebis. “We wish to help you overthrow the supposed Great One.”

Nya could not read the sinian leader from such a distance. She took a few more steps, and Erebis followed suit.

“Why should we trust you?” Erebis persisted. “How can we be certain that you are not soldiers from the Great City?”

Winfield had no chance to answer. Swift as a spirit, a massive black bird glided beneath the treetops and alighted on a log between Winfield and Erebis. Nya caught Seth’s eye—he also recognized the bird. It was the raven from Erebis’s vision.

“Go with them, old friend,” the raven said in a resonant tone.

“Raava,” Erebis replied. His eyes flickered with warm recognition—and trust. “Good timing, as always. Tell us what we must do.”

“We will hold off the sawgulls,” the raven Raava said, her eyes and neck ever-twitching to check the ongoing in the sky.

Sawgulls. Nya had heard of them—they were sea birds from the West. It was no wonder she had never seen any: this was the farthest west Nya had been.

“Magic winds quicken their wingbeats and metal claws bind their feet,” Raava continued, “but sawgulls are clumsy in battle. Go with the free sinians. They will keep you hidden until the gulls retreat to the Great City. We will keep watch and send word when the skies are clear. Now, go. In the words of the elves of old: kalada.”

“Kalada, my sister,” Erebis said, “and thank you.”

Raava’s head jerked upwards, and the next moment she was airborne, charging for a diving sawgull.

“Let’s get out of here,” Seth said as he grabbed his staff, and took the hand Winfield held out for him. Seth tottered when he stood up. That was when Nya noticed the slash of red that streaked Seth’s chest. He did not act mindful of his injury. There was plenty to distract him, and that was just as well.

“Winfield, take the lead,” Erebis said over the din of battling birds. “Nya and Seth, get on either side of me. Archers, flank the sides. And would someone tell the sprite to put out that cursed light?”

Seven bodies merged into one and the convoy streamed through the forest. Winfield seemed to know every shrub, every stone. Every turn presented ample overhead covering and a good width of path.

Only once did a gull dip low enough to cause alarm. An archer took aim, but Erebis intercepted the shot. “An arrow will give away our position. That is what they want us to do. Keep moving. Fire only if you must.” But there was never the need.

Winfield came to a sudden stop and gathered the group around an old, grey tree. "Here we are," he said. "Everyone move together."

Nya shuffled closer to Seth, who paid her no attention. He was white as a sawgull and swayed like a reed. Something was wrong.

"Bit of a way down," Winfield announced, "but it's a smooth ride and a soft landing. Let's head off!" Winfield reached up, grabbed onto a thick vine, and pulled.

The ground gave way beneath them, and they slid feet-first into darkness. Nya screamed as the chute curved sharply, feeling herself ride up, along its side. Felina flashed up ahead. Her sparks trailed behind her, revealing a jumble of bodies in her wake. *One, two, three...* Seven—Nya counted seven bodies, including Felina. And once the jolt of that first drop subsided, Nya realized the ride was as smooth as promised. The group slid in single file, without bumping or colliding, and Nya squealed as she whisked round a corner at just the right speed. But then Felina's light was gone, and Nya was alone, in her own chute, plummeting toward an orange circle of light.

The landing. It was as soft as it needed to be. *Hay*, Nya guessed, *overlaid with a beautiful patchwork quilt*. But that quilt was the room's only embellishment. It was a bare, torch-lit space, with tunnels leading off in every direction.

Nya sat up and turned to Seth, the rush of the chute still with her. "That was so—so cool!" she said. "Wasn't it, Seth? Seth?"

"Cooooool," Seth moaned. He tried to prop himself, and collapsed onto his back.

"He's hurt!" Nya cried. "Seth's hurt!"

Felina flew in circles, shedding an eerie light on Seth's already green face. Two long scratches glistened on his chest, exposed through torn clothes.

Torch-in-hand, Winfield rushed to Seth's side. "The cuts are not deep, but the sawgull's claws must have been spiked with a poison." Winfield shook his head, his face grim. "It is still a ways through the tunnels before we will have provisions to prepare an antidote. Every second the poison is allowed to mingle with air will worsen his condition. We must hurry."

"Wait!" Nya said, already fiddling with a flap on her belt. "I—I have redwart powder. If we can seal the wounds we might be able to delay the effects of the poison." Nya pulled a folded leaf from her belt and sprinkled its entire contents onto Seth's chest. The cuts began to close, sizzling as they did so, but Seth remained unconscious. His face looked stretched and grey in the dim torch light.

Winfield and another sinian raised Seth onto Erebis's back, and the company began to wind their way through the tunnels. Nya jogged alongside Seth, reciting bits of **Reviving the Wounded** in her mind. It would not work, though—it could not work. As Winfield had said, what Seth needed now was an antidote.

Nya started the spell again anyway. *Better to do something hopeless, than nothing helpful.* She was reciting the spell's second phrase when the convoy burst out into a well-lit room.

"Rivera, I need thunderbrush. Ash, get me drum seed!" Winfield yelled, pointing wildly. Two seated sinians—one much smaller than the other—jumped to their feet and hustled about the room. "I'll need water as well. Hurry, friends!"

Nya paced beside the table where Seth lay still and drawn. She hated to see him that way, and the contents of the sinians' dwelling soon drew her gaze away. Jars of colourful ingredients and liquids filled the cupboards. Ancient talismans and books of

magic lined the shelves. Even the kitchen seemed to double as a laboratory—there were as many beakers and cauldrons as there were pots and pans. But it was the wall between the two large bookshelves that intrigued Nya most. There, lit by lamps that emitted either yellow or blue light, were nearly fifty miniature greenhouses. Within each greenhouse grew a plant Nya had not seen before.

These sinians were practicing magicians. Seth was in good care—they could do more for him now than she could.

Still, it was more than Nya could suffer to watch and wait while the free sinians tended to Seth. It was the same torturous feeling she had had when Erebis was caged in Minertown square. Except this time, sinians were not hurting her friend, they were helping him.

Winfield's hands flew over his potions table, mashing leaves and seeds together in a bowl, then transferring the ingredients to a goblet. He added water and several drops of a red substance to the potion, muttered a few words, and raised the goblet to Seth's mouth. The crimson liquid trickled from down Seth's chin, and Nya turned away.

"It will not be long now," Winfield breathed. "Let us pray the antidote works. Antidotes only work on poison. It's not probable, but it's possible Seth was enchanted."

The sinians lowered heads, but Nya found silence unfit for such sorrow.

Out poured the same lament she had sung for Erebis, willing itself into existence from somewhere deep inside her, allowing her to voice its strange words and carry its ancient melody.

*Haaalloow, haaalloow. Laanya, renlie, haaallow. Haaalloow, haaalloow.
Laanya, renlie, lay...*

Nya sang and wondered how Seth could at once appear so sickly and so peaceful. Tears fogged her vision, tricking her into seeing that dopey smile of his she was growing to adore. Annoyed at her eyes for betraying her, Nya wiped her eyes.

Yet Seth's dopey smile remained.

"Seth!" she exclaimed, grabbing his hand and squeezing it tighter than intended. "Everyone, he's o—"

Nya spun around and saw a wave of movement pass through the room. One by one, the sinians knelt down and bobbed their heads toward Seth. They were bowing to him. *As though he's a ruler, or a—*

Murmurs of a leader, a true foretold one, buzzed the room, and Nya understood.

One last tear escaping her, Nya smiled at Seth and curtsied.

Chapter 12 – Foretellings and Foregone Things

Falling—no, sliding. Seth was on a water slide. A water slide! He laughed, squinted in the sunlight, looked behind him. Jeffrey was there, arched on heels and shoulder blades, trying to catch up. Not this time. This was a slide—not a running race.

Hands crossed over chest, back lifted off the slide, Seth sped bullet-fast. Around a corner, losing Jeffrey. Seth smiled—until he saw the smudge of white in the sky.

Seagulls. Or worse, sawgulls.

Jeffrey screamed. Seth glanced back. Sawgulls flapped around Jeffrey, masking him from view. Seth splayed out like a starfish, tried to stop, but couldn't. Feet first, no stopping. Feet first, into the eye of a tornado. A portal. Then darkness. Jeffrey's screams were gone.

The chute shot into moonlight, a starry sky above, but Seth slid on. No end to this slide. No end to this ride. No control. Sliding, sliding...

Seth was disoriented—to say the least. His head felt like a monster truck was doing laps around it and his eyes stung like crazy. His chest was kind of itchy, too.

He sat up, rubbed his forehead, and let the room swirl into focus. Everyone was there—along with a couple sinians he hadn't seen before.

“Oh, hey guys,” he said, forcing a smile that felt more like a grimace. “Sorry, I must've crashed on your table here.” Then, glimpsing that there was no one behind him, he whispered to Nya, “Why are the sinians all kneeling like that?”

“I believe,” Nya began, “that the sinians take you for their rightful leader, the true Great Foretold One.”

“Me? You’ve got to be kidding.” Seth looked from Erebis to the sinians, searching their faces for answers. They looked dead serious to him.

“It is something I suspected myself,” Erebis said, walking closer. “You bear an uncanny likeness to the Great One of the Scroll Stories. I expressed my observations in the smoke signals I sent from Smoulder Quarry. But this does not change anything, Seth—we mustn’t let it.”

Doesn’t change anything? “No. No way,” Seth said. “You guys take your fairytales way too seriously.”

Erebis smiled as if to say that Seth’s reaction was normal, that he’d get used to the idea in time. “Many consider the Scroll Stories to be prophecies, foretellings of events and ages yet to come to pass.”

Wooziness threatened Seth’s vision again and a tug on his pant leg almost sent him sliding belly-up off the table.

“Mister, you got to be him!”

Seth steadied himself and peered over the table edge. Still clutching his pants was a little sinian, no more than four or five years old. His eyes were as wide as lollipops, and by the looks of him he might have eaten one too many.

“Scuse me for saying, Mister Seth,” the kid blurted, climbing onto a chair so that he was eye level with Seth. “But I know you’re the real Great One—you have the staff and everything! Yessir! The Fake One is in for it now, because you’re going to free our friends and disenchant the wolves and save the—”

“That will be all, Ash,” Winfield said as he gestured for the little guy to get off the chair he was forecasting Seth’s victories from. Ash smirked, and jumped down. Winfield patted him on the head. “Quite the reception you’ve given our guest, my boy.”

Everyone was quiet, and just as Seth began to get the class presentation vibe, feeling every eye in the room fall on him expectantly, Nya started to giggle. Seth had never been so grateful to hear that tinkly laugh. He and the others joined in, and Ash scurried behind Winfield’s legs.

Feeling bad for the kid, Seth hopped off the table and crouched to Ash’s level. “Hey, Bud. That’s really cool you know so much about the Scroll Stories. I’ll bet you want to study them when you grow up. I don’t think I’m your guy, Ash, but I’d like to hear more about those stories sometime.”

Ash peeked around Winfield’s patchwork pants before deciding to approach Seth. “No, Mister Seth, you’re, um, my guy. And the scrolls are more than stories. Not all of them have happened yet, but they will. My Ma reads me the good parts. Ma studies the scrolls, not me. I’m going to be a sorcerer like my Pa.”

Nya clasped her hands together excitedly. Apparently she liked the idea of hanging out with a sorcerer.

“Sorcerer?” Winfield chuckled, his long, dark beard bouncing off his round belly. “Heavens, no. I only dabble in non-healing magicks—just enough to preserve the memory of their ways. Contrary to what my boy says, I’m an apothecary by trade. One of the oldest sinian professions, that is. Folk used to come from across the seas for sinian medicines and remedies. Ah, but it’s a near lost art now—as you know. Indeed, we may be the only sinians alive who have not traded our age-old crafts for those of industry.”

Winfield sighed. He wandered off, toward the corner of the room, and the lady who now held Ash's hand stepped forward.

"What my husband means to say is that introductions are in order."

The lady smiled, and for an instant she reminded Seth of his own mother—always making sure that everyone else was at ease, even when she wasn't.

"We have been so preoccupied reviving Seth from the grips of that sawgull's poison that we have not been properly introduced."

Sawgull poison? Seth whipped his head in Nya's direction and she nodded, confirming what the sinian lady had said. *Well, that explains a lot.* Seth wasn't exactly in the habit of passing out on people's tables.

"You've already met my son Ash and my husband Winfield." The lady pointed to the back of the room, where Winfield was lighting a long pipe. "I am called Rivera Landly. I oversee the scrolls and manuscripts. Bismuth is also a librarian. He is the only one of us not to have come from Forestrytown."

A white-haired sinian with a handlebar moustache stepped forward and coughed to clear his throat. Nya gasped, though no one seemed to notice this except Seth.

"Prefer to call myself an archivist," the little man said. He was skinny—for a sinian. "I mind much more than books. And if you think I'm old, friends, you would not believe the age of the curios and historical records in my keeping." The old man winked at Seth before his eyes locked onto Nya.

"M—Mr. Hezzelfrump?" Nya's voice trembled as she spoke. "Bismuth Hezzelfrump, from the Mineraltown Museum and Archives?"

“Just call me Bismuth, young miss,” the white-haired sinian said, sounding rather confused. He shifted his glasses down his round, rosy nose, and squinted hard, then harder. “Well crumple my pages and crease my covers! Miss Nya? What is the Archives’ best patron doing all the way out here in the Wild Woods?”

“I guess books and I have a way of finding each other.” Nya skipped right into Bismuth’s big bear hug, almost knocking the old guy over.

“Why, you’re a regular little lady, you are! I hardly recognize you!” Bismuth held Nya out at arms length before giving her another squeeze. “I always knew you were too free a spirit to resign yourself to the life of a slave.”

Judging by the murmur that spread among the sinians, Seth figured none of them knew much about Nya’s old life. And how could they? Nya either ignored the whispers or was too distracted to hear them.

“Well isn’t this joggling?” Bismuth said. “Smartest three year-old I ever met. Exceptional reader, even for a welvish lass.”

Seth couldn’t tell whether Bismuth was talking to anyone in particular, or just plain talking. Though he had a hunch it was the second option.

Wait a second.

“Three?” Seth squawked. “You could read when you were three?”

Nya shrugged like it was no big deal, and Seth was left staring at her with a stupid expression on his face.

“The welvish develop differently than humans,” Erebis explained to Seth. “They learn at a very young age. But their development slows down thereafter, such that they live nearly three times longer than humans.”

Seth frowned, trying to take this in. So, even if he and Nya were the same age, she would probably be a couple grades ahead of him back home. Then again, she hadn't really read anything in years—nothing except that book of healing magic she had told him about.

"Mist—er, Bismuth," Nya said. "Do you remember Erebis?"

"That's your buddy Erebis, is it?" Bismuth gave a low whistle. "Don't suppose you remember, Old Boy, but back in Mineraltown you were a great friend to me and Nya. Pleasure to meet you as your right self. Pleasure indeed."

"The pleasure is mine," Erebis said with a nod of his head.

"And this is my new friend, Seth, of course."

"Yes, yes. We sure are glad to see you, Seth. Only a proper Earth greeting will do for you, my lad."

Bismuth took Seth's hand in his and pumped his arm enough times to make Seth feel like a politician posing for a photo-op. Bismuth let go, and Seth flexed the blood back into his fingers. He wouldn't have thought the old guy would have that strong a handshake in him.

"Manners, manners," Bismuth scolded himself. "You still have to meet our in-house botanists. This is Fern Rikestaff, and the tall fellow is her brother Chester. They tend to our crops and the endangered plants in our greenhouses."

A young lady with wild, mossy hair shuffled forward, followed by the largest of the free sinians. Both still had satchels of arrows strapped to their backs but, looking at them now, Seth felt dense to have ever thought they were savages. Their clothes may

have been tattered and worn, but Fern's shy smile and Chester's ceremonious bow were perfectly civil. Besides, they studied plants. You couldn't get less savage than that.

"What Bismuth fails to mention," Chester said, hanging up his satchel and grabbing an oversized apron, "is that I am also the resident chef. I reckon you folk are mighty hungry after that journey of yours. So if you'll excuse me, I have a feast to prepare."

Awakened from hibernation by the mention of food, Seth's stomach gave a grateful grumble. He did not even want to guess how long it had been since he'd had a proper meal.

"I'm off to help Chester with dinner," Rivera announced. "And by the sounds of it, a tour of our modest abode might be a welcome distraction from empty tummies."

"Agreed!" Bismuth agreed. "Miss Nya always did know her way round a bookshelf, and I know it's been a deuce of a day for you both, so I'll keep my tour brief."

Nya and Fern accompanied Bismuth to the shelves and Seth followed, finding himself flanked by Ash and Felina. Ash kept looking up at him as if, at any moment, Seth might do something great. Seth felt like telling them that he wasn't who they thought he was, that there was just no way, but he didn't want it to come out wrong.

"This shelf," Bismuth said, "is all that's left of the Mineraltown Museum and Archives. That shelf, on the far side of the greenhouses, is what Rivera salvaged from the Forestrytown Library. Mightn't seem like much now, but save whatever the Fake One kept for himself, these shelves hold all that remains of sinian stories, medicine, and magic."

Bismuth paused, his chin quivering. He pulled off his steamed-up glasses and rubbed his eyes with the back of his wrinkled hand. His voice wavered to a whisper, “And to think the folk at home are none the wiser—probably couldn’t tell you the names of our hometowns before the Fake One claimed them.”

Seth wanted to say something—anything—to make Bismuth feel better. All he managed to do was stare at the ground, feeling awkward, and wondering what to say to someone who has lost everything.

Nya put her hand on Bismuth’s shoulder.

“Sinians are not the only ones to suffer under the Fake One,” Fern said, sweeping aside her frizzy bangs only to have them fall right back into her eyes. “As you may have noticed on your journey, Flora suffers as well.”

“We have noticed that,” Nya said. “And the farther west we go, the sicker the plants grow.”

Fern looked at Nya with new appreciation. “Yes, that’s right. The forests surrounding the Great City are worst of all. Entire species and genera of plants are becoming extinct. Chester and I try to conserve all we can, but we’re limited by space and equipment. The greenhouses are overcrowded, and we only have so many moon lights and sun lights to cultivate plants below ground.”

“So, some plants will grow in the greenhouses, but not in the earth aboveground?” Nya asked, examining a moonlit plant with shimmering blossoms.

“Exactly. If we do not discover what is making the earth so inhospitable to life, many more plants will die.”

“And along with them, their particular healing powers,” Nya said.

“And the vim sprites,” Seth added after seeing Felina’s wings droop. “Won’t they also be affected if the plants they live off become extinct?”

“I am afraid so. Fauna will suffer as dramatically as Flora.” Fern plucked a dead leaf from a plant and twirled it between her fingertips. “It has been a long day. I’ll let you rest and explore our relics. Let us know if you have any questions.”

“Thanks,” Seth and Nya said in unison.

Fern nodded in return and put her arm around Bismuth. Her head resting on his shoulder, the two strolled across the room to join Erebis and Winfield by the fire.

“Sadness rises and sets, just like the moon—that’s what Ma always says.”

It was Ash. He had been so quiet that Seth had forgotten that the kid was never more than a foot away. “That so, Mister Ash?”

Ash seemed to like that. He grinned back at Seth. “The adults get sad sometimes, but never for long.” Then, seeing Rivera wave him over, Ash pranced into the kitchen and plunged his finger into a bowl of sticky, blue stuff.

“He’s so cute,” Nya said.

Seth snorted. “Yeah, among other things.”

Nya strolled to the Minertown bookshelves and studied the dusty spines there. With an excited squeak, she pulled down an especially big book, flung open its cover, and slid it under a greenhouse sun light.

Seth stared up at the Forestrytown bookshelves—which shelved a lot more than books. There were gemstones, a decorative canister, carvings, and other odds and ends. It was all Seth could do to take in any one thing. But Felina’s sparks reflected off a big, silver plaque, grabbing his attention. Seth ran a finger over the plaque’s engravings.

“It’s a township emblem,” Felina hummed. “It belonged to a sinian settlement that was imprisoned by the Fake One years ago.”

Seth didn’t ask why. He didn’t want to know.

Nya squealed again. By the sounds of it, whatever she had found wasn’t as depressing as an imprisoned township’s emblem. Seth joined Nya on the floor.

“I remember this book well,” she said, her eyes so big Seth noticed the flecks of silver in them for the first time. “**Legends and Lore of Laar**, she said, running her hand over its golden title. “It practically taught me to read. Old, sinian fairy stories fill its pages—some with humans, even. Do you know that until I saw you, those few moons ago, I did not believe that humans really existed?”

She laughed, but it wasn’t a happy laugh. “The books and stories that were taken from Mineraltown were never replaced with anything. No new ideas, no new stories. So I made up my own stories, and I recited those in this volume to Erebis by memory lest I should ever forget them.”

Nya flipped the pages quickly, then slowly, as she wavered between skimming little bits and soaking up large chunks. It reminded Seth of how Jeffrey devoured comics. Except Nya didn’t shout things like ‘no way’ or ‘shut up’ while she read—she just smiled or sighed to herself.

Something tapped against Seth’s shoulder. Not quite towering above him was Winfield, who held out an old, brassy canister. Seth had noticed it earlier, on the Forestrytown bookshelf.

“What’s this?”

“The Scroll Stories—or parts of them. I reckoned you might like a little pre-dinner reading of your own.”

Seth caught himself giving Winfield a look he usually reserved for his French teacher when she told him to pronounce things more in his throat. *The Scroll Stories?* If the scrolls were as ancient as that canister looked, they would crumble the second Seth unrolled them.

“Only the case is old. The parchments are just copies—no need to fret about ruining them. I thought you might like to judge for yourself what all the fuss is about.”

“Yeah, actually, I’d like that. Thanks.” A smirk tugging up one corner of his mouth, Seth took the canister from Winfield. “You think I should ask Ash to help me decipher them?”

Winfield laughed, his beard dancing on his belly again. “Ash cannot yet read Sinian, let alone Elvish. However, with his enthusiasm we have every confidence it won’t be long.”

Seth waited for Winfield to cross the room before opening the canister. The lid screeched as he twisted it off, and he noticed Nya eyeing the parchment he removed from the brass cylinder.

“What? Fairytales not holding your interest?”

Nya smiled, rolled her eyes, and went back to her reading. He got the feeling she liked it when he teased her.

The scroll crackled as Seth unrolled it and he doubted whether Winfield had told the truth about its age. If it was a copy, it was an old copy. The parchment was brittle

and even the writing looked super old. A cryptic scrawl lined the pages in columns of text, none of which Seth had the vaguest idea how to translate.

This is stupid. I can't read Elvish.

Seth lowered the parchment and sighed. He was tired, he was hungry, and the kitchen smells and clattering pans weren't helping his concentration any. Frustrated, he raised the parchment back to reading level. Felina floated above his shoulder, her light flickering over the weird script. Weird, unreadable script.

But then something shifted in Seth's eyes, like a camera lens adjusting to auto-focus. The writing whirled around the parchment, smudged as if the ink were still wet, and then crystallized.

Seth half laughed, half gasped. The Elvish had changed to English.

Chapter 13 – The Seventh Scroll Story

Nya had not noticed much about Seth while he was reading the Scroll Stories. She had been engrossed in **Legends and Lore of Laar** at the time. *Yet, now that I reflect on it, he was exceptionally quiet.*

Nya seated herself at the dinner table, her eyes darting from the bountiful dinner that the sinians laid out to Seth. Seth sat across from her and alternated between thumbing his acorn necklace and fluffing his hair. He was avoiding eye contact, but Nya needn't have been an empath to know that he was nervous about something.

Whatever did he read in those scrolls?

As Chester, Rivera, and Ash packed the table with delectable nuts, cheeses, breads, vegetables, fruits, and pies, Nya resolved not to worry about Seth, that he would reveal his concerns when he was ready. For now she had a feast to enjoy. Never in her life had she eaten a meal that she had not prepared herself—not that she could remember.

Nya loaded up her plate and looked around the table. The room was brimming with warm energy and Nya drank it in. Utensils scraped plates and conversations were had through overstuffed mouthfuls—sounds that had always seemed unpleasant at blacksmith dinners, were delightful additions to this meal. The free sinians were generous hosts. They were kind at heart and quick of wit—and remarkable chefs as well.

Throughout dinner, Nya found her gaze stuck fast to Felina. And it was more than the way in which Felina inhaled green energy vapours from fruits and vegetables that held Nya's interest. The sprite was a natural entertainer. Felina kept Nya and Ash as quiet as slave dogs with her dramatizations of the escape from the sawgulls. Nya had

read that: sprites loved to act out histories. Just as sinian history was documented by story, sprite history was passed on through drama.

The dinner sounds soon thinned, as did the portions on plates. Chester did his best to auction off the last of the blueander pie, but not a belly in the room could manage it. Everyone reclined in their chairs, full and satisfied.

Winfield leaned on an arm of his wingback dining chair, then packed and lit a new pipe. Nya noticed the smoke. There was something familiar about the way it billowed in on itself instead of streaming into the air.

Winfield fingered the stem of his goblet and raised it high. "I propose a toast," he said, "to our guests Erebis, Seth, and Nya. Together we are united by a common commitment to a world that once was, and will be again."

"Hear, hear!" called the others.

Winfield looked to Rivera, who nodded and began to speak. "Our paths to this dining table are many and varied," she said. "But none of us would be here tonight had not a certain canister filled with elvish stories been brought to my attention eleven years ago. Winfield and I found that canister wedged between two bookshelves of the library storeroom. Able to read basic Elvish, I set to work studying the age, origin, and content of the scrolls. Little did I know what trouble these seven stories would cast upon sinians, and all the peoples of Laar."

Rivera had told happier tales in her day; that much was obvious. Her chest heaved a silent sigh and her eyelids sagged, but still she went on.

"I determined that the scrolls were copies, written neither of elvish ink, nor of elvish hand," she said. "Nevertheless, the stories were undoubtedly of elvish origin. And

they were beautiful. Stories make up much of sinian history and amusement—it was only natural for me to share such magnificent findings. But that was before I realized that the seven Scroll Stories were also prophecies—and that six of these prophecies had already come true.

“Quick as wind, the Scroll Stories spread from settlement to settlement and throughout the lands of Laar. But none were retold so much as the seventh story, which foretold the coming of the Great One, a wanderer who would lead the people to freedom, wisdom, and prosperity. Mistold and misinterpreted, the story of the Great One empowered an impostor, the Fake One. Our people sought a leader, but found a ruler instead.”

Across the table from Nya, Seth squirmed. The very mention of the prophecy seemed enough to set him fiddling. Though Nya doubted any at the table were comfortable with the thought of the Fake One.

“One of the first things the Fake One did upon coming into power,” Rivera continued, “was outlaw magic. Winfield and I refused to forego this part of our heritage and feared what would follow. We left Forestrytown by cover of night, carrying as many books and relics as our pushcart would allow. But we were not alone in our flight from Forestrytown.”

Rivera turned to Chester and nodded. Nya had seen this done at blacksmith guild dinners. Sinians often called upon others to tell parts of their stories.

“At the time, I was running one of only a handful of sinian restaurants,” Chester said. “My sister cultivated our small plot of land. We were happy and had done well for

ourselves. Folks near and far prized Fern's hybrid vegetables and my blueander pies." A smile rose, but soon settled behind the loss in his eyes.

"When he banned magic," Chester said, "the Fake One also ordered that all farming and food services come under his control. Restaurants closed, public drinking houses opened. Neither Fern nor I liked the idea of giving up our life's work of growing and preparing food. So we told no one and took to the woods, taking what equipment and provisions we could. We met Winfield and Rivera in the forest the night of our escape." Chester paused and looked to Rivera to take up the tale.

"We made a pact that night," Rivera said. "We pledged to be the protectors of knowledge, the keepers of sinian crafts. We called ourselves the free sinians—and for years we were four and four only. We returned once to Forestrytown in hope of saving others, but they would not be saved. They were a grossly changed people, thinking only of themselves and nothing of the world around them. There could be no mistake. Our families and friends had been enchanted."

Nya thought of Wrought. He was bitter, at times intolerable, but she had always felt that buried deep within him was a gentle spirit that yearned to be free. Now she knew this was so. All the moons she had known him, Wrought was enchanted as Erebis had been. *And unless we succeed in overthrowing the Great One, Wrought could remain that way.*

"I lived among the heartless, enchanted folk of Mineraltown for almost two years," Bismuth cut in. There was a strict protocol to the sharing of sinians stories, and at the blacksmith dinners in Mineraltown an unasked for interruption usually resulted in

arguments or fist fights. Unlike the Minertown blacksmiths, Rivera did not seem to mind the unsolicited addition to her story.

“I never was enchanted myself, though,” Bismuth said. “So, I figured the charms in the Museum kept me safe. Any number of them could have protected me from a spell or...”

Bismuth shrugged. “Either way, within a couple days of the Fake One being in power, the good folk of Minertown had changed, just as they had in Forestrytown. The outlawing of magic was one thing. I thought I could hide the most useful and notable books of magic and that would be that. Was I ever wrong. Before long, every animal-loving sinian in town was a dog enslaver. They tore metals and gems from the same earth they used to plant crops in. Homes turned to gem stores, and trading posts turned to factories and public drinking houses. I buried myself in books, and foreswore the abominable ways of my people.”

Bismuth sniffed and fixed his glazed eyes on Nya, his mind inflamed by both love and guilt. “If it weren’t for the companionship of Miss Nya and her dog Erebis, I mightn’t have made it through those deuced years. Then books were banned altogether, and I knew I had to leave before the Museum and Archives were burned to the ground. I should have taken you with me, Miss Nya. I realized that as soon as I’d left Knottwood. It was too late to go back, so I left something behind. I buried it deep, where only a foraging slave and her keen-sniffed friend could find it.”

It took a moment for Nya to realize what Bismuth was referring to. “Healing Magicks and Curative Charms? You left that for me?” She was dumbfounded. But it all made sense. *Of course!* That smoke charm Winfield had used for his pipe was **Smoke**

Less Choke Less, the same spell she had used in the Forbidden Forest to hide campfire smoke from spies. It was sinian magic she had taught herself, and the spells in her book were designed for the old apothecary trade.

All this time, Nya had thought of magic as something she had taken upon herself, something not rightfully hers. It warmed her from her toes to the tips of her ears to know that magic had been bestowed upon her.

“Oh, Bismuth, thank you! The book remains buried in Knottwood, but I carry every spell in my heart. Were it not for the **Sleep for the Weary** potion I found in its pages, Erebis and I mightn’t be here tonight.”

Bismuth shuffled his way round the table and embraced Nya in his wiry arms. She sensed his relief, the lifting of a years-old burden. But she could never be angry with him. She should have taken Erebis and left Minertown of her own accord long before she did. *I have only myself to blame for that.*

“Well, well,” Winfield said, slapping the table. “It would seem that we have another apothecary in our midst—and that I have another student!”

Me, an apothecary’s apprentice? Now the tips of Nya’s ears really were warm.

“Nya’s much more than an apothecary,” Seth blurted. Something in Seth’s voice halted all conversation. The whole room stirred in silence, waiting for him to speak.

He looked at Nya apologetically and her stomach tightened. *What has he to say that he’s so sorry for?*

Seth fidgeted with his acorn necklace, as though he were conjuring strength from within it to say whatever he was about to say—as if its **Courage for the Doubtful** charm had not already run out of magic.

“You want to know who your real Great One is? The one who’s really supposed to save you? It’s Nya. I’m sure of it. Nya’s in the Scroll Stories.”

Chapter 14 – Prophecies and Plans

Seth braced himself for the uproar he knew his news would cause. After all, the free sinians had been studying the Scroll Stories for years and they never saw this coming.

“That’s impossible!” Winfield exclaimed. “The prophecy clearly notes that the Great One will be a male wanderer—not a girl born of this world!”

Rivera gripped the arms of her chair like the ground was quaking under her, but when she spoke her voice was calm and sing-songy. “Winfield is right, dear. The scrolls clearly refer to, *‘he who wandered from another world in robes of foreign hand and stayed his staff to liberate the people and the land.’*”

More uproar. Everyone was too busy gasping and chattering to let Seth explain. Everyone except Nya. Stiff in her chair, staring blankly at Seth, she opened her mouth. “Seth,” she said, “what are you talking about?”

The room was abuzz once more. “Yes, what is he talking about...not of our world...seems preposterous...” Seth couldn’t think over the commotion.

“Just hear me out!” he yelled over the racket. “What I mean is that the scrolls mention two Great Ones, not just one.” That shut them up pretty quick. But now that he had their attention, Seth wasn’t sure he wanted it. What if what he had to say didn’t come out right? What if he couldn’t explain what he had read in the scrolls? *They seemed so clear when I was reading them, but what if...*

“It is what you have to say that matters, not what words you choose,” Erebis said. “Go on. Your intentions are good. There is no need to be guarded about your speech.”

“Well,” Seth said. “I read those parts of the seventh Scroll Story—about a wanderer ‘staying’ his staff to liberate people. But that’s just it. The wanderer Great One doesn’t really do anything. The more important heroic stuff—like how the Great One is supposed to awaken people and return riches to the land—that’s all associated with another Great One and the word ‘Lunalya.’”

“‘Lunalya’ being the Elvish word for moonstar,” Rivera put in.

“Yeah, and when translated from Elvish to Welvish, ‘Lunalya’ is pronounced ‘Nya Lunya’—Nya’s first and last names.” Seth glanced at Nya just long enough to see Nya’s jaw drop like a ventriloquist’s dummy. “According to the Scroll Stories, the moonstar is supposed to, like, watch over the wanderer.”

“Moonstar?” Winfield said, jumping out of his chair. He whipped his head from Rivera to the bookshelves and back again. “Hear that, Rivera? Seth thinks Nya’s the Moonstar of Laar!”

Rivera pinched her eyebrows into a sceptical frown. “But how do you know the scrolls are not referring to the moonstar of the Heavens? What if the Great One is simply meant to accomplish his mission by the light of the moon?”

“Now, let’s not badger the boy, Rivera,” Winfield said. “Remember, Seth has a wanderer’s command of languages. He may know something we do not.”

“Maybe. Elvish grammar is a tricky thing.” Seth stopped to absorb the weirdness of what he had just said. It still freaked him out that he could speak all the languages of Laar—and now this. *Me talking grammar?* “Can anyone tell me what the plural of ‘Grenyan,’ the Elvish word for ‘Great One’ is?”

A series of stumped faces stared back at Seth—and no one looked as puzzled as Rivera.

“The singular is the same as the plural,” Seth explained. “I can’t think of an example in Sinian, but in English our word for one sheep is the same as for many sheep. It’s the same with ‘Grenyan’—it’s used for both ‘Great One’ and ‘Great Ones.’ In the seventh Scroll Story, the wanderer and Moonstar work together. It says that the Great Ones are one.”

“‘Grenyan esla yan,’” Rivera repeated in Elvish as she stood up and walked zombie-like to the Forestrytown bookshelf. She pulled *Elvish Grammar of Olde* and **Elvish Grammatical Theory** from the shelf and began rifling through them.

“Does this mean you’re taking our ‘fairytale’ seriously?” Nya asked. The way she cocked her head to one side when she said ‘fairytale’ annoyed Seth.

“I don’t know what I believe,” he said. “But yeah, some of the stuff in that story is pretty coincidental. And yeah, it makes a little more sense to me that if the seventh story really does turn out to be a prophecy about us—if—I won’t be running the show, you will. But like I said, I don’t know what to believe. I can only tell you what I read in the Scroll Stories. And unless you want to have a crack at reading Elvish...”

Seth didn’t know where he was going with that last comment, but thought he’d made his point. Nya slumped a little in her chair.

“Heavens.” Even as she sat down at the table, Rivera’s fingers traced over lines of text. “Heavens,” she said again. Her finger stopped dead in the middle of a page. “...and that’s why ‘Moonstar’ is capitalized like a proper noun in the scrolls,” she mumbled.

Seth didn't get what she meant by that, but he was pretty sure Rivera was coming around.

Rivera slid her head into one hand. "Yes—yes, I believe Seth is right. The seventh Scroll Story does appear to refer to two Great Ones: the wanderer and a Moonstar."

"Two Great Ones?" Bismuth said.

"Incredible," Fern added.

Winfield shook his head. "All this time, and we had no clue."

"To the Great Ones," Chester said, raising his goblet.

"The Great Ones!" everyone cheered.

"Yahoo!" Ash yelped, and the whole table exploded in celebration. Felina was patting—and consequently shocking—Seth on the shoulder, Winfield was belly-laughing with Chester and Fern, and then Bismuth and Ash were pulling at Seth to join in their silly jig. The last thing Seth felt like doing right now was dancing. He had to wait until Bismuth and Ash dosey-dosed each other to duck out of the jig. That's when Seth noticed Nya's red and watery eyes.

Oh man. She's upset. He had, after all, dropped a serious bomb of responsibility on her. He'd been so freaked out about the whole prophecy thing himself that he hadn't thought how all this might affect Nya.

Seth stole over to Nya, who was now resting her head on Erebis's shoulder. "Trust me, I know how freaky this is," Seth said, "but at least you have your magic, and—" And then he noticed that Nya was absolutely beaming.

She laughed, shaking loose a droplet that clung to the corner of one eye.

“Remember what we shook on at Smoulder Quarry? I have already sworn to watch over you. So, I guess now you’re really stuck with me.”

For once she was the jokester and he was the one sizing up her emotions. “You—you’re okay with all this?”

“Of course I am. In helping you find your grandfather and in freeing the wolves I had hoped to find a purpose. Now that purpose has found me. You should be happy, too, Seth.”

“I already have a purpose—an urgent one. I don’t want another one.”

Nya didn’t seem too impressed with his comment. “Seth, I know you want to get home and I know your grandfather needs you. But we need you too—Laar needs you. And whether or not you’re willing to admit it, this prophecy is a good thing. It means that fate’s on our side. The sooner you stop fighting fate and realize that, the better.”

Seth blinked, not knowing what to say. If Nya had been angry he would have told her to get lost. But she wasn’t so much angry as she was disappointed. So Seth said nothing, and Nya turned and walked off.

By now, the sinians were busy cleaning up the loads of empty plates and goblets that were scattered across both the table and, because of a certain clumsy jig, the floor. Seth offered to help, but being prideful hosts, the free sinians would have none of it. Chester shooed Seth off to join Nya and Ash, who were feeding leftovers to Ash’s ferocious-looking pet plant.

Seth had had a venus fly trap once, but it was nothing like this thing. The snapping vermouth—which Ash had appropriately named Bitey—was a good four feet tall

with fat, thorny leaves that chomped together when it ate. Seth watched as the thing dived for table scraps and swallowed them down in globular lumps. A couple chomps and the bulge would slide down Bitey's stalk, just like the snakes on the science channel.

Nya took a turn feeding Bitey, and Seth was happy to give her the room to do so. She crooned to the plant as she fed it, and Ash was loving the attention the newest Great One paid his pet. Since dinner, Ash had taken to following Nya—and that was fine by Seth. Maybe she was comfortable with her role as Great One, but Seth still had issues with his. Huge issues. It just didn't seem right to get so much credit for stuff he hadn't done yet—and might never do.

Seth's mood wasn't the only thing that had changed in the last few minutes—the vibe in the room had changed too. Erebis and Rivera had begun speaking in hushed voices by the fire, and the joyous air of two-Great-Ones-must-be-better-than-one was dwindling.

As much as Seth pretended to be interested in Bitey, what really concerned him was that conversation by the fire. The grave looks fixed to Erebis and Rivera's faces made it hard not to snoop. Every time either of them glanced over, Seth pretended to be examining Bitey's feeding and grooming tools.

When Erebis rose and strode over to Bitey's corner, Seth spun around and shrunk a little. He was acting way too fascinated by the tool marked 'Bitey's Droppings Scooper' when Erebis arrived.

"Ash, Bitey," Erebis greeted both the kid and the plant. "Rivera and I have much to discuss with Nya and Seth. I hope you will excuse them."

“Okay, Erebis,” Ash said with a hint of a whine. Bitey just seemed glad to be addressed so formally; he swished a leaf downward in agreement with Ash.

Seth plopped into the pillowed chair beside Rivera, and Nya sat cross-legged next to Erebis on the floor. At least it was warm and dry by the fire. Even though Seth dreaded the discussion he suspected was about to take place around it, he was glad to feel the last bits of dampness leaving his clothes, hair, and socks. His socks in particular—they were a muddy brown colour, and they smelled worse than they looked.

“The day has been an overwhelming one,” Rivera said, “but Erebis and I think it best to consult you on all matters of import. The ravens estimate that it will be a couple days before it is safe to leave our abode. But when they deem it safe, we must make haste and leave at once. Better to plan now than plan to plan later.”

As nice as it was to be dry and well fed, several days sounded pretty long to Seth. “Can we afford to wait that long?” he asked.

“Can we afford not to?” Nya snapped.

“Now who’s the impatient one?” Seth said. “Why are you on my case all of a sudden?”

Nya sighed and checked her tone. “Seth, I know your intentions are good, but look what happened to the sinians when they were overanxious to bring about the future, to find the Great One. What would you have us do? Head out into the forest now and get caught by sawgulls? What good would we be to your grandfather then?”

Maybe they really were doing everything they could for now, but Seth didn’t like Nya scolding him like a little kid. “How about I lay off the time talk and you lay off me?”

It would help if I didn't feel like you were going to jump down my throat every time I opened my mouth."

Nya frowned, and her eyes dulled when she worked out what this meant. It was obvious she felt bad.

"Besides," Seth added, not wanting to fight. "I can't have my bodyguard getting distracted."

"You must both, at all times, act as you feel is right," Erebis said. His eyes flashed to highlight how important this was. "Rivera and I offer our counsel, but the journey into the Great City is yours alone. Prophecies are curious things, often fulfilled in the unlikeliest of ways—including through inaction. You may wait here with the free sinians, or stay with the welves we will sojourn with farther west."

Seth had worked it through a hundred times. *Not going to the Great City equals no Sedgewick equals no glowing acorn equals no way home.* There was no messing with that equation.

When neither Seth nor Nya took him up on his offer, Erebis inhaled, puffing out his chest and making his dark form as commanding as his voice. "Infiltrating the Great City is a challenging feat," he said. "Over the next few days we must prepare ourselves for whatever the Fake One may send our way. We must know our own strengths and our adversary's weaknesses." Erebis turned to Rivera, signalling for her to pick up where he'd left off.

"Ages ago," she said, "before the elves departed our world, they instated certain magicks and safeguards to maintain order in Laar after they were gone. The wolves and

ravens are part of this design. Together they were enchanted by the elves to live long and in service of peace.”

“So that must be where the whole ‘Kalada’ thing came from,” Seth said.

Nya scrunched her nose at him. “The which thing?”

“‘Kalada,’” Seth said. He tucked his feet under him—just in case Nya’s nose scrunch was a reaction to his socks. He doubted it, but surely Erebis could smell them. “Uh, ‘kalada’ means ‘to guide and protect’ in Elvish. I heard Erebis and Raava say it to each other back in the forest.”

“That’s right,” Rivera said. “The wolves and the ravens are the joint guardians of Laar. Strong magic connects them, but so long as the wolves are enchanted the ravens remain weak. With the wolves gone, the creatures of Laar have been scared and difficult to unite. That is why, save the ravens and the sprites, those in our company tonight are all that exist of a rebel force.”

Erebis growled. “We are few, but our strength does not lie in numbers. For one, we have the advantage of surprise. The Fake One has heard of our clash with the sawgulls by now, but we are nothing more than outlaws to him, two escaped slaves and a wanderer. He will expect us to run from the Great City, not toward it.”

Gigantic, crooked walls and hordes of sinian guards lurked in Seth’s mind. Erebis was right. The Great City was the last place a wanderer would go. Unless, of course, his grandfather happened to be trapped there.

“We have magic also,” Nya said.

“Some of us do, anyway,” Seth joked. “The rest of us have to rely on our bodyguards.”

Nya gave him her best don't-be-ridiculous smirk. "It has been nearly eleven years since the Fake One banned magic," she said. "To his mind he possesses all the remaining books of magic, and has enchanted the last of the sinian magicians and apothecaries."

"Quite right, my soon-to-be sorceress!" Winfield said, hopping into the conversation. "Indeed, we have more magic than you know." Winfield shoved a hand into his pocket, rummaged around, and removed his clenched fist. In one spastic motion that reminded Seth of Ash, Winfield then thrust his fist out and opened his hand. Resting on his palm was a tiny, green, rectangular object.

"A gift for my new apprentice—may it aid you in your journey." With a mischievous grin and a twist of his wrist, Winfield dropped the green thing into Nya's cupped hands.

Nya stared into her hands. "Thank you, Winfield. Um, may I ask what it is?"

Winfield's face wrinkled with delight. He was enjoying this, Seth could tell. The big guy wasn't about to skimp on suspense.

Winfield waved his fingers over the mysterious object, whispering as he did so. "Wake," he said, "grow, that you I may read. In service of Laar I swear is my need."

The green thing shuddered and somersaulted from edge to corner around Nya's hands. With one last pop, the object became as big as a book. Actually, it was a book. The silver lettering on its cover flashed from Elvish to what could only be Sinian. Seth's eyes blurred then cleared as the letters on the book's cover rearranged themselves. It read, "*Essential Elvish Magicks for the Moonstar of Laar.*"

"Do you like it?" Winfield asked Nya, his eyes large. "It understands Sinian. I taught it myself."

But someone else responded before Nya could.

“It would be much more accurate to say that I taught you, Winfield. But, never mind that. I have been waiting much too long to meet Master Lunalya to bother with such trifles.”

Seth and Nya swapped gawks. Her new book had just talked.

Chapter 15 – Book

Nya had never spoken to a book before—not one that could talk back, in any case. So instead of doing the polite thing and introducing herself, she gaped at the volume in her hands, waiting to see if it would speak again.

It did. “Surely, you have something to say, Master Lunalya? Yes, yes, I talk. But it is not as though you’ve never seen a book before, is it?”

Then, not quite under his breath, the book muttered to Winfield, “Heavens, she’s not illiterate, is she?”

That was all the prompting Nya needed. “Of course I can read,” she said, though she remembered all the sinian children she had watched grow up without books and wished she could take back the ‘of course’ part of her statement. “What I mean to say, Sir, is that I adore books and am glad to meet your acquaintance. And if you please, I am called Nya.” She winced at the thought of being called ‘master.’

The green volume bowed the corner of his soft leather cover, folding himself over the silver ribbon that fluttered out from his pages. “I am honoured to meet you at last. You may address me by my title.”

Nya read his cover again and frowned. ‘*Essential Elvish Magicks for the Moonstar of Laar*’ was fine for a title, but rather long for a name. “Oh—I—okay,” Nya said.

The book rustled its pages. “Oh, bother! If you’re going to stutter like that every time you read me, just call me Book. Winfield always insisted on it, and it beats ‘Essential’ or any poorly pronounced version you—”

“Hush, shrink, that you I may carry. When I need you next, I bid you not tarry.”

Winfield waved his hand over Book. Book mumbled and nipped his covers at Winfield’s fingers in protest, but soon shrank back to his original size.

“I wrote the sizing spells myself.” Winfield radiated a modest pride. “I was even thinking about changing the last part of the shrinking spell to ‘I bid you be merry,’ but that’s up to Nya now. Book’s a tad testy, but I reckon he’ll impart all the advanced magic you two will need to get into the Great City, free the wolves and the wanderers, and find Seth’s grandfather. As Book always says, it’s what he was born to do.”

“Good,” Seth said, “’cause I’m not going anywhere near that warped city without some serious magic on hand.”

Nya looked down at the tiny green book. *I just hope my hands are capable of wielding serious magic.*



The next few days at the free sinians’ abode bustled by like a beautiful dream whose delights Nya knew she would call upon forevermore, whether she was in need of cheer or not. She now recognized that memories feed the spirit as food feeds the body—though she believed she could never be full of the former. She had more unmemorable days to make up for than most people, but her time with the free sinians had already made a sizable contribution to her newfound collection of fond memories.

Nya had never learned so much, eaten so much, or spoken and laughed so much as she did in those short days. Her studies with Winfield and Book proved both exciting and exhausting, taking up most of her time during the day, and much of her dreams at night. Fern and Chester were keen instructors as well, and while their teachings lacked the amusing banter of Winfield and Book’s joint lessons, they had instilled within Nya

precious knowledge about extinct and endangered plants. Knowledge she could not wait to make use of.

During their stay with the free sinians, Nya mostly spoke to Seth at meals and by the fire at night. Although he would sometimes sit in on Book's lessons, Seth filled his days exploring the sinians' abode, practicing martial arts with Erebis, and cooking with Chester. It was just as well. Nya thought Seth and Book enjoyed each other's humour a little too much.

That is why, when Seth surprised Nya on their fifth day at the free sinians' abode by yelling, "Nya, time to pack! We've got to go," she pulled up her safety spectacles and glowered at him.

"I do not have time for your and Book's silly pranks. I could have dropped this beaker." She raised the tube of purple liquid only to realize that some of it had already splashed on her smallest finger. "You're lucky it only splashed on my finger—somehow I don't think our hosts would appreciate having an invisible floor."

Thrilled as she was to learn the multitude of practical magicks in Books pages, healing magicks were much less demanding and dangerous. Healing magicks had never made her faint in the middle of spell-casting as practical magicks had yesterday. And healing magicks could not make floors disappear.

Nya glanced up at Seth and noticed that behind his shock of seeing—or not seeing—her finger was genuine urgency. "Okay. You have my attention," she said. "What do you mean 'we have to go?'"

Seth wrenched his eyes from her vanished finger. "We're leaving. Raava just contacted Erebis through the fire smoke. Don't ask me how. She said the sawgulls stopped searching our area and have flown farther east. Pack your stuff, we're leaving."

Chapter 16 – Outlaws

When his dad moved to Hong Kong for work, Seth had made sure he couldn't make it to the airport to see him off. Seth had arranged to work on a group project that day. He loved his dad and all—they talked online almost every day. There was just something about sappy good-byes that Seth couldn't handle.

So it suited Seth just fine to have left the free sinians' abode in a hurry. A quick round of hugs, some good-lucks and thank-yous, then out the door. It had been a tear-free departure without a single bumbling good-bye speech. Perfect.

As sad as it was to leave the free sinians and Felina, it was great to be out in the fresh air again. During the last couple days Seth had caught a bit of what Jeffrey's mom called 'cabin fever.' Just like those rainy summer days at Jeffrey's cabin on the coast, Seth had worked out a variety of ways to entertain himself—bugging Nya included. Being an empath, she was fun to bug. No matter what he said, she always knew where he was coming from.

Seth took big strides, stretching out his cramped legs as he caught up to Nya and Erebis. It was a nice enough day for hiking—super sunny and dry—but a chilly breeze made his ears and fingertips ache. The wind carried tiny bits of grime, which clung to Seth's clothes and skin, making him feel like it had been days, not hours, since he'd last washed.

Seth shivered along with the leaves.

"This is a westerly wind," Erebis said, sniffing the air. "It is laced with magic—from the Great City, no doubt. There may be the odd, lone sawgull patrolling the skies,

but so long as the wind continues to blow east, there is little chance of a flock detecting us. For now, only ravens fly overhead. They will keep us safe.”

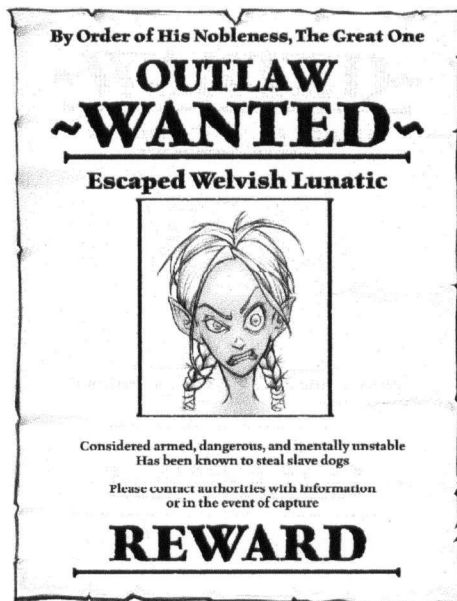
A raven circled overhead and its thick shadow swept within the surrounding trees. Seth jumped. That wasn’t a regular shadow. It was huge, searching, and left an odourless stream of smoke in its wake. Countless wafts of the smoky vapour curled in all directions, probing the forest. One wisp found Seth’s face, warming his cheek as it dispersed into the air.

The last trailings of the raven’s smoke disappeared and, like a cleansing steam, took the grimy breeze from the Great City with it. Seth felt warm again, and fresh. He watched as one last wisp of smoke-shadow withdrew behind the trees.

Something fluttered as the wisp snaked by. It was a white thing stuck to a tree. There was another, and another behind that one.

They were notices, nailed to tree trunks. Seth ran to the nearest one and tore it down, avoiding the sticky sap that oozed from its nail. “Guys, check this out!”

Nya and Erebis peered over Seth’s shoulder as he read, “Wanted: escaped welvish lunatic. Considered armed, dangerous, and mentally unstable. Has been known to steal slave dogs.”



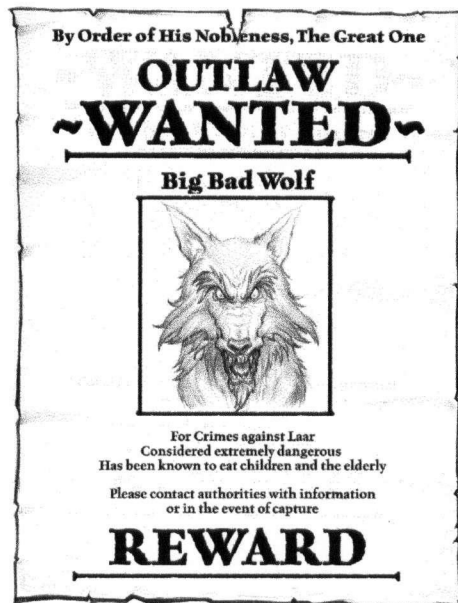
Seth laughed. He couldn't help it. "Mentally unstable, hey?" Nya glared.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Sometimes it's just easiest to laugh stuff off. And how can I not laugh at that kooky eye?"

"Not to mention the messy hair," Nya said, cracking a grin and taking the poster from Seth.

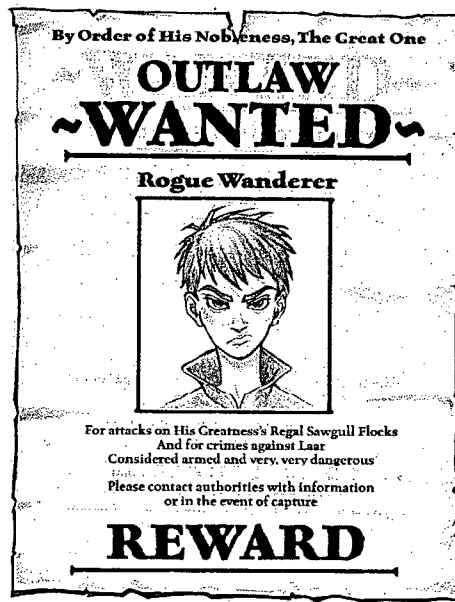
There were still two more notices—and it wasn't hard to guess who was on them. Seth rushed over to the second notice and pulled it down.

"Wanted: big, bad, wolf," Seth read, "for crimes against Laar. Considered extremely dangerous. Has been known to eat children and the elderly."



"Erebis, please don't eat us," Seth joked. Both Nya and Erebis managed tense smiles.

Nya leapt over to the third poster before Seth could get to it. She ripped it off the tree, cleared her throat, and read, "Outlaw wanted: rogue wanderer. For attacks on His Greatness's Regal Sawgull Flocks. Considered armed and very, very dangerous."



“Wow,” Nya said. “Your poster really does make you look like a rogue.”

“I look so old and so—”

“Devious?” Nya suggested.

“Yeah, it’s like they’re trying to make me look like some sort of conniving mastermind.”

“Well, you did attack that poor flock of sawgulls. Do you think if I turned you in they might pardon me?”

“Nya, don’t even joke. This is too weird. We’re outlaws.”

“Sorry.” She grinned. “Sometimes it’s just easier to laugh stuff off.”

They burst into nervous snickers.

Seth shuffled through the outlaw notices again before handing them back to Nya.

“So, what does this mean? This stuff is total lies.”

“The notices are designed to make us look like monsters—to tempt the creatures of the forest to turn us in,” Nya said matter-of-factly.

“And will they? Are there creatures that would do that?”

“It is difficult to say,” Erebis sighed. “None who remember the wolves would be foolish enough to turn one of us in. We live for the betterment of Laar—that is common knowledge. I believe most creatures will see through the Fake One’s other lies as well. The creatures of Laar fear him; they are not loyal to him. Only the selfish and corrupt would betray our whereabouts, those who are after a reward.”

What the posters meant, they decided, was that they needed to remain alert and discreet at all times. As Erebis put it, “Being outlaws is of little consequence, but being recognizable outlaws is troublesome, indeed.”

All the same, they agreed that even recognizable outlaws needed to rest for lunch.

As he unpacked the knapsack of cooking supplies Chester had given him, Seth thought about the outlaw notices and the long journey that lay ahead. It was totally possible that somewhere down the road something would give them away. Or worse. Seth had already been poisoned by a sawgull. There was no telling how far the Fake One would go to make sure they were no longer a threat.

Seth sliced off a few pieces of lart leaf bread, shaking his head. What he needed to do was think positively. *Think positively and pay attention.* He had slopped half a jar’s worth of anderberry jam onto Erebis’s small slice. *Good thing the jar’s fixed with an Everfull charm.* Seth had made the jam himself and was proud of it—even Chester had said it was delicious.

Erebis frowned at the slice.

“Oh, sorry,” Seth said, embarrassed. “I forgot you hardly eat anything. What’s with that, anyway? Does food weigh you down and stop you from getting all smoky and

hard to see, or something?” Seth scraped the surplus jam onto his own slice and handed Erebis back his.

“Something like that,” Erebis said, smiling and taking the slice with his teeth.

After lunch, Seth and Nya washed up in a small stream. It was the same stream—or ‘tributary’ as Erebis called it—that was supposed to flow larger and faster until it became suitable for traveling on. Erebis had said it would become Eldred River. What Erebis hadn’t mentioned was how he planned to travel on it. It would take hours of hard work to build a boat and, so long as Seth’s conniving face was posted everywhere, that wasn’t exactly Seth’s idea of a fun afternoon. Erebis had already spotted another set of their wanted notices, and everybody knows outlaws should keep on the move.

Erebis wanted to cover as much ground as possible while the skies were still sawgull-free. So on they marched, along the stream that was becoming a river.

In some ways, the forest reminded Seth of home. The tall, straight trees, the moist air. Even some of the plants were similar to those at home. But the illusion of safety was never perfect. The air had a mouldy tinge to it, and Seth could see the stuff growing on some of the branches. There was also the occasional whisperings in the trees. When whispers drifted over to them Erebis’s ears would perk up, and he would announce that their watchers were friendly. Friendly or not, Seth wished he could slip in and out of shadows as Erebis did. Something told Seth that if Erebis were alone, he’d have been traveling in a form that was more smoky vapour than wolf.

It was a long, but easy trek, and for most of it Seth was happy to walk without saying much. *But a guy can only walk in silence for so long.* Since Erebis was a wolf of

few words, and Nya had developed the anti-social habit of reading while she walked, Seth thought it only polite to check up on the only other member of their company.

“How’s it going over there, Book?” Seth asked.

“Not bad, Seth, thank you for asking. Fancy that, someone who values my spoken opinions and not just my written words. I dare say my wisdom could add to my reader’s learning—a clarification here, a mention of comparable spells there—but there is no sense speaking if my reader won’t listen to me.”

“Yeah, after all these years of studying your own pages I guess you know a thing or two about magic.”

“Well said, my dear boy. I don’t like to boast, but I do believe my viewpoints on magic are every bit as valuable a resource as the spells within me. How dreadful it is to be underappreciated, ignored, and doomed to—”

“Oh, don’t be ridiculous, Book,” Nya said. “I am listening, and of course I appreciate you. How do you expect me to consult you about magic or protect Seth from danger if I know nothing of your spells myself?”

“I just think that the boy has a point, Nya. Surely if he can recognize—”

Nya gasped. “Book, Seth, look at—”

“Two can play at the interrupting game, Nya. If you would only listen—” And that must be what Book did just then, because he arched his covers and exclaimed, “What? Why have we stopped by a riverside? What is it? What do you see?”

Tied to a small dock on the river was what Nya had tried to point out.

“It’s a raft,” Seth said. “A large and ready-made raft.”

“Surely we are not getting into that—that thing!” Book cried. “I haven’t survived tens of thousands of moons in perfect condition only to become wrinkly and waterlogged!”

Without so much as a splash to warn them, a brown, furry, otter-like creature leapt out of the river and onto the dock. The creature shook himself dry, reached into the raft, grabbed a ratty grey cap, and yanked it onto his little round head.

“She’s a steady raft, Sir,” the creature lisped, “and I know Eldred River like the webs of my paws. Only way you’ll get wet on my raft is if one of your mates throws you off. And I can’t be held responsible for the company you keep.”

Even Book was speechless.

“Niffred Longfellow, at your service,” the little creature bowed. “Unless those wanted notices I’ve seen about are truthful and you’re about to rob or eat me, I’ll be your ferryman for the day.”

Chapter 17 – The River Reet and his Raft

“You’re a river reet!” Nya exclaimed as she skipped down to the dock. She had not meant to be rude, addressing him so, but she was excited to meet one of the curious little ferrypersons she had read of in fairy stories.

“That I am. And you don’t seem nearly as loony a welf as your wanted notice makes you out to be.”

Nya laughed. “I am relieved to hear that, Mr. Longfellow. I am called Nya, and these are my friends Erebis, Seth, and Book.”

“Ah, yes. The ‘big bad wolf’ and the ‘rogue wanderer.’ And Book, Sir—like I said, your dryness is my word.”

“I shall do a *Waterproofing* spell for you in any case,” Nya whispered to Book. Nya knew they would never hear the end of his waterlog worries otherwise. So long as they were on the river, the raft would be visible from overhead, and Nya figured it was better to have Book large and legible, than small but silent.

“Truth be told,” Niffred said, “a raven stopped by earlier and told me you folk would hitch a ride. Raava, I think she said her name was.” He began untying one of the raft’s ropes. “Headed just short of Forestrytown, are you?”

Erebis stood still, his eyes glowing. He was examining the river reet, assessing whether they could trust him. Nya put a hand on Erebis’s shoulder. “He is truehearted—worthy of our trust.” She faced Niffred. “Yes, Mr. Longfellow, that’s where we’re headed.”

“Good then,” Niffred said, lifting his cap in thanks. “I don’t live far from Forestrytown. Just a few rules and regulations before we set sail. First off, I’m a practical chap with mouths to feed. So I ask for half the ferry toll up front.”

Nya watched, relieved, as Erebis pulled a small pouch from Seth’s sack. She doubted that charms or talismans were an accepted form of payment, and that was all she could have offered. The purse’s contents clicked and clacked together. Likely, they were precious stones. *Erebis must have gotten them from the free sinians.*

“In helping us, you serve Laar as well,” Erebis said, offering the pouch.

Niffred accepted the purse with one paw, and peeked inside. “Brilliant. My apologies for the advance payment, but even last week a broken-winged sawgull ran off without paying me half my dues.” With a wink he said to Seth, “They’re a dirty lot, those gulls. I don’t blame you your scuffle with them.”

Nya giggled. She liked this Niffred fellow.

“Last of all,” he said, “I ask that you keep your arms, legs and, well, pages inside the raft at all times. That said, all aboard!”

Nya tucked Book under her arm, took the paw Niffred offered her, and hopped onto the raft. It was a strange sensation, floating upon water. And even though this was the first time she had been on a boat, Nya trusted Niffred’s raft. Its railings felt sturdy, its floor was level, and its front curved to a point—which Nya hoped meant it went fast. She seated herself under the beautiful, quilted canopy, and enjoyed the raft’s dips and sways.

Using his staff for support, Seth jumped onto the raft. Niffred goggled as Erebis stepped onboard. The raft did not sink one bit.

“He’s not as heavy as he looks,” Seth explained. “Or, he’s only as heavy as he wants to be ’cause he sure can throw his weight around when he wants to.” Seth did a quick Kung Fu bow to Erebis, who bowed in return.

“I remember that about wolves now,” Niffred said as he untied the last rope and shoved off from the dock. “I used to take wolves out with my dad when I was a little reet. Always was a light load sailing with wolves. Safe, too. Don’t suppose the wolves are back for good, then?”

“For the time being, I am the only of my kind.”

“Oh drat!” Niffred said, but he was referring to the fact that the raft had gotten stuck in a current and was beginning to spin. “Enchanted whirlpool. Only one way out of this.” Niffred threw on a harness, which was tied to the raft by a length of rope. He then tossed aside his cap, did a perfect front flip, and dove into the water, hardly making a ripple.

“As I was saying earlier,” Niffred panted as he swam and pulled the raft clear of the whirlpool, “it’s a darn shame about the wolves. You see and hear a great deal in this line of work. And let me tell you, Laar is worse off without ’em.”

Niffred loved swimming ahead of the raft and Nya loved to watch him. He would plunge into the water, or float along on his back. Nya promised herself she would try swimming one day—in unenchanted waters, of course.

Before long, the currents sped up and Niffred hopped back onboard—and he was polite enough to towel himself off instead of shaking dry. He then neatly hung his towel to dry, picked up his long, wooden pole, and began to steer.

The bob of the raft, the gusts of fresh air, the way Niffred's little, swift arms steered the raft round rocks and away from the shore, it was all very lulling. Or it was until Book yelled over the rapids, "You don't say!" He was engrossed in whatever Niffred was telling him. "Do you remember her title?"

"Miss-something. Don't remember, exactly, but she was a gracious passenger. And she was a book of magic, of course. She was being taken to the Great City by order of the Great One himself."

"Hear that, Nya?"

"Oh. I'm sorry, I missed it."

"I'm not the first talking book to travel on Niffred's raft!"

"How peculiar," Nya said, but she was too aghast at the shoreline to heed him.

Vast stretches of shore had passed them by, and Nya already noticed a change in it. Less reeds grew, and those that did were wilted or brown. Ferns did not grow as large, and fewer insects buzzed and swarmed. Even the towering trees seemed to sag under their own weight, their mighty branches lowered in defeat, covered with scars of mould. The rising smell of decomposing life was out of place for the spring, when plants should be all buds and blossoms.

To Nya this was every bit as much a graveyard as the grounds of the kragem statues. But unlike those statues, the plants of the forest were rotting, slowly, slowly, becoming fossils. The life and goodness of the forest had helped sustain Nya for many moons, and now something was draining the forest of life. Killing it.

Nya cupped her head in her hands. Things were far worse than she had expected. Even if she could stop whatever was killing the forest, even if she could figure out how to

heal masses of sickly plants, it would be a long time before Flora recovered.

Nevertheless, when she lifted her head, Nya saw something that made her take heart.

Yearn fruits. An orchard full of yearn fruit trees lined a large section of the shoreline. While the trees were wilted, the fruits they bore were full and ripe. Nya smiled to herself. *How Wrought would drool if he were here!* It occurred to her to do a **Fetch**ing spell to pick some of the fruits, but such a public display of magic could also attract the wrong kind of attention.

She was glad she had thought so, because just then a small town drifted into view.

Nya shielded her eyes from the glare of the setting sun, fear brewing in her thoughts. That was not just any town—it was a sinian town. As she went to warn her friends, Nya noticed something strange about the place. It was empty.

Everyone's eyes were on the town now. Deserted stores still had their open-signs out, and dog carts lay upturned in the middle of streets. An axe stuck up from a stump, abandoned midway through chopping a pile of wood, and laundry was lined out to dry. Save the flapping of the laundry in the breeze, only a waterwheel moved, turned by the force of the river. This town had been deserted in a hurry.

Nya tracked Seth's finger to the large, broken sign that framed the town's docks. The broken part reminded her of Minertown's sign. It too had a giant symbol branded on it. This sign symbolized 'Watertown,' and it hung by a single nail so that Nya had to tilt her head sideways to read it. There was another sign, a sign that had been covered by the Watertown symbol—and strangely enough, even that one seemed familiar.

"Do you recognize the older sign, the straight one with the emblem on it?" Seth asked.

“Yes, but I cannot place it,” Nya whispered.

“There was a township emblem, on the bookshelves in the free sinians’ abode. It was identical to that one. Felina told me the Fake One evacuated sinians from this township years ago and imprisoned them in the Great City.”

“But why would he imprison them?” Nya asked. “Why wouldn’t the Fake One enchant them as he did the sinians of Mineraltown and Forestrytown?” It didn’t make any sense.

“No one knows,” Niffred said. “After all these years, the abandonment of Watertown remains a mystery.”

Chapter 18 – Smoke Signals

Seth crouched to check under an upside-down dog cart. He was looking for something. What was he looking for? And what was he doing in a ghost town?

He saw Nya across the empty street. She shrugged, kept looking. She pushed aside laundry, lifted the wood-chopping stump. She was holding a black top hat. A magician's hat. She had lost her rabbit. That's what they were looking for, a rabbit.

Nya waved Seth over. He followed around a corner, down an empty alley. Blue moonlight cut through shadow. Light at the end of the alley. Nya walked into the light and disappeared. Seth went to do the same, but stopped.

Staring down at him from up ahead was a giant, glistening, pink eye. It's owner hopped to block the exit, hopped into view. White. An albino rabbit the size of a pickup truck bared its teeth. It dove for Seth...



No one had told Seth they would be sleeping on the raft. Not that he had gotten much sleep. He had spent the better part of the night rolling and readjusting, and the worst part of it dreaming that he was in Watertown, hiding out from a giant, albino, man-eating rabbit. At least, when Seth had awakened from his nightmare to the bobbing of the raft, he'd known that nothing could get to him. Not very easily, anyway.

Seth yawned and crawled out from under the raft's canopy, only to be blinded by the sun. He cringed and covered his eyes.

"Morning, Sleepy," Nya called. She was riffling through the knapsack of cooking stuff Chester had given him, then examining a bottle of rendrick spice.

"That's not exactly a breakfast-type spice," Seth croaked, reminding himself of a raven. "I'll make breakfast." He wasn't much of a morning person, but he did know the

knapsack's contents best. Plus, he was starting to like cooking. Maybe he would open a restaurant of his own one day, like Chester had. But in his own world.

"No way." Nya said. "In your condition you would probably set the raft afire. Relax, you can make lunch."

Seth squinted up at Nya and stretched out his hand, a grin sneaking up his cheek. "Pinky swear?" From somewhere on the floor behind Nya, Book snorted a laugh.

Nya flipped Seth her pinky. "The *Imperceptible* potion only lasted a couple hours."

"My finger reappeared yesterday afternoon—thanks for your concern. Now if you'll excuse me, I have breakfast to make. I wouldn't want to get distracted and slop too much jam on any one slice."

Ouch. I've created a monster. Seth liked that about Nya, though. She was sharp. It was no fun bugging the indefensible.

"And what are you laughing at, Book?" Nya said. "You don't even have fingers."

Seth stood up, stretched, stumbled a little, and said to Book, "I think we'd better let her make breakfast, hey, Buddy?"

"Indeed," Book chuckled. "The raft is not the only flammable thing around here."

Seth ate his breakfast of lart leaf muffins and anderberry jam while leaning against Erebis's side and gazing out the back of the boat. Erebis was great that way. Of course Seth thought of him like a person and all, but hanging out with Erebis still had all the comforts of being with an animal. No need to fill silences with chit-chat, or to check how he was feeling. He was a loyal, protective friend who was always there to lean on.

Seth swallowed the last of his muffin, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and checked his watch out of habit. It was still stuck on 8:01.

At home Seth was a timer, he was always timing things. Walks, car rides, ferry trips to his grandma's place on the island. You name it. But he was getting used to going with the flow. Kind of like the raft. Worrying about the future only seemed to stress him out, so maybe it was time to stop fighting time. Maybe he would be the one to arrive late at the Treegrove Park benches one of these days. Maybe he'd even try not wearing a watch for a change. Starting when he got home. If he got home.

For the umpteenth time, Seth thought how amazing it would be to finally walk through his front door again and see his mom and dad. And his bed—he'd never take a mattress for granted again. If he made it home, he wouldn't take anything for granted.

Seth sighed.

"Not long now, mate," Niffred said. "It's been a long ride, but believe me it beats making the trip under your own steam."

"No rush, Nif. I was just thinking of home—that's all. How could I not like being on your raft?"

"Glad to hear it, but you'd be surprised. There are plenty of folk who don't like traveling by water. Felines in particular."

Seth smiled and turned to watch out the back of the raft again, letting himself become transfixed by the frothy wake. Sometimes he forgot how much he loved being outside. Sure, the woods here were stinky and dying, the rivers were enchanted, and there were giant, metal-clawed birds after him, but it was still beautiful.

Seth closed his eyes and let the breeze pass over him. He soaked up the warmth of the sun and the sounds of gurgling, rushing water. *It doesn't get more relaxing than this.*

Seth was right. When he opened his eyes he saw a grey streak of smoke zipping along the riverbed. The raft was going pretty fast, but this thing was way faster. It was one of the raven's smoke detectors. And by the looks of it, it was searching for them.

"Erebis!"

Erebis spun around just as the smoke streak arrived. It billowed as it streamed alongside the raft, and the tip of it began to take shape. A pointy-winged bird with unnaturally long claws formed in the smoke.

The message was clear.

"Sawgulls," Seth said.

Erebis's eyes flared as he inhaled a bit of the smoke. The sawgull shape dispersed and, like a giant recoiling spring, the entire streak of smoke disappeared back along the riverbed.

"Everyone, under the canopy!" Erebis called. "The nearest raven sentinel has been poisoned. There is a lone sawgull not far behind us. He's following the river and has likely been tipped off as to our whereabouts. Nya, Book, at the ready. We don't have long before—"

A screech echoed over the water and Seth covered his ears, peeking under the back of the canopy. A white smudge flew round a kink in the river. Niffred switched his pole for a paddle, and rowed like crazy now. But the sawgull had spotted the raft. And the sawgull was gaining on them.

In a panic, Seth grabbed his staff. His elbows buckled, he rolled, and Nya screamed. A set of metal talons ripped through the canopy, right by Seth's shoulder, barely missing him.

They were exposed now; the raft's canopy was gone. It floated behind them in shreds.

"The wife's going to have my head for that," Niffred shouted, his little arms paddling at a furious speed. "Hey, that's it! Nya, can you hold off the gull?"

"I—I think so," Nya called over the bird's piercing cries. Nya flipped from spell to spell, Book shouting in her ear all the while.

But Nya didn't have time to choose a spell. The sawgull dive-bombed again, its serrated beak pointed right at them. And just as the sawgull got close enough to block out the sun, Nya reached into her belt, pulled out a fistful of crushed leaves, and threw it in the sawgull's face. The bird shrieked and veered away.

Seth watched as the sawgull circled the air above them. It was stunned and kept jerking its head from side to side. *Shock leaf*, Seth figured. Nya had shown it to him at the free sinians' abode. The problem was the stuff didn't last long.

The sawgull was flying straight again in no time—straight for the raft.

"Page forty-three!" Book barked, flipping himself to the page before Nya could argue. "The ~~Memory Muddle~~ spell—hurry."

The gull was not about to give them time to recover. It was back on their tail, and something in that bird's beady, black eyes told Seth it was furious. It had smartened up, too. This time, the gull dived claws-first.

Nya pulled a handful of green dust from her belt and began to whisper over her hand. The sawgull tucked its wings close to its body, and plunged toward the boat in a blur of white and grey.

"Memory muddle and befuddle. Forget your past, become a—"

“Duck!” Seth yelled.

Nya threw the dust in the air and covered her head. The sawgull’s poisoned talons skimmed overhead. Seth screamed and squeezed his eyes shut. And then, except for the swish of water and the thud of Seth’s heart, all was quiet.

“It’s okay everyone, you can look.” Niffred was already back on his feet, steering pole in hand.

Not trusting himself to stand, Seth crawled along the floorboards to the back of the raft. About fifty feet behind them, preening itself as it bobbed along the river, was the sawgull. Except now it looked like a duck.

It looked up. “Quack, quack.”

“If you look behind the raft you will see a bird native to earth, the duck,” Seth said, impersonating a tour guide.

“Quack, quaaack!”

“I believe that was duck for, ‘What are you staring at, Stinkers!’” Seth snickered.

Everyone laughed. And they were all still laughing as Niffred steered them into his cave-like den and parked his beat-up raft right under the nose of a very cross-looking Mrs. Longfellow.

Chapter 19 – The Longfellows’ Den

Nya’s limbs felt heavy and her head dipped. The memory spell had drained her of energy, but Nya refused to let exhaustion detract from her experience of a genuine river reet den. The roots of the large tree they had sailed under poked out from a high, dirt-packed ceiling, and the narrow dock that Erebis now helped her onto was lined with small, flickering torches, which receded into a dimly lit room. Nya’s heart skipped with anticipation. From what she had read, river reet dens were charming little dwellings, indeed.

Mrs. Longfellow shook her head at her husband. It was clear she did not know what to make of the battered raft and its four troublesome passengers. She plodded down the dock and into the den. Niffred pawed his grey cap, followed his wife, and motioned for his passengers to follow.

The dock led right into the kitchen, which was modest, but well organized with shelves of preserves and a dining table laid out for tea. There was a spinning wheel off to one side, next to a quilting table and a rack of colourful quilts. On the farthest wall were three bunk beds made of mud and grass, and these were complete with little slides into the living room. The living room was best of all—it was partially submerged in water. One could not sit on its driftwood couch and chairs without being half wet themselves.

Mrs. Longfellow ushered Niffred into the kitchen corner. “Really...know better...little ones...dangerous,” she said, and Nya did her best not to overhear any more over-pronounced conversation bits. But when “hours to quilt... irreplaceable,” floated her way, Nya could not help but interrupt.

“I beg your pardon, Mrs. Longfellow.”

“Yes?” Mrs. Longfellow said, scrutinizing Nya.

“I could not help but hear you mention the raft’s beautiful quilted canopy. You are quite right to call it irreplaceable, but that canopy, and your husband’s skill and bravery saved three lives today.”

Book snorted at not being counted as a living being, but Nya ignored him. She had Mrs. Longfellow’s complete attention now.

“We are much obliged to both of you for your sacrifices and assure you that they have not been made in vain, but rather in the service of Laar.” Nya pulled the last pouch of precious stones from Seth’s pack and handed it to Niffred. “Never has a ferryperson so heroically earned the second half of his dues.”

Swayed by Nya’s kind words and courtesy, Mrs. Longfellow smiled at her husband and clasped his paw in hers, all concerns forgotten.

“Well, now,” she said to Nya, “you may be an outlaw, but it seems you are also a natural peacemaker. With a wolf in your company, I should have known you as friends. You can never be too careful these days. Please, make yourselves comfortable.”

“I’m afraid that we cannot stay,” Erebis said.

Nya longed to sit down. She put her hand on a chair back, to support her weary body, and was glad that she had when two river reet pups shot out of the living room waters and onto their bunk beds. Nya just about collapsed in alarm.

“Unhand my magic wand, you miserable wolf!” shouted the littlest river reet, too absorbed in his game to notice his guests.

His big sister balanced on the highest bunk, also oblivious to onlookers. “Never!” she cried, clutching a stick in one paw. “Your evil ways have ruled Laar for too long,

Fake One! Prepare to meet your doom!" She flung herself down, tackling her brother into the living room with a big splash.

The pups wrestled underwater awhile, the occasional tail or limb popping up from their skirmish. It was not until Seth applauded, and everyone else joined in, that two confused, whiskered faces peeked out of the water. And when the pups spotted Erebis, that confusion transformed to sheer wonderment.

"No way!" the girl gasped. She elbowed her brother, and they swam over to the kitchen and hopped onto the kitchen floorboards. "Are you a real wolf?"

"Last time I checked I was," Erebis said.

"Are you going to save the forest?" the boy squeaked.

"Can you keep a secret?" Erebis asked. The pups nodded, their little black eyes bulging. "That is exactly what my friends and I hope to do, but you mustn't tell anyone that you saw us. Okay?"

"Okay," they whispered back.

"Reeda, Chip, our friends have had a rough morning. Why don't you stop gawking and show them to the exit."

"Wait, there's something I need to do," Nya said. She slipped off to fetch Niffred's steering pole from the raft.

"Just one more spell," she told herself, knowing she should conserve her strength, but taking two bickwert chips from her belt anyway. "For Niffred."

When Nya returned, everyone was standing by the slide that also happened to be the only dry exit to the forest. Nya faltered over to Niffred and handed him his pole. She

blinked, attempting to steady her stirring head. Her body swayed as though she were still on the raft.

“I—I charmed your steering pole.”

Nya handed Niffred the pole, and he cradled it in his paws as though it were made of glass. “With this pole you will be able to travel upstream with as little effort as you travel—”

Nya wavered then fell, and Erebis caught her.

“Downstream,” she said, gazing up at a hazy Erebis. The river reets, the den, her friends, everything swirled around her. She was sleepy. So sleepy.

“Hoist her onto my back,” she heard Erebis say. “Nya is weak from spell-casting. She needs help—help we cannot give her. We must hurry. The Northwestern Welvish Settlement is not far.”

Welvish settlement? Nya’s stomach pitched, her eyelids flickered, and then she sank into a sea of dark.

Chapter 20 – The Northwestern Welvish Settlement

Seth struggled to keep pace with Erebis's swift strides. The only thing that kept Seth moving his cramped legs was the thought of Nya's suffering. She kept twitching and mumbling panicked, nonsensical phrases. Erebis had called it the Magician's Demise. The longer she remained unconscious, the more likely it was she would awaken with an extreme fear of magic. And neither Seth nor Laar would get on too well if Nya had a magical meltdown.

"Fall behind if you must," Erebis said. "The welves will welcome and guide you. Look for me in the medicine tent."

"Okay," Seth panted. He pulled back, easing into a jog, then a walk. He knew from racing Jeffrey that it was a good idea to keep walking to prevent his muscles from going into spasm. Seth's legs wobbled with every step.

Not a second later, the settlement rose into view. He was still a good three hundred paces away, and even from that distance the place blew his mind.

Within this nightmare of a forest, the enormous, circular area that made up the settlement was like an oasis. The trees behind its ivy-covered archway were straight and healthy, and many of them had houses in their tops that were connected by suspended walkways. On the grounds of the settlement were tents. Lots of tents. There might have been a hundred of them. Some square, some round, and most with colourfully flagged spires. But what boggled Seth most was what surrounded the place. The entire settlement was built within a huge, clear dome. *A force field.* It had to be some sort of force field.

Seth walked, and wheezed, and watched as Erebis reached the settlement's archway. A glossy black bird soared out of the force field and landed next to Erebis. The creatures exchanged words before the raven flew back into the settlement. With one last glance over his shoulder, Erebis dashed after the bird.

"Oh man," Seth said to himself. He wondered what walking through a force field would feel like.

"What is it? Are we there yet? Let me out. I won't stand for this a moment longer—it's undignified."

Seth had almost forgotten that he had put Book in his pack without shrinking him. Maybe Nya didn't hesitate to shrink Book to his more portable size, but Seth found Book's complaints to be more of a burden than his weight. "All right. Don't get your pages in a bunch. I'll let you out," Seth said, pulling Book from his bag. Truth was, Seth was happy to have the company.

"We're at the settlement," Seth said. "Erebis and Nya went on ahead."

"Well, I hope they have comfortable shelves here—Heavens know I deserve a good shelf," Book mumbled. "Though any shelf would be better than that untidy clutter of a bag."

"At least I didn't shrink you," Seth said. He debated whether to tell Book about the force field—they were almost at the ivy archway.

"True. Now, if Nya could only take a lesson in courtesy from you, I dare say—" Book stopped mid-complaint. "The medicine tent, you say? Will she be all right?"

"Let's just say that if the welves can't help her, Nya might never be able to cast your spells again."

“Oh dear,” Book said. “Oh dear.”

Tell me about it, Seth thought as he stood in front of the force field, psyching himself up to pass through it. *No big deal—it’s just a doorway. Totally harmless.*

Before Book had a chance get suspicious, Seth closed his eyes and went for it.

In Seth’s experience of weird entries, passing through that force field was second only to the portal that’d brought him to Laar. It was kind of like walking through the film of a giant bubble. Except instead of being soapy and wet, the force field was pulsing and warm. One second Seth was standing in the dank stench of the forest, and the next he was in the fresh, fragrant air of the welvish settlement.

“I felt that,” Book said. “You know, I’ve been through a settlement dome before. You need not patronize me. I am your sage and experienced elder, and I would appreciate being treat—”

“Shhh, Book. Keep it down, will you? I need to find the medicine tent.” Seth could think of better ways to make an impression on the welves than being seen talking to a book. His being human attracted enough attention. His black mop-top stood out among the welves’ bluish-grey hair.

A tourist without a map, Seth kept walking. They had to stumble upon the medicine tent sooner or later, he figured. The path they were on was shaped in a big semi-circle—the whole place was laid out like that. Most of the paths were in smaller and smaller rings. He and Book had crossed only a couple of intersecting paths, which looked like they led to the dome’s centre. *Like spokes on a wheel.*

“Hello stranger,” someone said before bursting into a fit of giggles. Behind him, three welvish girls stood clinging to each other. One of them waved.

Seth whipped back around.

“Ask them where the medicine tent is,” Book insisted.

“I can find it on my own, Book,” Seth muttered.

“Actually, the medicine tent is pretty tough to find,” came a girl’s voice. It was a welf with chin-length hair, the girl who had waved. “It’s the only tent that’s up in the trees.” She pointed to a tree with a grey tent at its top. “Come on, I’ll take you there.”

Before Seth could protest, the girl started walking. Seth went after her, and the girls left behind broke into another round of giggles.

“Sounds like you’re already popular here, Seth,” Book said.

The blue-haired girl laughed. “We don’t get many visitors.” Seth felt her eyes on him and Book. “I am called Kala, by the way.”

“Oh, um, I’m Seth. And this is Book.”

“I can speak for myself,” Book griped. “You’ll have to excuse him, my dear, he’s still unfamiliar with the ways of this world.”

Kala smiled. “Well, he seems to do quite well—for an outlaw.”

Seth groaned. Just what he needed, to be recognized as a tourist and an outlaw.

“Here we are,” Kala said, stopping by a platform that encircled the base of a tree. “Hop on—it’s an elevator. It operates by a pulley system.”

Seth did so, and closed a gate behind him. With what looked like little effort, Kala then pulled on some strings. The elevator jerked into motion, and began to climb the tall, thick trunk. “So, where are your fellow outlaws, Nya Lunya and Erebis?” she asked.

“How’d you know their names?”

“My great, great grandpa is the chief elder of the settlement. He knew Erebis and Nya once. Erebis is as old as the settlement itself, and Nya was born here. You should have seen how my grandpa danced about our treehouse when he learned they were alive.”

Kala paused, her face crinkling. “Is one of them sick?”

“Nya’s a magician,” Seth said. “She made herself sick by casting strong spells. Gave herself the Magician’s Demise. Have you heard of it?”

Kala broke eye contact and began pulling the elevator strings faster than before. “Yes. Yes, I’m afraid I have.”

The elevator jerked to a halt, and Kala opened the gate for Seth. She walked him over to the two flaps of material that made up the medicine tent entrance. Seth nodded, grabbed a tent flap, and peeked his head inside.

The medicine tent was a flurry of motion. The raven, who Seth now recognized to be Raava, flew around the room, a team of welvish doctors or nurses bustling after her. Nya lay on a table at the centre of the room, Erebis watching over her. She wasn’t twitching anymore, but she was still rambling about potions and spell.

Erebis noticed Seth and strode over. “I believe it best you wait outside,” Erebis said. There was no light in his eyes. “There is nothing you can do for Nya now. Raava and the welves are doing all they can.”

Seth would rather not have been in the tent, anyway. He walked onto the balcony and leaned against the railing. “This isn’t good,” he said to Book.

“She’s a feisty one, that Nya,” Book said. “Do not write her off yet.”

“Our herbalists are very skilled,” Kala said. She came to stand beside Seth.

Seth grunted in response. He didn't want to talk about it. He didn't want to think about it. He sighed and breathed the fresh air. The settlement was so healthy and green. It seemed wrong to feel miserable here. "Why's it so green here?" he asked, though he didn't really care.

"Welves have lived here for ages," Kala said. "We can't make the trees grow bigger, as the elves of old could, but our love and goodwill keep the grounds healthy and fertile. Plants that won't grow anywhere else flourish here. Including the split-leaf valia, the plant used to treat Nya's condition."

There were lots of blue-grey dots below. Welves were going about their normal business, with nothing to worry about than whether the flower arrangement was too low, or whether the glowy orb things lining the paths were evenly spaced. "Why's it so busy?" Seth asked, annoyed by the little grey dots. "What's up with the decorations?"

"Tonight is a New Moon Party. I—I don't suppose you'll be coming?"

"Does it look like I'm in the mood to party?" Even as he said it, Seth regretted his harsh tone. "I mean, if things were different, maybe. Just not tonight."

The tent flaps rustled and Seth found a faded Erebis standing behind him. The wolf was see-through in places. "You may see Nya now," he said. "Although, it would be a good idea to conceal Book."

Seth nodded, undid his backpack, and placed Book inside it. Book didn't utter a single complaint.

Erebis disappeared through the tent flaps, and Seth took a moment to prepare. He tried to tell himself that what mattered was that Nya was alive, that everything would

work out even if she did turn out to be deathly afraid of magic. But he wasn't so sure. He tried to mould his face into something less worried, then opened the medicine tent.

Nya sat upright on the table in the middle of the room. She was trying to stand up, even though the welves around her were trying to make her do the opposite.

Nya saw Seth and smiled. "Seth! Guess what? I can speak Welvish."

"What? Welvish? Oh. How's that work?" So long as she was alert and talking, Seth could not have cared less what language she spoke it. It was all the same to him.

"I'm told Welvish is inborn—it's the strangest thing. It must be what having the gift of tongues is like. Erebis says even my accent is good." She laughed. "Although, I'm still having trouble convincing these helpful welvish herbalists that I'm well enough to stand."

Seth ran over and offered her his arm. *Herbalists—she said herbalists.* But herbalists didn't use magic, just plants.

"Thanks," she said, linking arms with Seth and heaving herself up. "I couldn't let you be the only one to pass out on this journey."

Seth tried to smile. *Still no mention of magic.*

"Do you want to go on the balcony?" Seth suggested. "It's a killer view. You're not going to believe this place."

"Sure." Nya gave him a weird look, raising one eyebrow and lowering the other. "Seth, what is it? I'm okay, aren't I? Is there something you're not telling me?"

Seth looked down. "Of course you're okay. You're already walking—that's amazing."

“Seth, come on. What is it?” Nya stopped walking. “Oh, no. Where’s Book? Is Book okay?”

“It took you long enough to notice my absence!” Book garbled from Seth’s backpack.

Seth and Nya laughed as Book poked his cover out of Seth’s bag. “No matter, Nya,” Book said, shrugging off the offence with his bookmark. “What matters now is that you rest up, and that we ensure you never magically exhaust yourself again.”

Chapter 21 – The New Moon Party

Nya felt lighter, and not simply because Seth supported her elbow with such intent that one of her shoulders sloped higher than the other. The moment she had awakened to find her caring friends near at hand, Nya realized that it did not matter how alike or unlike other welves she was. Erebis, Seth, and Book accepted her. And wolf, human, and book as they were, they were like family.

Of course, it also helped that she could speak Welvish.

“Seth, you really don’t need to support me,” she said. “I’m fine. A little hungry, and a little sleepy, but otherwise I feel great. Honest.”

“I just think you should take it easy for a while. Maybe you should rest up for a day or two.”

“Take it easy? Rest up? What happened to the old Seth?”

“I’m just trying to be reasonable.”

“Seth, with every passing moon, the Fake One gets closer to finding us. We need to keep the advantage of surprise. Tomorrow we will head to the Great City—just as we planned.”

“You’re the same-old strong-minded Nya, all right.” Seth laughed and pulled the tent flaps aside.

From the lofty perch of the medicine tent balcony, Nya had a giant’s view of the settlement. The trees were tall, straight, and strong, with treehouses built at all heights. Suspended walkways led from house to house, each dripping with ribbons and flowers. Vegetable gardens encircled every trunk, fruit orchards lined every pathway, and shimmering over all was a transparent dome of magic.

Nya breathed in the rich air and drew strength from the trees around her. Now more than ever, she was determined to save them.

“The settlement is spectacular,” she said. “And what is that, at the centre?”

“The main bonfire pit,” Raava said, emerging from the tent with Erebis. “Which I must go and light now. Bonfires to light. Sentinels to oversee. Such is the life of a raven.”

“Thank you again, Raava, for healing me.”

“Not at all, little Lunya. Your strength gives hope to us all.” At that, Raava hopped over the balcony railing and streaked to the ground below.

“The bare ground around the bonfire pit is a dance floor,” Erebis said, anticipating Nya’s next question. “Dancing is a very important part of the new moon parties.”

“And a new moon is when the moon isn’t visible, right?” Seth said. “There was a lot of stuff about the phases of the moon in Sedgewick’s research papers. Except aren’t the phases of the moon different here? Aren’t they way shorter?”

“Oh yes,” Erebis said. “The phases of our moons, the length of our years, the flow of time—there are many differences between our world and any other. Every seven days we have a new moon, which is rather convenient for the welves. They do so enjoy their new moon parties.”

“It is beautiful,” Nya said, “but everyone seems a little too preoccupied with celebration, if you ask me.”

“Guilty as charged,” squeaked an unfamiliar voice. It was a shrunken welvish man with a little, pointed cap. Indeed, his cap was the only thing that fit him properly. His robes and his walking stick might have belonged to someone twice his size, and his

ears were large as lart leaves. Even the welf's smile took up more than its share of his kindly face. And standing beside him was a welvish girl who looked to be Nya's age.

"I was gadding about in the forest when I heard," the welvish man said, a little short of breath. "I came as quickly as I could." Plain as night, relief and adoration surfaced in his watery gaze. "Nya Lunya," he said. "What a wonder it is you're okay. I'll try not to get all blubbery on you, but I knew you as a wee, beautiful baby."

The little man tapped his walking stick on the ground, as though this helped him compose himself. "Erebis, old friend, what a joy it is to see you. And Seth, my lad, your reputation precedes you. Welcome. Tonight, you are our honoured guests. I am called Dorfin, chief elder of the Northwestern Welvish Settlement. And this," he said, pointing to the girl beside him, "is my great, great granddaughter Kala."

Kala smiled at Nya and curtsayed. "Nya Lunya, it is an honour. Ravens brought us your story days ago, and already you are something of a legend."

Nya searched Kala for insincerity, but found none. "Thanks," Nya said, not knowing how else to react to a girl who was not taunting her.

Dorfin hobbled over and, with some stretching and reaching, managed to put his arms around Seth and Nya. "Now what do you say we dawdle over to your guesthouse and have some refreshments? You might want to chew on a stir stem. Better than sleep, those are. You'll feel like you've been resting for days."

A suspended walkway connected the medicine tent to the guesthouse. The bridge bounced and swung as they crossed it, reminding Nya of Niffred's raft. Lights sprung up along the walkways, and strange coloured orbs lit up the pathways below. By the time

they reached the guesthouse, there looked to be as many lights in the settlement as stars in the darkening night sky.

The guesthouse was decorated and lit like the other treehouses. Flowers covered the railings, and a yellow banner of a moon framed the door. Yet nothing pleased Nya more than the table of fruits, nuts, and drinks she spied inside.

Seth ran straight for the food table, and Nya was not far behind.

“The food is completely safe,” Dorfin said, patting Seth on the back. “I gather the fairy stories of your world say all kinds of things about elvish foods, but I assure you, welvish fare is both harmless and delicious.” Dorfin giggled. “You should hear what our stories say about human food.”

Seth took a pocketful of stir stems and two fistfuls of nuts, while Nya grabbed some juice, a stir stem, and a wink fruit.

“The dance floor is lit up, the bonfires are ablaze,” Dorfin said. “Tonight is a New Moon Party like no other. Tonight we have much to celebrate.”

The forest floor twinkled. Piccolos sang. It seemed a shame to be up here, when such joyousness was a mere elevator ride away. “We could go down there,” Nya suggested.

Seth whipped his head in her direction. “Are you joking? Nya, tomorrow is a big day for us. Shouldn’t you get some rest?”

She shrugged. “I can rest after. The settlement looks so beautiful, and who knows when I’ll be here again. We needn’t take long—perhaps just a quick look?”

“Excellent idea!” Dorfin twirled his walking stick. “You heard the lady. A quick look, it is. Come along, everyone. Onto the elevator. Out we go.”

The view was as beautiful from the ground as it had been above. Lanterns, candles, and bonfires pulsed all around them. And most intriguing of all were the glowing orbs that hovered along the pathway to the central bonfire. By some magic, the little globes swayed and bobbed in time with the music. Perhaps the magic was in the music, for as the merry warblings of piccolos grew louder, Nya found more and more skip in her step.

Dorfin was all but dancing as he walked. "The idea of the New Moon parties," he said, offering Nya and Kala each a bony elbow, "is to lighten our spirits and our homes during the darkest nights of the moon's phases. Naturally, dancing is as important to the festivities as is light."

Nya had not planned on dancing. But as soon as the giant bonfire and surrounding dance floor were in view, Dorfin tugged at her elbow and hopped around so gleefully that she could not disappoint him. Not that he gave her much chance to. One moment they were standing on the outskirts of the dance floor, and the next Dorfin was twirling her around the bonfire.

All of that whirling and skipping was exhilarating at first. Nya loved how Dorfin leapt freely about, looking upon her affectionately as though she, too, were his great, great granddaughter. She laughed as Dorfin capered and spun her, and she nearly collapsed in hysterics when she saw Kala drag Seth onto the dance floor. His air of panic seemed a more appropriate reaction to a kragem toll-taker than a welvish jig. That image of Seth alone was worth a jaunt on the dance floor.

Still, Nya grew weary of the circling and the spinning. She grew tired of evading glances which reminded her that she was the new welvish girl in town. That she had

somehow been taken away from this very settlement when she was only a baby. That she had slaved, not danced, away her youngest years. Suddenly she did not feel so much like dancing.

Nya motioned to Dorfin that she wanted to rest and he gestured back that he would join her. He smiled, took her hand, and led her off the dance floor, but not without his brow wrinkling first.

Dorfin directed Nya to one of the smaller bonfires, where they took a seat next to Erebis. Nya could tell by how Erebis gazed into the fire that he was in one of his contemplative moods. But that was no matter. His mere presence was comforting, and it was Dorfin who Nya really wanted to speak with.

So many questions haunted her. *So many mysteries Dorfin may be able to solve.*

"Dorfin?" she asked.

"Yes, my dear?" he said, his face already crumpling into a sad smile.

"Why did I not grow up here?"

Dorfin put a wrinkled hand over Nya's. He loved her. She could see that. He loved her unconditionally, in the way that she loved Erebis. Nya lowered her eyes, knowing they could not return his affection. Not yet.

"That is a many-sided question, my dear," he said. "The simple answer is that you were taken from us. But I know it is not simple answers you seek."

Dorfin sighed and shifted to better face her. His hand shook a little, and his eyes betrayed his concern for her, or the conversation to come.

"You were, indeed, born here," he said. "Your parents, however, were not. Your mother Nyala, and your father Harwyn were born in a settlement to the south. They

moved here so that your mother could work for me, as my advisor. Your parents were like family to me, and I loved them as I love my own children. Naturally, I was overjoyed when they asked me to be your caretaker in the event that anything should ever happen to them.”

Nya felt tears simmering under her lids. *Nyala and Harwyn Lunya.*

Dorfin smiled though his own tears. “But you, my dear, had your own ideas. Even as a tiny infant, you chose Erebis as your protector. He and his packs worked with your parents as peacekeepers, and so his visits here were many and frequent. Oh, how you would cry each time he left the settlement!”

Nya smiled and leaned back a little, so that her head rested against Erebis’s side.

“But your parents were much more than peacekeepers, Little One,” she heard Erebis say.

“Oh, Heavens, yes,” Dorfin agreed. “Harwyn was a shepherd of fair-trade, and Nyala was a powerful healer.”

Nya gasped.

Dorfin laughed and dabbed his eyes with his sleeve. “I know! Imagine my surprise upon hearing that not only had my little Nya Lunya grown up safe, in Erebis’s care, but also with a desire to heal the world around her. I gave the poor raven who delivered that news quite the reception. Planted a big old kiss right on her beak!”

Nya could not help but smile. “And what of the day I was taken? How did Erebis and I come to be sold as slaves together?”

“My nightmares have tried to piece it together since the day you disappeared,”

Dorfin explained. "It was fall, eleven years ago. Erebis and his packs were camping outside the settlement, just back from one of their negotiation attempts in the Great City. And whenever Erebis visited, he would take you on a ride through the woods. I don't know who enjoyed those rides more, you or him."

Dorfin swallowed hard, trying to keep the sadness in. "But one horrible day, the day the wolves were enchanted as dogs, you and Erebis did not return. I sent search parties out, in every direction. Years we searched. Years. And nothing eclipses hope as well as time. We assumed that you had died in the wild, or were imprisoned in the Great City. In time, we gave up hope."

"And my parents?" Nya asked. "Why—how did...?"

The bonfire flashed as a boy added wood to the blaze, bringing to light the sorrow etched in Dorfin's old face. "That, my dear, is a twofold story," he said, "and it begins long before your parents came to the Northwestern Welvish Settlement.

"Fifty or so years ago, when I was but a newly elected elder in chief, it came to my attention that our settlement was dividing. We welves are not the celestial beings that our ancestors were, but our unwritten laws decree that we never take more than we need from nature, and that we give back to the land when we can. Some were no longer content to live by these laws. These wayward welves cut down more tree than they needed and built decadent treehouses. They dug gems from the earth and wore these in pomp and vanity."

"I have known such people." Nya said, thinking of the sinians of Mineraltown.

"Yes," Dorfin said, "I'm sure you have. And as the sinians have their Fake One, the wayward welves had a self-proclaimed leader by the name of Lord Fel. The wayward

welves agreed to leave our settlement, and determined to set sail for the Nameless Lands. But the conditions of their departure were firm. Lord Fel demanded that they receive half of the settlement's elvish heirlooms—including the first half of the Scroll Stories."

"The Scroll Stories?" Seth said from behind Nya, nearly startling her off her seat. "This Lord Fel guy has the original Scroll Stories?"

Dorfin shifted to accommodate his growing audience. "Yes, Lord Fel and the wayward welves have the first half of the Scroll Stories, the same seven stories that the sinians have copies of."

"And that's what my mother and father went to the Nameless Lands to retrieve," Nya said, though she could reason no further. The trill of the music, the flickerings of light, the shouts of party-goers, suddenly everything clouded her mind. "Why," she said in an unfamiliar whimper. "Why did they need the Scroll Stories?"

Dorfin squeezed her hand, but she took no comfort in it. "For the very same reason that you now journey to the Great City," he said. "Your parents believed that only the printed word of the original Scroll Stories could prove that the sinians had misinterpreted the stories and taken an impostor for a leader. Nya, you are the answer to your parents' calling to bring peace to Laar. They would have been so proud of you."

Tears boiled over Nya's lids, slid down her cheek. Nothing seemed fair in this world anymore. *The good are enchanted or die, while the cruel rule selfishly over all. Is this the world we inherited from the elves?*

Nya was confused, angry. "Why has no one done anything? Why have the welves not done anything about the Fake One?"

Dorfin dabbed his eyes. “As empaths we risk absorbing too much of the pain around us. There is but a small difference between perceiving and receiving. That is why you must learn to focus on the words and magic of your spells, nothing else. If you take on the forests’ burdens you risk meeting your magical demise. Or worse. Strong magic can be fatal to the magician who is too receptive to the suffering that surrounds her.”

Nya shook her head. “But that is also our greatest strength. The trees here are healthy and green, while the forest outside suffers. You have the power to change this world. Why do you not use it?”

“Oh, Nya. This bit of land is only healthy because we continue to live on and tend to it. If we left this place, the land of our settlement would die like any other. To change this world now we would have to challenge the Fake One. Wolves are not fit for war—nor do we believe in it. We will do our part when the time comes. Until then, we wait.”

“You—you wait? And what? Party? How does that make you any better than that Lord Fel you spoke of?”

“Nya, please. We live in peace with Flora and work to save what endangered plants we can. You must see that.”

Nya stood up, disappointment wetting her face. “My friends and I risk our lives to save Laar and you celebrate? How can you celebrate the cosmos when you live in a bubble? I, for one, am tired of waiting. This world is not going to heal itself!”

Nya turned and ran. Away from Dorfin and the dance floor, past blurred fires and glowing orbs. She reached the trunk of the guesthouse and threw herself onto its elevator. Her damp hands nearly slipped with each pull, but she made it to the top. She stood there a moment, looking over the settlement. Breathless and alone.

"You can keep your phantom life, your parties and fun," Nya said. She then stormed into the guesthouse, slammed the entrance and bedroom doors behind her, threw herself onto a bed, and let the sorrow come spilling out.

Shortly thereafter, a soft knock came at the door.

"Go away!" she rasped. "I have nothing more to say to you!"

"All right. Let me know if I can bring you anything."

That wasn't Dorfin. Nya lifted her head. "Seth?"

"Yeah?"

"You can come in."

Seth poked one eye then his head inside the door, as though he thought she might toss something at him.

Nya wiped her eyes and waved him in. "I'm sorry. I thought you were Dorfin."

"Yeah, I saw you run away from the campfire. You okay?"

"No, I'm not okay. For so long I hoped that the welves would accept me—and now I want nothing to do with them. And you know what the worst part is? I'm every bit as bad as they are."

"Don't say that."

"It's true! I should have left Minertown way sooner than I did. I watched the forest grow sick and yet I stayed. Just like the elves in their stupid bubble of a settlement, I stayed in Minertown and did nothing to fight the injustice around me."

"Don't you think you're being a little hard on yourself?" Seth came and sat on the bed beside her. "It's like you said to me at Smoulder Quarry, everything in due time. What if you'd tried to leave Minertown before you knew any magic? You and Erebis could have been killed. And even if you had escaped from Minertown sooner, and safely, you might never have met me. And trust me, I need your help."

Nya hung her head and raised her eyes to Seth. "Really?"

"Are you joking? Of course I need your help. And so do the elves, and so does Laar. But you're wrong about the elves, Nya. They're good, peaceful people. It's cool that they don't want to go to war with the Fake One. You should respect that."

Now that she reflected on it, even the free sinians had not managed to challenge the Fake One. The bed seemed to sink a little under her weight.

"You know what else?" Seth said. "You may have the same elvish blood as the elves, but you're totally different from anyone else here. I mean, come on. You're a sorceress healer and a Great Foretold One!"

"I'm not a sorceress yet."

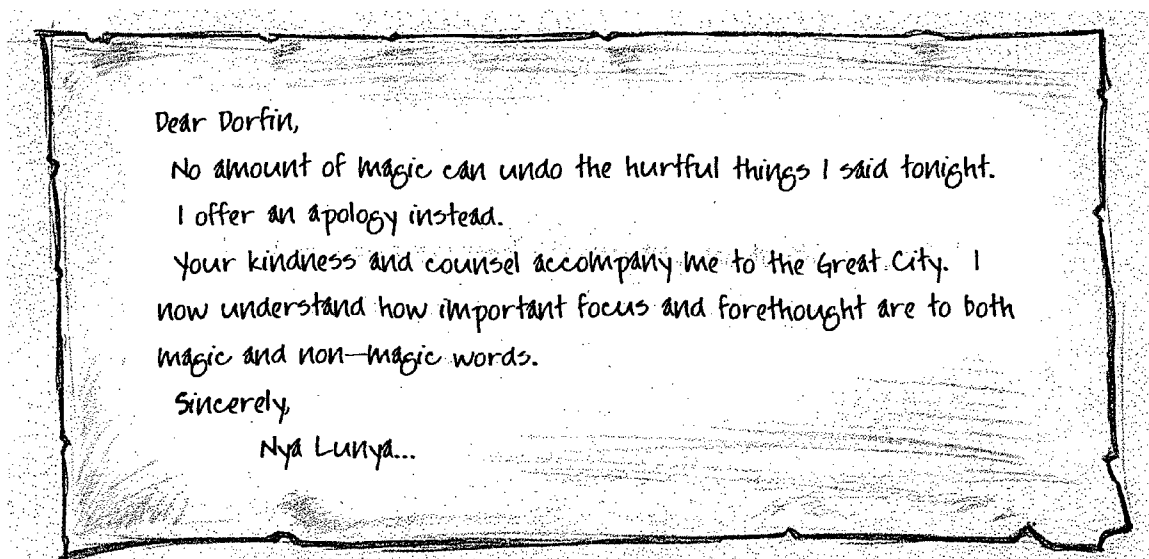
"Well, all I know is that it's Nya the magician who's going to save my butt tomorrow, not some random elvish girl who can dance a jig."

Nya smiled then pulled at the sheets on her bed. "I was so hard on Dorfin. I practically blamed him for all the troubles of Laar. I cannot go back down there, not now. And we leave before dawn."

"This has been a crazy day for you. Dorfin will understand. Just write him a letter. I sometimes write my mom letters after we argue—you can say everything perfectly that way."

"Thanks, Seth. I'll do that." She grabbed a quill and some parchment from the dresser in her room. "I hope I remember how to write. It's been thousands of moons since I've written with more than a stick and some soil."

Yet the motions of drawing ink across paper came to her with as much ease and enjoyment as speaking Welvish had.



"This is great, Nya," Seth said after reading her note. "Geez, even your spelling's perfect."

"Really?" Nya was delighted—until Erebis's glowing eyes appeared in the doorway and she saw what he held in his mouth.

Erebis dropped Nya's herb belt and Seth's staff on the floor.

"Collect your things," Erebis said. "We must leave the settlement at once. The ravens spotted sinian soldiers and a pack of dogs a half day's journey from here. The dogs have picked up our trail."

Chapter 22 – The Bane of Old Elf Grove

It helped having a powerful wolf and a hopeful sorceress to protect him, but being back in the forest at night was still pretty freaky. The trees themselves scared Seth almost as much as the thought of things jumping out of them. Seeing the landscape changing, rotting, from Niffred's raft had been nothing like walking among these trees. Nothing at all like it.

The forest that once reminded Seth of home now seemed like a giant, failed biology experiment. Branches buckled and wilted, and the moss that hung from them was now a mouldy-smelling slime that clung to Seth's hair and clothes. The trees' bark scared him most, though. Sores festered on every trunk, sap oozing and gleaming in the light of Erebis's eyes. The small amount of light they traveled by painted a dim impression of carnage, leaving Seth's imagination to do the rest.

And Seth was pretty sure all the stir stems he'd eaten were making him jittery.

Seth closed the gap between himself and Erebis's foggy form, stretching out a hand. Something about the wolf's thick, warm fur made him feel safe.

"Erebis, how long 'til we pass Forestrytown?" Seth whispered.

"Not long. I can hear its machines. We should have a safe view of it from up here."

Not long. That was good. Seth just wanted to get Forestrytown behind them—one less hazard to worry about. But 'not long' can seem like forever when you're walking in the dark.

Seth needed to do something to ease his nerves. He was under Erebis's strict orders to whisper, and only when necessary. He was pretty sure he had already broken

that rule several times. Given the creepy scenery, that didn't leave many options. The way Seth saw it, he could listen to the sounds of the forest or listen to his own thoughts, which were wondering whether Nya's magic would hold up in the Great City, and whether his mom and dad had planned his funeral yet.

Okay, snapping twigs and crunching leaves. Seth made most of these noises himself. He felt like a total klutz walking next to Erebis and Nya—they were much lighter on their feet than he was. It was impossible to watch where he stepped, so every step risked giving them away.

The odd raven call overhead. Seth loved that sound. It was soft, throaty, like a crow with a cold. Sometimes it came from ahead of them, sometimes beside or behind. It reminded Seth that he was in good hands, claws, paws, or whatever. He wasn't alone.

There were lots of other, more distant sounds, too. The nearly faded rush of water, and the strange cries of night creatures. Seth had thought he heard an owl or something like it a ways back, but all the other sounds were unfamiliar. There was a new sound, too. It was a dull, rhythmic clunking. It was getting louder.

The machines of Forestrytown. Erebis mentioned machines.

Seth glanced behind him to make sure Nya was still there. She was and she smiled, but he could tell she was also distracted by the clunking.

A few minutes later, a light became visible through the trees. It was a ways off, and it was hard to make out, but this was no candle in a cottage window. It was some kind of bright, white flood light. And it was shining on something huge and metal.

"What in Laar is that?" Nya whispered, looking to Erebis in alarm.

Erebis inhaled sharply. "It smells of both life and death. I do not know what it is, though I fear I know where it is."

"Well, whatever that machine is doing, it's something horrible."

Nya was right, something was up. Seth looked back to the floodlit machine. The faint buildings of Forestrytown stretched behind it. Right where they were, right around that machine, were the mouldiest and droopiest trees they'd smelled or seen yet. And Seth was willing to bet that machine was responsible.

Nya clenched one hand into a fist. "We must get closer and see what that machine is doing."

"If we approach the machine, we risk being seen," Erebis said.

"Yes, but..." Nya trailed off. "Our first objective when we get inside the Great City is to awaken the wolves, right?"

"Right," Seth said. If it had been up to him, freeing the prisoners would have come first, but it made sense to arrange for reinforcements as soon as possible. That way, if he and Nya were captured, the wolves could return the favour.

"Well, how do we know what to look for? How do we determine what the Fake One used to enchant the wolves and how to destroy it?"

Neither Seth nor Erebis said anything this time. Nya went on, "What if that machine down there can give us some answers? Or clues, even."

"Perhaps it can." Erebis dulled his eyes, directed them at Seth. "How do you feel about the prospect of going down there?"

"Uh." He didn't know how he felt. It was risky, no doubt about that. But maybe that machine did have some answers.

“Uh. Maybe we could use the invisibility potion,” Seth suggested. “You pre-made them, right? If we used those you could save your energy—for now.”

“No, I only have two vials of *Imperceptible* potion. We need to save them. However, I could do a spell to make us soundless.”

Erebis gave Seth another loaded look, telling him to do what he felt was right, to listen to his gut. So that’s what he did.

“Okay,” Seth said, opening his backpack and grabbing Book. “I’m in, but only if Nya promises not to overdo it.”

“She does tend to ignore her magical limitations, doesn’t she?” Book said. “Nothing my expertise cannot solve.” Book ruffled his pages and got down to it. The only thing he liked better than complaining was showing off.

“May I recommend the *Select Soundlessness* spell?” he said. “It allows those under its spell to be heard only by others who are also under its spell. So, unlike when I am shrunken to a dreadfully lonely and silent state—”

Nya cleared her throat. She was all business tonight.

“We’ll be able to talk to each other without being heard by outsiders,” Seth finished for Book.

“Quite right, Seth. It’s a relatively undemanding spell.” Book paused for dramatic effect. “So long as Nya is willing to accept my guidance.”

“I’m fine everyone, really.” Nya blew a strand of hair out of her eyes, grabbed a few dried leaves from her belt, and began the spell. “Quiet, hush. Words between us sound among us, sound of naught to others...”

It took her a couple times to get it right—if only because Book interrupted with ‘guidance’ whenever Nya got to a crucial part of the spell.

“Got it,” she said at last. “Come on, let’s head down there.”

Getting down there wasn’t as easy as it looked. The slope to Forestrytown was steep and rocky; sure-footing was a hard find. When Seth wasn’t slipping on loose dirt, he was sidestepping fallen clumps of mould-slime. The first clump he stepped on nearly sent him on an express trip down the hill. He shouted as he caught himself. *Good thing for that spell.*

As they got closer to the floodlights, the clunking sound changed. It grew louder, more complicated, and it crept Seth right out. He could handle the pounding clunks of metal on metal, but the long sucking sounds that followed each clunk and made the earth tremble were just plain disturbing.

Erebis stopped and motioned for them to stay behind a shrub. There were about ten metres of trees, still, between the shrub and the machine. There were plenty of shadows to meld into. This would be the perfect viewing spot.

No one seemed to want to look first. Not because they were afraid of being seen, but because they were afraid of what they would see.

Whatever. Might as well be me. Seth gave Nya and Erebis a bleak nod and, from the safety of the shadows, moved to see the machine.

It stood in the middle of a ring of impossibly huge trees—the biggest Seth had seen. Some of the trees’ roots were dug up, hacked off, and attached to the machine by long suction tubes. A giant, clear, tube of a pump made up the machine’s belly—and it

was filled with the green stuff it sucked from the tree roots. And there were sparks.

Green sparks flew up and down the pump. Seth spun to face Nya and Erebis.

“Those sparks, they’re like Felina’s. That machine, it’s—it’s sucking energy.”

Nya bobbed her head, stunned, and Seth noticed she was gripping his sleeve.

“Life-force,” she said. “The machine is draining the forest of its life-force. That’s why everything’s dying.”

“This is the Old Elf Grove,” Erebis said. His voice was soft, shaken, but there was an undertone of anger to it. Seeing his expression, Seth understood why. This place had special meaning for Erebis. Just as he’d done at Smoulder Quarry, Erebis stretched out his front legs and bowed to the ring of oversized trees.

“The elves used to convene here to discuss matters of import to Laar,” Erebis explained. “They were not magicians themselves, but rather guardians of magic for the ages. Yet magic infused every bit of the elves’ being, flowed in their blood such that what they willed would be. And so the trees here grew bigger and stronger than elsewhere. Their roots stretch deep into the earth for millions of acres around, connected to all things that grow in the soil above. If one wanted to extract manna—energy or life-force, as you call it—from the very roots of the forest, this would be the place to do it. And that is what’s being done.”

Seth and Nya stood in silence for a moment, soaking this in.

“Roots,” Nya eventually muttered, and she turned to examine the machine again.

“Yes, that’s it! Look over there—at those barrels, stacked by the guard.”

“**ROOT LIQUOR**,” Seth read. “Yeah, so?”

“So, that is how the Fake One controls the sinians! Don’t you see? The sinians haven’t been enchanted at all—they’ve been poisoned!”

Chapter 23 – The Machine

Nya's mind was reeling, but it was all coming together now.

"Okay, let me get this straight." Seth tugged at a fistful of hair. "The wolves were enchanted, but the sinians are being poisoned?"

"Yes!" Nya did not know where to start. "Remember I told you about my Master Wrought and how I fed him things that made him kinder?" She didn't wait for a response. "Well, whatever I fed him acted as an antidote—and antidotes work on poisons, not enchantments."

"Of course," Erebis said.

"Good Heavens," Book added.

"There's more," Nya said. "Guess what Wrought's favorite food is? I'll give you a hint: there were orchards full of them by Watertown."

Erebis dropped his head in realization of what she was saying. Seth still stared at her, puzzled.

"Yearn fruit," she said. "The same fruit that grew abundantly by Watertown worked as an antidote to the root liquor Wrought drank. Yearn fruit must have been one of Watertown's primary food sources—and that must be why the sinians there were evacuated and imprisoned. They couldn't be poisoned. The root liquor didn't work on them because they were eating its antidote daily!"

Understanding flared in Seth's eyes, followed by anger.

"Who is the Fake One kidding?" he said. "He can't keep this up. Look at this place. Everything's dying. He can't make root liquor forever. And when those sinians come to, you better believe they're going to be pissed off!"

“We have to do something,” Nya said. Stopping that machine would not save the forest, but it would prevent it from doing further damage. “We could drain those barrels of root liquor, to start.”

“No,” Seth said. “That’s only a temporary solution and it might give us away—we don’t want the Fake One to know someone’s going up against him. We need to wreck that machine. Gum up the works somehow, make it look like it broke on its own.”

“Yes, and leave the barrels! The way sinians drink root liquor, those barrels won’t supply Mineraltown and Forestrytown for long, anyhow.” Nya put her hand on Erebis’s haunches. “Can we, Erebis? Can we break the root liquor machine?”

Erebis smiled. “This is not my decision to make, but I believe sabotaging that machine is an excellent idea. It must look like an accident.”

Nya knew she would need Book’s cooperation on this—and she also knew just how to get it. “What do you reckon, Book? What’s the best spell for wrecking that monstrous machine?”

Flattered by Nya’s request for advice, Book wasted no time taking stock of their magical options. Nya could not help but be impressed.

“Chapter 3, ‘*Undoinqs*,’ might be helpful,” he mused, turning to it. “There’s the *Sismantle* spell, page 73. No, that would be too suspicious. The *Halting* spell would only stop the machine for two, three hours at most. The *Breaking* spell on page 75 could crack that pump. But that’s too obvious—glass doesn’t just break on its own. Unless—unless a tree branch broke the glass for us.”

“Book, that’s perfect! You’re a genius!” Nya cried.

“Oh, it’s nothing. Just doing my job,” he said in a tone that was not quite as humble as his words.

Nya shifted Book under Erebis’s eyes so she could read page 75. The spell looked simple enough where equipment and ingredients were concerned. It only required one physical item to break. A twig would do. Yet, as she read on, Nya realized that the spell also required extraordinary mental concentration. The moment she broke the stick, a tree branch of her choosing would also break. And then it was up to her to direct its fall.

If something went wrong, if she did a poor job of directing the branch and its fall appeared more than happenstance, she mightn’t have a second chance.

“I don’t know if I can—”

“You can do it, Nya,” Book said. “As I am meant to help you, you have been called to save Flora.”

“Thanks, Book,” she whispered. *For Flora, then.*

“Do you want another stir stem?” Seth offered.

“No, thank you.” Nya laughed. “Awake is one thing, focused is another.”

She skimmed the spell *Breaking*. The altering of a spell’s words or passage to suit her needs had always been a strength of Nya’s.

Remember what Dorfin said, block everything out but the magic. Nya knit the din of the machine and the forest’s suffering into the deepest threads of her mind, collected her thoughts, and began.

Break, fracture, sever, split. Tree Branch, fall where I see fit. Branch, when you break else in stride, ’til I fix it let it bide.

Nya held the twig out before her, envisioning energy flowing between it and the large branch she had chosen to break. She snapped the twig in half and, after hearing an earsplitting crack, used her index finger to guide the great branch. It was heavy, too heavy for her mind to hold. She missed.

Think fast. The tree branch crashed to the ground and, with but a moment's hesitation, Nya focused all her being into using the branch's bounce to launch it back at the pump. Her plan worked. Glass shattered everywhere, and a cascade of green, sparking life-force flowed from the tank. The machine heaved one last thunderous clunk before collapsing to the ground.

"Nice one!" Seth yelled over the ruckus.

Erebis's eyes glowed with congratulations and Book's soft cover formed into what very much resembled a smile. "Well done, Lunalya," he whispered, "well done."

But there was not time to rejoice. A guard appeared from behind the machine, jumping over rivulets of life-force. He stopped, gawked at the broken root liquor machine, lifted a horn from his sash and blew. Two long blows then a short echoed off the hillside.

"An alarm," Erebis said, his ears perking up. "More guards are on their way. We must head off at once."

Nya groaned. The hill looked much higher from the bottom.

"Do you want to borrow my staff? For support?"

"No thank you, Seth."

"Here, give me Book. I'll put him in my backpack."

“Thanks,” she said. Really, it was carrying her own weight that Nya was concerned about.

Nya had thought getting down the hill was tricky. She clambered up it, Erebis pushing her from behind. Every fibre of her being throbbed, but she had done it. She had blocked out distractions as Dorfin told her she must, and she had broken that wretched machine.

Nya reached the hill’s summit and plopped to the ground beside Seth, out of breath. It was a dismal view from those heights, and the wash of red leaking from the horizon shed no light on her spirits. That first glow of morning only highlighted what lay beyond Elf Grove and the buildings of Forestrytown. Large, brown patches scarred the land, completely bereft of life.

“It’s been clear cut,” Seth said. “Those stumps go on forever.”

Erebis’s muzzle rested on Nya’s shoulder. “When we reach the Great City, you will see what has become of those trees. We have done all we can for now.”

Seth picked up a rock and pitched it down the hill. “How can the people of Forestrytown live next to this? How could anyone?”

“That Lord Fel, the welf Dorfin told us about, would feel right at home here,” Nya scoffed. She held onto Erebis’s leg and pulled herself up, dizzying as she did so. She could not have those stumps within view any longer. “Those stumps are so huge,” she said. “They must have taken thousands of years to grow.”

Erebis growled. “We must keep moving,” he said. “Even if the guards believe the machine broke by accident, they will search the area as a precaution. Come, we will find a safe place to rest for a couple hours.”

Nya's feet dragged and her eyelids sagged. *As though I'd drunk a capful of Sleep for the Weary.*

"I will carry you," Erebis said, nudging Nya over to his side and stooping so she could crawl onto his back. "With practice, strong magic will prove less and less tiring."

Too sleepy to worry about the concern in Erebis's voice, Nya drooped forward and draped her arms round his neck. "Please don't let me oversleep," she yawned.

"I won't."

"I know," she said, the gentle bob of Erebis's step already lulling her to sleep.

"You never do."

Chapter 24 – Toward the Great City

The floor was checkered black and white, like some old fifties diner. Erebis on Seth's left side. Nya on his left. They were walking down a long, narrow hall. Circles of light shone on the floors. Stepping on squares, walking on circles.

Seth, Nya, and Erebis walked into a giant room and stopped. Black statues all around them, white statues across from them. They were on a chess board. And they were the missing pieces.

Nya and Erebis walked to an empty square. Seth did the same. All lined up. Ready to play. Snickering came from the other side of the board, from a piece hidden by a pawn. The white king laughed, taunted them.

Nya glanced over her shoulder, smiled, then took a step forward. In this game, black went first.



Seth figured a couple hours of sleep were better than no sleep. Even so, Seth's yawns were so fierce that he'd probably have done a face-plant by now if he hadn't had his staff. Not only was the thing practically propping him up, its rhythmic thudding of the ground was keeping him alert. Or awake, in any case.

Hope the ground's the only thing I have to hit with it today.

Seth reached around to one of the outer pockets of his backpack and pulled out a stir stem. The sour juice alone warded off sleepiness. Though Seth suspected the blast of adrenaline he got from the mere thought of having to fight today had something to do with it. This was one day he needed to be alert.

Seth had both anticipated and dreaded the day they would hit the Great City ever since he'd seen its deformed buildings in Erebis's vision. And now today was that day.

It reminded him of how Halloween had rolled around after weeks of waiting to investigate Sedgewick's disappearance. Halloween hadn't exactly gone as planned.

Hopefully getting into—and out of—the Great City does.

It didn't help the nerves much that the plan was for Erebis to leave them at the outskirts of the Great City. After that, Seth, Nya, and Book would be on their own. Seth knew Nya and Book could handle themselves—last night they'd worked well together, better than ever. It was his own part he wasn't so sure of. It wasn't like he knew any magic or had inside knowledge of the Fake One and his palace.

Hopefully the 'stay his staff' part of the seventh scroll story turns out to be true.

Being Nya's personal cheering squad was fine with Seth.

The familiar, throaty call of a raven drifted down through the trees, and Seth saw Raava circling the skies. She dipped within the cover of the treetops and dropped something beige from her bill. A smoky tail drifting behind it, the beige thing fluttered right into Nya's hand.

Nya frowned at the folded piece of paper and slid her finger under its crescent moon-imprinted wax seal. She stopped walking, unfolded the note, and held it out so that she and Seth both could both read it.

Dearest Nya,

I must be brief if Raava is to deliver this before you reach the Great City. Your letter put my spirit at ease. I hope to return the favour.

I have given much consideration to all that you said, and perhaps you are right. Perhaps those of us the cosmos has not yet called to action must seek out ways to do our part.

*If you need us, if we can be of any help, give word. The
Northwestern Welsh Settlement is forever at your service.*

Wishes of vigor and victory to you and Seth.

*With love and admiration,
Grandpa Dorfin*

Love from me, too!

Kala

"Look, Seth. He signed it Grandpa Dorfin!"

"I told you he'd understand," Seth said, trying to sound cheerful.

Nya must have read right through him. "Oh, Seth, I'm sorry. I forgot about your grandfather. I'm sure he won't always expect you to call him by his proper name."

"Nah. It's cool. It's not that. It's just the thought of him, you know? I keep picturing Sedgewick curled up in a filthy dungeon with, like, rats and a metal bed. I could find him like that today. I need to prepare myself for whatever we might see."

"Yes. It's difficult to guess what horrors are hidden behind the Great City's wall." Nya folded Dorfin's note and tucked it into her belt. "Come on. We had better catch up with Erebis."

Erebis was only about twenty paces ahead, but even in that distance the trees had begun to thin out. It wouldn't be long now. They were almost at the forest's edge.

"We're almost there, aren't we?" Seth said, shielding his eyes from the sun.

"We're going to separate soon."

"Yes." Erebis lowered his head, but kept walking.

"I knew it," Seth said, his hand finding the acorn tied around his neck.

“This is as good a place as any to part ways.” Erebis sighed, stopping so that Seth and Nya stood on either side of him. “Once you get past the wall, go straight to the palace—it is the largest and most heavily guarded building. Begin your search on the top floor and work your way down. The prison is in the palace basement. If you have not been successful in awakening the wolves by the time you reach the prison, release its prisoners. This should provide distraction enough for you to find Seth’s grandfather and escape.”

Seth was glad to see Nya looking so calm, because all of this plan talk had his stomach doing some serious acrobatics.

“You are the true Great Foretold Ones,” Erebis said. “The will of this world is on your side.”

Erebis turned to Seth and bowed. “Seth, be true of heart. Take no action that is contrary to your nature and you will triumph.”

Erebis turned to rest his head on Nya’s shoulder, “Little One, you have every bit the power and purpose of the moon. Use it well.”

Seth gulped down the lump that formed in his throat. This was it. This was the end of their travels with Erebis. When they saw him again it would be in failure or success—and Seth prayed it would be in success.

Nya hugged Erebis—that was all the motivation Seth needed to do the same. He flung his arms around the wolf’s warm neck, and felt it grow solid as he did so. *Guide and protect.* That was exactly what Erebis had done for him and Nya. And though he wasn’t able to guide them into the Great City, Seth knew that some part of Erebis would see them through to the end—whatever that was.

Seth and Nya finally let go. Even in the bright light of morning, Erebis's eyes glowed with encouragement. But he said nothing more. He simply turned and strode back toward the settlement, his silhouette evaporating with the morning mist.

As he watched the last traces of Erebis disappear, Seth noticed the distant crashings of waves for the first time. *The ocean*. The very thought of it made him perk up. He felt that much closer to home.

"I hear it too," Nya said. She began to walk toward the sound, hypnotized by it. "I've never seen the ocean before."

"Well then, this will practically be a vacation for you."

"Oh, right." She laughed. "About as much a vacation as your trip to Laar has been."

"You know, it kinda has been—in a way. Parts of it. If I don't get sucked through a portal the second we find Sedgewick, maybe we should even go swimming."

"I would love that! Niffred made it look like so much fun."

Seth smiled to himself. "He did, didn't he?"

The trees petered out, and Seth and Nya soon found themselves amid the last row of trees. They stood there overlooking the endless, blue ocean and the smear of grays and browns before it. Any hint of a smile slid from Seth's face. *The Great City*. Its dingy buildings and enclosing wall smothered the coastline, a nasty stain on what would once have been a beautiful view.

Even from that distance and masked by the smog, most of the Great City's buildings appeared crooked. The roofs and chimneys leaned this way or that, as though each building had given way to one gust of wind or another. *Rome wasn't built in a day*.

That was what Seth's mom said whenever he was impatient or too into timing things.

Seth laughed to himself, blowing out his nose. Maybe Rome hadn't been built in a day, but the Great City sure looked as though it had been. And somewhere in that Frankenstein of a city was Seth's grandfather.

Only then did Seth notice something in the water—something he had dismissed as a building before. It wasn't a building, though. It was a ship.

"Do you see what I see? The ship? What's that all about? Why would the Great One need a boat?"

Nya's big eyes got even bigger. "I don't know," she said. "Maybe the Fake One has greater plans than ruling Laar. Or maybe that's not his ship at all."

Seth's stomach started with the circus acts again. Nya's reaction to the boat made him anxious. He didn't want to dwell on it—he couldn't. *I'm not getting any braver, here.*

"What do you say we grab Book and do this thing?" Seth said, hoping his upbeat tone didn't sound too forced.

Nya reached into her belt and took out two vials of purple liquid. She passed one of them to Seth, a grin creeping into her eyes.

She sucked in a big breath. "I say cheers to that."

Chapter 25 – The Wall

Nya was having a difficult time convincing Book that the purple *Imperceptible* potion would evaporate on contact—and without discolouring his cover.

“Swear,” Book cried, “swear to me, Nya, that your own pinky is not besmirched.”

“I swear. I promise.”

“I’m looking at it right now, Book,” Seth vouched. “It’s totally normal.”

“Oh, very well. But be quick about it. I don’t want to know when—”

Nya tapped a droplet of the purple liquid onto Book’s cover, and he squealed like a river reet pup.

“Am I besmirched?” Book cried. “I can’t very well appear besmirched if I’m invisible, can I? What happens when it wears off? What if a stain appears then?”

“Book, we can see you now,” Seth cut in, much to Nya’s relief. “It’s just like the *Select Soundlessness* spell, except we’re the only ones who can hear or see you now.

And I’m telling you, your cover is not stained.”

“You’re certain I’m fine? And you’re certain Nya’s finger is pristine?”

“Yes. I’m certain,” Seth insisted. “What part of ‘Imperceptible’ don’t you get?”

“Thank Heavens! A stiff spot on this supple leather cover would be a tragedy, indeed.”

Nya rolled her eyes skywards. Book accepted whatever Seth said as truth, but had a habit of listening to Nya without hearing her.

“I think the front gate is our only way in,” Nya said to Seth. Seth followed her gaze to the massive wall. Now he saw where the massive, old growth trees near

Forestrytown had gone. They had been used to build that monstrous wall. There was no getting over that thing.

“Agreed,” Seth said. “Front gate it is.” There were swarms of armed guards lining the top of the wall, and only two at its base, one on either side of the gate.

“The front gate?” Book yelped. He made a sound like he was clearing his non-existent throat, composing himself. “Erebis did say that Fake One collects and values books of magic, didn’t he?”

“So the story goes,” said Seth.

“Then what are we waiting for?”

Nya shook her head. “Come on, then. Let’s head off.”

“One sec.” Seth peeled off his backpack. “I’m going to ditch the pack—it’ll only weigh me down, and I figure we won’t need the cooking supplies from here on in. The only gear we need now is Book.”

“How right you are,” Book boasted. “How right you are.”

It was not what Nya had expected, leaving the forest’s edge. With every step she felt her legs and her spirits strengthen, her senses sharpen. Dorfin had been right. She had taken in much more of the suffering around her than was good for her, let the woods that once nourished her weaken her. *From henceforth, I will block out all disturbances, concentrate.* Much more than her own welfare depended on it.

Nya passed a boulder and saw a black thing flit across it. Thoughts of kragem toll-takers flashed through her mind, images of herself and Seth as statues. But as quickly as she had seen it, she realized what the black thing was.

“Um, Seth? There’s something about us that’s still visible—our shadows.” She had been so intent on vanishing their clothes and effects that she had completely forgotten about their shadows.

Seth scuffled to a stop. “What do we do?”

“Nothing, I guess.” Nya was still trying to fully understand their predicament. “Anything that’s a part of us vanishes when we drink the potion, anything that’s not must be splashed with it. But a shadow is neither an organic being nor a physical thing—”

“And is therefore resistant to potions and spells,” Book finished.

“Oh, man. You’re right.” Seth puffed out his cheeks like a witmunk with a mouthful of nuts, then exhaled slowly. “At least it’s morning and our shadows will keep shortening until noon—or midday. I mean, even the moon casts shadows here, right?”

“Right,” Nya said, impressed with Seth’s positive attitude. “All we have to do is veer away from the gate, the guards, and the sawgulls on the top of those lookout towers, then slink back along the wall in its shadow.”

“Then what?” Seth asked.

“Then we wait for someone to go through the gate so we can sneak in with them.”

It was not until they were waiting within the wall’s shadow that Nya realized how flawed her plan was. The longer they waited, the less time they would have in the Great City while they were still invisible. They had already spent a fair amount of time getting down here. *And Heavens know how much longer we will wait for an escort through the gates.* They only had a couple of hours left before patches of them began to reappear, betraying their every movement as leaves betray the direction of a breeze.

Waiting. She had pictured this day many times, practiced it in her mind, but not once had it been like this. She had envisioned today all spell-casting and guard-dodging, but those parts were still to come.

Nya shook her head, reproaching herself. Here she was watching the shadows shorten, while Seth stood steadfast, eyes fixed to the northern horizon. Indeed, the only time he tore his eyes from it was to utter the odd heartening comment to her or Book. His doggedness became her own, and she closed her eyes, picturing their day anew.

“I see something,” Seth said. “Coming down from the forest.”

Nya opened her eyes, running them along Seth’s outstretched arm, following the line of his finger. A dark spot was moving toward them. Nya strained her eyes. It was a sinian, likely coming from Forestrytown, and he was driving a double dog cart.

Dogs. If that dog cart was going to get them past the wall, Nya needed to keep those dogs from sniffing them out. “Book, I need a spell to keep dogs from smelling us. Turn to the section in chapter five on fooling the senses. There’s a dog cart fast-approaching—and we cannot afford to miss it.”

Book flipped to page 167. “May I recommend *Scent Switch*? It should do the trick.”

“Yes.” Nya’s finger floated down the page. “Well done, Book. This is perfect.” She lifted a flap of her belt and pulled out a pinch of dried dullenberry. *It’s lucky I have this ingredient at all.* Dullenberries were poisonous when eaten—only a magician would know of their magical properties.

Nya picked up a pinch of dirt, mixed it with the dullenberries in the palm of her hand, and focused her mind on mingling the two ingredients.

“Hurry, Nya,” Seth warned. “I’m guessing you’ve got about ten seconds here.”

Nya knew better than to break concentration and acknowledge him. To her mind, in that moment, all that mattered was the ingredients, the magic, and her words.

“Scent switch,” she said. “Powders mix. Touch you, take your scent.”

“Five more seconds...”

“Got it!” she said. Seth held Book out for Nya, and she sprinkled the powder over each of them before rubbing some on herself. “We should smell only of dullenberries and dirt now,” she said, sniffing her arm. “Just in time.”

The cart swung by, and Nya jumped, kicking up as little dust as possible. “Mind your shadow,” she said as Seth leapt beside her. Their shadows melded with that of the cart, and neither the dogs nor the driver noticed the stowaways.

Whatever cargo the sinian was delivering was making a great deal of clatter. Nya peered through a crack in the slats—and could not believe what she saw. Jostling around in the cart were parts of the root liquor machine. Fragments of the pump stuck up from a bed of hay, and tubes draped over the cart’s sides.

Seth saw it too. “It’s the life-force sucker, the root liquor machine,” he said.

“That’s what the cargo is.”

“Well how do you like that?” Book said. “Sounds like we wrote our own ticket into the Great City.”

The dogs were slowing down, anticipating a stop at the gates. This was the first time since Minertown that Nya had seen a slave dog. She had always thought them noble, but knowing there were wolves trapped within them made their servility all the more brutal.

“Good boy, good girl,” Nya coaxed. She knew they could not hear her, though she could have sworn she saw their ears prick up. While the wolves within them may have sensed a presence, the dogs detected nothing.

The tower leaned over them now, and the cart came to a creaking halt.

“State your reason for entering the Great City,” barked a guard. A second guard encircled the cart, examining the machine parts—and nearly stepping on Nya’s foot in the process.

“I’m to deliver machine parts for inspection by order of the Great One himself,” came the driver’s jumpy reply.

The first guard cast the driver a distrusting look then stepped into the booth at the foot of the towering gates to check some parchment. Nya’s heart boomed in her ears.

What if the guard does not let us through? Or if she examines the cart more closely?

The guards of Minertown were temperamental—how hard a time they gave any given person was entirely mood-dependent. *What if the palace guards are the same?*

The first guard reemerged from the booth, looking disappointed. “You may pass,” she spat. “But you’re to take those goods right to His Greatness’s workshop, and return straightaway. No tarrying, no sightseeing. Understood?”

The cart driver bobbed his head so violently Nya thought it might detach itself.

“Good. Eighth building down Palace Road—on your left.” The second guard jabbed his spear into the earth three times then raised it high, signaling the gate controllers above. “No sightseeing,” he mimicked.

The gate moaned into motion, its giant, spiked doors swinging inward. The driver lost no time cracking his whip. He was as anxious as Nya was to escape the guards' searching glares.

Sharp cries filled the air as a flock of sawgulls took wing from the towers, circling over the cart as it lurched forward. Her hand finding the belt pocket with shock, her feet keeping pace with the cart, Nya surveyed the enclosing cityscape in horror. Save the commotion of the birds, not a being stirred or grew here. It was all nailed slats of wood, without window, adornment, or care. Buildings rose around her, boxing her into a giant maze of a coffin. Nya drew a deep, steadying breath.

There is nothing good or alive about this place.

Chapter 26 – The Fake City

As far as Seth could see, there was nothing great about the Great City. It was just a bunch of shoddy buildings—not at all the crowded metropolis he had imagined. The only people who seemed to live here were sawgulls and guards. *Nothing we didn't expect. Everything's under control.* Or so Seth tried to convince himself. And he was doing an okay job of it until he turned to watch the sawgulls fly back to the gate towers.

Chained up on either side of the gate, standing at least half the height of the towers, were a couple of giants.

“Uh, Nya?” Seth said, forgetting that the ~~Imperceptible~~ potion meant there was no need to whisper. “Nya?” he tried again, his voice cracking.

Nya yanked her eyes off the cart driver's route down Palace Road. “What is it?”

Seth pointed at the giants. “What are those?”

Nya just about staggered out of the cart's shadow. “Giant tree trolls,” she said in wonder. “I've only ever read of them. Tree trolls aren't native to Laar. They're from the Nameless Lands.”

“Heavens!” Book exclaimed. “All the way from the Nameless Lands?”

“And I thought the animals here were big,” Seth said. “Well, at least they're chained up. If one of those things got loose it would wreak havoc on Laar's food chain.”

“No,” Nya said, attending to the cart again, which was slowing down. “Giant tree trolls farm and eat trees. They're herbivores.”

“Vegetarians?” Seth said, amazed. “My mom's a vegetarian,” he added quietly.

The cart driver pulled up to a building marked with pictures of tools and parked just within its shade. Seth and Nya jumped out of the driver's way—there were a lot of

machine pieces to unload, and he was intent on getting the job done as soon as possible. He wasn't taking any chances on the 'no sightseeing' rule.

Shoulder to shoulder, Seth and Nya leaned against the workshop wall. Seth's heart wasn't slowing down any, but he managed to catch his breath. "How do those trolls farm trees fast enough to eat them without killing a whole forest?"

Nya's chin and nose puckered. "Something in their urine makes the trees grow quickly."

"They pee on trees?" In spite of everything, Seth laughed. "Maybe you could offer to free them in exchange for them peeing in the forests of Laar!"

"You laugh," Book cut in, "but that is exactly the kind of thinking that led the magicians of old to discover valuable ingredients and invent potent potions and spells."

Seth shrugged, eager to change the subject. "Well, whatever magical properties their pee possesses, those trolls are probably what the ship's all about. The Fake One might have brought them here to guard the city."

"Perhaps," Nya said. "Let's just hope that is all the Fake One uses that ship for." Book writhed in Nya's hands.

"We are not going anywhere near it, Book," Nya said. "Relax. Right now we need to concentrate on getting into the Great Palace."

Seth ran his eyes along the buildings that made up Palace Road and toward the off-putting structure at its end. "Well, those shadows leading up to the palace aren't getting any longer or closer together. Let the shadow hopping begin."

The corners of Nya's mouth turned up, like he had said something funny. But Seth saw no humour in the thought of leaping building shade to building shade down

Palace Road while a couple of giant trolls stood guard behind them and His Fakeness's regal sawgull flocks flapped overhead.

It wasn't until Seth and Nya had jumped from the workshop to the neighboring building that he realized the mayhem in the skies actually worked to their advantage. There were plenty of passing sawgull shadows for their own shadows to blend in with.

Seth was watching the birds' shadows when his hand brushed a metal doorknob. The door he leaned against creaked and gave way, sending him tumbling into the building's entrance. Lying stomach down, propped up on his hands, Seth froze. "Uh, Nya? Come take a look at this."

There was nothing inside the building. Not a floor, nothing. It was no more than a building-sized box. And given how empty the streets were, Seth guessed every building in the entire city was just like this one—an empty shell.

"I see, I see." Nya dragged Seth off the dirt floor. "Close the door before a sawgull spots it open."

Seth took one last look inside and closed the door. "That's messed up—this whole place is. The Great City's a sham, just like the Fake One. The Fake City."

"With some luck, the Fake One will be a sham of a sorcerer, too," Book said.

"Not likely," Nya murmured.

The final hop—the one between the last building on Palace Road and the palace—was by far the biggest and scariest. The gulls were on their way to the tower, following the empty dog cart back to the gates. There were no more sawgull shadows to melt in with, and sinian guards lined the palace ledges two rows deep.

"We could create a diversion," Seth suggested.

“Yes, but it would have to be something natural,” Book said. “We wouldn’t want to reveal that there’s a magician about.”

“How about an illusion?” Nya said. “Book, flip back to chapter five.”

From what Seth could tell by reading over Nya’s shoulder, *Projecting an Illusion* required only one ingredient. But Seth knew better to think that meant the spell would be easy to cast.

Nya grabbed what must have been a nellar root from her belt and paused. “What do I project?”

“Something to cover our shadows,” Book said.

“A bird,” Seth suggested.

Nya gave him an approving smile. “A raven!” she said, her eyes darting to Book. “There is no bird the guards would fear more.”

Nya rubbed the nellar root between her palms, squinted at the empty sky, and threw the root in the direction of her gaze. One, maybe two minutes passed and still no sign of an illusion. Nya began to sway. The magic was weakening her.

She was going to fall over. And Seth was about to call off the spell when Nya called out, “Got it!”

Sure enough, a big, black bird looked to be buzzing the palace. The sinian guards were running around the palace ledges in a panic. They couldn’t take their eyes off the thing.

“Jump!” Seth said, taking his own advice. He went first and Nya leapt after, but she never stopped peering at the sky. It wasn’t until they stood on the shady palace steps

that she let the illusion fade, directing it off into distant skies. The black dot blinked out, and Nya sunk to the ground in a cross-legged sit.

“Now what?” she asked, smiling a tired but stubborn smile.

Seth sat down across from her and grinned. “Now you get to take a short break from magic, and then we get to play a little game called Nicky-Nicky-Nine-Doors.”

The palace entrance wasn’t all that impressive or imposing. It was wooden and arched to a peak. If it weren’t for the sawgulls carved on its doors, it might have better suited a church or a city hall. Except there were no door handles.

“So we just knock?” Nya asked. The concept must have been too simple for her to grasp.

“That’s preposterous,” Book grumbled. “I know such decisions are not mine to make, but that’s absurd. No spell, or potion? We just knock?”

“Yeah, but not too loud,” Seth explained. “The idea is that whoever opens the door believes they could have imagined the knock. Then as soon as the doorperson moves enough to let us by, we go for it.”

“All right,” Nya agreed. “But you must do it, Seth. You knock.”

Seth got up the guts, made a tight fist, and gave two light raps on the door. Almost a minute passed and nothing happened, not a peep came from behind the door.

Seth was about to try again when he heard the scuffle of hard-soled shoes on ground.

The shoes stopped behind the door. There was the enormous clunk of a lock unbolting, and then Seth found himself nose to nose with a pale-faced, scraggly-haired sinian. The sinian looked right at—or through—Seth and then from side to side, but did

not budge from the doorway. Hands tingling, blood pounding in his veins, Seth realized this was the only chance they were going to get. He ducked under the doorman's arm and into the palace.

The doors slammed shut behind him.

Nya! She and Book hadn't made it. They were still outside.

His breath trapped in his throat, Seth stood still, wondering what to do next. The doorman rubbed his sunken eyes, straightened his robes, and attempted to smooth his nasty hair. The doorman scowled at the door one last time before returning down the hallway. He clomped loudly as he went, as if he was trying to convince himself that those phantom knocks had been the echoes of his own footsteps.

Seth leaned on his staff and stared at the door.

Don't freak out. Think. I could open the door and let Nya in. No, the lock's super loud—someone would hear. I can't just wait here until someone enters or leaves, until I become visible and have nothing but my staff to pro—

Three gentle taps sounded from outside the door. It had to be Nya. She was breaking the golden rule of Nicky-Nicky-Nine-Doors: never hit the same door twice.

The doorman galumphed back down the hallway, arm reaching for the door handle, dead bent on proving the knockings to be real. The lock clunked. The doorman whipped the door open and jumped through the doorway with a confident, "Aha!"

Nya leapt back just in time to avoid head-butting the pale doorman.

"Show yerself!" he shouted, rotating his head to either side of the palace steps.

Seth's heart was thundering now. *Does he know? Does he know we're invisible?*

With Book tucked close to her chest, Nya scuttled by the doorman. The doorman shifted, like he'd sensed a presence or a gust of wind, but Nya was clear.

She ran up to Seth, clutching onto Book as if he was life itself. "I—I didn't know what else to do!" she panted.

"It's okay," Seth said. "It might have worked."

The doorman cringed, glanced above him, scurried back through the door, and bolted it behind him. He shook his head, hands combing his greasy locks. "Blasted guards, playing me for a fool," he said. "Next time I'll send Grog to answer the door. That'll show 'em." The doorman cracked his knuckles into two fists and stormed down the hallway, his mutterings melting into quiet.

"Hope that's the last we see of him," Seth breathed.

"And I hope we never meet that Grog fellow," said Book.

Nya's upper lip curled in agreement.

Seth turned and peered up the stairway that loomed behind them. It was rickety and gloomy, but wherever it led was where they were going. Seth planted his staff on the next step, flashing Nya the bravest smile he could muster. "Going up?"

Chapter 27 – Up the Palace Stairs

The stairwell alone was enough to shatter every image of a palace Nya had ever dreamed up. The air was stale and fusty, and she doubted the palace windows—what few there were—had ever been opened. At a glance, the floorboards looked faded from daylight, but the clouds of dust that rose every time she stepped bespoke years of neglect. When she and Seth could climb no farther, when they reached the uppermost floor of the palace, Nya found herself even more disappointed. Cold, narrow hallways stretched left and right, more barren and cobwebbed than the stairs.

One would think a ruler who condones slavery might have servants to clean up from time to time.

“Which way?” Nya asked.

“Whichever,” Seth said. “How about right? Then we can double back.”

Nya positioned herself in front of Seth and received no complaints from him. That way, if something were to come at them straight on, Seth could not block her spells. And if something came at them from behind, Seth would just have to use his staff.

Nya dropped one hand down from Book’s pages and onto her belt. She wrapped her fingers around her numbing stone, using her mind to charge it to its full strength. *Just to be ready. Just to be sure.*

The first door they came to was a plain and wooden, no bigger or fancier than that which had divided her and Erebis’s bedroom from the main part of Wrought’s house. It didn’t look like the sort of door that would hide magic talismans, amulets, or whatever it was that kept the wolves enchanted. Then again, nothing in the palace was remarkable.

“Slowly,” she muttered as she turned the knob, “so that it appears the door might have opened on its own—like Nicky Nine Doors.” The door opened without resistance.

There was no one in the room, so Nya and Seth slipped in and closed the door behind them. Four pieces of furniture huddled together in the centre of the room, covered by dusty sheets. Nya checked under the sheets, while Seth went straight to the only other object in the room, a landscape painting that hung crookedly on the wall.

Seth shifted the painting to one side, but not in the direction to straighten it.

“What are you doing?”

Seth was a little embarrassed. “Oh, I was just checking for a safe in the wall—you always see secret hiding spots behind paintings in the movies.”

“Movies?”

“Uh,” Seth scratched his head. “They’re acted-out stories you watch on a screen.”

“Oh, cool. Well, good idea checking under the painting—we should be thorough. Thorough, but quick.”

There were three more doors down the rightmost hallway, each identical to the first door. And behind each one there was little or no furniture and not a single magical object to speak of.

“Maybe we’ll have better luck searching the hallway on the other side of the stairs,” Seth said as he closed the last door.

“Maybe.” *It would be nice to leave this place while we’re still invisible.*

Nya reached the stairwell’s edge and peeked around it to check for occupants. “Empty,” she said, crossing the stairs. She turned, waved Seth over, and failed to notice the wire that ran across the hallway until she took her next step.

Nya slammed into the floor, skinning her hands and elbows, and sending Book and her numbing stone flying.

“Oh crap—a trip wire!” Seth shrieked, rushing over to help Nya up. “This place is booby trapped, we’d better get—”

A deafening alarm drowned Seth out, and his eyes flooded with terror.

And what Nya heard next sounded much like the thumpings of Mineraltown Guard regulation boots.

“Guards!” Nya yelled, scrambling down the hallway, and reaching for her numbing stone. She stumbled, rolled, and watched as the first of three guards charged blindly at Seth.

“Look out!” she cried, but Seth stood at the ready, feet planted on the floorboards, staff held out before him. He was trying to win her and Book time, and she would not waste it. Nya crawled to grab Book and her numbing stone. Then all she could do was wait for a clear shot.

The charging guard ran with his spear thrust out before him, oblivious to the invisible human in front of him. Seth’s staff met the spear with a loud crack, and then he was falling—no—rolling into what looked like a backwards tiger roll, and using the guard’s momentum to send him flying overhead and into the wall. The guard slid down the wall, and landed in a pouf of dust.

“Something’s down there!” the second guard yelled. He was scared, but not scared enough to stop him from rushing the invisible intruder.

Seth was not ready this time. He was pulling himself up, hardly off the ground. And the guard was almost at him.

Nya had to do something. “Seth, get down!” she yelled, and he did. Nya threw her numbing stone, and it grazed above Seth, hitting the guard square in the brow. The guard slumped to the floor in a clanging of armour.

Seth was in position again. Just in time. The last guard lunged down the hallway, sword swinging in front of him.

Nya could have sworn she saw Seth smile. The sword’s tip was almost at him now, Seth did a high block, then dropped to the floor. He swept a leg and staff in a circular motion and struck the guard’s ankles, forcing his legs out from under him. The guard dropped to the floor and stayed there, with his eyelids flickering and an inappropriate smile on his face.

Nya picked up her numbing stone and gave Seth her most grateful of smiles. “Thanks. We’d better go.”

“I hear shouting,” Book whined. “And I don’t feel running.”

“You go first,” Nya told Seth. “Look for an exit or a hiding spot.”

They clambered down the hallway, which was just like the last one. No exits, just rooms full of sheet-covered furniture. *Unless*. There, at the end of the hallway, was a fifth door.

“The last door!” she cried. There was light under it. *It might be a way out.*

Seth dove for the door handle, pushed it down. “It’s locked. What do we do?”

Book rifled his pages, settling on page 232. “~~Unlock~~,” Nya read. She traded her numbing stone for some knottwood chips, dusted the distraction from her thoughts, and began. “Unlock, unbolt, release—for five seconds only, please.” Nya tried the handle.

This time, the door opened.

Nya ushered Seth through then slammed the door behind them. She heard the click of the lock refastening, but that was little comfort. Whoever was fast approaching might have a key, know a route to head them off, or worse: they could know magic.

There was a window and Nya ran to it, but it was the sort that did not open. And they were at least five floors up.

“We’d break our legs if we jumped. Know any flying spells, Book?” Seth asked.

“No, nothing of the sort,” Book said, sounding defeated.

“There’s stairs!” Seth shouted. “We have to take the stairs!”

Nya spun around and spied the bottom steps of a tight, spiral staircase. “Go, hurry!”

Up, up they ran, taking two stairs at a time. And just as they reached a metal door at the top, they heard pounding on the one below.

Seth tried the metal door, shook his head, and stepped aside.

“Unlock, unbolt, release—for five seconds only, please.” Nya pulled the remaining knottwood chips from her belt and opened the door—and not a moment too soon. Shouts and clattering weapons resounded in the stairwell.

The guards have keys!

“Seth, get in! Close the door behind you!” she cried. Then, without knowing whether it was a spell she had read or one she was inventing now, Nya pulled a net twig from her belt, jammed it into the door’s keyhole, blocked out the clamour of nearing guards, and yelled, “Break!”

A light clunk came from within the door, a faint version of the sound the dying root liquor machine made. The door was locked, the lock was broken, and no key could open it now. Nya bowed her head, smiled, and whispered, "Thank Heavens."

But that was the last bit of relief she felt for some time.

They were standing in the doorway of a giant laboratory. Scattered haphazardly about the room were stainless steel tables, piled high with papers, bizarre instruments, and beakers of colorful liquids.

And they were not alone.

Standing across from them was a man dressed entirely in a white, synthetic material. A hood suctioned close round his face, and dark safety spectacles covered his eyes. The man aimed his mirrored lenses at the doorway, giving his intruders a wild, yellow-toothed smile.

"Of all the rooms in this palace to break into, my invisible friend, I am so very glad you chose this one."

Chapter 28 – Inside the Laboratory

The Fake One. Seth figured it had to be him. The man in the white plastic lab coat jerked his head from one corner of the wall to the other, searching for them, and looking as if he'd been dusted with shock leaf. Except instead of a shock leaf victim's telltale stunned expression, this guy wore a permanent grin.

Shouting came from behind the door, then more fiddling with the lock. But Seth tried not to listen to those things—there was enough going on right in front of him.

"I've been waiting for you," the Fake One cooed as he crept toward the door. "We can help each other."

Seth and Nya backed away from the doorway, careful not to disturb any of the many piles of paper that covered the floor. "Nya," Seth said, "he can't hear or see us. Throw your numbing stone!"

Nya wound up and fired. It was a good shot—it hit the Fake One right in the chest. But the stone ricocheted off his plastic lab coat, and the Fake One remained standing.

He laughed in utter glee. "Excellent!" he cried, hopping about, and stopping to pick up the stone with a gloved hand. "A numbing stone?" he said. His plastic-hooded head rotated on his neck like it belonged to a prehistoric bird. "An old sinian healing charm. Why, you must be a magician or an apothecary!"

The Fake One dropped the numbing stone into a beaker of clear liquid—and by the looks of it the liquid was an acid. The stone fizzed, floated to the top of the beaker, and disappeared.

“Numbing stones are no good on plastic, I’m afraid,” the Fake One bragged. “But enough with these games!”

There was more banging on the metal door. The guards weren’t messing with the lock anymore. They were trying to ram the door down.

“Hear that?” The Fake One said, his grin sagging from his face as he strode to the centre of the room. “That is the sound of time running out. Any second now those guards will break down my door. Reveal yourself, or you may never leave this place!”

“Don’t fall for his tricks, Nya. Do something!”

“I’m trying,” she said through gritted teeth. “I need to think, I just need time.” Something flared in Seth’s peripheral vision, and he turned to find Nya holding a blazing ball of light. He’d seen this spell at the free sinians’ abode. The thing was called a *Flashbinder*.

“Seth, close your eyes!” Nya yelled.

They were already closed.

The *Flashbinder* exploded with a crack. Seth opened his eyes—but only to see the plastic-clad figure flying straight for them—and he was holding a test tube filled with orange liquid.

The Fake One lunged at them, and flung the test tube’s contents in their faces. Seth screamed and did a crude sweep with his staff, tripping the Fake One just below his knees.

But it was too late. Seth, Nya, and Book were dripping with the orange liquid.

“Now he’s gone and done it,” Book growled.

The Fake One's head snapped in their direction. "Yes, I have indeed done it," he repeated, "now I can hear you perfectly!" He tapped a goggled eye. "Mirrored lenses, my friend—I'm absolutely, scientifically Flashblind-proof!"

Seth put a finger to his lips, telling Nya to be quiet, reminding her they could now be heard. He guided her to the far corner of the room.

Arms outstretched, the Fake One shuffled toward the spot they'd just been. Finding nothing there, he stomped his foot in frustration and pulled back one side of his plastic hood to reveal an ear. He was listening for them, but it would have been difficult to hear anything, even the forceful pounding of Seth's heart, over the bashing at the door.

"Fools!" the Fake One shouted, pointing at the door. "I can help you! There is still time for planning, but no time for games."

When no answer came, the Fake One started to giggle like a deranged child. "Fine! If it's games you want, it's games you get," he said, each of his gloved hands picking up a test tube of violet stuff. He began circling the room with the vials, chuckling between shouts of, "Marco!"

With all the papers strewn across the floor, Seth and Nya had to be cautious. Rustling those papers was as good as yelling, 'Polo.' One clumsy step and they'd be doused with violet liquid—and there was no telling what effect that stuff would have.

Seth glanced at Nya. She stood still now, running her finger down one of Book's pages, mouthing the words to what Seth hoped was a quick and powerful spell. The Fake One was moving into their corner now, so Seth gave her a look that said to cast the spell or move.

Nya chose the spell. She pointed her finger at the Fake One and, as she moved it in figure eights, a viney rope shot out of nowhere. Quick as a snake, the vine wrapped itself around the legs and torso of the plastic man. He struggled, tried to hop free of the bindings, but his efforts only landed him on the floor. He lay there, cackling like a madman in a puddle of violet liquid.

Nya beamed at Seth, and Seth yelped with relief, but the sounds at the door cut their victory short.

There was one last bang, the inside door handle crashed to the ground, and the door flew open. First thing through the door—and it barely fit—was the biggest and scariest beast Seth had ever seen. A tangled mass of fur, teeth, and horns, the thing snarled, and headed right for Seth and Nya's corner.

Just a couple feet short of making a human-welf shish kabob, the beast ran out of leash. A guard held its leash, content for now to keep the thing's unbroken horn thrashing inches from Seth's gut.

The beast couldn't see or smell Seth and Nya, but it could hear them. Seth tried to deke around it, lure it away from Nya, but its nostrils flared and its jaws snapped at the invisible, moving target.

They were cornered.

From somewhere on the floor came the Fake One's crazed laugh. "Allow me to introduce the palace pet, Grog," he shouted.

The Fake One rolled into view, drenched with violet liquid. "Idiots!" he yelled to the guards. He struggled against his bindings like a spastic inchworm. "What are you waiting for? Untie me!"

One of the sinians that Seth had taken out in the hallway—the one with the sword—ran forward to cut his master free.

The Fake One heaved himself up, rubbed his wrists, and snatched a fresh test tube of violet liquid from the closest table. He hobbled over to Grog and pet the beast with a plastic hand. “Now!” he said, uncorking the test tube with a grandiose flourish of his arm, which reminded Seth of a cheesy magician he’d had at his eleventh birthday party.

“Now we find out who my invisible intruder really is!”

At that, the Fake One leaned forward and splashed the entire test tube of violet liquid directly on Seth and Nya. Seth blinked away droplets and opened his eyes. His own frightened reflection stared back at him from the Fake One’s goggles. He and Nya were now totally visible.

This had a strange effect on the Fake One. He made a loud choking noise, reeled back a step, and then steadied himself by gripping onto Grog’s half-horn. He stepped forward again and squinted at Seth, his expression changing. Softening.

“Seth? Is that you?” the Fake One whispered. He moved closer and lifted up his goggles.

Seth gasped. “Sedgewick?”

Chapter 29 – Locked in the Library

Nya told herself to stay focused. Seth was too stunned to do anything other than shake his head and deny the harsh reality of finding his grandfather—like this. But Nya pulled Book close, trying to gather her wits. Sedgewick was the Fake One. *And he could still throw us in a prison cell as quick as a vim sprite can flutter its wings.*

Sedgewick's now unmirrored eyes bounced from Seth, to Nya, to Book, to Seth. They bulged with shock, panic, fear—but when next they fell upon Book, they also glimmered with hope.

In one discreet motion, Sedgewick leaned over them and whispered, "It is not as it looks." He ogled Book a second time before asking Nya, "Can you take care of the guards?"

Very, very slowly, Nya nodded that she could.

Sedgewick winked and then whirled around to face the guards. "Which one of you bumbling fools is responsible for letting these little brats disturb my work?" he bellowed. "What do you think He will say once He hears that the experiment I am working on for Him was destroyed because of your unspeakable incompetence?"

The guards quaked in their armour, and one of them was so distressed that he backed into a metal cot. *A cot.* Nya recalled the lock on the laboratory door. Perhaps Seth's grandfather was, in fact, a prisoner here. And judging by the guards' cowardly reactions to His mention, Sedgewick's captor was a fearsome character, indeed.

Book was silently flapping his pages to get Nya's attention. He was strides ahead

of her, already open to a spell in Chapter 11 entitled *Drift Off*. Nya had never read this spell. In fact, she had not read any of Book's final chapter, *Mischief and Miscellany*.

"Fools!" Sedgewick yelled. "Do you not think to tie up Grog by the door so that these pint-sized gatecrashers can't escape you once again?"

The leash-holding guard mumbled a half-hearted apology and led Grog to the door. Grog's growls of resistance provided the perfect diversion; Nya slipped one hand into her belt and grasped some quillflower petals. Focusing all her weary mind on the words, and moving her lips as little as possible, Nya chanted, "Drift off. Go to sleep—"

"Must I do the thinking for each and every one of you?" Sedgewick barked.

"—Off you go, without a peep." Nya let the quillflower petals fall to the floor, and when the last petal landed, the guards dropped their chins to their chests and nodded off. But that was only one aspect of the spell. One by one, as though they each lay on an invisible bed, the sleeping guards began floating about the room. Nya gaped at the spectacle overhead. The guards were actually trying to 'drift off.' Time after time, and without waking up, they hovered into the laboratory's floor-to-ceiling windows.

"You must believe me," Sedgewick pleaded over the thuds and clanks of bodies and armour on glass. He rushed over to Nya and Seth, and put a shaky hand on each of their shoulders. "He told me I was part of a prophecy, that my knowledge could help the people of Laar. But He lied, and I believed Him. So I, the scientist, became a lab rat. All this time, in this laboratory, conducting experiments for Him."

"Who is He?" Seth demanded.

Sedgewick snapped out of his tragic musings, his eyes popping with urgency once more. "You'll see for yourselves in a matter of moments. You're just going to have to trust me. We haven't got much time."

"I trust you," Nya said with certainty. For although Sedgewick was crazed of mind, he was also true of heart.

Seth hesitated. "I trust you, too, Sedgewick."

When the footfalls reached the stairwell, everyone was in position. Nya was cowered in a corner, not quite feigning fear. Sedgewick was backed into a table, appearing to be held and threatened there by Seth and his staff. Seth was the most convincing of all. He ranted about having come to reclaim the lands of Laar, and threatened to use the contents of Nya's herb belt. The belt was strapped across his chest—minus a pinch of all the belt's contents, which mingled with a now shrunken Book in the hood of Nya's cloak.

Whomever those footsteps belonged to was in no hurry to reach the laboratory. Yet Nya noted that Seth had no trouble continuing in the role of the True Great Foretold One, enraged by the injustice done to the forests and creatures of Laar. Seth was, after all, that person.

The footfalls reached the laboratory doorway, but their owners remained hidden by the massive beast Grog. "Wretched beast!" someone scorned from behind Grog. Then, as though kicked from behind, Grog yelped and staggered out from the doorframe. A man with a grandiose hat strutted into the laboratory, followed by four of his associates.

Nya could not believe what she saw. The men in the doorway were welvish. Yet they looked nothing like the welves of the Northwestern Welvish Settlement. Their hair was not a silvery blue, but a dull, tarnished yellow. Their skin was ashen and light, as if untouched by the sun's rays. Most frightening of all, these welves were swathed in furs and dripping with gems.

There was not a doubt in Nya's mind: these were the wayward welves. And the welf in front, whose smug face scoffed from under a hat much like those Nya had seen humans don in illustrations, must have been Lord Fel himself.

Lord Fel clapped his hands together in an arrogant round of applause. "Well done," he said to Seth, who now lowered his staff from Sedgewick's throat. "It is no small feat to infiltrate my palace and best my guards. Allow me to introduce myself, I am Lord Fel."

Seth frowned, unimpressed. "Nope, haven't heard of you," he lied. "But maybe you've heard of me. I'm the True Great Foretold One."

Nya's mouth fell open at Seth's brashness and her eyes fell upon his acorn. Could the **Courage for the Doubtful** charm still have some power left? *No, impossible.* She saw that the acorn was not aglow.

Seth found his grandfather, so why is it not glowing?

"Ha!" Lord Fel laughed, though misgiving slinked into his smile. He withdrew something from the ornate leather pouch on his hip, and snapped his fingers twice in the air. The guards awakened from the ~~Swift~~ **Off** spell, and dropped to the ground in a riotous clang of confusion.

Nya exchanged glances with Seth. *So much for Fel being a sham of a sorcerer.*

The self-satisfied sneer returned to Fel's face. "Guards, fellow Fel-maarians, I would like to speak with this boy alone. He has a choice to make: he can either live comfortably as my scientist Sedgewick does and help me reign over Laar, or spend the rest of his life in a dark prison cell." Fel snorted to himself then yelled, "Everyone but Sedgewick, out!" He turned to Sedgewick. "You have some cleaning up to do."

"Um, er, Lord Fel?" one of the sinian guards stammered. "Shall I take the girl to the prison?"

"Right, the boy's—" Fel looked down his sharp nose at Nya, "—slave. Would you look at that, a welvish slave."

"She's not my slave," Seth said. "I helped her escape. She's my friend."

"Whatever," Fel said with a careless flick of his wrist. "We could use a maid around the palace. Take her to the library, and leave Grog in there to see that she doesn't escape. I want her close for questioning."

Fel swiveled back to Nya. "And don't go trying to play magician," he said. "The library has more magical security than any other room in the palace. Every book of magic in that room is enchanted so that I alone can read the spells within it."

Fel's entourage of over-adorned welves left the laboratory first. A lady with a river reet scarf, a man with a sawgull feather in his cap, a lady who hunched under the weight of her citrinus stone necklace, and a man wearing trousers of fur all pranced out the door as if all the creatures of Laar were there to admire them.

The guards grabbed Nya by the slave bands and dragged her across the lab. Away from Seth. And although Fel's plans to enslave or imprison Seth were not life-threatening, she was still leaving Seth with a very powerful sorcerer. Panic sparked

within her. *What about Grenyan esla yan—the Great Ones are one? How can we be one if we are separated?* Yet, Erebis had said that they must follow their hearts, their guts. And Nya's gut was telling her to leave Lord Fel to Seth, and find a way to be alone and unwatched with Book.

It was precisely because the library was high security that Nya thought it the perfect room to be held hostage in.

Grog's hot breath on her back, Nya marched down the stairs and into the hallways. She should have paid better attention to the route they took, its endless hallways and turns, but all she could think of was Seth's necklace. Why was it not glowing? *Seth must have gotten it all wrong. His task as a wanderer must have been something else.* But there was no sense in worrying about that now.

"Your jail cell, my lady," a first guard mocked, throwing her through a doorway.

"Enjoy the reading and the company," said another guard. He gave Grog a swift kick in the behind and slammed the door.

Nya could hear them laughing and jeering their way down the hallway.

Grog hung his head and stood at the door. Hurt welled up in his eyes. All this time, Nya had only observed his horns, his fangs, his claws. But seeing beyond that now, for the first time, she pitied him.

"Oh, you poor dear," she said, putting her hand out for him to sniff. "That bully of a guard really hurt your feelings, didn't he?"

To Nya's shock, Grog nodded and a giant tear slid down his furry cheek. Nya took his jowls in her hands and wiped the tear away with her thumb. "I'll bet all you ever wanted was to be loved."

Grog sniffed and bobbed his head again.

He understands. He can't talk, but he understands. "You know, for years I was also a slave." Sympathy widened Grog's dark eyes, so she went on. "I swear it. For years I had only my friend Erebis to love and love me back. And all that time I never knew he was a wolf enchanted as a slave dog."

The creature cocked its head, listening—and caring.

"It was your master, Lord Fel, who enchanted them."

Grog nodded, bowed his head. He knew this already and it pained him to know it.

"The wolves were separated from their families. Like you must have been. Like I was. I was only a baby, so I don't remember it." She sighed. "Maybe that's why I want to save the forest and the wolves—they were my family when I had none. When I help others, I remember my mother and father, and I can feel what it must have been like to be them, healing and helping."

It was Nya who was crying now, and Grog returned the favour of wiping her cheek. He did so with the side of his broken horn.

"Grog, if I promise not to hurt any of your friends here if—"

Grog angled his eyebrows as if to say, "What friends?"

"Well, then, if I promise to help you be free of this place, would you allow me to search for a way to awaken my wolf friends?"

Grog nodded and jumped up and down, and Nya was so excited that she kissed him on the forehead, right between his horns. Embarrassed, but overjoyed at being shown so much affection, Grog prodded Nya with his horns, urging her to explore. Grog

made it clear he would watch and wait by the door. He circled on the spot, plopped to the floor, and smacked his lips into a contented smile.

Nya studied her surroundings. Seth was relying on her—and he could only hold off Lord Fel for so long. She was in a large and fully-shelved library. Even the Minertown Museum and Archives had been small by comparison. Gold and silver gilded spines shone from two stories of shelves—shelves lined with stolen books. Nya tried not to envision what had become of the sinians and creatures to whom these vestiges of knowledge once belonged. Nor did she have time to.

Nya took a deep breath, the familiar smell of musty books sharpening her mind. *What else?* There were paintings on the wall—a few landscapes, one of an elvish maiden, and a ridiculously large portrait of Lord Fel. There were tables and reading chairs, candle sconces and a small window, but nothing looked out of place. None of the books were displayed in a manner that suggested favoured use, and there was not a magic charm or talisman in sight.

Despair threatening to envelop her, Nya started pulling books from the shelves. The first was a blue-bound volume entitled *Sinian Crafts Through the Ages*. Not likely to hold what she was looking for, but she opened it anyway. Blank. Every page was blank. Nya grabbed another book, *THE MODERN APOTHECARY'S SPELLBOOK*. Also blank. Flustered, Nya pulled three more books at random from the shelves. Blank, blank, blank.

This was not good. This is what Sedgewick had meant when he said that only he could read the spells within the library books' pages. To anyone else, these books appeared blank.

The bookshelves leaned over her, taunted her. She could not read the books within them. These books, they could not help her. She put her hand on a chair back for support, a wave of faintness passing through her. She recognized the symptom: it was the first stage of the Magician's Demise.

Calm your mind, focus, she told herself. *Book. Yes, Book will know what to do.*

"Do not be alarmed, Grog, but I am about to awaken a magical book. And what's more, he talks. He's a tad grumpy at times, but he's harmless."

Grog shrugged and gestured up at the portrait of Lord Fel.

"Yes, I'm sure you see Lord Fel practicing magic all the time."

Deep, furry furrows wrinkled Grog's brow. He nodded then shook his head in agitation. Frantic now, Grog pointed his nose and horns at the portrait.

"I'm not sure what you mean," Nya said. She was confused, and she dizzied, but as she looked from Grog's horns to the portrait, she recalled what Seth had done earlier. *Well, I suppose I should be thorough.* Nya ignored the expectant flutter of her heart, placed both hands on the portrait frame, and heaved it aside.

There, sunken into the wall behind the portrait, was a shelf. And on that shelf were a maroon book and an opaque glass container.

Nya slid the painting back to its upright position. She paced and spoke aloud to herself. "I mustn't open anything—not without Book. If the hall was booby-trapped, I would think this book and charm would also—"

"Mmm hmmm," said a muffled voice. It had come from behind the painting.

Fingertips tingling, Nya grasped the edge of the portrait frame and shifted it aside. "I beg your pardon?" she said into the nook, not knowing if she was talking to a book or a glass container.

"I said that's correct, dear." It was the maroon book. "The glass dome is jinxed."

Nya clapped her hands in delight. "Oh, you're brilliant, Grog! Is this what you were trying to tell me all along, that Lord Fel has a talking book, too?"

Grog nodded.

"I prefer not to think of myself as Lord Fel's book," the maroon volume corrected. "But that's quite all right, dear. You should know that the glass dome beside me is jinxed with an auto-enchant spell. If the dome is moved or even touched, the transgressor will turn into a witmunk—or was it a swamp knat? That phony of a magician is always changing it—his idea of a good time. He doesn't have what I would call a healthy sense of humour."

"Yes, I have noticed that, Mrs.," Nya skimmed the book's spine, "*Mystique of Magic*."

"It's Miss, dear. But Mystique will do."

"I am called Nya," she said. "Are you booby-trapped, or jinxed, as the dome is?"

"No, no. You may pick me up, but it will do you little good. If it's the spell to open that dome and release the piece of wolf's fur you are after, I cannot give it to you."

"W—wolf fur?" Nya stammered. *Could it be?* "The glass dome contains wolf fur? You're quite certain?"

"Oh, yes," Mystique said. "But as I said, dear, the fur is impossible to get at. Absolutely impossible. I am the only book in existence who holds the spell to free the

wolves and that greedy excuse for a ruler is the only living being able to read my pages. They appear blank to anyone else.”

“No,” Nya said, choking back a sob. “No, you must be lying to me.”

Mystique sounded hurt, but still she spoke gently to Nya. “I wish I were, dear. Believe me, I would rather your delicate little fingers flipping my pages than Lord Fel’s filthy, clumsy digits. Why, look at how he’s soiled and torn my title page, and how he left a goblet ring on my back cover!” Mystique twisted to show Nya her damage.

“No, Lord Fel does not seem to be very considerate of others,” Nya said, her mind searching. “If I cannot read the spell, can you read it to me?”

“No, dear. I am cursed such that I cannot convey my spells to another living being. Only that miserable fool Fel can consult me,” she sighed.

Nya sank to the floor, this news more than she could bear. “Then I shall have to become a witmunk or a swamp knat if I am to free—”

Living being. Mystique had specifically said living being. Nya’s heart pulsed so fast that she struggled to breathe, to speak. “Mystique, would you be able to tell a non-living being your spells?”

The corners of Mystique’s title turned down. “I’m the only talking book in the library and maybe the only of my kind, if that’s what you mean, dear. I’m so sorry.”

“No, Mystique!” Nya blurted. “You are not the only book of your kind! My friend Book, his name is actually Essential Elvish Magicks for the Moonstar of Laar, that’s me, the Moonstar, and, well, you absolutely must meet him!”

Nya reached into her hood, plucked out the shrunken Book, and held him flat on her palm. Mystique squished up her title as though she thought Nya a few pages short of

a volume. Nya laughed, promised herself never to tell Book the true first impression he had made on Mystique, and whispered his sizing spell over her hand.

“Pah! Ptah!” Book spat stems and leaves from his pages. “Why, there are leaves between my pages and twigs stuck up my—”

“Book, guess where we are? The palace library!” Nya exclaimed. “And there’s someone I’d like you to meet. Her name is Mystique of Magic and she is a lovely elf-bound volume, such as yourself.”

Nya shifted Book so that his cover faced Mystique’s. Mystique began brushing her own cover with her gold silk bookmark.

“Oh, hello,” Book faltered, though he was quick to assume a much more courteous tone. “Pardon my being caught unawares, Mystique of Magic. It is not every day I am graced with fine, elf-bound books.”

“Oh, Sir, you are too kind,” Mystique giggled. “Please, call me Mystique.”

“And you, Mystique, may call me whatever you like,” Book said. “Though my friends insist on calling me Book.”

“Oooh, how contemporary,” Mystique crooned.

“Please,” Nya said, “Book, we don’t have much time. Mystique knows the spell to free the wolves. She is cursed and cannot tell another living being her spells. But we think she may be able to tell another sentient book.”

Mystique sighed. “If we succeed, my curse will be broken and my pages will be legible again.”

“Well, what are we waiting for?” Book said. “It would be cruel to deprive the world of Mystique’s enchanting words a minute longer.”

Nya moved to get up, but found her legs too weak to lift her. Grog saw her struggle and hastened to her side. Nya grabbed a horn and pulled while he nudged her with his nose. Nya placed Book next to Mystique and collapsed once more on the floor.

Mystique whispered in Book's ear, and he relayed, "Dried compassion flower, mingled with a dusting of esprit sand."

Nya rummaged around in her hood, found just enough of the two ingredients, and did as the spell instructed.

Then it was as though the three of them were playing a game Nya had seen sinian girls play by the Minertown well. Mystique would whisper a line to Book, and then Book would recite this line to Nya. In this manner, and by focusing all of her love and strength and attention on that single strand of fur trapped beneath the dome, Nya adapted the spell *Returning the Spirit of a People*.

Spirit return, untransform, return the dogs to wolves. Fur that holds wolves as dogs, break your bonds, be gone.

Not daring to blink or breathe, Nya watched as a single piece of fur wriggled out from under the glass dome and vanished in a puff of black smoke.

Chapter 30 – Sedgewick’s Captor

The moment Nya disappeared behind the beast Grog and down the spiral staircase, Seth turned his back. He needed a moment to get up the guts to deal with Fel on his own. Alone.

Worse case scenario: he sends me to prison. At least, Seth hoped that was the worst case scenario.

“Leave your herb sash and staff in the corner of the room,” Fel said. “I’ve got a Transformation spell ready, so no tricks.”

Seth rested his staff against one of the metal tables and untied Nya’s herb belt. Ignoring Fel, Seth strolled over to the window, and caught a glimpse of his grandfather on the way. Sedgewick was hunched over the floor, picking up shards of test tube glass. He looked older, feebler than he used to. It tormented Seth to see him that way. It angered him.

Someone needed to stop Lord Fel.

Seth clenched his teeth and stared out the window. The view was no comfort. Buckling buildings and the monstrous wall that enclosed them spread out before him like a homemade diorama or a miniature model city. The Fake City.

Lord Fel’s way-too-high heels clacked closer and stopped within view. Fel stood beside Seth now, fiddling with the tacky, bejeweled leather pouch at his hip. He was putting away whatever ingredients he was holding.

“Magnificent, isn’t it?” Fel more said than asked.

“All the buildings are empty,” Seth said.

Lord Fel snorted. “Figured that out, did you? Clever. Yes, the buildings are vacant, but that’s the beauty of it, you see.”

“No, actually, I don’t see the beauty of it at all.”

“Appearances speak louder than truths. Think about it. What makes a city great, if not its perceived greatness? And what makes a ruler great, if not the extent to which subjects believe that ruler to be formidable and all-powerful?”

Seth caught Lord Fel’s reflection in the glass window and smirked. *Who’s he kidding?* The guy was wearing more fur and jewelry than any rap, rock, or movie star Seth could think of. And Seth wasn’t the only one checking out that reflection. Fel admired himself in the window, adjusting his collar and hat.

He’s a deluded egomaniac—and I’m going to play that to my advantage. Seth figured the best way to buy Nya time was to get Fel talking about himself. It always worked in the movies.

“So, you used your knowledge of the Scroll Stories to convince the sinians that—” Seth paused, “—that scientist over there was the Great Foretold One?”

Lord Fel stroked his collar as though the animal it was made from was still alive. Really, he was petting himself.

“My rule began with my knowledge and is maintained through my knowledge, and I will tell you how.”

Fel began to pace the room, and when he wasn’t stroking his collar, he was examining the beaker liquids, row by row, as if by routine. “Once I had claimed the Nameless Lands for my own and turned them into the productive nation of industry Felmaar—” Fel drew the pronunciation of this last word out longer than Seth would have

thought possible “—I began to grow bored. I wanted a greater challenge, I wanted a greater empire. I realized I wanted Laar. Of course, I shall rename it Fel-Laar once my occupation is absolute.”

Fel chuckled to himself and went on, “And then I got wind that the sinians of Laar had discovered copies of the Scroll Stories. Why, it was as though the Heavens themselves wanted me to colonize Laar! So, I convinced unsuspecting Sedgewick, here, that he was part of the prophecy. I used my unparalleled knowledge of the scrolls to stage Sedgewick’s arrival as the Great One.”

A beaker smashed to the floor, and Sedgewick scrambled to pick up the pieces. Fel jumped, glared at Sedgewick, and Seth could have sworn Fel then glanced at his staff. If anyone knew the first seven Scroll Stories, it was Fel—and that staff was not exactly a good omen for him. But Seth didn’t want Fel to feel too threatened. *Not yet.*

“And then you kept Sedgewick under close observation, as the palace scientist?” Seth asked.

“Yes,” Fel said. “As you have your sorcery, Sedgewick has his science. Your skills alone can keep you from being imprisoned with all the other wanderers and sinians who threatened to thwart me.”

Fel swooshed a beaker full of yellow stuff, stuck his long nose in it, and sniffed. He cringed and put the beaker down. Seth hoped the yellow stuff was troll pee.

“What an asset science has been to me,” Fel continued, “what an incredible complement to magic! Sedgewick invented a root liquor machine that could make thousands of batches at once, while I used magic to alter an old sinian root liquor recipe

to achieve a mind-numbing effect. Once the sinians were drinking root liquor, they practically begged me to take their books and relieve them of their crafts.”

Seth couldn’t stifle his anger. “Is that what you think? That the sininans appreciate being brainwashed and having their magic, their crafts, taken from them? That they appreciate having a new way of life imposed upon them?”

“Knowledge is a burdensome thing. Perhaps you are still too young to realize it, but the knowledge of truths can be difficult to bear. The sinians are free of that now. And I have given them something much more lasting in place of knowledge. I have given them industry. The sinians searched for a leader who could give them a new way of life and that is what I have given them.”

Seth was furious now. “It was a promise of a better Laar the sinians were after, and if you think for a moment you have made Laar a better place, you’re crazy. You can’t keep brainwashing the sinians and killing the forests. That can’t go on forever.”

“Root liquor is a delicacy that has been produced for thousands of years.”

“A delicacy? What about your freakin’ sawgulls? What do you call whatever you spike the ends of their metal claws with? Is that a delicacy, too? Do you suck the forests’ life-force to make that delicacy, too?”

“Whatever,” Fel said, sniffing another test tube.

“Whatever? All you can say is whatever?” Seth shook his head. “Listen, man, sooner or later the forests are going to be die out, and when they do you’re going to run out of root liquor and the sinians are going to be mighty pissed off. And that’s assuming the sinians aren’t waking up as we speak. That root liquor machine is broken, enchanted so you can’t fix it. And once the sinians realize they’ve been brainwashed and tricked,

you better believe that the first thing on their minds will be bringing you to justice.”

Fel was getting nervous. He had stopped making eye contact with Seth, and he smelled the beakers with more urgency now. Then Seth looked out the window and knew Fel had every reason to be nervous.

Seth turned to face Fel dead-on. “You know something else? Appearances aren’t everything. It may appear that you have the upper hand, that Laar is as good as yours, but the truth is you’re not in control. In fact, I have an entire army on my side. And whether it’s done today, tomorrow, or years from now, The United Creatures of Laar will see to your downfall.”

Fel snorted, but when he looked up, all traces of superiority melted from his face. Through the windowed walls behind Seth, Fel saw his greatest fears realized. Eyes glowing sharply, a wall of wolves marched on the Great City, and a horde of ravens cast a dark, cleansing shadow from the skies above. And leading them all were the distinct and stately figures of Erebis and Raava.

“N—no. It cannot be.”

“Believe it, Fel. You know the girl you sent to the library? She’s the greatest sorcerer Laar has ever known. *Grenyan esla yan*—sound familiar? the Great Ones are one. There’s two of us, Fel. There are two Great Ones.”

“No,” Fel said again, unable to take his eyes off the scene at the city gates.

“Yup. And pretty soon there’s going to be more creatures than wolves and ravens marching on your pathetic Fake City. You’re finished, Fel. Any way you look at it, you’re finished.”

Just then, as if reinforcing what Seth had said, the acorn around his neck began to glow so brightly that a slice of Laar's moon could have been trapped inside it.

The effect must have terrified Fel. His pale face turned a pukey shade of green.

Now Seth was the one who was laughing. "Would you look at that," he said, stroking the acorn, "it's as though the Heavens themselves want me to liberate Laar."

Fel spun on his heels, tripped on his furs, and fell smack on his pointy nose. His enormous hat flipped from his head and Fel squealed. He clutched at his head as he scrambled for the door, and as Seth caught his last glimpse of Fel he thought he knew why. There, atop Fel's skinny head, was something neither a greasy comb-over nor all the stolen spells in Laar could apparently hide: a big, shiny bald spot.

Sedgewick cheered and rushed over to Seth, giving him a hug worthy of a professional wrestler. Seth couldn't remember the last time Sedgewick had hugged him.

"Well done! Good show, my boy," Sedgewick said, his face creasing into a kooky smile. It was like his mind had gotten younger, while his body had grown older.

Seth smiled back. "It's been a tough year without you."

"A year?" Sedgewick said. "Is that all it's been? I've been locked up here for over ten years and only a year has gone by at home?"

Of course. Erebis had told Seth that. *Time flows differently in Laar.* "So, why didn't anyone tell me that time moves slower on Earth?" Seth thought aloud.

"Well, no one in Laar would know for certain," Sedgewick said. "No one can ever return to Laar, you see. So there's never been anyone to report on the time differences between Laar and other worlds. Of course, I had the time differences worked out long before I came, but..."

Sedgewick's voice gloomed over. He snapped off his gloves and peeled off his lab coat. "You must know that I had no idea what Fel's intentions were when I built that root liquor machine. I came here with hopes of finding new resources. I wanted my knowledge to be appreciated—useful. Some scientist I am. All these years and I've been unable to get myself out of here, unable to undo the damage I've done." Sedgewick sniffed, his buggy eyes watering. "But Fel kept such close tabs on my experiments..."

"You don't have to explain. Fel is a sorcerer—it's no wonder you couldn't escape. You can go home now. We can go home. And is Mom ever going to freak out!"

"Really?"

"Really. She's always saying how brilliant you were—are—and how she should have been more supportive of your work. She's hardly even sorted through your stuff. I did, though. That's how I found your research papers. I went looking for you and, well, here I am."

"That you are. My grandson, the Great One!"

Seth laughed. "Yeah, I guess I am. But when I told Fel there were two of us, I wasn't kidding about my friend—"

Nya. She was still locked in the library.

Chapter 31 – The United Creatures of Laar

Nya moved Book and Mystique from behind the portrait of Lord Fel and placed them together on a reading table. She thought it important that they have time to get acquainted and discuss their histories and experiences. Although, the way they were cooing and giggling, Nya almost wished she had left them behind the portrait.

Nya collapsed into a red velvet armchair and draped her arm over its side, her hand stroking Grog's matted fur. She needed to rest, get her energy back. Just thinking about climbing those stairs to the laboratory was tiring.

"Poor dear," she said to Grog. "Your fur is so knotted. As soon as we have the chance we'll give you a bath and a groom. I could certainly do with one myself."

Grog gave a happy grumble.

"And as soon as things are settled here, I will have much traveling about to do. You could come with me. And we could look for your family. Would you like that?"

"Argh, arrrgh," he said before plodding over to the book shelves. He roved the shelves and, finding one with an etching of a dog on its spine, pawed at it until it fell on the floor.

"FANTASTIC PETS," Nya read. "You want to be my pet?"

Grog nodded, did a little spin, and then motioned with his horns from Nya to his back.

"And my steed?" she guessed.

Grog gave another excited nod and pouncing spin.

Nya laughed and gave him as best a hug as she could manage, considering her arms did not come anywhere close to wrapping themselves around his neck and

shoulders. “How about you be my friend and travel partner—a travel partner who also happens to make an excellent steed?”

Grog’s gigantic, sloppy tongue lapped the side of her cheek—the side of her entire face, really. Nya laughed and used her cloak to dry off. “Why don’t we hold off on that bath until we’ve got some water and sponges, though.”

Grog’s ears perked up at the sound of voices in the hallway. Nya stood up and so did Grog, who proceeded to position himself between her and the door. He was snarling when the door cracked open.

“Whoa! Easy, boy!” Seth said, peeking his head into the library.

“It’s okay.” Nya put a hand on Grog’s back. “Come in, Seth. Grog’s an absolute darling. He won’t hurt you.”

Seth looked at both Nya and Grog before he opened the door. Sedgewick stood behind him in the hallway.

Seth handed Nya her herb belt. “Lord Fel took off,” he said. “As soon as he saw those wolves, he ran out of the laboratory as fast as those crazy shoes of his would carry him. How’d you do it? How’d you free the wolves?”

“It was a group effort,” Nya said. She tied her herb belt around her waist, reveling in its familiar feel. “Book, Grog, and Mystique all helped.”

Mystique waved her front cover by way of a greeting.

“Well, thanks everyone,” Seth said. “And by the way, Nya, that ~~Drift~~ ~~Off~~ spell was wicked!”

“That was pretty ridiculous.” Nya laughed. “Hey, how do you know the name of that spell? I don’t know that I’d ever read it before.”

“Are you serious?” Seth said. “*Wischief and Wiceffany* is, like, my favourite chapter of Book’s. I must have skimmed it three times at the free sinians’ place.”

“She never did fully appreciate me,” Book complained to Mystique in a loud whisper. “But I am a rather sizeable volume, so perhaps I cannot blame her for never reaching my last chapter.”

Mystique giggled and snuggled closer to Book.

Nya and Seth both rolled their eyes.

“Your acorn’s glowing,” Nya sighed. There was no sense trying to sound cheerful about it. “I must admit, I’m glad you didn’t get sucked through a portal the moment you found your grandfather.”

“Yeah, turns out I was wrong about my wish. I think I just needed to stand up for myself or do something about what I believe in for once.”

“It was brilliant,” Sedgewick piped up. “And might I add that after your display of sorcery, my dear Nya, I am much relieved to know that you will be around to clean up the mess we’ve made of Laar.”

Sedgewick brimmed with guilt.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Nya said. “You are every bit as much of a victim as the rest of us.”

Seth cracked a grin. “And Nya’s a real victim. She may even have to clean up giant tree troll messes.”

“Don’t even joke,” Nya squirmed. “Those trolls could prove very useful if they agree to help heal Laar—or to, uh, make a contribution to our healing magicks ingredient inventory.”

Seth laughed and fiddled with his necklace. “You know, Erebis is outside.”

“Right.” Seth’s acorn had already faded a little, and Nya knew that going to greet Erebis also meant saying goodbye to Seth. “I suppose we should go see him, then.”

“Tell the old boy hello for me,” Book declared, his silken ribbon entwined with Mystique’s. “At last I have found someone who appreciates me, and all the wolves in Laar could not tear me away from her.”

Mystique’s flattered titterings resounding after them, Nya, Seth, Sedgewick, and Grog, set off down the palace hallway.

It was a sombre business, weaving through those hallways and stairwells. The effects of the root liquor were wearing off, and palace guards wandered the halls, baffled by their armour and surroundings. Nya and Grog in front, Seth and Sedgewick behind, they walked without hurry so as not to cause alarm.

At the bottom of the last flight of stairs, staring in disbelief as the frightful beast Grog nuzzled a stranger, was the paler-than-ever doorman. But it was not until Grog stuck his big, blue tongue out at the servant that the four of them burst into giggles.

And so it was that Nya, Seth, Sedgewick and Grog were chuckling hysterically when they pushed open the palace doors and discovered an enormous crowd of creatures gathered before the palace steps. All manner of cheers erupted from the crowd—hoots and hollers, caws and howls, foot stomping and applause. And it was no wonder. It looked as though every creature in Laar was in attendance. Ravens shadowed the sky,

and floating among them were the little green lights of the vim sprites. More wolves than Nya would have dared to dream of encircled the stairs, and wandering about were droves of very disoriented sinians. Winfield and the free sinians were there too, as were Dorfin and some of the Welves. Nya even spotted Niffred Longfellow in the crowd.

Erebis strode over to Nya and Seth, who greeted him by throwing their arms around his neck and burying their faces in his thick fur.

“How is it that everyone is here?” Nya asked Erebis, amazed.

“I contacted them from the Longfellow den,” he said with a cunning smile. “I figured the sinians could use some of the yearn fruits from the Watertown orchards—I reckon root liquor hangovers can be quite agonizing.”

Nya scanned the crowd and, sure enough, saw several sinian guards grasping their heads in pain.

“The free sinians helped Niffred load the yearn fruits onto his raft,” Erebis explained. “The magic steering pole you bestowed him came in handy. And Dorfin insisted that we use welvish carts to transport the yearn fruits to the city gates.”

Nya glanced out at Dorfin. He and several other Welves were dancing in celebratory circles. Nya could not think of a better cause for dancing. The creatures of Laar stood united, but more importantly, they were free.

Erebis pawed a backpack over to Seth, the one they had left at the woods’ edge. “Your acorn has almost faded,” Erebis said.

Seth threw the pack over his shoulders. “That’s when I get sucked back through the portal, isn’t it?”

“I am afraid that wanderers cannot choose when they leave Laar. Nor can they choose to return.”

Erebis motioned for all to follow and led them around back of the palace patio. Waves hurled themselves onto the rocks below, while the rest of the ocean spread into an endless calm. Yet there was nothing at all calming about the clickety-clack of heels which bounced off the docks below.

Running toward their ship, pursued by a swarm of vim sprites were Lord Fel and the wayward welves. Fel swatted at the air; he leapt and squawked as he was buzzed and shocked by none other than Felina herself.

Nya lowered her gaze. Not even the sight of Lord Fel in flight could cheer her. She wanted to tell Seth to stay, that he was one of the best friends she had ever had, that freedom would not be the same without him. But that would only make things harder.

“Can I go home, too?” Sedgewick asked Erebis. “I’ve thought about it. I’ve thought about what my wish was. I think I wished for my knowledge to be helpful.”

“And it was helpful,” Nya said. “You came up with the plan to deceive Fel. I might never have made it to the library without you.”

“Yes, you may both go home now,” Erebis said.

“I guess I don’t have time for that swim,” Seth said as he put his hand out for Nya to shake. “But it was a pleasure doing business with you, partner.”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” Nya exclaimed, giving Seth a big hug, and a little kiss on the cheek.

He smiled that cute, dopey smile of his, and flushed the colour of redwart powder. "Will you say goodbye to everyone for me?" he said. "And if ever you can find the right spell, will you save the kragem's statues? Will you try to bring them back to life?"

Nya nodded and smiled in spite of her tears.

Seth put a hand on Erebis's shoulder. "You're going to have to be Nya's back up now."

"Always," Erebis said.

"Aruuugh," Grog added.

Seth laughed. "Thanks, Grog. It's good to know you'll take care of her, too."

"Your staff," Nya said remembered. "Seth, you forgot your staff."

"Wasn't that part of the prophecy? The staff can stay. You can keep it as a souvenir of all this—something to remember me by."

"Okay," Nya said. "I'll keep it."

Erebis bowed to Seth. "Your courage will story the lands of Laar, but I will remember you for your true heart and sharp wit. You forever have friends in Laar." Erebis cleared his throat, his eyes a liquid amber. "Are you both ready, then?"

"I certainly am," Sedgewick said with a toothy grin.

Seth nodded, blinked away the glaze in his eyes, and went to stand beside Sedgewick—but not before Nya managed to slip something into his backpack.

Erebis breathed a vision of a grassy hill, a great, old tree, and a surrounding burial ground. The vision swirled around Seth and his grandfather, transforming them into pallid, airy versions of themselves. Nya's eyes met Seth's one last time. He smiled, put one hand in the air, the other on his heart and, just like that, he faded away. Left staring

out over an endless sea of blue and a sun half-submerged in the northern horizon, Nya realized she already missed him.

A glint of light drew her gaze away from the horizon and down to her wrists. The slave bands that had always been a part of her now seemed so foreign. Laar was free and so was she; it was due time that they came off. Nya drew the net twig from her belt, touched it to each of her wrists, and whispered, "Break." The metal bands landed with a hollow clank, a sound echoed by the unbolting of long-unmoved prison gates below.

Nya, Erebis, and Grog shifted to the patio railing and watched as hundreds of sinians and wanderers staggered through the gates, blinded by the dimming light of day. Nya wished Seth could have been there to see it, to know this joy, this sorrow, to feel what it felt like to set so many creatures free. Sinians rubbed their heads, leapt up and down, and hugged one another in elated confusion. Wanderers wove through the commotion, searching for they-knew-not-what until, one by one, each found a wolf to guide them or send them home.

"So, what now, Little One?" Erebis asked. "Where shall we begin this grand, new adventure of ours?"

"Well, we could borrow the last half of the Scroll Stories from Dorfin and try to bring about the future," she joked.

Erebis and Grog groaned in unison.

Nya laughed. In many ways, she knew what lay ahead. She pictured herself going back to Minertown to spend time with the Wrought she had always hoped and known could be. She would become a shepherd of healing as her parents had been, travel and cure the forests of Laar with Grog, establish libraries with Book, and build schools

with the free sinians to revive long-forgotten magicks and crafts. She would visit with friends throughout her travels, eating and laughing and learning with them. And although he had an important job of his own to do, Nya knew that, whether in body or spirit, Erebis would always be right there with her.

Yet Nya also knew that the unforeseeable forever makes the future unpredictable. And so she simply smiled and rested her head on Erebis's shoulder, as she had done a thousand times before.

"Whatever may lie ahead, dear Erebis, this seems like a perfect beginning to me."

When next she looked down to the prison gates, she knew this was true. For, among the last trickle of prisoners, Nya saw a graceful welvish couple stride hand-in-hand to their freedom, completely unaware that their own daughter had set them free.

Chapter 32 – Home

It was different traveling home through Erebis's portal. There was none of the breathlessness, whirling, and falling that there had been on the way to Laar. One moment Seth had been waving goodbye to Nya from Erebis's smoky vision of the old oak and the graveyard, and the next he was actually standing in Treegrove Cemetery.

Sedgewick. Seth spun around and saw his grandfather sitting on the ground, giggling to himself. Seth put out a hand to help him up, and ended up in a hoppity happy dance. Seth felt like he was taking Bismuth Hezzelfrump home, not his grandfather Sedgewick.

"You sure do smile a lot more than you used to," Seth said, squirming out of the dance and gesturing for Sedgewick to follow him out of the cemetery.

"No, I didn't used to smile much, did I?" said Sedgewick. "I guess some years into being locked in that lousy laboratory I decided that sometimes it's easier to laugh about things"

"Hey, that's what I said when I saw my wanted poster for the first time in the Wild Woods!"

"I'll tell you one thing, my boy," Sedgewick said. "I hope to do a lot more laughing when we get home. More laughing and less working. That's something your mother will be glad to hear, no doubt."

"She'll just be glad to have you home."

Sedgewick seemed to like that idea. He smiled to himself and huffed in a huge lungful of air. "Much better than that musty palace air."

“Not to mention the rotting forests,” Seth said. “But there were still places in Laar where the air was good, though. Like in the Forbidden Forest.”

“Oh, yes,” Sedgewick sighed. “I remember that air—quite something. Quite some time ago, that was. Quite a lot of time...”

Seth looked up. It looked like a full moon. *So either it's the same night I left, or at least a month has gone by.* In a way, it didn't matter. He was almost home.

“Maybe we should have brought one of those giant tree trolls home to help fix some of the problems with trees and resources you mention in your research,” Seth joked.

“Read all that, did you, my boy? Most impressive for a boy your age—not exactly light reading.” Sedgewick's smile faded into something much more serious, and he shook his head. “Look what damage my science did in Laar. The root liquor machine alone might have destroyed Laar. It would be a gross mistake to bring magic, or creatures from Laar into our world. No, I'm afraid we'll have to manage with what we've got. We'll just have to manage...”

“I know, Sedgewick,” Seth said with a sigh. “I know.” He had only just pushed through the cemetery gates when someone practically slammed into him.

“Seth!” It was Jeffrey.

Jeffrey straightened his glasses. “Man, am I glad to see you! I thought for sure Mitch and them did something horrible to you—Halloween style, you know? I kept picturing you tied to a tree all mummified in toilet paper, or something. Do you have any idea how long I've been looking for you?”

“No, actually, I don't have a clue. How long has it been?”

Jeffrey gave Seth a weird look. "You're the one who's always wearing the watch, man."

Seth pushed the glow button on his watch. 8:11 PM. "No way, it's only been ten minutes!"

"Sure felt like longer to me," Jeffrey said.

Seth grinned. "Yeah, tell me about it."

That was when Sedgewick decided it was safe to squeeze through the cemetery gates and into the flickering light of the streetlamps. "If it felt long to you, my boy, imagine how I feel."

Jeffrey didn't even try to hide his shock. Mouth half open, he just stood there, pointing at Sedgewick. "But he—how did—"

Seth swooped over to Jeffrey's side and whispered, "I'll explain later."

Still staring at Sedgewick, Jeffrey gave a small nod.

"Sedgewick, you remember my best friend Jeffrey, don't you?"

"I believe I do," Sedgewick said, tapping his chin. "If I'm not mistaken, I last saw you at Seth's eleventh birthday party."

"Wow, good memory," Jeffrey finally managed.

"Yes, well, it's all coming back to me now. It's all coming back."

"Oookay," Jeffrey said, turning to Seth and handing him 'Essays on Inter-world Travel, by Sedgewick C. Mill.' "I almost forgot, I grabbed this for you."

"Thanks," Seth said. He shoved the book of research papers into his canvas back pack.

Jeffrey was probably wondering why Seth's clothes were so dirty, where his stuff had gone, and how he'd traded his black, sporty backpack for a brown, canvas one. If he was wondering any of this, though, he didn't say anything. Jeffrey was good like that. And Seth had made it quite apparent that, for the time being, it was best to ask only the simple questions.

"So I guess this rules out the block party, then?" Jeffrey asked.

"Yeah, Sedgewick and I should get home to my mom ASAP. The party's on the way, though. We could walk you there."

"Sounds good. Mitch and those creeps are probably still roaming around looking for trouble."

Except for the odd cluster of older trick-or-treaters finishing up their rounds, the streets were almost deserted. It wasn't quiet by any means, though. Fireworks cracked in the air, sometimes visible above the rooftops, and Seth kept turning around to check on his grandfather. But Sedgewick seemed content to trail behind Seth and Jeffrey, walking on his own. *I'm sure he's got a lot to think about.*

"I guess none of them got you, then?" Seth asked, trying to go on as if things were somewhat normal.

"Those lugs? You kidding?" Jeffrey laughed. "What about you? Last I saw, Mitch was coming right for you."

Seth scrunched up his face, trying to figure out how to answer this without getting into it all—without mentioning the portal.

Jeffrey must have read his expression. "Right, you'll tell me later. You better call me first thing in the morning, then, because have I ever got some questions for you."

Jeffrey's block party was in full effect when they got there. Every year his block had some of the best fireworks going—the really big and loud ones—and Seth almost wished he could stay.

“You're sure you gotta go?”

“I really should get Sedgewick home. He's a little, uh...”

“Shell shocked?”

“Something like that,” Seth grinned. Good old Jeffrey, always using the military lingo. “Thanks for understanding, man. I'll call you tomorrow.”

“I'm counting on i—”

“Look who we have here—if it isn't Speedy McGee and the Disappearing Kid.” Mitch Roberts swaggered through a crowd of kids from school and over to the sidewalk where Seth, Jeffrey and Sedgewick stood. Mitch chugged the last of whatever he was drinking, let out a huge burp, crumpled up his plastic cup and chucked it at Seth. Seth blocked it.

“Wow. Pretty cool, Sethie-Poo,” Mitch spat. “What? You're not going to disappear? You think you can take off on me like that and get away with it?”

Seth stared Mitch hard in the eyes. “Look, Mitch, we don't want any trouble, all right?”

Mitch seemed a little taken aback at this, but a sneer resurfaced on his smug mug when his usual gang came and stood cross-armed behind him. “Since when do you get to say where and when I make trouble?”

“Since now,” Seth said. “Save your breath, Mitch. I was just leaving.” Seth turned around, motioning for Jeffrey and Sedgewick to follow, when he heard Mitch scuffling around on the ground.

Seth whipped around just in time to catch the rock Mitch threw at him.

“Didn’t I just tell you not to go taking off on me?”

“He will come and go as he likes,” Sedgewick yelled. “My grandson is a hero!” Giggles rose up from the crowd.

That was embarrassing. Seth turned to Sedgewick. “It’s all right. I can handle this.”

Sedgewick smiled sheepishly, and ducked back behind Seth.

“No way!” Mitch chortled. “Look everyone, it’s Seth’s crazy grandpa. We’ve all read about him in the newspaper. A total nut-job!”

Laughter.

“Leave him alone!” Seth shouted. The crowd shut right up. “For your information, he’s a genius. Which is more than I can say for you, Mitch. You think you’re so freakin’ tough, don’t you? Because you failed a grade, you think you’re tough. Well I’ve got news for you: nobody likes you. Why should they? You don’t care about anything but yourself!”

Now Mitch was really pissed off. “Are you threatening me?”

“No, I’m not threatening you,” Seth said. “I’m telling you what’s up. It’s about time somebody did. Just drop it, Mitch. This isn’t accomplishing anything. Why don’t you go cool off—go light off some bottlerockets or something.”

Mitch Roberts' overblown ego had already suffered more injury than it was willing to take.

Mitch came at Seth with a right hook to the face. But Seth had seen that big fist coming long before Mitch swung it. Using his wrist to knock away the attack, Seth countered with a well-executed monkey paw block. Mitch staggered back, stunned.

But not for long.

Mitch lunged forward again, and this time his fist was aimed at Seth's chest. Mitch may have been strong, but Seth was way faster. Meeting Mitch's forearm in time, Seth diverted the assault with an inside hooking block. Mitch took a step back, re-evaluating his opponent. But the anger in Mitch's eyes told Seth he wasn't through yet.

"You think because you're wearing those pajamas you can fight?"

"No. I can fight because I took Kung Fu for five years. Come on, this is stupid. Let's forget about it."

"You can't block my attacks forever," Mitch growled. He was right.

This time Mitch just charged, throwing all his weight into mowing Seth down. There was no blocking that kind of force. No way. Using Mitch's own momentum against him, Seth stepped around him and dropped into a horse stance and did a perfectly-timed foot sweep. A look of dumb shock on his face, Mitch flew into the air. The fact that an overfull garbage can cushioned Mitch's fall was a happy coincidence.

Feet stable, fists upside-down and pulled into his ribs, Seth was back in ready position. But there was no need. Mitch was groaning and rolling around in the garbage. There was cheering, and a couple of kids Seth knew from school came up and patted him

on the back. It felt good to have stood up to Mitch—incredible, in fact—but Seth didn't want to humiliate the guy.

"Show's over," Seth said, as a couple of parents came running over to break up the swarm of kids. Seth went over to Mitch, offered him his hand, but Mitch made a feeble attempt to slap it away.

Some people never change.

"That was amazing!" Jeffrey said with a congratulatory shoulder check. "I bet Mitch'll think twice about hassling us again."

"Good show, my boy!" Sedgewick added. "I haven't seen fisticuffs like that for a long time."

"Mitch didn't give me much choice," Seth said coolly. Truth was, after having confronted a sorcerer like Lord Fel, dealing with Mitch was a joke. Only, unlike Lord Fel, Mitch had wanted the fight as much as anything. But Seth couldn't flat out say that around Jeffrey—not yet, anyway. Not until he had enough energy to last through what he knew would be a very long question and answer period. "All right, Jeffrey, this time I'm really out of here."

"No worries, man. Me? I'm going to stay and celebrate your victory for the both of us. But don't forget to—"

"Call you in the morning? Got it," Seth laughed. "But don't call me—I've got a feeling I'll be sleeping in."

Those next few blocks were the longest few Seth had ever walked. And when his house finally came into view, a funny thing happened. His overused muscles started to ache and his sleep deprived body began to drag and yawn. If it weren't for the fact that

he couldn't wait to see the look on his mom's face when she saw Sedgewick, Seth would have probably been sleep walking.

Seth's mom was asleep and slumped over the kitchen table when he and Sedgewick snuck in. She looked so peaceful Seth almost didn't want to wake her. Almost.

"Hey, Mom. Wake up," Seth said, pulling back her lion hood.

Seth's mom raised her head, her hair messy and her eyes squinty. "Oh, I must have fallen asleep."

"You're home early," Seth said. "Did the McPhersons' party get busted by the cops, or something?"

She didn't laugh. "I just couldn't do it. I got to the party and all I could think about was—" Tears began streaming from her now wide-open eyes. "Dad?"

"Yes, I'm home for good. Seth came and got me. Seth brought me home."

She ran to Sedgewick, hugged him, and looked at him again and again. Seth knew what she was seeing: an older Sedgewick, a Sedgewick who couldn't seem to stop smiling.

"Well, have a seat—welcome home!" Seth's mom said. She was shaking now, fumbling through the cupboards. "Waffles—you must be starving. Let's have some waffles."

Seth put his arm around his mom, and directed her to the chair beside Sedgewick. "I got it, Mom. I'll make the waffles. You rest." Sure, Seth was tired, but his mom was delirious.

"I can't believe it," she said, sitting down beside her dad. "I can't believe it."

Seth undid his watch and laid it on the windowsill. *Maybe I'll even leave it there for a while.* He smiled as he washed his hands. He had found his grandfather. His mom was happy again. Things were good. And as he stirred and poured the batter, Seth remembered something. Something that would make his waffle debut especially tasty.

"I don't understand," Seth's mom said as she took the waffle he handed her. Seth didn't know what she was more confused about: him making waffles or Sedgewick being home. She turned to Sedgewick. "How did he find you?"

"It's been a long day for the both of us, and that is a story best kept for morning. Wouldn't you say, my boy?"

"I think that's a good idea," Seth agreed.

"Mmm," Sedgewick mumbled. "Is this anderberry jam?"

"Yup," Seth said. "I made it myself."

Unaware of the blob of jam that smudged her upper lip, Seth's mom smiled at him. "However you did it, however you found him, thank you," she said.

Seth popped the last of his own waffle into his mouth and brushed off his hands. "I'm going to go upstairs and get some rest," he garbled. "Besides, I'm sure you've got some catching up to do. I think you'll find you've got much more in common than you thought."

"Alright, dear," his mom said. "Sleep well. Oh, and your dad called. He was very excited when I told him you wore your Kung Fu uniform tonight."

"Then he'll sure love to hear that I'm thinking about taking Kung Fu again," Seth said. "Night, Mom. Night, Sedgewick."

“Call me Grandpa, my boy. It’s high time you did, and it’s high time I started acting like one.”

Seth grinned the whole way upstairs and was still grinning when he threw himself and his backpack on his bed. Two folded pieces of paper fell from his backpack to the floor.

Even from a distance, Seth could tell it was Nya’s handwriting scrawled across the back of the sheet. He picked up the note and read, “For our dear friend Seth, the most wanted outlaw in Laar. Something to remember us by.”

Seth unfolded the papers and smiled. He was going to miss that escaped welvish lunatic and that big bad wolf.



APPENDIX

