Riverlilly

Second Edition

Story & Art 2011 J. Evans

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An Ending

What law can there be in the Land of Lin If three days of magic rule all herein?

~the Fisherman

A Beginning, The Year Nine Hundred & Ninety-Nine, The Third to Last Night, In which no wheel has an end.

Night fell at last where the mountains met the sea. The moon shone like a lanternfish's heart twisted inside-out, hovering between clouds the black of ancient depth. Two children crouched in the darkness halfway up the mountainside, spellbound, watching the sea roll east, endless wave upon wave without end.

"Ready?" Jai whispered.

"Ready," Ceder whispered back.

Their wheelbarrow had no wheel—it had long since rusted, bent, and broken off, but Jai thought they would be quicker away without it. The mountain was too steep to go by foot in the dark and this was their only chance, wheel or no.

Straining every fiber in his body, Jai grudged the makeshift sled to a building pace over the shale and loose rocks. *This is too loud!* He turned to check over his shoulder but there was no one there.

The mountainside declined quickly. Jai sprang into the wheelbarrow behind Ceder and they were immediately sledding downhill at an uncontainable speed. He braced his legs against the sides of the cart for stability and tried to steer left or right but he had as little control as a captain whose sinking ship is already halfway below.

From the Dawn of Time to Dusk of the Last Day in the Land of Lin there has been, there is, and there will always be a boy named Lion and a girl named Lilly, each as beautiful as summerset, sage as time unwound, more magic in their smallest fingers than all the spells of wry old warlocks, wizards wise, or wishing wells.

They made their home in a forest where the sky was forever cast in silver twilight, but the frozen sunset was a curiosity they both ignored and forgot. They stayed in their forest a thousand years and a single night beset them not. In the enchanted evening they passed their time without a care, inseparable but for the running and the hiding of their play, and only once would they succumb to sleep and in so doing lose their neverending day.

Down the haggard mountainside the wheelbarrow hurtled breakneck into rocks the size of whales' bones, recklessly off course up rising crests and peaks they sped, cascading over dips and crisscross fractures in the stone. Disturbed for the first time in a thousand years, knocked-loose sand and pebbles zipped past the children's heads like swarming bees.

Jai held his breath and squeezed Ceder. Her back was clammy against his cheek. He closed his eyes and prayed, but the mountainside was mammoth and their ride down lasted longer than a dream disquiet.

Lion and Lilly slowly spun in circles in a moonlit pond and shared a kiss as if it was their first. Then Lion carried Lilly up to the grassy shore and lay beside her, gazing at the stars in the water. She smelled of rainy flowers, close against his droplet-freckled cheek. He smiled as he wrapped his arms around her waist. No sooner than that but they fell asleep.

When Lion woke up, Lilly was gone. The twilight that had graced their forest for a thousand years had given way to Dusk, and Dusk to Dawn. A strand of her hair was all that remained where she had slept—one golden thread, strung through a handful of heart-shaped flower petals, all colors of the rainbow.

He had never been apart from her before. Whether they played tag or ran and hid from one another for uncounted hours, he had always sensed her vividly—a warm spot, like the sun behind closed eyes—but he had never known this deep abyss that was suddenly inside his mind. His thinking plummeted and disappeared.

She was gone.

He knew nothing, now. But how can she be gone, when I have never wished it so?

He pawed at the ground beside him with unthinking fingers and, finding her abandoned flower necklace, scooped it up. As he stared at the glowing petals he felt his own light fade.

Water crystallized in his eyes. Numb, he pulled the necklace on. It circled gently around his neck, his first teardrop in a thousand years fell from his cheek, the forest disappeared, and Lion crashed into a hard world of dark water, headfirst. I – The Open Sea

Chapter the First, **The Third to Last Night**, *In which runaways flee to the sea.*

I. The Ghostly Coast

The dented wheelbarrow skidded to a toppling-over halt three fins shy of the shoreline. The children tumbled out onto slick, mossy rocks. Jai caught Ceder around her waist as they fell, cradling her and slanting his shoulder into the ground to soften the impact of her landing.

He turned to inspect the mountainside behind them for any sign of pursuit from their master—a miserly slave-driver who called himself Sorid the Synclaw—but there was no one there. *His sight is focused elsewhere this night*, Jai reminded himself, although it was inevitable the old magician would see their escape tracks as soon as the sun rose, for all the rocks along their reckless sled-path had avalanched in turn beside them, tilling a long streak in the top layer of gravel like a finger traced through sand. The rocks settled and the mountainside was deceitfully quiet again, but the telltale streak remained.

Jai found himself staring at a dim cluster of stars over the coast. They looked like a ship with no sails. He imagined another pair of twinkling lights to be passengers aboard the constellation. *If only Ceder and I were so lucky. All we have to sail on is my wheelbarrow!*

To Jai's tunnel-trained eyes the heavens looked no more than arm's reach high. He rose on his toes to pluck the moon down as if picking a white apple off a low tree. Realizing his mistake, he cast an embarrassed look to Ceder, but she was still curled up within the protective shell of the upturned cart.

The night was silent but for the low, roaring draw and pull of dark waves. Something that Sorid had often said tolled inside Jai's head:

The sea itself, it bites. Its kisses—salt and sting. To burn your tongue and burn your lung, Its bite will all Syn's burning bring.

Jai shook himself, amazed at how entrancing the black waves were as they nestled into the ghostly coast. He crawled back to the wheelbarrow to ask Ceder what they should do next but stopped cold when he saw her face. Her forehead was gushing blood from a gruesome cut. She had not moved from where Jai unhanded her after their tumble to the shore. An unlucky stone which the wheelbarrow had barged out of its headlong way must have hit her, Jai reasoned as he watched her blood leak away in thin, globing rivulets.

His shoulders shook with frustration at the unfairness of it all. What can I do? Take her back? But Sorid will kill us both if we return, and I couldn't carry her back up the mountain all by myself even if I wanted to! He knelt beside her and pressed his hand firmly onto the cut to slow the blood flow—it bubbled against his fingers like a stifled burp—and looked east, out to the slowly rolling sea. Something in the water was watching them. What had hitherto been a lone, lurking shadow broached the surface and revealed itself to be a creature that looked dimly like a man, but the moonlight was too pallid to see any detail except his one raised arm, beckoning the children to come closer. "You there! Persons! *Shhhh!*" the creature rasped just loud enough to carry to Jai's ears. "Greetings! I have a boat! Do you have the... *never mind!* Here! Out here! Come! It's safer here!" The something dipped back underneath the surface.

"Wait!" Jai called in a timid whisper. The creature did not reappear. Jai could not wile away even a moment—Ceder was losing blood too fast. *I have to carry her out there*, he quickly decided. *She can rest and heal in this stranger's boat, while I find out how he knew we would be here in the first place.* The dark waves lapped against the shore, ushering him to try a thing so brave as swimming into the water at night leaving fresh blood in his wake.

Jai stood up and patted down his tunic—an old habit—checking the few meager things they had stolen away with from Sorid's lair: two ruby red eggs that seemed almost to glow with an inchoate luminosity, as if each housed a candle flame instead of an embryo. In addition to the eggs, he had an apple with the wriggling rear end of a glowworm sticking out of a tiny hole. It was Ceder who had nicked the eggs and the apple from Sorid during her own escape, but she had given all three to Jai to stow in his satchel, which he wore slung around his shoulder. The satchel was no more than a torn and tied scrap from an older, worn-out tunic. The last item in the tattered scrip was a rope that had formerly been used to mark Jai's route through the labyrinthine tunnels in which he worked.

He also carried a crude knife, no more than a twisted piece of iron salvaged from the rigging of his wheelbarrow's former wheel. The knife was still tied securely to the tunic-strings at his waist, dangling unsheathed beside his knee. It was dripping blood. Warm blood.

Jai knew at once what had happened: there had been no stray stone to strike Ceder, there had only been his carelessly unsheathed blade. He swallowed a nauseous upheaval in his throat and forced himself to continue the task at hand, if only to atone for what he had allowed to happen to her. *If she dies, it will be my fault! How could I be so careless?*

He checked behind for pursuit one last time—empty mountainside. A tremendous fear spontaneously cleared his mind of courage like a shark scatters a school of fish, but he clenched his teeth, picked Ceder up, and without hesitation walked her into the open sea.

II. Slipping Away

Under Jai's bare feet the stones on the seafloor were slimy, smooth, and warm. They squabbled out of the way of each of his sinking steps. To his surprise, the water did not burn, as Sorid had so often promised. He waded out thirty steps, holding Ceder's head a cautious distance above the water. The stranger who claimed to own a boat suddenly popped up next to them, breaking no water and making no sound. "Ghazahg!" swore the creature softly as he stared at the children, and at first Jai could only stare unabashedly back because this was the first intelligent being he had ever seen other than his master and the girl in his arms, and it was not at all what he was expecting.

The stranger's eyes were shrewd, squinting yellow bulbs. His nose was narrow, his ears thinner and more translucent than a glowfish tail. "By the Holy Sight of Silver, I truly thought this all a trap, a ruse," he said with a shrill voice that was surely meant to be heard underwater, muffled, instead of in open air. "I was told you would have an apple for me, but '*No*, 'I thought, '*the Magician guards his store too greedily!*' And where else would an apple come from? As if I don't know! Yet I was compelled by a very fine point, to say the least—"

"Where's our boat?" Jai cut in, though he had found the creature's rant eerily absorbing.

"The boat? The *boat!* Yesss," the creature cooed, fretting with one finger in his mouth. His skin was ever so finely scaled and he had long, dark hair that was surreptitiously woven through with seashells, rusted talismans, and the teeth of great beasts. He looked vaguely human in the dark: head, arms, eyes, and nose. His lower half, however, was underwater, left to the realm of imagination, where Sorid's grisly tales still ruled Jai's mind. The creature winked at Jai and grinned, "Your boat is safely anchored out undersea. My name is—"

"What?" Jai hissed.

The creature squished up his orbicular lips at the interruption and tapped his fingertips together. "My *name* is—"

"Where's the boat, serpent?"

"My boy, I could not sneak an El fish—let alone a boat—within a hundred tails of this accursed bay above the surface of the sea, mind you—without that bone-dry, crackpot, tunnel-dwelling *trickster* up there bringing the fires of Syn raining down like I was Saerin Silvermoon himself come back to call!"

The stranger's eyes went wide as he spoke of Sorid and Jai could see the truth in his words by the fear on his face. Evidently the creature was familiar with their old master and Jai was intrigued to hear more, but time was slipping away so he pressed on, "What do you mean it's anchored 'out undersea?" Does it *float?* Where is it? We need it—*now*. She's *hurt*." Jai hefted Ceder's sagging body. The creature eyeballed her like he was inspecting rotten meat; Jai's patience bottomed out when he saw the look of disgust in those shrewd yellow eyes. "Go get it!"

"As to that, *yesss*, have you my reward, boy?" The yellow eyes darted to the satchel bobbing on the surface of the water at Jai's side—the bulges from the apple and the eggs were distinct. The creature's grin widened. He licked his lips. His tongue was the color of slime, a lustrous green. He had sharp teeth, too. Jai saw them all.

"I've got one apple for you if you get the boat right now, and one rusty knife to gut you if you don't. So hurry up, *serpent*!"

The creature's stare was frigid. "My dear young friend, my *name*, if you please, is not *Serpent*. My name

is Seaweed. And I am not, as it were, some lowly, turntail, treasureless *goldfish*!" His fat lips curled in and he snorted a spoonful of clear bile out his nostrils. "Now, if you would be so kind as to follow me three tails east of here," and with that he lowered into a patronizing bow. His head and torso dipped below the water, returning to the unnerving realm of Jai's imagination, where teeth were long and sharp and mouths were opened wide and closing fast.

For a long minute Jai stood holding Ceder. She was still bleeding freely and her breath was slower, it seemed to Jai, than the draw and pull of the waves.

He could not believe his own stupidity. *I just* threatened to disembowel our only hope—a stranger with a boat—and why? Because he was hungry? Because he was rude? What have I done? If anyone dies tonight, it should be me.

Jai stood up straight with Ceder in his arms and trudged slowly east until the water rose to his chest, then his chin, and then his toes lifted off the squabbling stones and he found himself swimming.

This is not so hard, he thought at first. Until it became a challenge to keep Ceder's wound clear of the water, holding her head up at the cost of his own, wrestling with the smallest currents like a butterfly in a full wind. With only his legs free, his wild kicking drove them forward, his advance slow and desperate.

Seeing nothing of Seaweed, gulping for air at every chance, Jai swam for what seemed like an hour and he nearly covered the three tails in a more or less unwinding line. However, one 'tail' is as long as ten tall men standing on each others' heads; *three* tails is as long as three tall trees performing the same stunt. Jai had never swum before this night and try but for the life of him and the girl to whom he owed it, he could not make the distance full.

Doubts that had been roiling in his mind seized one sinking moment to make him wonder whether or not he was indeed traveling east, or if he had veered too far off course. Uncertainty hit him like swallowing air from the oldest, foulest tunnel below the earth. He fought to hold Ceder up higher but she fell altogether from his hands. This is when he realized that believing they could escape from their master had far outstripped the order of mere naivety.

He smelled her blood in the warm water that filled up his nose. Holding her cold hand, they dwindled down tranquilly. Being enveloped in water did not wake her, not even when her mouth opened and the sea gullied down her throat and she choked out the ten-thousand bubbles of her last breath.

Jai's puny, syrupy kicks were too weak to move even his own wet weight anymore, so he gave them up. His mind dissolved, unhindered by fear, now that he knew he was going to die. It was suddenly very easy to abandon his pointless struggling.

He could see Ceder's body darkly by the final, frail grace of one deep-diving beam of moonlight, then he gave up his air like a man stepping off a cliff. The sea gushed down his throat, but neither did it bite nor burn. The water was sweet as honey, pure as rain.

III. Master of Them All

'Tunnel-minnows,' as Sorid called his slaves, Jai included, existed locked away below the ground to never know the truth about the sea or the wild lands beyond. The magician claimed they were born in the lava caverns from the drippings of dirty stalactites. Imprisoned in the dark, they did nothing but haul wheelbarrows full of liquid magma along unchanging routes day in, day out. Jai's path had led him from a subterranean lake of fire, where he filled his cart with lava, to a brooding iron furnace, where he dumped it out. This was the only task Sorid set him to.

Jai had not been allowed to meet another tunnelminnow in all his life beneath the mountain. Sorid told him there had been countless tunnel-minnows once, wretched and crowding everywhere one looked and that he—Sorid—was master of them all, but they had shriveled up long ago. To discourage their daring to escape, Sorid told the slaves that if they ran away to the open water, ever-waiting swarms of sea monsters would make a meal of their flesh. The magician's words echoed like a phantom whisper in the deepest chasms of the labyrinth:

Once upon a time, a tunnel-minnow ventured east. He swam away from me to flee into the open sea, And there he was invited to a very fancy feast Where his flesh was feasted on by great beasts From out the deep.

Jai knew there was a way out of the tunnels years before he left. He lost count of the times he promised to do it tomorrow, to take his cart and rope and knife and run. All that changed in one night.

Sorid told him a story he had heard many times, the legend of Syn and of the death of the Land of Lin, but he changed the ending. The magician had always said the last three days would begin with the appearance of a comet over the sea, but no one knew for sure when it would arrive. That was the end of the story for years: uncertainty. Fog. A legend with no end. Until Sorid claimed he had seen it from the top of his tower, that *this* was the night, at long last. The foretold comet had no color but nevertheless he had witnessed it rise into the sky, casting a small shadow over the stars it surpassed. Sorid said it would gain intensity as it circled the world, filling the sky with light before the fires of Syn consumed it. The fires would consume all, Sorid said. Flesh, bone, sky, and stone.

Three more days to tend the furnace, he told Jai. Three more days, he said with a cruel twist, until Jai himself would be flung into the very flames that he spent his life stoking—one final sacrifice to get the fire hot enough for Syn to burn the world down.

After countless years, that night Jai found the courage to finally undertake his long-dreamt-of escape.

IV. A Curiously Quiet Splash

Water plunged into pores deep within Jai's flesh that had dried up long ago but never died. He saw a flash of how much he had overcome already and a burning desire to live throughout the night heated the blood in his veins. Kicking like a titan with a lifetime's worth of bottled-up rage he and Ceder shot upwards and crashed into the air.

"Ah, so the guppy can hold his breath," crooned Seaweed, who was casually scrutinizing his fingerscales in the moonlight, sneering at some fungus there, or at the children, or both. There was a boat bobbing softly up and down, buoyed by a rope that was held in his hand. "Where is my apple?"

Jai pulled Ceder's head next to his own. Her blood stained the water around them. "Help me lift her into the boat," he panted.

"First," drawled Seaweed, scowling at the spreading blood with obvious discomfort, "give me that ripe, red, rosy *apple*, boy." His eyes jumped to Jai's satchel.

Jai took a deep breath. With an exhausted surge, he drove himself deep underwater with the effort of pushing Ceder up, out, and onto the lifeboat, where she draped over the side like a wet dishrag. The vessel nearly capsized under her weight, but Seaweed steadied it before it could flip. "Get in, then! Hurry, while I hold her still!"

Jai clambered over the side and then hauled Ceder in, laying her lengthwise along the narrow bottom of the boat. With his first unchallenged air in what seemed like hours he examined the condition of their newly acquired craft. What he saw turned his stomach out: colonies of mold and rot-sickness, slugs, snails, barnacles, a dozen small leaks letting water into the boat one drip at a time.

Seaweed unhanded the boat. It tilted violently, forcing Jai to crouch low.

"Boy! Give me the apple! Let us be on with this!"

"This thing is a wreck! It must have been rotting at the bottom of the sea for a thousand years!" Jai grabbed the side of the boat and shook it to emphasize his point, but a clump of the rotting wood tore off in his hand. He threw it in Seaweed's cringing face. "You've killed us, you stupid, squiddling *serpent*!"

Seaweed lunged. "Give me that bloody apple you wretched brat!" His legless body stretched like a leaping cat until he towered head and shoulders taller than the boy, looming over him like the shadow of a hooded snake with fierce, yellow eyes. He snatched at Jai's satchel with one lanky arm.

Jai ducked and grabbed his knife.

Seaweed's tentacle-like fingers closed around the apple in the exposed scrip just as Jai swung his crude blade under the creature's outstretched hand and slashed through the webbing of his armpit like it was a slice of sweaty cheese. Seaweed shrieked as he ripped the apple from Jai's possession and collapsed backwards into the sea with a curiously quiet splash.

The Year One,

Fin in fin two dolphins fled through the dark. They passed through an obliterated doorway, down a steep, lightless shaft, then through a series of endless tunnels. The ghostly white dolphin led the way. It had haunted these subterranean corridors in a former life and would never forget the design of their twists and turns.

The mountain quaked and the walls crumbled in and collapsed, but the inseparable pair continued to navigate the stifling labyrinth with unparalleled speed and surety. They raced through a gaping cavern filled with eddies of liquid fire and molten char, then through a long, dark channel, and finally out to open water.

The sky was thick with rain. A small sea of apples floated in the floodwater like flotsam from a sunken ship—an orchard had lined this side of the summit less than an hour ago. The trees were all underwater now.

As the two dolphins surveyed the extent of the cataclysmic destruction, the *Riverlilly* popped up to the surface next to them, expelled from the maze of tunnels by the same force that shook the mountain to its core. They gave the boat a push toward an old friend in need, then dove to deeper waters to begin the last leg of their journey home.

Chapter the Second, **The Third to Last Night**, *In which the dark delivers a friend.*

I. For Keeps

There was no sail on the dilapidated boat nor any oars, but the West Wind carried them as surely as if they were hooked by an invisible line reeling them in with infinite patience. Jai could not tear himself out of his defensive trance, still wary of an ambush. If Seaweed was so inclined, he imagined, it would be an effortless task to poke a hole in the bottom of the boat and leisurely watch the two children sink like stones. *That's what I would do,* Jai told himself. Thinking this and other ill things like it, his thoughts took a murderous turn as the boat sped farther away from the coast.

In his trance he saw schools of fish swimming to and away from the boat in formations mirroring larger versions of the same species which composed them. He saw jellyfish that looked like phosphorescent mushrooms a scale below the surface. He saw a thing like the carapace of an enormous crab, as big as a mountain, scuttling across the horizon to the south. But he saw no sign of Seaweed.

Jai carefully leaned over the edge of the boat and drank a cupped handful of the sea, then poured another handful over Ceder's wound. The dried blood on her face melted away and the feverish gash on her forehead was clearly exposed. He flung himself over the side of the boat and vomited water and old apple seeds. His consciousness tried to swim away; he let go like an angler who would never catch a fish for keeps.

There's no acid or venom in the sea. There are probably no wool fish, wyrms, or pirates either. The water isn't waiting here to snatch us up. It doesn't even look alive—it's just another object, like the earth and the sky. How much of what Sorid told me was a lie? Everything? Jai shot a worried look at Ceder. But she's here and real, so she must have been there all the time, right above me. That story was true. So is it true she's cursed, as well?

The black heavens played canvas to Jai's imagination. He saw all the monsters from Sorid's tales surging through the air a hundred times larger than they could truly be: he saw killer whales with a hundred eyes, mangy packs of dire wool fish, and Ghazahg, the wyrm that was big enough to strangle the entire Land of Lin. As a young boy Jai had imagined these legends swimming at him through the maze of dark tunnels, devouring him where no one would ever find his bones.

He thought he might lose his mind this first long night, gazing into the vast unknown, but he had only to look at Ceder to recall himself. Her eyes did not open or flicker for all the crawling hours of Jai's watch. He held her hand, his back hunched, his head hung. Once or twice a faint dribble of speech fell off his lips, coaxing her to wake up, to open her eyes to see the stars now that she was free, but at long last he could not hold his own eyelids open anymore. "Watch over her," he whispered to himself, or to the moon, or to no one at all. He slept curled up like a dog at her feet. If any friendly creature in the open sea was aware of the sorry ruin of a boat wending its way eastward, taking on more water with every tail it traveled, then none came to its aid, and so it was the wind alone that watched over the children this first cold night.

II. Hide and Seek

Something bumped the boat.

Slouching like a seasick sailor, Jai sat up, still halfasleep. He checked Ceder first—her breath was but a hint—then he peered timidly over the side of their soggy craft to see what had jarred him awake.

He saw nothing. The water was undisturbed. Their boat, however, was rocking violently and showed no sign of settling, except perhaps at the bottom of the sea.

"Seaweed?" Jai asked the night. No, it won't be him he has what he wants. Unless he thinks we have two more apples for him.

A far more terrifying thought struck Jai: the most gruesome stories Sorid told were about the savage scavengers of the sea that sailors grimly named 'wool fish.' An aberrant hybrid of pack sharks and shaggy wolves, they hunted where they smelled spilt blood, ripping the skin or scales off anything they ate while it was still alive, as if sheering sheep for the slaughter.

Jai studied the seascape. From Ceder to the sea, back and forth his eyes flitted fervently. *There*, he saw a fin in the water! *Two!* Two sleek fins, cruising through fractured shards of moonlight. There are two scents of blood in the water tonight, Jai quickly tabulated, Ceder and Seaweed. The wool fish will be ravenous.

The fins hunted the boat in smooth, quickly-closing spirals. Jai's knuckles were moon-white gripping his knife. He had not put it down for all the hours since cutting Seaweed, not even when he had fallen asleep. The blade had no true handle—every edge was equally jagged, twisted, and corroded. His hand bled freely as he held it. Gritting his teeth for a disappointing end to life, he pointed the knife outward, aimed at the first snout that should dare break the surface.

The fins sank into the sea, their circling only half complete. Jai marveled for a moment at the ripples left in their wake: opposing rings passing into and through each other like steel hoops wed into one by a magician's sleight of hand. Inflated by the good fortune of having not been killed and eaten, Jai congratulated himself.

They bumped the boat again—whatever *they* were jostling Jai hard enough that he stumbled forward and fell down next to Ceder. Staring at her profile he found a shred of courage, for her sake if not his own. He rose and peered over the side again, puny and exposed to the gaping maws of insatiable evil which he could not now help but envision. Rows and endless rows of razor-sharp teeth did not consume him; when he opened his eyes he did not remember closing them—and unhunched his shoulders, he was still in one piece.

A splash of water hit him in the face, whipping his hair back. Something was laughing at him, squawking like a dunked goose. He shook his hair dry. "No wool fish," he said sheepishly, "but what?" When he looked for the sound the dark sea was as silent as a child playing hide and seek. Jai wrapped his arms across his scrawny chest and tried to appear menacing, lest the culprit make another run at them. *Or maybe this is how wool fish play with their food*. His courage faltered.

He was wondering whether their boat could sustain another hit and remain in tact when a third bump came just hard enough to catapult him off his feet, over the side, and into the sea.

Jai heard a spurt of high-pitched giggling before he sank. Disoriented, he tried to shout for help but instead swallowed seawater. Bubbles burped up his unready nose. Before he could focus and try to swim, something powerful and sure sidled up underneath him, whisked him back to the boat, and tossed him brusquely aboard.

"Thanks," he squeaked, squatting next to Ceder in the bottom of the boat. Jai quickly checked her heartbeat still a subdued echo—then stole another look over the side of the boat. The sight made him fall to his knees.

III. Somehow Familiar

Jai could only stare. There, before his eyes, a pair of dolphins, one pearl white, one charcoal black. A glowing, seashell-colored horn grew from the middle of either dolphin's head. "*Unicorns*," Jai said under his breath with stunned reverence. Quite at once he was convinced that these were two animals of an ancient and most sacred magic.

As Jai stared slack-jawed and vapid both dolphins drew near to the boat, standing on their tails, poised like two lords of the sea. Jai vaguely felt he should kneel before them, but found that he was still on his knees from the shock of their appearance so he lowered his shaggy head instead. When he opened his eyes the unicorns had approached to hand's reach beside the boat. Jai dared not touch them, though the temptation was nearly overwhelming. "Hello. *Ummm*, how's the water?" he stammered, blushing. "Not too cold?"

Before Jai could embarrass himself further the black dolphin leaned forward and lowered something into the boat. The moon ducked behind a cloud; Jai could not see what the secret bundle was other than a hazy pile of shadows and a handful of flower petals. The petals glowed like embers in the night, but they did not illuminate the indistinct mass of solid darkness to which they were tethered.

The white unicorn reached its horn over the side of the boat and unlooped the strap of Jai's satchel from around his shoulder. The dolphin lifted the satchel over the choppy water; with it, the two luminescent red eggs. "Hay." In factly objected

"Hey," Jai feebly objected.

The black unicorn turned its attention to the satchel. Without a glance at Jai it tapped each of the two eggs with its horn. Each tap produced an unmistakable *crack*. Jai clenched his teeth and winced—Ceder had told him the eggs were valuable, to guard them well. *And that's all we had to eat*, he lamented.

The black took the satchel from the white and immediately dove below the surface. The white returned to the boat and met Jai eye to eye. It piped a singsong salutation, then sidestepped a fin to stare down directly over Ceder's pale face. Ceder moved, shifting oh-so-slightly in her sleep—a sign of life! Her lips parted and a tiny cough fluttered in her throat. Her eyes flickered open. Jai saw a look of profound relief wash over her face as she beheld the unicorn and at once fell back to sleep.

The charcoal dolphin emerged shortly thereafter, Jai's waterlogged satchel securely in tow. The dark unicorn wasted no time in giving the bag back to its rightful owner.

"Thank you," said Jai, not sure why, as he had not willingly given the bag away to begin with. In his hands the satchel jumped and shook as though the eggs had been replaced with wriggling fish. Jai removed one of the eggs and raised it to his eye, examining the hole that had been cracked in the top of it.

A storm raged inside the egg, a whirlpool as small as a cup of tea but violent as a hurricane. The egg itself was no longer scarlet, but deep blue. Jai was astonished to behold that both eggs were still aglow with internal light—now a cool, soothing sapphire rather than ruby red. Enchanted, he held the cracked hole to his mouth and drank. He poured the water over his face and his hair and his itchy tunic. Then he realized that he had poured from the little egg more water than might fit in a wheelbarrow, yet the mad whirlpool inside the shell still spun with endless fury!

He looked to the dolphins, and they to him. In their level gaze was conveyed a strict imperative which was one and the same as Ceder had told him: *guard them well*. Jai nodded and tucked both eggs tightly into his satchel. The unicorns turned away from the boat and regarded one another for a long moment. An aura of love and respect as old as the waves passed between them. Then the white turned back to Ceder. The black approached Jai. In one of its reflective eyes, Jai saw a glowing horn dipping toward Ceder's bloody face. For an instant, he thought he saw the unicorns not as dolphins but as man and woman—he as old as time with a beard like snow, she his ancient equal, wearing a quizzical expression that struck Jai as somehow familiar. Then the dark unicorn's horn touched Jai's forehead and he was no more.

IV. A Reflection

In no story told is a kiss from a unicorn a trifling thing and the Land of Lin does not dissent from this fine and long-standing tradition, though the unicorns are nearer fish than fancy goats. By law of the land, the aftermath of such a rare affair will be perpetually complex and impossible to predict, but these two gentle blessings given to two children who had never known a tender touch before also bore an effect that was both immediate and self-evident: without blankets or beds Jai and Ceder slept like rocks. Any lingering nightmares or chills in their blood were swept away like fire in the rain.

Deep in the night, the boat began to sink. They had taken on too much water. The prow dipped below the surface.

The shadowy bundle which the black dolphin had dropped in the hull sprang to action. It jumped like trained lightning quick as a spark to the front of the boat, where it became perfectly still, tamed in a beam of moonlight. Then the moon met a cloud and the world went dark.

A grief-stricken roar rippled out over the open sea. A pink flash split the night.

A comet began to blaze across the sky, due east, for nothing can happen in the sea that is not a reflection from above.

The Year One,

Every variety of creature in the sea came to watch the two dolphins make their way east. Big fish and small fish, simple fish and fancy fish alike were filled with wonder as the parade stretched along tail after countless tail. Old fish wept at their coming while the young fought through the teeming masses to catch a glimpse of the procession.

Wild sea-lions stampeded the seafloor, raising clouds of green silt until it seemed as much confetti filled the water. Seahorses roared approval. Throngs of mermen and mermaids cheered so loudly the surface of the water bubbled. Later, there would be fish who swore they saw the Spirit of the Sea herself watching the pageant from afar. But of all the unique animals that came to celebrate, the two most remarkable in the crowd were the pair of dolphins, black and white.

Seashell-colored horns grew from their foreheads, emitting halos of soft light to guide them home. The sea itself, normally crabby and quiet, applauded with thunderous waves when the two young unicorns and their ebullient entourage finally arrived at the soaring stronghold of Coral Wing. Chapter the Third, **The Third to Last Day**, *In which one question sparks three.*

I. The Face of Nature

Jai awoke parched more severely than he had ever felt. He flung his head and hands over the side of the boat and drank as though he would never have the opportunity again. When he had his fill he sat back and his attention settled on their boat, which in no way resembled the hopeless wreck he had examined the previous night in the devious moonlight.

Where are the leaks? What happened to the water in the bottom? This is not the same boat at all. "And why is it pink?" he asked aloud, for a question such as this would not fit quietly inside his head.

The boat was pink as a blush, but not painted. The wood was imbued with the rosy hue. He could not see any individual planks—the vessel was made out of one solid piece. Jai tried to tear a clump out from the side of the boat, as he had done the night before, but now his hand met only perfect craftsmanship. He scratched his head, befuddled.

When he knelt beside Ceder, Jai thought at first that he must be dreaming, for there was a small, dark animal—a cub of some sort—sleeping on Ceder's stomach. Jai rubbed his eyes. He could not seem to focus directly on the sleeping cub without his sight going fuzzy and his thoughts drifting away like leaves floating down a river, under a bridge and gone. All he could clearly see of the strange animal was that it wore a flower necklace.

Jai had never learned to count, but he guessed there might be as many petals on the necklace as all of his fingers and toes put together. They came in all colors of the rainbow, though the most were bright pink. *Same as the boat*, he deduced with a flutter of pride, although he could not see how the two clues fit together.

Finally he brushed the hair away from Ceder's forehead in order to inspect her cut. He ran a finger over the scar—what had been a life-threatening gash last night was somehow fully healed. He thought about the unicorns. Did they fix her? He felt his own forehead, where he had been touched by the black dolphin's horn, and wondered what it all meant: he had escaped the tunnels alone, without a plan, and in the course of a single night had met Ceder on the mountainside, then Seaweed at the shore—who happened to be bringing them a boat, even though Jai and Ceder had only just met!—and been approached by a pair of the rarest animals in myth, who had stayed no longer than to deliver to the children a nearly-drowned lump of an animal that Jai could not tend his mind to for more than a moment before his eyes felt like spinning in opposite directions.

Stranded in confusion, Jai sipped another cupped handful of sugary seawater from beside the boat, but his thirst did not relent. The more he drank, the more he feared no amount of water would satisfy him. He closed his eyes and could see only the burning ring of the sun in his mind as though his forehead was branded by an iron circle. He drank again and this time tasted only ash. The sun rises slowly in the Land of Lin. Jai watched the sky change colors in reticent solitude, humming a tuneless song to himself, enraptured by the beauty of the morning and he did not hear Ceder rise and sit beside him.

She put her hand on his. He turned to her. She froze. "Your *face*…" she said, drawing back.

"What?" Jai asked, sensing instantly that something was wrong.

Ceder walked her eyes across every detail of his face but avoided meeting his gaze.

"What are you looking at?" Jai asked more urgently. Then he saw his reflection in her sparkling blue eyes: his forehead was covered in black runes and jagged glyphs. He ripped himself free of Ceder's hand and slung himself over the edge of the boat, his dark eyes a fin away from the mirror-like surface of the sea. Instantly he was absorbed, seeing his own face for the first time in his life. He studied every pore of his skin, every hair, every tooth, every scar, even as the waves rolled underneath and distorted his image so that he never saw one true picture of himself. Ceder came and knelt beside him, looking plaintively at the myriad distortions of her own visage.

To another pair of children their appearance may have been unsettling: a girl as thin as an apple core, her skin sun-browned and her eyes like bright ice; a boy with skin nearly as white as a ghost, hair like a dirty mop, eyes darker than coal, and a tattoo of arcane symbols inked upon his brow. But to Jai and Ceder, who had never met another boy or girl, their mismatched appearance was the face of nature, no different than the pale sky and the golden sun.

"But what does it mean?" Jai asked. "Have I always had these markings?"

"You don't know what those are?" Ceder asked him, biting her lip.

"I never knew what I would look like in the light. I never knew there could *be* this much light." Jai squinted as he turned his gaze up again, but he did not use a hand to cover his brow, as if the thought had never occurred to him and staring at the sun directly was the best you could hope for. "I always thought I looked darker, smaller... like a shadow."

"Sorid told me about you," Ceder cut in matter-offactly. "He said he put a curse on you that was stronger than iron locks. Those *are* the marks of his magic. I've seen him make others like them using ashes from the stove."

"We're *free*, Ceder," Jai retorted loudly, "we're not locked up anymore. *I'm* not cursed. I don't know what these marks are, but they didn't keep me from getting away, did they? Everything Sorid said is a lie. You'd be stupid if you believed any of it." He regretted what he said as soon as it left his mouth, but his pride was hurt, so he crossed his arms and glared into the water.

"Sorid told me he marked the tunnel-minnows to keep them in sight of the sun. Those *are* his marks. He can probably see where we are *right now*." Ceder spoke anxiously, struggling to choose her words in her haste to tell Jai all she knew. "He said he marked you at birth, and if any of you ever escaped, then the farther you fled from the Circle of the Sun, the more... well, the more—

"The more what?"

"The more dried up you'd get, until you dried up all the way—" she looked at him to see what he would do, "—and died."

Jai was unmoved. "The farther away I get from the Circle of the Sun? What is that?"

"It's the room where I was kept inside the mountain, the room with the great stone stove. The whole place is a big circle—a *huge* circle—with a hole in the ceiling that the sun passes over."

"The Circle of the Sun," Jai echoed to himself. He thrust his hand into the reflection of his face, scattering his image, and then lifted a cupped handful of water to his lips. He spat it out as soon as it hit his tongue. His whole mouth was dry.

Ceder sat down in the bottom of the boat next to the shadowy cub. It roused itself and jumped into her lap. When she ran her hands through the silken shadows of its fur the cub looked up at her adoringly. Ceder gasped and turned its face for Jai to see.

II. A Handsome Bow

Jai had difficulty focusing on the black body of the little cub, but its eyes were vivid green emeralds. It held his gaze and then roared sadly and sickly with a smell of seawater still in its lungs.

"Come pet him," Ceder told Jai. "You can feel his heartbeat. It's strong."

Jai sat down next to her and ran a finger down the cub's spine. "Is he fuzzy to your eyes, too? Like you can't quite see what he's made of?"

Ceder nodded but offered no insight.

"What about his necklace?" Jai asked.

"What about it?"

"Should we take it?"

"Jai!" she scolded him. "Why would we take it?"

"There's something funny about it," Jai said softly, "I think it's magic. Last night it was glowing."

Ceder looked up. "Last night?"

Jai could not restrain a ruminating smile as it dawned on him that Ceder would have no memory of their neardrowning, the treachery of Seaweed, or the dolphins' unannounced visit; here was a golden opportunity. "Yes," he began with a dramatic sigh, "it was truly a night to remember."

Ceder was enthralled as Jai recounted every detail of their escape, from his daring walk into the sea, she in his arms, to his fearless battle for the boat, culminating with his unfloundering command of the entire unicorn situation. As Jai spun his narrative web ever more grandly, the cub climbed out of Ceder's lap and sashayed to the front of the boat.

The cub looked into the sky at the comet that blazed above them, small and pink, and tore a pale purple petal from his necklace. He released it to the wind, which took it up and away like a fish caught on a line of thin air cast from the clouds. The cub curled down to bask in a patch of sunlight while Jai and Ceder continued talking. Spray from the sea pelted the children like hail as the wind picked up suddenly, whipping their untidy hair into whirling tangles. Ceder ripped a piece of her tunic off at the knee and used it to tie a tight ribbon in her long locks. Delighted with the idea, Jai ripped the sleeves off his own tunic and wrapped them around his head like a bandana, pretending to be a pirate, and with a tattoo covering his forehead, the notion was not too far a stretch.

"Ceder," said Jai, absent-mindedly excavating one ear with his finger, "when we cross the sea, do you have a... a home to go back to?" He read her long silence to mean *no*. "Neither do I. So I've been wondering, what will we do once we get to land?"

"We'll have to find help," Ceder answered thoughtfully.

"Who would help us?"

"We'll find people. *Good* people. Enemies of Sorid." Jai thought it over, but there was something about the idea of meeting a bunch of strangers and no longer being Ceder's one and only confidante that was distinctly unpleasant. "Sorid once told me about a place where the sea is pure silver and magic flows through the air like smoke over a fire. Maybe we could go there... together."

Ceder stared at him like he had pinched her.

Jai picked his nose nervously, unsure what to say. His eyes fell on the cub, curled in the prow of the boat. "Hey, look at that. You can see him more clearly when he's lying in the sun." "You're right," said Ceder, turning on her seat, "but I don't think it's the sun—all the light seems to sink into his fur."

"At least I can tell which end is his head now and which end is his butt," said Jai. Ceder snorted with laughter.

"LOOK OUT BELOW!" boomed a bell-clear voice from above.

Jai and Ceder sat bolt upright.

"INCOMING! COVER YOUR HEADS! DUCK AND ROLL!"

"Ceder, do you see anything?" asked Jai, scanning the sky, squinting helplessly. She shook her head.

"BRACE FOR IMPACT!" the voice cried hysterically.

Ceder grabbed Jai, pointing high behind them to a purple spark in the air. "There!"

Descending at breakneck speed like a rock hurled down by the West Wind itself, a violet butterfly with wings too thin and flimsy to rear in his flight was plummeting toward the boat and bellowing with exhilaration, "HERE WE GO AGAIN!"

The cub stood up in the prow and batted the butterfly into the sea with one quick paw.

Jai and Ceder shared a look of surprise.

The cub sat at the side of the boat and watched the sea patiently. The butterfly popped out of the water a moment later, although he had no easy time dragging his wet wings free of the sea. He flew a dizzy loop to the boat, but he saw the cub waiting in the prow and thought better of that approach. He flew instead to Jai and Ceder, head-high at arm's reach. Now the children could see that he had a wispy, white beard no longer than an eyelash, and that he held a crooked twig like a walking-stick in his hands.

Ceder smiled and gave the butterfly a friendly wave, which was enough of a force to send the frail flier somersaulting backward several scales. "Why, hello," she said when he had steadied himself.

The butterfly gaped at her. His wings stopped flapping and he fell disconcertedly onto the bench in the back of the boat. Righting himself at once, he thrust out his walking stick like a sword, afraid of being pounced on by a shadowy predator.

From the prow, the cub watched the newcomer's theatrics with complete indifference.

The butterfly cleared his throat and put his miniature cane back to its proper purpose. He looked up at the children and gave them a handsome bow, during which he fluttered his wings in an elegant arpeggio of tiny waves. "My fair lady, I must inquire: How is it that you know my name?"

"What?" said Ceder.

"Why not?" asked the butterfly happily.

"Why not what?" asked Ceder.

"Why not Why," said the butterfly.

"What's your name, you annoying little bug?" demanded Jai.

"Why," the butterfly said as if that was the question. Jai and Ceder kept quiet this time.

"My name, my fair lady, is Why. Or is it not?" "Is it?" asked Ceder.

"That is precisely the quandary," said the butterfly, far more interested in the articulate delivery of his words than in the sense, or lack thereof, which he was making.

"We don't know," said Ceder. "Is Why your name or isn't it?"

"Why, I haven't a clue!" said the butterfly, brandishing his twig like a sword again, parrying from and thrusting at imaginary foes.

"Are you serious?" Jai asked with sorely tested patience.

"Ask the girl," said the butterfly, still absorbed in his fencing, "she acts like she knows everything."

The cub sprang out of nowhere for the butterfly, who leapt into the air at the last moment to save himself. He quickly flew up to Ceder's head and landed on the tattered ribbon in her hair, giving the makeshift bow a splash of color.

"Almost got me that time," Why chuckled to himself atop his new perch. "And what do you call this uncivilized menace?" he asked the children, indicating the cub.

"He's just a stray," Jai said offhandedly.

"Pleasure to meet you, Astray," said the butterfly to the shadowy cub, though he did not fly any closer for his introduction. "I am Why, and these are two strange children I have just discovered—" Why tapped each on their head with his cane as he said so, "—but I don't yet know their purpose, assuming they have any, which children rarely do, of course," he added with a wink, to which the cub rolled his forest-green eyes and yawned.

"Let's each grab one of his wings and pull," Jai whispered to Ceder. "Whoever gets the bit with his beard on it gets to make a wish." "Jai!" she hissed. "Don't scare him off. He might be able to help us."

"Help us? How? He's daft as driftwood."

Why flew off of Ceder's head so that he could address the children face to face. He seemed not to have overheard any of their insensitive words, for he politely declared, "Now then, please allow me to say that I am altogether delighted in every windy, weathered way to meet you three. Most pleased, indeed. But might I ask what you are doing in a boat so pink in the wide blue sea?"

"This is Jai and my name is Ceder." She looked down at the cub, who sat on the rear bench in a pool of sun. "Astray," she said tentatively, testing the name. The cub looked up at her affectionately. "We're making our way to the East," she said, turning back to Why.

"The East? *The East!* Ah, yes, the East." He spiraled around three or four times, zipping every which way. "And where exactly is that, my lady?"

"East is... just *that* way," said Ceder, pointing to the thousands of tails of empty sea ahead of them.

"*That way*, is it?" Why besieged her. "To The East, you say? *That way*? You mean you don't know where you're going!"

"We're trying to find help," Ceder told him.

"And we need to eat soon," said Jai.

"Have you seen any islands?" asked Ceder. "Do you know how far it is to the nearest place with people?"

"People with food," added Jai.

Why was working himself into a frenzy flying in random patterns. "I've seen People before, haven't I? I can't remember anymore." "Please, the sea is supposed to be full of islands," pleaded Ceder, "didn't you see any before you fell to our boat?"

"I couldn't say," replied Why. "Islands? I really don't know." He landed in the prow and leaned on his walking stick, stroking his miniscule beard. "Come to think of it, I don't know *anything*. How did I get here? Who am I? I couldn't tell you a single thing." As he looked at the children his doughty smile deflated. "Well, this is rather depressing—I'm an idiot!"

"That's the first smart thing he's said so far," Jai whispered to Ceder.

"What an odd day this is turning out to be," said Why. "I woke up and here I am, a butterfly, when I was just dreaming I was the wind. Now I do not know if I am a butterfly who dreamt he was the wind, or if I am the wind, now dreaming I am here with you."

"You poor thing, you've lost your mind," said Ceder. "Perhaps you bumped your head with your little stick when you were zooming around. I'm sure it will all come back soon."

Why clung to her words. "Where do *you* come from, my lady?"

"Jai and I both come from the West, where a wicked old magician had us imprisoned our whole lives. We've just escaped last night. We have to get as far from him as the wind will take us, farther still. If he ever finds Jai and I, Why, he will do terrible things to us."

Why sat in silence, greatly troubled. He asked, "Where is this place, this *The West*?"

Jai stifled a laugh. "It's the opposite way from east." He pointed at the vast horizon behind their boat. "Why, that looks like the same place as The East!" said the butterfly. "I knew you were lost!" This seemed to cheer him up considerably.

Ceder knelt forward and looked directly into Why's eyes. "Will you do me an act of kindness?"

"You need but ask, my lady. I am at your service."

"Splendid. Thank you. I was hoping you could fly up as high as you can go and see if you spy anything—any islands or sailing ships or anything nearby."

The butterfly flew away and was gone within seconds, then returned just as fast. "I saw The West! There is a mountain there, larger than all the rest; atop the mountain, a tower; atop the tower, a beam of red light is sweeping over the sea like a lighthouse beacon. The searchlight turns the water to steam wherever it looks. Very unwelcoming place, The West. A good thing you are going the other way—the farther from The West you get, the better. Don't stop until you're all the way around the world, I say. That'll be for the best."

Ceder gave Jai a fretful look. He knew she was thinking about the marks on his forehead and whether they might attract the red beam, which was surely an instrument of Sorid's far sight.

"Is it anywhere near us, this red light?" Ceder asked the butterfly.

"It jumps from one place to another like an angry horsefly, my lady. It might land on us at any moment. And woe betide us when it does."

"Tell us what you saw to the East," said Jai.

"Good news!" said Why. "There is a dark road under the sea, as wide as a thousand ships, leading us ahead like a ribbon of dead shadow. We are on the road! We are no longer lost!"

"A dark road of dead shadow?" echoed Jai, unblinking. "Gee, Why, that's *great* news."

"What's at the end of the road?" Ceder asked quietly. "Excellent question," said Why, "but we are yet too far away to tell."

The Year One,

When they arrived at Coral Wing the two young unicorns were crowned King and Queen of the open sea. The very next day they led an expedition of soldiers to the western reaches of their realm to see what could be set right. The coast had always been a place that fish feared to go—the tower of the magician had long cast a dark shadow over the shoals. The only inhabitants among the shipwrecks that lined the rocky seafloor were criminals and outcasts, fish who had nowhere else to go and nothing to lose.

The outcasts fled or hid from the unicorns, for a guilty heart cannot abide true beauty. One haggard creature alone remained to see the King and Queen, his eyes bloodshot, his face hollow and emaciated. The soldiers offered him an apple but the outcast withdrew from the gift as though it was a poisonous serpent.

The creature ranted incoherently about visions of winged carnivores dragging him from the water to tear his body limb from limb, and of the magician and his endless apple orchards, and of two children in a boat. In one breath he accused the King and Queen themselves of dooming him to his madness; in the next breath he begged that they put him out of his misery.

The creature was escorted back to Coral Wing. The King and Queen ordered that he be sequestered in a secure room—he was too deranged to set free, yet too sick of mind to mercilessly confine to a prison cell. He was given all the apples a fish could have hoped for, but he never ate a single one. Day and night the creature lay awake, wide-eyed, and cried to those outside his locked door that flying demons had broken into his room and were devouring him even as he spoke.

When the King and Queen entered his room for the last time they found the outcast starved to death, skinny as a strand of seaweed. He had an apple clutched in his lifeless hand, but had been too afraid to take a bite, even to his last breath.

Chapter the Fourth, **The Third to Last Day**, *In which an arrow stands alone.*

I. Redirected

If the wind had altered its direction to guide them north or south or even west Jai and Ceder might never have noticed, for the scenery in every direction was the same endless backdrop of azure curtains. Lulled by the heat of the sun, they found refuge in the bottom of the boat with their heads tucked in the shade under the middle bench. Astray lay curled in the prow with Why sitting atop his head, reclined against one of the cub's ears as though the butterfly was lounging in a favorite reading chair.

An abrupt thud shook them all from their drifting reveries. Astray was the first one up, vigilantly sniffing at the obstruction in their way—a wooden pole, standing tall and skinny in the empty sea. The wood was green, sickly, and twisted, like dried fish flesh. There was a white arrow affixed to the top of the pole by a rusty iron nail. The tip of the boat touched the pole, wedged into a small nook in the wood. Despite vigorous waves the vessel did not slide past the signpost.

"Jai, do you think we just *happened* to bump into the *only* pole out here in the entire sea? Not bloody likely," Ceder concluded. Jai raised an eyebrow.

It was a vexingly simple sign. Astray looked around each side of the pole as if he might see something past the left that was invisible from the right.

"Not very helpful, is it?" asked Why.

"You can say that again," said Jai, glaring at the butterfly and the arrow both.

"Why, be a dear and fly into the sky for us again," said Ceder. "See if there's anything this sign is pointing to."

Why bowed to her and jumped into the air. With the first flap of his wings he gained the top of the white arrow, where he landed for a split-second in order to spring higher. As he pushed off, the arrow came loose and swung down to the left and up to the right, as slow as a pendulum, and whether from the wind or by its own volition the arrow fell down again to the left, around the bottom—pinned in place by the rusty nail—and up to the top, where it only preceded to fall one more time in a squeaking loop. At the top of the arrow's last ponderous rotation whatever strength was left in the nail reaffirmed itself and the sign was still, pointed at the noonday sun.

"Ceder, good idea sending Why to scout," said Jai. She smiled shyly. "Thanks."

"This will give us a chance to slip away before he comes back."

"Jai! That's not why I asked him to go."

"But there's nothing up there," said Jai, craning his head to look where Why had gone.

"This arrow must mean *something*," she asserted, as much to convince herself.

"To me," said Jai, "it looks like it's just an old, ramshackle, forgotten, ruined, stupid sign that doesn't point to anything, anymore. Even if we knew what direction it used to face, we still can't sail anywhere but where the wind takes us. Right?" "I suppose so," Ceder hedged, as if there was something more they ought to do at the pole before leaving. This was their first meeting with any landmark in the sea or sky—leaving it behind so soon felt too hasty. *On the other hand, we can't wait forever*, she told herself. "We'll push off and sail around the pole when Why gets back."

"Ceder," said Jai, "have you gotten the feeling at all today that we're—I don't know how to say it—being *pushed* east?"

"That's called wind, Jai."

"I don't mean that. 'Pushed' isn't the right word. *Pulled*, is more like it. Like we're being drawn one way and one way only?"

Ceder shrugged uncomfortably. "Maybe a little."

"Well, I don't feel it here," said Jai, looking up at the twisted signpost.

Ceder nodded, and they waited. Why did not return. "I'm getting worried," she whispered to Jai.

"I guess we don't have any choice but to leave without him," said Jai. "Too bad. Oh well, off we go."

Astray leapt into Ceder's arms, knocking her down on the bench. The cub gazed intently into her eyes, then leapt to the pole. With one look back to the children, he darted up the pole in an instant, circling around while he ascended as though a spiral staircase wound a welcome for him. At the top he disappeared.

"Astray!" Ceder exclaimed, perfectly shocked.

Both Jai and Ceder rushed to the pole and snaked their heads around either side, but their dark companion was nowhere to be seen, and still no word from Why.

"What should we do?" Jai asked Ceder.

"We have to find them. We can't leave them here."

"They left *us* here," Jai pointed out with heavy emphasis, but Ceder turned a deaf ear.

She stared at the arrow with her head cocked to one side. "Jai, how many times did that arrow spin around when Why bounced off it?"

Jai replayed the scene in his mind. He counted on his fingers. "Three. Or four. No, three. But maybe four."

"And how many times did Astray circle around the pole when he climbed to the top a moment ago?"

Jai considered, then shrugged dismissively, implying he could figure out the right number if he really tried. "Who cares?"

The black tattoo on Jai's forehead suddenly flared like fire in the night. He fell forward off his seat and screamed in agony, clamping both hands over the symbols embedded in his brow. In the next instant a scarlet light flooded over the boat. Ceder stared at Jai, horrified and frozen with fear. He writhed back and forth, his eyes crazed like a rabid animal.

"Jai!" Ceder shrieked, but she did not know how to help him. Steam rose around the boat where the red light touched the sea. Ceder began to sweat. The heat was choking. She knew this must be the searchlight from Sorid's tower that Why had warned them about; their master had found them, after all.

She grabbed a hold of the wooden signpost and pulled the boat around to the right. She could feel the red beam on her back as she did so—it felt as though the heat was melting her tunic to her skin. She knew they would survive no more than a few moments in the severe temperature, and yet now that Sorid had found them, there was nowhere to hide—the beam would focus on the wooden hull like a concentrated sunray on an insect until it burst into flames.

Ceder bit her lip as she pulled the boat around the pole in a slow, counterclockwise circle. Once around and nothing happened. She looked down at Jai. He was tensed up in a ball, every muscle in his body contracting in pain. Sweat poured down Ceder's face as she pulled the boat around the pole a second time. In a swoon she put a hand to her forehead, feeling a swiftly spiraling sense of nausea.

The red beam intensified as if all the power of the sun was redirected at the pink boat. The steam surrounding them was as thick as fog and it burned Ceder's arms to reach over the water to grab the pole, but with her last scrap of will she pulled them around the signpost one more time.

The sea before them was no longer empty.

No more than half a tail from the signpost was a well built of gray stone, much the same as a thousand wells in meadows and glades the world over but that this well rose from the sea itself, which is not the sort of location usually in need of a ready water supply.

The red beam vanished. Cool wind swept the suffocating heat and the lethal steam away in the blink of an eye. Jai sat up slowly. The marks on his forehead were black and lifeless once again, but the pale skin around the dark ink was swollen raw. Without a word he joined Ceder in the prow of the boat.

Music filled the air, or perhaps the water, for it was so soft and subtle that if the children strained to hear the melody over the ambience of the waves, the tones seemed to melt into the sounds of the sea. When Ceder returned her concentration to the well she thought she heard the music again—bubbling voices singing cascading scales of liquid notes, and the plunk of harps and golden strings below the surface—but when she closed her eyes to listen more clearly the voices sank under the spray.

Before the children could speak their astonishment Why reappeared and flew to the ribbon in Ceder's hair. He stroked his beard furiously, as if he was waking up for the first time all over again.

"Where did you go?" Ceder asked him.

"I must have flown too high. Yes, that's it. I looked down and saw the pole, but the boat was gone. How could it be gone? I must have fainted, but falling always seems to wake me up, and here you are. Yes. Obviously. I'm not crazy."

A proud roar called their attention back to the signpost. Atop the pole, curled around the white arrow like a fetch of living shadow, Astray sat watching the children. Even with the sun at his back, silhouetting him in sharp contrast, neither Jai nor Ceder could attach their sight to the outline of his form before they found themselves rubbing their eyes and drifting away into half-solid daydreams. The cub roared again, playfully, then leapt from the top of the pole straight at Ceder. She flung her arms up in time to catch him, but fell back on the bench, off balanced.

In the brief span of their approach to the mysterious well, Jai realized that he was far thirstier than he had been at any other point that day. Unwilling to take his eyes off their destination, he fumbled for his satchel and retrieved one of the enchanted eggs. He handed the other to Ceder and they both drank gratefully.

"What is a well doing out here?" asked Jai, breaking the silence.

"I don't know," said Ceder, "but if the people who built this are the same ones who designed that signpost, I'd say we might be here a long time trying to figure it out."

II. Darkness in the Depths

The well was no more than arm's length across. The foundation looked like it should have been battered apart by the elements long ago, but there it stood against an ocean of odds, its moss-covered gray stonework and simple wooden roof enduring for untold time. As to what it was doing there in the middle of the sea, neither Jai nor Ceder could fathom. They looked to Astray, whose ever-confident body language was quickly becoming a source of reassurance for the children, but the cub betrayed no clue to what he knew. The phantom music grew louder near the well, as if the abyss was lending its great volume in harmony, but when Jai and Ceder looked inside, the song was gone as if it never was.

The brim of the well was as tall as the children's waists as they stood up in the boat. The roof—two angled and conjoined boards of moldy wood held up by two flimsy posts—was higher than their heads. There was an unadorned, corroded iron winch fastened to one of the posts, attached to a taut, fraying rope; the rope ran over a rickety pulley hanging underneath the center of

the roof and then trailed down into the hole. There was no water in the bottom of the well for as far as Jai or Ceder could see.

"Why, go take a look down there," said Jai. "See if there are any coins at the bottom."

"Jai!" Ceder scolded him.

"Absolutely not," said the butterfly in a fatherly tone, "I don't want you two getting lost again while I'm gone," but he was stroking his beard more nervously than before.

Astray jumped to the well's ledge as soon as the boat was close enough. The cub immediately shoved his nose against the handle of the winch, straining to move it, but ultimately he was far too weak. He gave up the futile effort and stared back at Jai with begging eyes.

"Okay, watch what a real man can do," said Jai, spitting into his hands and rubbing them together. He grabbed the handle, guessing to turn it counterclockwise like the secret entrance around the signpost. It would not budge. He tried turning it the other direction but the gear was stuck so tight that he nearly ripped the skin off his hands. Astray watched this spectacle of failure without sympathy.

"It's completely useless," Jai said to Ceder, blowing on his palms, "just like the arrow on that stupid pole."

Ceder ran her hands along the smooth stones of the well, tracing her nimble fingers through the sea-cement that filled up the cracks in between each rock. "Strange," she said, "this feels familiar, somehow." She looked up underneath the roof at the pulley, trying to reason out the mechanics. Finally, she grabbed the rope and tugged it upward, testing its weight. "We might be able to pull this up by hand," she told Jai. "It's not all that heavy." She yanked it up again to show him.

"I guess it's the only thing left to try," he admitted, looking at his already blistered hands in despair, "but I have a feeling that hauling in a tail's worth of wet rope is going to be a lot easier said than done."

"You can climb down instead and have a look around, if you like," countered Ceder, her hands fixed for pulling.

Jai blanched at the alternative. "What if we haul it up and there's nothing at the end but a plain old bucket?"

"Then I'll stick it on your head to stop you complaining." She tugged the rope again, hefting it up a good two fins. "A little hard work never killed anyone."

"Tell that to all the tunnel-minnows that died before we were even born," Jai groused.

Suddenly the winch began spinning and the pulley screeched like a banshee as the rope wound around the axle. Ceder and Jai both jerked back and fell to the bottom of the boat.

Unflinching, Astray remained statuesque on the lip of the well, staring into the abyss. Ceder rose to the cub's side and peered timidly into the hole. "Jai... something's coming."

Jai leaned over the edge with her. For a few short moments the darkness in the depths of the well was impenetrable.

It appeared at first so small it was impossible to say what it might be, but it grew like an unimpeded ripple in still water as the winch raced like a runaway wagon wheel; before Jai or Ceder could recoil from the speedily ascending object, in the next breath it was underneath their noses, where it stopped as abruptly as it had started. Hanging from the fraying rope was a mildew-lacquered bucket boasting a scale's depth of muddy water. In the muddy water was a dead, green fish with two blubbery whiskers protruding from the corners of its mouth.

Jai let out a disappointed sigh.

"It's just a dead fish," said Ceder, leaning away from the bucket. "What do you think we should do with it?"

"Do with it? I don't know," said Jai, wondering whether he should stick it with his knife or not.

"I don't know either," Ceder said at last.

"Eat it?" suggested Jai.

"Auuuguuacoublrgh," said the fish, vibrating to life. It flopped spasmodically around the dingy bucket. "Eat it? Eat it? *Eat it*? What do you mean, *eat it*? Eat *this*!" The fish kicked his tail, lobbing an oily blob of mud at his perceived assailant.

"Blarg!" squealed Jai, goop in his eyes.

The not-quite-so-dead fish exploded with laughter.

"Bravo! Bravo!" applauded Why. "This guy's got great timing! Enlist him at once!"

Astray put a paw over his face and shook his head for shame.

Jai scraped the mud out of his eyes and used one of the enchanted blue eggs to pour clear, cold water over his face until all the sludge was washed away. He shook his hair dry and then turned to the not-quite-so-dead fish with an angry glint in his eye.

The not-quite-so-dead fish stared back at Jai. His eyes bulged as he drank in the vision of the boy's tattooed skin. "By the Holy Sight of Silver, those marks on your face chill my gills."

"Thanks," said Jai. "It seems the hospitality around here is about as deep as your bucket."

"Easy, boy, I meant no harm. And if you're done tidying up, put that egg away—such sacred water is not to be squandered."

"It's my egg, I'll do what I want with it, and this water never runs out anyhow." Jai's grating thirst was beginning to get the better of him, his temper shorter than a candlewick. "*You're* the one who just splashed *me* with mud, so chew on your fat lip until I'm good and ready for you."

"I always forget," said the not-quite-so-dead fish, turning one opaque eye to Ceder, "how insolent the little boys come."

Ceder giggled and clapped a hand over her mouth. Jai glared at the fish.

"Nonetheless," and here the not-quite-so-dead fish ceased flopping about his bed of mud, "it is, of course, my bottomless pleasure to welcome all of you to my humble well. I am called Wishfish, the most wise and mystical of all fish!" He paused to see if the children were inclined to believe him. "I must tell you I am quite impressed whenever anyone makes it this far. That sign out front fools most fish away. It is a simple device, true, but it is strong enough to move mountains."

Jai grunted his disapproval, but when he saw Ceder puff up her shoulders and smile proudly—for she had solved the riddle of the arrow before Jai even knew it *was* a riddle—his rising temper began to dwine. "Impressed, but not *surprised*," said the Wishfish. "After all, they told me to expect you: a girl and a boy, intrepid, perseverant, and hopelessly, aimlessly, unequivocally as lost at sea as fish on land."

"I beg your pardon," Ceder interjected, "but *who* told you to expect us?"

"The King and Queen, girl! Who else? I've never seen them act so secretive, constantly looking to the sky as if they were a pair of roosters waiting for the sun. The King and Queen, can you believe it? *Here*, last night, the first time in a thousand years! Even for the Wishfish it is an honor to swim under the same stars as a unicorn. And to think they only stopped to see *me*... to tell me about *you*!"

"Unicorns?" Jai asked, realization dawning.

Ceder was quicker to piece the story together. "The King and Queen—they are dolphins, black and white? With horns—" she illustrated, tapping her forehead where Jai's knife had scarred her, "—right here?"

"Isn't that what I just said?" grumbled the Wishfish. "What did they say?" Jai asked impatiently. "Where are they now?"

"Gone a dark road," the Wishfish answered grimly, and Jai and Ceder were instantly reminded of Why's report that there was an ominous highway—a ribbon of shadow—under the sea.

"Please, what did they say?" Ceder pressed. "How can we find them again? We have so many questions."

"But I'm a fool," said the Wishfish. "See how I waste our precious time together, and I haven't even asked how fare your own travels?"

"We've been—"

"Silence, girl! There's no time, now. We must be quick, then you'll have to scurry off to Coral Wing."

"What do you mean 'we must be quick?" asked Jai. "We've got nowhere to go. We have all day."

The fish turned his gloss-eyed gaze up to the comet in the sky. "That's exactly what I'm afraid of. At the castle, the Coralute will receive your questions, but, for now, let me tell you that the King and Queen are in the highest danger and it is no accident—do you hear me?—*no accident* that you have found my abode when their need of aid—nay, the need of all the open sea—is at its greatest."

"I just realized something," said Why, jarring everybody from the emotive spell of the fish's speech, "your name is Wishfish. This is a well. Therefore, this must be a fishing well! The children have been complaining of hunger. Perhaps you will allow them to catch something to eat?"

Jai rolled his eyes, but Ceder slapped her forehead and said, "Of course! This is a *wishing* well! How did I not see that earlier?"

Why cleared his throat. "Well, you could *wish* for a fish." His purple cheeks flushed like tiny cherries.

When the children looked back to the Wishfish, he was locked in a staring contest with Astray, whose emerald eyes seemed to expand and contract as the cub communicated some silent message to the keeper of the well.

"Wishes, are they real?" Ceder asked the Wishfish. "Can it be true?"

The fish flopped back and forth uncomfortably under her gaze. "To tell you they are real is to blind you with light, to tell you they are not is to blind you with darkness."

"Then how are we supposed to know what's real?" asked Jai. "Our old master spoke nothing but lies and showed me nothing but shadows on the wall, the King and Queen never said a word to us, and here you are, claiming to know something we don't, but you won't tell us what it is."

"The Land of Lin is like the sea, boy—everything you behold is only the surface. What happens at the bottom will throw bubbles and waves to the top, and this is all we are shown—shadows and words, bubbles and waves. But you must remember: below your boat lie deep waters!"

"And what of wishes?" Jai asked. "We need so many things—we need food, we need a bigger boat, we need to find land, we need to find help. Can we wish for them all?"

"Careful, boy. Fish who have many wishes will find themselves tangled in many nets. Mind your heart, and one wise wish will suffice."

Jai looked doubtful.

"In any event," said the fish, "I don't think you could afford more than one."

"Huh?" said Jai.

Ceder looked up. "Are you saying you *sell* them?" she asked, incredulous. "But you can't *sell* wishes."

"Why do you think people toss a penny into every backwater hole they stumble across?" The fish flopped himself back to an angle where he could see both children clearly. "The truth is, nothing in the sea is free," the keeper of the well intoned with ancient resolve, "not even for the King and Queen."

"And what is *that* supposed to mean?" asked Jai.

"It means," Ceder said with frost in her voice, "that he wants us to haggle over the price of his make-believe magic."

"When you're only open for business three days every thousand years, you can't afford to give anything away," said the fish with a satisfied grin, his fleshy whiskers curling up like a well-oiled moustache.

"But we don't have anything to give you," said Jai, doing his best to slide his satchel—aglow with the enchanted eggs—under his seat without the Wishfish noticing. "I suppose our butterfly could perform for you," he offered as a diversion, "sort of like a clown or something. In fact, you can just keep him."

The not-quite-so-dead fish turned to Why, who was flying hither and fro above Astray. When he realized he was being scrutinized by the authoritative Wishfish the butterfly nearly fell out of the sky, but eventually managed a mid-flight bow, which turned into a somersault, which turned into three. The not-quite-sodead fish gave Why a supportive wink.

"That will not be necessary," the Wishfish said to Jai. "And let me inform you, *boy*, that this handsome butterfly is not *yours* to broker any more than a runaway slave is the property of his former master, so mind your words. If you want a pet, get a goldfish! I've heard they live forever. And if I desired those eggs, rest assured I would already have them from you—"

"You said we had to be in a hurry to save the King and Queen," Ceder cut in, flushed with frustration, "but you want us to stand here and argue over the cost of a wish! Why should we trust *you*, after all, and not chop you down the middle and eat you for lunch?"

The fish turned to Astray with a baleful expression. "Alas, I spoke too soon. It seems the girls are as rude as the boys, these days."

The cub gingerly walked around the lip of the well next to the bucket.

"In any event," said the fish, unperturbed by Astray's proximity, "*we* have already agreed to a price that is most fair." He gulped. "Most fair indeed." The Wishfish looked up blankly at the stalking cub.

Before the children could get their questions out, Astray lifted his flower necklace with one paw and bit off three heart-shaped, pink petals.

"You know the rules, I presume," said the Wishfish.

Jai put his hands on his hips. "We play by our own rules."

Ceder shook her head.

"You don't know the rules?" The fish was

flabbergasted. "Don't you ever read?"

Both children shrugged.

The Wishfish took a deep breath. "Wishing is serious stuff. That's why I'm here, to make sure nothing goes wrong. It should be obvious how important that is!

"Now, you must be advised of three things: one, that no magic may last more than a thousand years. Such are the laws in the Land of Lin. Second, if you tell anyone what you wished for—anyone at all—then I can't be held liable if it doesn't come true. Lastly, if you are not absolutely clear in your heart what you desire, you're going to be in for some big surprises and likely a thorough disappointment. Do you both understand and accept these terms?"

Jai and Ceder nodded enthusiastically, their heads so full of possibilities their necks could barely support them.

"Listen closely: you will know what to do at Coral Wing when you arrive there. Understood? Good. I am sorry we could not linger and talk more of sweeter things. Wherever your journey takes you, I personally wish you the best of fortune, for whatever my own wish is worth, which isn't as much as it should be, seeing as I'm not allowed to buy and sell from myself."

Astray dropped the three petals into the bucket of mud.

"What then be your wishes," boomed the fish in a voice suddenly fit for a circus ringleader, "oh, masters of my well?"

III. Gone Like the Night

Astray nimbly bowed his head and held it low. When he raised it, the Wishfish nodded, opaque eyes brimming with power. The cub jumped back to the boat and looked to Ceder.

Why could not abide the silence and the seriousness that accompanies the choosing of wishes; moreover, the butterfly seemed not to have noticed that he had been excluded from the group's collective bargain, so he flew away to find something more entertaining to do up in the sky, which consisted chiefly of singing bits and pieces of made-up songs to himself and swinging his cane around like a cutlass. "Ready?" Ceder asked the Wishfish at last, stepping forth to the bucket. The fish stared at her, unmoving again, as if dead. She gulped and closed her eyes, then bent her head over the well as she had seen Astray do. She focused on her wish in the center of her heart, mindful of the Wishfish's third warning; the music of the well suddenly returned to her and she could hear every note as clear as a bell. The fish nodded. Ceder smiled and sat down.

Jai needed no further time. "Ready." He stood up over the edge of the well and looked at the fish for one short second with a self-assured look in his eyes.

The Wishfish nodded. "So be it! So be it! So be it!"

The winch came loose and the bucket dropped out of sight like a stone, the rope uncoiling too fast for the children to grab with their bare hands. Jai tried to catch the handle but it was spinning fast enough to break bones.

"What's happening? What did you wish for?" Ceder shouted above the noise of the rusty iron gear.

"Not this!" cried Jai with his hands in his hair, his eyes agog, his mind disbelieving and confused and angry all at once.

Before either of them could think of a way to jam the pulley or to slow the rope the entire well began shaking and shuddering. Jai pushed the boat back to a safe distance a dozen fins away.

Ancient dust shook free from the rocks within the well and fell into the abyss. The wooden roof creaked as its foundation flexed and stretched. The big stones fell in on one another, building on top of each other, restructuring this way and that like some fantastic, living kaleidoscope.

What floated before the boat afterward was no well, but a cobbled dome of precisely packed gray rock. All told, it was no larger than the well had been and it had the same old-fashioned, familiar feel to it—the moss, the wave-washed and faded stones, the mud and seacement.

A boxy head emerged from under a hidden covey in the stone dome. The texture of the face bore a striking resemblance to the grain of the wood that had constituted the roof of the well. "*Gahhhhh*," the creature yawned. "My lord. So soon?" It blinked a sleepy blink as it took them all in with one jade eye, then head and dome together sank below the surface and swam off due west.

Jai, Ceder, and Astray watched the creature's underwater shadow travel away against the wind. The sea was empty and the well and the signpost were gone like the night, with not a solitary fish or wish fulfilled in sight.

The Year One,

For a thousand years the King and Queen never forgot the night when a pair of dolphins found a boy and a girl sailing east together across the sea, watched over by the West Wind alone. They always wished it could have lasted longer, tugging at their hearts like a halfremembered dream.

Their long-awaited night was pronounced by the light of a comet in the sky where the mountains met the sea. The King and Queen knew what they had to do. They departed for the western coast at once.

She would find the one who fell off the turtle's back. He would find a fish who was willing to do anything

for an apple.

They would meet at the *Riverlilly* to play their part. After which they had a dark road to go, but they would travel it together, fin in fin. Chapter the Fifth, **The Third to Last Day**, *In which two ends come together.*

I. No Kin of Earth

Astray growled halfheartedly and cantered back to his bench in the prow, unconcerned that he had been hoodwinked out of three of his peculiar petals. Ceder was more perturbed. "What a crock!" she swore, her hands firmly clasped on top of her head as if to keep her body from blowing apart like an overheated teapot.

There passed a silent moment in which she and Jai did nothing but stare at the empty spot where the well had stood. "Actually, I think it might have been a turtle," Jai added delicately.

"This isn't what I wished for!" Ceder looked at Jai like she was going to cry uncontrollably or start shouting, depending on what he said next.

"Ummm, you're *right*," Jai nodded, pleased with his quick thinking.

"I bet that wasn't a real wishing well at all."

"Maybe not—"

"The Wishfish was a fraud! And he never told us one credible thing about the King and Queen—it's as if he made that bit up as he went along. What a despicable, ugly, irredeemable, selfish—"

Jai put his hands up to hold her unrelenting stream of complaints at bay.

"You should have gutted him, after all."

Jai raised an eyebrow. "That's a little harsh, don't you think?" The glare she gave him indicated that *no*, she

did not think that was a little harsh. "Maybe it takes time. Maybe they'll still come true. The Wishfish did say something about 'a thousand years.' Maybe we just have to wait."

Ceder adopted her most patient expression and Jai had to laugh. "Ceder," he said a moment later, hoping he would not sound too transparent, "what *did* you wish for?"

She blushed, but quickly regained her composure. "If I tell you, it will never come true."

"Wait. Wait. Weren't you just saying that old fish was a fraud, or did my hair get stuck in my ears?"

"Don't be silly," said Ceder.

What she thought was silly about this, Jai had no idea, so he nodded complacently and feigned to concur.

She tapped him on the shoulder. "Will you tell me what *you* wished for?"

Jai smiled, locked her mischievous eyes with his own, then laid back with his hands behind his head, staring at the sparkles and pops of light that danced in the wake of the pink comet cutting its trail across the sky. He wondered if it could truly be the shooting star Sorid had spoken of so often.

"Jai, look," said Ceder, pointing to the prow.

Astray was leaning as far forward as he could, staring into the east with the butterfly standing on his head. Why grabbed the cub's ears like the reins on a team of horses. Astray's flower necklace whipped up and down in the wind—the wispy glow of the petals shone like fire against his coal black coat. As the cub watched the horizon and the children watched the cub, a dreamlike shift occurred in the way they saw him, a foggy lens wiped clean. Their dark companion no longer seemed to be a bundle of shadows stitched together, for now Jai and Ceder could see clearly the hairs of his fur, fine as gossamer, and the pink of his nose, the size of a button, and the points of his claws, sharp as pricks of light.

A tall, thin entity emerged on the horizon.

"What do you think that is?" asked Ceder.

"Could it be Coral Wing?"

A blaring sound rang through the air like a chorus of sirens. The soaring notes that carried to the boat across the restless waves seemed to take on the shape of the seascape they prevailed over and the melody grew rugged and inconsolable, pitching to a storm.

An island rose out of the sea, halfway between the boat and the eastern horizon. It was no more than a dumpy, glistening mound, but the trumpeting chorus was swallowed at once by the crashing waves created in the island's tumultuous rise.

The waves quickly doubled and doubled again. Jai and Ceder ducked in the bottom of the boat and wrapped their arms around the bench to keep from falling overboard. Astray kept his balance in the prow with the butterfly riding his head and shouting oaths into the newborn squall.

The rising island swayed from side to side as if made of jelly, groping upward to the heavens. The water that rained from its surface hammered the surrounding sea like waterfalls of shattering crystal.

"What is it?" Jai finally put to words.

"It is the dark road," said Why, "but I didn't know it came to a dead end here."

"It doesn't look dead to me," said Ceder.

Neither of the children could count past their own fingers, so they could never have guessed how many hundreds of tails wide the monstrosity was, but they needed no astronomical sums to feel the sheer unreal power of the force they beheld. And still it rose, reaching for the clouds, the pinnacle of the broaching mass fifty tails above the sea.

The blaring music rang out from the north, drawing on new reserves to make itself heard over the din. An answering call sounded sharply from the south. The two majestic chords met in perfect unison, and then the sea split apart like an open wound and there gushed forth endless legions of mermen and fantastic armored sea creatures flowing into, over, and under one another with every lurch of frenzied waves.

Jai and Ceder clung to their bench. The pink boat skirted up and down the crests of the waves, a leaf on the wind. The torrents of water spilling off the top of the island-that-could-not-be-an-island diminished, revealing aspects of its surface to the light. Jai and Ceder, west of the island and directly under the sun, were granted an unobstructed view of the towering behemoth.

The children fell to their knees, then back to their bottoms as if the shock from the sight before them was overpoweringly physical. Their eyes stretched wide, they grabbed each other close, and their hearts shook with terror because this thing was no kin of earth and stone, no island.

The beast grew larger still. It wavered and leaned like a drunken sailor, ever rising, until its head broke through the clouds.

"I know what it is, Ceder," said Jai.

"Yes," she whispered.

"Ghazahg," they said together. This was the filthiest word spoken in the Land of Lin, according to Sorid, as well as the namesake of one of the sea's most vile legends—a serpent large enough to wrap its coil around the world, a recurrent demon that some said had never lived and some said had never died.

"Jai, what if it's here to attack the castle? What if this is the danger to the King and Queen—what if Coral Wing is *their* castle?—and we have to help?"

"The Wishfish told us we would know what to do," Jai said matter-of-factly. Then, because neither of them knew what to do at all, they said nothing more.

As Ghazahg continued to wobble back and forth for balance the waves around the monster's base reached a tremendous crescendo. At a hundred tails distance the uproar was powerful enough to throw the pink boat through the air like a tuft of thistledown. Jai lost his grip on the bench and went flying over the side of the boat, plunking into the choppy water without a sound.

II. A Drop in the Bucket

The turbulence forced Astray and Why to take cover under the foremost bench, although the cub kept his head poked out to keep a view of the action.

"Jai!" Ceder screamed into the storm. "Jai!"

There was no sign of him and the waves grew larger with every beat, carrying the boat up and down, back and forth, relentlessly farther away from where Jai had vanished below the surface.

"Jai!" she screamed again.

The calls of conch shell trumpeteers rang out louder than ever, delivered by the teeming masses of mermen soldiers. From the boat, the armies of the sea appeared no larger than grains of sand on a beach, for they were just as small—compared to the giant wyrm—and layered just as deeply. The waves rose and fell and as the ranks of mermen slid apart and shifted an endless supply of reinforcements appeared from underneath with perfect cohesion, all firing hailstorms of arrows at the serpent. Ghazahg ignored them as a tree the rain.

Ceder anxiously bit her lip, scanning over both sides of the boat for a sign of Jai, a hand, a scrap of his tunic, anything, but her search went unrewarded. She could not waste another moment. Fighting against the lurching of the boat, she retrieved the knife and rope from Jai's satchel, stowed under the middle bench. She wound one end of the rope around the handle of the knife, crossing the line over and under into a hasty knot. More desperate than satisfied with her sudden plan, she stabbed the knife into the side of the bench, grabbed the loose end of the rope, and dove into the sea, praying the lifeline would hold fast.

Astray took his eyes off Ghazahg when he heard Ceder's splash, then he turned back to the beast and let out a defiant roar.

The giant continued to pull itself out of the sea like the endless scarves a magician pulls out of his sleeve. It teetered dangerously from side to side, almost too heavy to support its own weight. It had attained such a staggering height that even the pink comet was no longer safe; the wyrm was tall enough to snatch the shooting star from heaven with no more trouble than a frog catching a fly.

Undaunted, Astray faced Ghazahg with a zealous snarl. The cub bit a grass-green petal off his necklace and let it fall into the water. The petal sank like a stone.

Jai and Ceder burst out of the waves like two harpoons, flinging themselves over the side of the boat and dragging themselves aboard, panting and shivering. Ceder clutched a fistful of Jai's hair like a vice; having found him underwater in a miraculous instant, she had never let go. As soon as they could breath the children looked up. A shadow was overtaking them.

The wyrm craned its body. Its head descended from the clouds to hang into the west, so that the whole of it formed the shape of a skinny S, giving the unmistakable impression that it was posing itself to strike.

"What is it doing?" Jai had to shout to be heard. "Coral Wing is behind it! It should be leaning the other way!"

Ghazahg leveled its head and fixed on the approaching comet with unnatural concentration even as the rest of its body quivered and shook with the exertion of maintaining such elevation. From the boat, the shooting star seemed to trace its path across the sky with all the speed of a snail. Equally sluggish, the great wyrm opened its mouth, creating a vacuous black hole to intercept the comet's trajectory.

Astray dug his razor-sharp claws into the prow of the boat, a formidable masthead standing strong into the storm. When he bellowed at Ghazahg the colossus hesitated for the shortest instant. The cub's necklace flared. Slowly, slowly, the wyrm began to change color: two glowing green tendrils intertwined around the giant's body under the surface of its skin. Spasms of pain suddenly wracked the great beast.

Sensing a weakness, the armies of the sea blasted their trumpets once more, redoubling their assault. They shot their fish-scale-fletched arrows at the convulsing wyrm in hurricane-like assaults that ate away at Ghazahg's outer layer of skin and flesh like a ravaging plague, but the damage to the beast's bulk was but a drop in the bucket. Its dark green blood gushed into the sea, malfeasant waterfalls drowning scores of mermen at a time.

The monster lowered its head from the clouds, finally driven to distraction. The glowing green tendrils continued to braid their way around its body. Astray sprang into Ceder's lap as she hid in the bottom of the boat. She could barely summon her arms to enclose him.

The wyrm trembled ominously, marshalling itself for an attack. Instead of directing its wrath at the armies that attacked from the east, Ghazahg looked back west, not into the sky at the comet, but into the sea.

"What is it looking at, Jai?" asked Ceder.

"For a second I was sure it wanted to eat the comet," said Jai.

"Then why is it staring at *us*?"

Ghazahg dived into motion, swooping its head down over the pink boat.

"Jai!" cried Ceder.

"Ceder!" shouted Jai.

"*RARRRRRRRRRRRR*?" bellowed Astray, the loudest one of all.

III. Primal Challenge

Far behind the boat the wyrm's rear end rose above the surface of the sea. The size of a mountain summit, the tail was flat and raw, a gruesome mixture of open flesh and half-healed wounds, as if it had been lopped off with a colossal axe a thousand years ago and left to scar over and decay.

The monster's head, plunging down through the clouds, stretched farther west. Its tail stretched up and east. And still the filigree of green fibers spun around the wyrm's body, head and tail alike, snaking under its skin like burrowing moles.

The wyrm passed directly under the sun and the sea was cast in shadow, a darkness broken only by the blush of the comet and the unhealthy glow of the green blood that gushed down in sheets from the holes in the serpent's hide.

In the same moment that the monstrous shadow passed over the boat, Jai and Ceder saw a familiar marking upon the head of Ghazahg: a crescent of incandescent silver skin that pulsed with radiation, pale and soft.

The wyrm passed over the children entirely, indifferent to the ship without sails and its passengers.

Jai and Ceder exchanged a puzzled look. "It's not coming after us," Jai said thankfully.

"You're right," said Ceder. "It's going to bite its own tail!"

They both saw what would happen. The loop the wyrm would form as it chased its own rear end was going to close around the boat.

"We have to get out of here, NOW!" Jai screamed. The din of crashing waves and falling water and arrows whistling in the distance was deafening.

"We'll never make it!" Ceder screamed back.

Jai draped himself over the side of the boat and paddled frantically with his hands. Ceder did the same on her side. Why flew to the back of the boat and perched astern, facing west, using his film-thin wings to fan the boat forward for what little his strength was worth. "*I think I can! I think I can!*" the butterfly bellowed as he flapped for his life. His tiny face flushed red and he waved his walking stick at the tempestuous sea in a primal challenge. Only Astray made no move to escape the crushing fall of the great wyrm. Jai and Ceder paddled with such intensity that the boat picked up a shred of speed—although this may have owed to the wind—but the loop they were seeking to escape was impossibly wide and they were nowhere near the edge.

"Ceder, it's no good! Stop paddling!" Jai shouted desperately. "*Stop paddling*!"

She stopped and looked up, and hope died. They would have to move a hundred tails in ten heartbeats to escape. She counted down their demise in her head: *Nine... Eight...*

She looked at the monster's repulsive head, angry that it had not swallowed the merman army instead and gone on destroying the world to the east; that it had decided to wreck their little boat and ruin their lives when they had only been given one day to be free. Seven... Six...

Ghazahg engulfed its own tail with one gluttonous bite. Its jaw unhinged and gulped down over the length of its own lower half, attempting to swallow itself like one long noodle.

Five... Four...

The noise of the waves turned into a cacophony like splintering glass and raging thunder as the loop tightened to a pinch, mere tails away from closing down onto the boat.

Three... Two...

IV. A Heartbreaking Roar

One truth that is undeniable in all stories is that no matter how big a thing is, no matter how strong, it cannot squeeze something into nothing; all that something has to go somewhere, and fast. As the coil of Ghazahg's self-ensnaring body reached a critically small circumference, the sea swelled up inside the loop, packed with more pressure than the space would permit. Like a slimy pebble slipping out of a clenched fist, the water shot out of the closing circle faster than any wave in the Land of Lin had traveled in a thousand years. The pink boat skimmed along for the ride.

Jai and Ceder, holding the trusty rope to keep from flying out of the boat, looked behind to see Ghazahg disappear into the sea. For an instant, just as the children were turning away from the ghastly sight, they caught a glimpse of the waves rising into a thrashing imitation of a crab's claws, clutching the wyrm's body tightly and dragging it under. In a final, infinite moment, the serpent that was big enough to strangle the world sank below the sea. Too big to go quietly, the impact of its fall sent a ring of tidal waves ripping across the sea in every direction.

Jai and Ceder huddled in the bottom of the boat. Had they peeked but a moment longer they might have seen that the wave they were riding was faster and higher than all the rest, that the surging crest did indeed display a strong resemblance to a crustacean's curvaceous hand, that it was smooth and strong and safe.

Astray stared at the comet, trailing slightly behind them in the sky, and let out a heartbreaking roar.

The wave set the boat down gently and the great arm of the sea spilled back to its domain. The children looked over the side of the boat and found that they had been deposited in a decorative pool built into an outcropping on the side of a mountain of coral reef.

Resilient to the blaze of the sun, the coral soared above the water in tangles of strangely fortress-like formations. Set into the side of the reef not far from the boat were a pair of white pearl doors.

"I think we found Coral Wing," said Jai.

"So all we had to do was wait it out and go along for the ride," said Ceder, replaying what had happened to Ghazahg over and over in her mind. "I guess what we knew *was* what we had to do—*nothing*."

"Yeah, and not fall out of the boat," said Jai. "Ceder, you saved my life. I never would have made it back to the boat by myself if you hadn't jumped in after me."

She smiled and blushed. "You saved me, too."

Jai knew she was referring to last night when he had carried her into the sea. He turned away from her; he had conveniently forgotten to tell her that the only reason he had to carry her—the cut on her forehead owed to his own carelessly unsheathed knife. He was not sure there was any real reason to tell her, now.

The outcrop they landed on was decorated with lush plants potted in upright seashells. Two marble statues stood near the pearl doors—dolphins balanced on their tails. Neither was represented with a unicorn's horn.

One of the doors swung open and a small glass ball rolled out. The ball looked to be filled with clear water, for inside was a dazzling blue and white striped jesterfish who moved about by swimming such that his ball rolled forward, back, and side to side. He maneuvered his unusual vehicle into the pool of water, where he bobbed up and down next to the boat.

The jesterfish stared at the sky, his expression rapturous. "By the Holy Sight of Silver, the comet, she prevails! She prevails! And blow my bubbles—two kids in a boat, sitting in the fishbath like they've been there all along." He grinned from his widest gills and gave the children a stately bow of his pointy head. "Welcome, my friends, to the heart of the sea—Coral Wing. If you have no objection, I will escort you to the King."

The Year One,

A red apple came to rest on the bottom of the sea. Cowering inside the core was a half-eaten glowworm, struggling to survive. The worm gorged itself on the flesh of the apple like a man before a fast. When the sun rose over the water, the worm slept, falling into endless night. Trapped in endless night.

When the moon was high, the crescent on the worm's head glowed incandescent silver, transforming the deepdiving moonlight into sustenance. Locked in hibernation, the worm began to grow. In mere hours it outgrew the apple core and burst out like a hatchling from a shell, although it never awoke. In spite of the smothering pressure on the seafloor, the sleeping glowworm swelled ceaselessly long and fat until it was so big that its bulk could be seen from the surface of the sea like a dark road leading east. Chapter the Sixth, **The Third to Last Day**, *In which water is reduced to stone.*

I. An Unexpected Turn

"My name is Cliff," said the jesterfish. "Please, follow me. Don't mind your wet clothes, of course, but you *will* have to get a haircut before you see the King."

Jai and Ceder both said, "Who, me?" and the jesterfish chuckled pleasantly. Floating in clear water inside his glass ball, he seemed to hang suspended in midair.

From far below, the glorious ring of conch shells and the raucous cheers from mermen soldiers filled the air. Fish of all shapes and sizes leapt out of the sea in acrobatic displays. Waterworks were launched into the sky, bursting into multicolored showers of flowershaped rain. Jai and Ceder sat watching the celebration and forgot at once that Cliff was waiting for them.

"I assure you, the party will carry on for days and weeks, if not months," said the jesterfish in a voice that suggested he would prefer to join the festivities below if given the choice. "Such a thing as this! The King may very well award every soldier with an apple. Fish love nothing so much as a fresh apple, you know. With a nice, big worm inside. Yes, this may very well carry on for years." He swam a backward somersault, causing his ball to begin spinning in place in the water, but he could not move forward without friction. "A little help, if you would be so kind?" Ceder gave the ball a tap to get it started and Cliff rolled out of the pool and up to the pearl doors. "I wonder how he gets in and out of that thing," Jai whispered to Ceder, giving her something to grin about.

Jai stepped over the side of the boat. The water was perfectly cool. He had not noticed so before, but tiny translucent fish seemed to be everywhere in the pool, suddenly crowding around his exposed skin. They tickled and he shook them away, only to find that the tiny fish had eaten away every remnant of dirt and blood on his skin so that his pale legs fairly shined under the water.

"Ceder, the water is amazing." Jai held out his hand for her. She stepped down from the boat with Astray perched on her shoulders. The tiny fish attended to her unwashed legs and she giggled out loud at the peculiar sensation.

"Excellent," said the jesterfish, "I'm sure the King will appreciate that you've taken the time to soak your toes. Now, if you are ready, please follow me. Your ship will be attended to in your absence."

Before climbing out of the pool, Ceder winked at Jai, held her breath, and stuck her face in the water. The translucent fish darted to her submerged skin like sharks to blood and when she whipped her head out a moment later her face was cleaner than if she had scrubbed with soap and hot water. Jai's breath caught in his throat upon seeing her remarkable beauty revealed. Her skin was flawless and dark, offsetting her winter blue eyes. She smiled at him shyly then followed after Cliff.

Jai had a sudden idea. He looked at his reflection in the water—the dark tattoo on his forehead stood out like ink on parchment. He took a deep breath and ducked his face into the pool. The tiny fish rushed to cover his cheeks, lips, eyelids, even up his nose, but none came to his forehead. He pulled his head out and checked his reflection—Sorid's dark marks were still inscribed on his skin. Jai closed his eyes; in the void of his mind the sun burned into his thoughts like a ring of fire. He gasped, clutching his throat, and lowered his face to the decorative pool, scooping water into his mouth.

He drank greedily, needful—the tiny fish swam every which way to avoid his cupped hands—until he felt Ceder and the jesterfish watching him with disdainful frowns, as if he had been caught spitting in the King's private fountain.

Cliff rolled his glass ball against the pearl doors, which had mysteriously shut themselves since he passed through a moment ago. The ball made a sharp *clack* as it hit the door, and the children scrunched their shoulders in anticipation of the glass sphere shattering, but the jesterfish repeatedly knocked himself against the doors and the ball never broke, although the doors never opened, either. "A little help?" he asked the children

The doors were twenty fins tall, solid pearl. Jai pushed one gently and it swung open on hinges of air. Cliff led them through and Jai, Ceder, Astray, and Why passed into a dimly lit hallway.

It was another world inside Coral Wing. Blue light threw itself in tempests around the corridor. An endless series of hollow glass sculptures lined the walls, filled with glowing, swirling water—this was the source of the ethereal blue light. Jai stared into the largest sculpture, a gigantic king crab, then he grabbed Ceder's arm as he suddenly remembered something: "We've left everything in the boat! The eggs, the rope, my knife." He turned to dash back to the outcropping, but the pearl doors had silently closed behind them. "Hey, Cliff!" Jai called ahead—the jesterfish was already rounding a distant corner.

Jai and Ceder ran to catch up—the lighting inside the castle was low enough to remind them of Sorid's dark abode and they wanted anything but to be left behind here. As the children soon saw, the reason Cliff had proceeded so quickly was that he was involved in an awkward game of give and chase with Astray. The cub was stalking the shiny ball like a born predator. In the aquamarine ambience he became one with the shadows. He leapt forward every few strides to give the glass ball a tap with his paw; the poor jesterfish, for his part, was so torn between fleeing for his life and performing his duty-namely, to escort the children-that even as he yelped and scurried to escape like a mouse inside a wheel, he was simultaneously pointing out interesting sculptures and striking coral formations as though giving a historical tour of the castle. "Right this way," he was saying as Jai and Ceder caught up, "and we'll wind our way around the Circle of the Sea on our way to the high council room, which is, of course, deep in the castle."

"Why are there hallways and doors for people in a castle full of fish?" asked Jai, already distracted from his purpose of revisiting the boat.

"Coral Wing is the heart of the sea and belongs to everyone therein," said Cliff, "which I believe includes you, at the moment. But these slumbering floors haven't felt a firm footfall for a good long time. If I didn't have my great grandfather's old ball, the King would have had a dry time finding someone to come up to the palisade to collect you. Most of the rooms in the castle are in places you could never get to, unless you can hold your breath a lot longer than I can."

Jai appeared ready to take this as a challenge, but Ceder cut him off to ask, "How far down does it go, the castle?"

"The castle and the sea are one and the same, and who knows how deep the sea flows? But fish *have* been known to fall out of the sky from time to time. Ha!" The jesterfish raced ahead, just out of reach of Astray's lightning-quick paw.

The glass ball took an unexpected turn and rolled into the shadows at the base of a far wall. Astray trotted after, vanishing into a jagged, knee-high split in the coral. By the time Jai and Ceder arrived at the spot, the tangled hole had grown large enough to accommodate them. Ceder entered, unruffled, and Jai followed her, hearing the sound of Astray's muffled footfalls ahead. The children descended several steep steps that seemed only to appear under their feet at the last possible instant.

Ceder stopped suddenly.

Jai bumped into her. When he looked over her shoulder he was struck speechless.

II. Similarities

The room they entered was without compare. Battleworn shells of armor lined the bleached walls, arching high overhead. The ceiling was a masterpiece to put the rest of the artwork in the castle to shame: fashioned from jewels, diamonds, and bits of smooth glass was an expansive, inverted model of the open sea, replete with cruising fins and schools of fish, tropical islands and archipelagos, a tortoise with a scale forest on its back, and a replica of Coral Wing itself carved out of a sparkling prism, so faithfully rendered that Jai wondered whether there was an even tinier version of the fortress inside the first model. Why flew up to the ceiling to inspect the sea of precious stones from close quarters, although he was much too large to fit inside the little castle.

Thousands upon thousands of blue gemstones were stuck to the coral ceiling like ivy clinging to a wall this was the sea. Most amazingly—the children had to stare vigilantly to be sure what they were seeing—the miniature sea was ebbing slowly west to east. The gemstones that washed into the eastern edge of the recreation were sucked up into the ceiling by the living coral and brought back to replenish the western coast and begin their journey again. The children saw that as the blue gems swept from side to side, the myriad tiny fins and turtle shells rose and fell below the waves. Ceder found herself wondering if the motion of the water and the miniature creatures reflected what was happening in the sea outside at that very moment. She posed the question to Cliff.

"You see fish and a house of coral, but all you really see is the sea," the jesterfish replied innocently, as if he truly believed this was a helpful answer. "You see?" Ceder looked up at the model of Coral Wing. Most of the fortress was multicolored, but the tip of the replica was brown and black, as if it had been singed by a torch held aloft. The children had not seen the top of the actual castle when they were outside, so Ceder asked Cliff whether only the model was discolored, or if, in fact, the peak of Coral Wing itself had been burned by the sun.

"Indeed, Wingtip Tower was drenched in flame long ago," replied Cliff, "but it was not the sun—not unless you believe that all fires are to be blamed on the sun above all else. Many fish *do* feel that way, unfortunately."

Jai walked around the room in a circle, checking the inverted model for something in particular, but he did not seem to be able to find what he was looking for. "Is there not a place where the sea is pure silver?" he asked Cliff in frustration. Ceder looked up.

The jesterfish gave Jai an odd look. "A place where the sea is pure silver? Sounds fishy to me. Who told you that?"

"Why did you take us here?" Jai asked right back.

"This is the Circle of the Sea," said the jesterfish, as if that explained everything. "This is the pride of Coral Wing. We can't stay long—the King is waiting—but I just thought you might like to see it."

"It's beautiful," Ceder said appreciatively.

"What does it do?" asked Jai.

Cliff looked startled. "Do? It's doing what it does." "But what is it for?" Jai pressed.

Cliff was at a loss for words. "Well, you see, *hmmm*. Interesting question. Actually, I don't really know what it's *for*, when you put it like that. I suspect the only one who might have an intelligible answer to that would have been Saerin Silvermoon. This was his favorite place to come and think."

Where have I heard that name before? Jai asked himself.

"The glass sculptures lining the hallways are all Saerin's handiwork," said Cliff, "and the lights inside were his idea, too. Thank goodness! It would have been a dark place around here without him."

"But who was he?" asked Ceder. "I don't understand."

"Who was he?" echoed the jesterfish with a coy smile and brimming eyes. "Who was the Man in the Moon? Look up at night, you will see him. Look down in the sea, those are his waves. He had more water in his blood than earth and stone. He was a great poet, a composer, philosopher, inventor, and friend of every fish who ever swam. He lived in the castle, here, for a time. During his stay he made more of those sculptures than there are stars in the sky. They line every wall from the peak of Wingtip Tower to the lowest basins of the sea."

Ceder thought about the countless sculptures she and Jai had rushed by in the first few corridors alone. "But they're all so lifelike—how could one man carve so many in a single lifetime?"

"Your question is a forked river," replied Cliff, "but the simplest answer is that he never carved so much as a scale on a single fish. Saerin's art is *waveglass*, and there isn't a blade in the world that can make a mark on it."

"Then how did he sculpt them?" asked Jai, confused.

"No one knows." Cliff cleared his throat, embarrassed at not having a good answer now that he had introduced a subject which the children seemed to be genuinely interested in. "Searin alone held the secret for making waveglass, which is to say not glass at all, you see, but water soothed, stilled, somehow put to sleep, hard as ice though never frozen; strong as iron, but the weakest fish can swim through it like sunlight through a window. My ball, for instance, is waveglass-made and one-of-a-kind, passed down from my forefish of old, a gift from Saerin himself."

"Where is he now?" asked Ceder.

Cliff's fins drooped like wilting leaves. "For the latter half of his time at Coral Wing, Saerin took no visitors, kept his own council, and spent all his time calculating obscure dates and pouring over arcane maps of star constellations."

This sounded all too familiar to Jai and Ceder—Sorid had done much the same in his compulsion to locate the comet that would betoken the return of Syn.

"He left over three hundred years ago," said Cliff, "around the time that the Magician began to make a name for himself in the western reaches and the wild lands beyond."

Jai and Ceder exchanged a look of premonitory dread.

"Saerin never told anyone where he was going, not even the King and Queen, who had been his dear friends. He left in the middle of the night, shrouded in darkness, and the surface of the water shows no tracks. Some say he went mad up in Wingtip Tower and knew not day from night or sun from moon," but Cliff sneered at this suggestion as if it was the most asinine thing he had ever heard. "And some say he left to confront the Magician—can you imagine, the Man in the Moon trading blows with the Son of the Sun?—but there is no account of a showdown between the two in all the sea, and you know a fight like that would have made some pretty big waves."

The children were sure they knew what was coming next. The similarities between Saerin and their master *former* master—Sorid were too great to be coincidence.

"But I know the truth!" said Cliff, the sparkle returning to his eyes. "My grandfathers and all my forefish before me have worked in this castle. More than a hundred generations ago, my great-great-greatgreat-great—you get the idea—my great-great-great grandfather was a devoted servant to Saerin himself. He was in charge of bringing apples up to the tower everyday. Well, my father's fathers told him and my father told me that when Saerin left, there was only one thing on his mind."

The children waited in suspense.

"Silver!"

Jai and Ceder were unable to hide their confusion. "Silver?"

"Silver!" cried Cliff. "He was obsessed with it! Why do you think they call him Saerin Silvermoon?"

"I don't know," asked Jai. "Why do they?"

"Because he went to search for *silver* on the *moon*," said Cliff. "I've tried to tell everyone—I even told the King and Queen, once—but nobody will listen to me."

"Oh," said Ceder.

"Hard to believe," said Jai.

"How in the world would a man get to the moon?" asked Ceder.

"When Saerin left he said he had to find something called 'the secret stream.' It must be some kind of passage from our world up to the sky. Think about it!"

Jai looked to Ceder and rolled his eyes.

"Maybe you should take us to the King, now," Ceder said to the jesterfish.

Cliff was disappointed, but he seemed to take it as a matter of course that his elaborate thesis about the Man in the Moon should be disregarded by the uninitiated. He turned to leave the Circle of the Sun just as Ceder realized something was amiss with the upside-down model of the sea. "The little version of Coral Wing is too close to the eastern shore," she pointed out. "It should be farther west, closer to the middle of the sea. Jai and I set sail from the *western* coast last night, and here we are at your castle already—"

"Our castle," Cliff interjected.

"—but there's no way we crossed more than half the sea in one night, is there?"

"Right you are. No ship can sail the open sea so fast. A skipping stone thrown from shore to shore, skimming a tail at a time and never losing speed, would take a week at least."

Ceder folded her arms proudly.

"And yet," said Cliff, "the Circle of the Sea is a perfect likeness. When Ghazahg rose today, I was in this very room; a coil of green diamonds burst from the ceiling, reaching for the floor, even as the wyrm outside rose to the clouds. It very nearly smashed into my ball. Yes, the Circle of the Sea is a perfect mirror." "Then how did we come so far in one day?" asked Ceder.

"This castle *has* been known to change latitudes entirely when there is sufficient danger, but questions about that—strategic tactics and the such—should be presented to the Coralute. In any event, we certainly weren't moving around *last* night," said Cliff. "You must have your story twisted up... which is not altogether uncommon in the Land of Lin, if that makes you feel any better."

Ceder turned scarlet.

"We should go," said Cliff, rolling for the door. "The Cor... I mean, *the King*, does not take kindly to those who tarry."

III. Stopped Dead

Cliff wagged his tail to get the ball rolling. The children followed obediently after. Once again, Astray gave chase to the jesterfish. Jai and Ceder had to jog along behind, shouting their questions ahead, hoping to be heard.

"Are the King and Queen *both* safe?" asked Ceder, something she had meant to ask since they first arrived.

"I do not know," Cliff called back.

Ceder traded a worried look with Jai.

"Can we have something to eat while we're here?" Jai called ahead—he had been meaning to ask this an equally long time.

"We'll see to that as soon as we get to the high council room," said Cliff as he led them constantly down, never up, his glass ball bouncing ahead like a renegade marble. The floors and doors in the castle were made of pearl, onyx, glass, and stone, set haphazardly into the coral like loose boards in a treehouse. Cliff often turned sharply to take unseen shortcuts and side-ways as they opened up in the living walls, explaining to the children that the coral 'participated' in the day-to-day comings and goings of the castle.

Astray caught up to the jesterfish and gave him a sturdy whack. Cliff yelped and swam off with his tail flapping like a broken tiller. The children shook their heads in bewilderment as they trotted to keep up.

"He doesn't demonstrate much dignity for someone working at court, does he?" scoffed Why from atop Ceder's ribbon. "His responsibility is to escort us before royalty and here he is getting dizzy on the job."

The children caught up with Cliff and Astray outside a pair of round doors. The cub was licking his fur, the jesterfish wheezing for breath. Demarcating the doorway were two elegant statues of dolphins standing on their tails, one to either side of the entrance.

"Ceder, look!" said Jai, pointing to the unciorn horns on the glass sculptures. Ceder smiled and ran her fingers over the smooth glass, considering what manner of man had shaped it.

Cliff rolled his ball into the doors, knocking three times. They swiveled open and he rolled inside onto a bed of fine white sand. Astray dashed into the room and vanished into the darkness at the far end.

"This," said Cliff, "is where the Coralute will receive you."

"The *what*?" Jai asked the fish. "I thought it was the King we were coming to meet."

"Of course, pardon me. *The King* awaits you inside." The children swapped a suspicious look, but since the cub had already gone ahead, they had no choice but to follow. Jai put his hand on his hip, elbow pointed out; Ceder slipped her arm through his and they both walked slowly forward.

The high council room was long, low, and narrow. Buttresses of navy coral held the ceiling up scarcely higher than the children's heads. There were no statues or plants for decoration; the liquid lights swirled in plain waveglass urns as if to show visitors that nothing but the strictest and gravest business should proceed here.

Seeing what waited at the end of the chamber, the children stopped dead in their tracks.

"*That's* the King?" Jai whispered anxiously back over his shoulder.

"Of course not," said the jesterfish, "that's his horse." Jai and Ceder each took a step back.

"Don't do that," said Cliff. "You'll make it nervous." A savage growl confirmed his words.

The Year One,

The West Wind labored day and night to sweep the ash from the air. The sulfurous, crimson remains mingled with the azure backdrop of mirrored sea and sky until earth and heaven melted into one unending purple spectrum, as if the wind flew with lavender wings from one horizon to the other. Month by month, year by year, the wind carried the smoldering ash to the eastern boundary of the sea and let it fall to blanket the coast until a desert of red dunes glittered in the sun like goosebumps on the skin of the world, stretching up and down the shore as far as the eye might see.

Chapter the Seventh, **The Third to Last Day**, *In which ill-tidings roll in like bad weather.*

I. And One More Thing

At the end of the room sat a white lion with a mane composed of dangling green moss and urchin-like seaflowers. Brocades of shimmering lace were draped over the lion's back, interwoven with patterns of chromatic jewels. His eyes were jet black orbs, his nose a black seashell, his claws curved sabers, serrated like lobster pincers.

"That's not exactly how I imagined a horse would look," Ceder whispered to Jai.

The lion sat on a wooden dais a fin above the finely raked sand. Astray climbed onto the dais and crouched at the lion's feet. The lion lowered his head, grinning hideously to bear teeth as long and thin as whale baleen.

Jai and Ceder took an instinctive step toward Astray, but Cliff rolled in front of them and came to a sharp stop, signaling that to approach the platform now could be a fatally unwise decision.

No sooner than Cliff stopped them, but Astray rose to his back legs and caught his claws in the lion's mossy mane. The cub ripped down forcefully. The lion shook him off and snorted, gnashing his teeth.

"Will he bite?" Ceder asked Cliff.

"I don't think he would have an easy time chewing on a glass ball," said the jesterfish. Ceder shot Jai a concerned look. Dodging an irritated swipe of the lion's forepaw, Astray leapt into the mossy mane again and jerked it down without mercy. The larger beast whipped back and let out a bellow that lifted the petulant cub into the air like a speck of spittle stuck to his lip.

Astray hung to the mane by one claw. The lion ran out of breath and the plucky cub shot his free paw into the dangling moss and tore back with all his strength. The lion instantly snapped his jaws at Astray and if the cub's tail had been more substance than shadow he would have lost it, but he managed to spring away just in time. He landed in Ceder's arms and for once she was ready to catch him without falling down.

The lion lowered to his belly with a wet *squish* and fixed his black eyes expectantly on the children.

"Go on then-kneel," Cliff ushered Jai and Ceder.

Without thinking to ask a rational question, the children found themselves dropping to one knee and bowing their heads deferentially. They also found that once their heads were bowed and their eyes lowered, it took more nerve than either of them could muster to look back up to the lion's hungry grin.

The only movement the beast betrayed was the rise and fall of his back as he breathed, purring with a hum as low as the tide. The children smelled lime and lichen in his musk. Then he opened his cavernous mouth and retched out a spraying mess of water and foaming saliva, and one more thing—a dead, green fish.

II. Consumed

"Ha! So they caught him!" said Jai, for the white lion had evidently consumed and now regurgitated what could be none other than the elusive and indecorous Wishfish.

"And he really looks dead, this time," noted Ceder.

"Where's the King?" Jai turned to ask Cliff.

"Where's the Queen?" Ceder added, leaning over the jesterfish's glass ball.

Cliff regarded them with a lofty expression and shrugged his tail, as if to say they would have to figure out this part of the ceremony on their own.

The children turned back to the dead, green fish. "I think we should try to wake him up," said Ceder. "He might still be alive."

"I'd just as soon leave him for dead," said Jai, "if it's all the same to you."

"Say you're going to eat him, like you did at the well," urged Ceder. "See if that works again."

Jai looked at the puddle of lion phlegm in which the fish lay. He looked at the lion—if it desired, Jai thought, the beast could gobble him up in one lazy bite. Finally, he looked back at Ceder. "You say it."

She sighed, annoyed. "Fine. Excuse me, mister fish—" her voice was the epitome of humility, "—but I think my friend Jai, here, is planning on eating you."

"Shut up," Jai hissed, elbowing her, but she got the words out.

The dead, green fish did not respond.

"What now?" Jai asked Ceder.

"Maybe we should try touching it. Just a poke, to see what happens?"

"Sure. Good idea. I'll use my knife. We'll see—"

Before Jai could finish, before Ceder could remind him that he did not even have his knife with him, the lion stirred; the roar that emanated from his gaping maw blasted Jai onto his back in the soft sand and filled the entire room with spine-tickling reverberations.

When he sat back up, Jai's shaggy hair was windswept and his eyebrows were disarrayed. Covered from head to foot in the lion's saliva, he blinked several times like he was waking up from a strange dream.

"You've got to learn to watch your mouth," hissed Ceder. "Did you already forget what happened with the Wishfish?"

"I've never heard of a Wishfish, but he sounds like a handsome guy," said the not-quite-so-dead fish, smiling widely, making his fleshy whiskers curl up like shriveled worms. "*I* am the King."

"You're not the King," Jai accused the fish, "you're a filthy little thief that likes to play possum."

"Calm down, boy. Your words aren't worth the water," said the fish-who-claimed-to-be-King, eyeballing Jai's tattooed forehead, then he shifted his attention in between the children. "Cliff, is that you?"

"Yes sir," said the jesterfish, rolling in between Jai and Ceder.

"Our guests must be starving. Bring something to tide them over right away."

"Yes sir," said Cliff. He swam a somersault to roll away, but his ball got no traction in the sand. "A little help?"

The lion gave a cursory roar that blew the glass ball to a start and Cliff spun off on his errand. "Welcome to Coral Wing," said the not-quite-so-dead fish-who-claimed-to-be-King. "Your every wish, if it is in my power to do so, shall be granted."

"Before you vanish, this time?" Ceder asked tersely.

"Pardon me," said the fish, "that was a figure of speech. I should know better than to speak lightly of such things in the Land of Lin."

"Why are we here?" Jai asked. "Better yet, why are you here?"

"The sea was at war today. I thought it fitting I should be here. I am the Coralute, after all."

"What?" said Ceder.

"I am the Coralute," the fish repeated, "and if you do not yet wish to think of me as King, call me by this title instead."

"What's a Coralute?" asked Jai.

"Is that another name for con-artist?" asked Ceder.

"Mind your manners," said the fish. "My horse's favorite snack is a straw-haired girl."

Ceder stuck her tongue out at him.

"The Coralute is the highest military commander of Coral Wing," the fish said stiffly. *"It is the most powerful station in the open sea! I have been serving in this office for over—"*

"So you're *not* the King!" Jai boasted triumphantly.

"Correction," said the fish, "I *was* not the King. Not before today. Not before an hour ago. Not before that twice-cursed wyrm arose and blotted out the very sun."

Ceder scrunched up her face, trying to think beyond what she heard. "So... the King and Queen left when Ghazahg attacked, and put *you* in charge?"

"Precisely."

"And you expect us to swallow that horse-spit after the stunt you pulled at the wishing well?" asked Jai.

"There is no wishing well," said the fish-whoclaimed-to-be-both-Coralute-and-King.

"Oh yes there is!" Ceder jumped in. "We were all just there! Well, maybe there isn't one anymore, since it turned into a turtle and swam away, but there was one! Don't play dumb with us—you're the Wishfish. You've got the same voice and everything!"

"No, I haven't," said the fish in a slightly deeper voice.

"The King is a dolphin—a unicorn!—and the Queen, too," said Jai. "There are statues of them outside this room! I don't know what you're doing here, but you're not the King! Admit it!"

The fish looked gravely troubled. "Alas," he said, "there is much to explain. Please, give me a moment to think."

"We'll give you a moment when you give us back our three flower petals," Ceder countered. Jai thought this was an especially good comeback.

The fish took a moment to think, whether he was awarded it graciously or not. At last he said, "Some fish cannot swim in deep waters. This is a sad thing."

Jai frowned. Ceder crossed her arms.

"You must not confine your reality to what you see on the walls of a cave. To wit: there is no wishing well, and I am not the Wishfish. I am the Coralute, and I am the King."

"Do you just go around collecting all sorts of pretend names, or what?" asked Jai. Ceder thought that this was a much better retaliation than her own, but she added, "Confess, and we'll go easy on you."

"Very well," the fish resigned, "I am *not* the true King."

"We knew it!" cheered Jai.

The fish shot him a glance that meant *wait until I've finished*. "What I have to tell you is not easy."

"Admitting you're a liar never is," said Ceder.

"The King and Queen are dead," the Coralute said flatly, "not but an hour past."

III. A Sudden Stroke

Ceder felt as if the wind was knocked out of her. Why gave her a rare look of sympathy. In a stupor, she let Astray fall from her hands. Jai stood stock still, letting the leftover lion ooze drip down his nose as the fish's words sank in.

"Is it true?" Ceder asked softly.

The fish looked at her long and hard. "You were lucky to have seen them before they died; it is—it *was*—a fantastically rare thing for them to take their original forms, of late. It may be a hundred years since anyone last saw a unicorn about the castle."

"But, Ghazahg fell," said Jai. "The soldiers were celebrating."

"The soldiers do not know the truth. I will inform them when the time is best. As Coralute, I was second in command. Now, for the time being, I am King."

"What happened to them?" asked Ceder, fighting back tears.

"Not ten minutes before you four appeared in the distance, His and Her Majesties led an attack against the beast in the deeps, hoping to stop it before it breached the surface. Those who made it back alive say the King and Queen were swallowed; they ordered everyone to retreat, then dove into the serpent's mouth and it swallowed them, that confounded, great, mindless nightmare! It swallowed them like so much krill, not even knowing! And then, only minutes later, it doubled back and devoured its own tail-the titanic ass!-and already our scouts report that it is surely dead. Its body is *melting* apart a hundred tails at a time into mountains of green silt vast enough to reform the seafloor. Some kind of poison... Those glowing green tendrils... I don't know what they were or where they came from, but if the King and Queen had waited just a moment or two more they would still be alive."

We will never see them again, Jai despaired as the keenly painful moment seemed to lag into infinity.

Now how can our wishes ever come true? thought Ceder, for she had the sneaking suspicion that she and Jai had wished for the same thing at the well. But I still won't tell anyone what it was.

"That can't be right," whispered Jai, reaching for any shield at all to ward off his grief, "you're the fish from the wishing well. This isn't true."

"Heed my word," said the fish, "the throne of Coral Wing does not acknowledge the existence of a wishing well, and never has: How would it do for every birdbrained fish in the sea to be always bothering someone who has important work to do—not as important as mine, naturally—but important nevertheless? It would not do at all. As the King of Coral Wing, I shall tell you this one last time and trust you to leave it at that: there is no wishing well, and I am not the Wishfish."

Ceder nodded acceptingly. Jai glared at the fish, frustrated by his non-answers. There was a long silence after that.

The sound of clattering and clanking announced the return of the jesterfish. Cliff rolled into the room with a silver tray balanced on top of his glass ball. The tray held two goblets, a dish, and a thimble. He stopped in front of Jai and cleared his throat. "*Ahem*?"

Jai lifted the tray from the ball, wondering why the castle bothered to employ a servant who needed help with everything he did. He set the tray in the sand and handed the thimble to Why, placed the dish before Astray, and lifted the goblets for Ceder and himself.

"Thank you," the Coralute said to Cliff.

"Yes sir," said the jesterfish, retreating.

"Drink up!" said the Coralute.

With rumbling stomachs, the children excitedly looked into their cups. Cliff had brought them all water. Plain water. Jai felt like throwing his goblet at the wall.

"Is it possible the King and Queen carried the poison into Ghazahg?" Ceder asked in a sudden stroke of insight as she swirled the water around in her cup, reflecting the speed of her thoughts.

"No venom in the sea is deadly enough to kill a creature that big, that fast," said the Coralute, "but there may be something to your idea. Did you know that among the other powers of a unicorn's horn, the foremost is a—was a—how to say it?—a certain sense of direction. They were never lost, *could* never be lost,

no matter where they were. No, but it's more than that. They had a... correlation... to the sea itself. I've seen them control waves with a look of their eyes, witnessed them guide lost fish home from afar. They could swim blindfolded through day or night and they were the only ones who didn't need an arrow to find the... never mind. I never fully understood it. And never will."

Ceder idly ran a hand through Astray's fur as she followed her train of thought aloud, "If the King and Queen knew about the poison, somehow, then perhaps they *let* Ghazahg swallow them so they could use their power to spread the poison quickly enough through its blood to kill it before it destroyed the castle."

"Why would it devour its own tail, though?" asked Jai.

The Coralute shrugged. "There were reports of an unidentifiable fish—a glowing, green fish—near the wyrm's hindquarters. Perhaps..." but he did not finish his thought.

Jai felt he was missing whatever conclusion Ceder and the Coralute were coming to. "When Ghazahg fell, it looked as if the water came to life and dragged it— Ghazahg—under," he said, unsure whether this held any significance.

"No!" the fish gasped. The children both nodded, unaware what had made their host react so strongly. "To see the sea awaken from its eternal slumber and play a part, this is rarer still than a visit from a unicorn!"

"But we didn't know what we were seeing until it was over," said Jai. "We were basically just trying not to die." "Yes," said the Coralute, nodding earnestly, for some reason strangely satisfied, "such is life."

"What do we do now?" asked Ceder.

"Raise your goblets and drink to the Holy Sight of Silver, that the Spirit of the Sea may soon return to us. Then we're going to follow the King and Queen's last orders."

Jai and Ceder downed their water in an instant—Jai scarcely registered the taste of ash—and slammed their goblets on the serving tray. "What orders?"

The Coralute's fleshy whiskers twitched. "They told me two children would come in a boat. I did not believe it, but here you are, and I have my instructions: I am to give you a gift, I am to give you a warning, and I am to send you somewhere and see to it you arrive there safely."

"How is it that everyone except Ceder and I seems to have known we were coming here?" Jai asked peevishly.

"The hour is growing late," said the Coralute, overlooking Jai's question. "We can talk as we go."

Without further bidding the white lion picked the fish up in his mouth. The wooden dais sank into the sand, revealing a hidden stairwell. The lion carried the Coralute down the secret tunnel and the children hastened to follow, Ceder holding Astray and Why riding in her ribbon. The lion led them through a dank section of the castle where the waveglass sculptures were few and far between.

"I always thought people rode on *top* of horses," said Jai.

"People do," said the fish.

"I expected horses to look much different," Ceder added delicately.

"What were you expecting?" asked the fish.

"I don't know. Something less... fierce."

"I understand your confusion. This is a *seahorse*. There are animals that dwell on land, I am told, that look very much like our seahorses—*they* are called lions. In the sea these mighty beasts with their magnificent manes are an altogether different breed. Seahorses are loyal to a fault, and yes, very fierce."

"Sorid spoke of sea-lions, too," said Jai. "What are those?"

"Sea-lions are wild and reckless creatures. They roam the seafloor in herds, trampling up clouds of longsettled silt wherever they run. They, too, have unruly manes of mossy hair, like our seahorses. All in all, sealions most resemble what those on land commonly call horses. Yes, I can see why you would be confused."

They walked in silence until the children could bear the suspense no longer; they asked the Coralute what, specifically, the last orders of the King and Queen had been.

"The gift, you will find in your boat," the fish said cryptically. "The warning, I swore to tell you only as you were sailing away."

"And where is it you would have us go?" asked Jai.

"Not I, boy, not I. If it were up to me, I would see you stay at the castle and enjoy the immeasurable comforts of Coral Wing. But when the King and Queen told me last night of Ghazahg stirring in the deep, and of your coming, they made me swear to have you escorted to the Oldest Fish in the Sea. It may seem like madness, when you are already safely here with me, but they always had their reasons."

"Who is the Oldest Fish in the Sea?" asked Ceder.

The Coralute gave her a steely stare. "He is the guardian of the river, which is the only road through the Sands of Syn to the wild lands beyond."

"Land?" Ceder repeated excitedly. "Will we find people there?"

"That's exactly what I'm afraid of," said the Coralute, fixing her with a penetrating stare. "All fish are forbidden to swim the river, all except the ancient Dwor fish, who is bound to make his home underground, away from the sea."

"Why is the river forbidden?" asked Ceder.

"Don't you ever read, girl?" cried the fish, annoyed at the relentless questions. "The Sands of Syn, they must never be disturbed!"

"But what are the Sands of Syn?"

The Coralute sighed, seeing there was no way around telling the children the truth. "The Sands of Syn are a wasteland on the eastern coast, red hills of ash as far as the eye can see. The river there is boiling hot, they say. And the Sands... well, you don't need to know about the Sands, if you will promise me one thing."

"What?" the children asked as one.

"You will not give any water to the desert. Not a drop. You must be impeccably vigilant that under no circumstance do you allow so much as a mist or a vapor to stain the Sands. Can you swear that to me now?"

"Are you telling us the desert is going to ask for a drink of water?" asked Ceder.

"It is not so polite as to ask," said the fish.

IV. Under Way

They came to an arched doorway and passed into an indoor harbor that was protected on all sides by towering walls of tangled coral that grew so high as to disappear in a fog of darkness. At the edge of the enclosed lake was a dock, at the end of which was tethered their boat. A knot of tentacles erupted from the sea bearing limb-replacing wooden peg-legs or metal hooks attached to their tips. The tentacles wrestled with various tasks over the pink boat, preparing the vessel to sail faster than any eight deckhands ever could.

"What is this place?" Ceder asked in awe.

"A secret," said the Coralute, "a place from which to depart in times of great haste. Your journey to the river cannot be hindered, and we must be careful to avoid drawing the attention of the Magician. He has some control over the Sands of Syn. If he learns that you are on the river, he will churn the desert into a deathtrap."

"Sorid already knows where we are," Jai told the fish, tapping his tattoo. "He can find me anywhere I go."

"Except in the sea," asserted the Coralute.

"Nothing can hide from the sun," said Jai. "He told me so."

"Sorid Sunclaw may be able to see anywhere at any time, but he cannot see everywhere at all times. Fish in the sea, we feel the waves—the motion of all things at once—but the Son of the Sun must cast his sight over the far sea like a man casts a fishing line, and neither is he accurate nor patient. You will be safe."

Jai looked doubtful.

"If he can summon the sun on a whim to kill whomsoever he pleases, would he not have done so already? You haven't been burnt to a crisp yet, have you?"

Jai thought about his shriveling stomach and the wreath of flames imprinted on his mind whenever he closed his eyes. He cringed at the vivid memory of the searing scarlet searchlight that had made his tattoo flare like a red coal. "To a crisp? Not quite yet."

The Coralute was visibly disturbed that he could not convince Jai he would be safe at sea. "You will have the finest escort," said the troubled fish. "The Royal Seal itself shall attend you all the way to the coast."

They circled the harbor and filed down the narrow dock. The tentacles surrounding the wooden walkway withdrew below the surface; the last of the prehensile limbs to leave placed a pair of sturdy, white oars inside the boat.

Astray sprang at once into the prow. Jai and Ceder were not so anxious to be off. They climbed in warily, not at all wanting to leave behind the charms of the castle so soon, but neither wishing to disobey the last requests of the King and Queen.

Next to the new oars the children found a small dial made of waveglass. Ceder picked it up, examined it, then gave Jai a turn to inspect the delicate contraption. There was a frail pin inside the dial, spinning one way then the other with a mind of its own.

"A compass," said the Coralute. "Your gift from the King and Queen."

"Why is it spinning in circles?" asked Jai.

"It points to water! In the Land of Lin, that means pretty much every direction you can name. I don't know why they left it for you. I shouldn't think you'll have a very difficult time trying to find water in the sea or the river."

The octopus below the surface knew the look of a beast that yearns to be under way; when it saw the black cub standing like a figurehead in the prow, eight tentacles unwound the cords that bound the boat to the dock.

As they drifted away the white lion shook his head so that the fish-who-was-King flopped back and forth, waving goodbye to the children, although anyone who did not know better might assume the larger beast was merely playing with his food.

Cliff rolled onto the dock suddenly. Balanced atop his ball was the dish of water which Astray had been given in the council room. Jai and Ceder could not hear what words passed between the jesterfish and the Coralute, but they could see that the water splashing out of the dish was aglow pink—certainly not the same stuff they had all been given to drink. The Coralute gave Cliff a curt command and the jesterfish hurried back into the castle, whisking the dish of rosy water away with him.

"You said you had one more thing to tell us as we were sailing away," Ceder called to the Coralute.

"And so I do," replied the fish, scarcely loud enough for the children to hear. "Do not follow the fisherman!"

The white lion tilted his head back and swallowed the Coralute in one gulp, then turned and walked out of the harbor.

The Year One,

The fisherman awoke in the middle of a desert of blood-red dunes. He did not know how long he had been asleep—several days, he guessed, or else his memory was already twisted; how else to explain falling asleep on one side of the sea and waking up on the other? He found it even more strange that he was so far inland. He had climbed into the pink boat during the hammering rain, he recalled, before he fell unconscious; if he had stumbled sleepily out of the boat when it reached the eastern shore, he could not explain how he had come to be so far from the sea but that the desert had swelled up and formed around him as he slept. He shrugged—it was inconsequential.

Lightheaded, he touched his forehead. The hole was still there, as if a worm had mistaken his face for an apple and burrowed an entrance inside. It was also of no moment.

He fumbled his fingers into the breast pocket of his vest. His compass was missing. He looked down. The cloth around the pocket was wet. It would be more difficult to find fresh water without the compass, but the fisherman was only thankful he had not lost more in the fight. He still had his fishing pole. That was usually enough. And he remembered! He still remembered everything. All was not lost. *There is hope*, his beloved had told him a thousand times and more. *There is hope*, she would tell him again.

He knew that the river must cut somewhere through the sea of crimson ash but he could neither smell nor hear running water, and without his compass... Rather than guess at bearing north or south, he hiked east toward the rising sun.

The fisherman ambled through the dunes for weeks, yet he never tired, thirsted, or opened his mouth to utter a syllable of grief or privation. He reached the mountains at the edge of the desert and passed over them with as little regard for the majestic scenery as if he was blind.

He saw a forest in the distance and quickened his stride. He knew he would find the river there and amend his sorry future. All was not lost, not yet. *There is hope*.

Chapter the Eighth, **The Third to Last Day**, *In which brewing storms are an unborn beast.*

I. Ever-Revolving

The pink boat quickly approached the wall at the edge of Coral Wing's enclosed harbor, but there was no opening through which to pass. The fish-who-was-King had given them no instruction on where or how to exit the enclosed lake. Whatever escort he had promised was nowhere to be seen.

"Leave it to a bunch of fish to put a sign pointing to nowhere in the middle of the sea," said Why, "and then build a place with no way out, and no signs or arrows to speak of."

"Should we use the oars?" asked Ceder.

"Should we jump out?" Jai asked at the same time.

They were too slow to choose—the prow of the boat sailed into the tangled reef. The children hunched their shoulders, closed their eyes, and grabbed hands to brace one another, but no collision ensued. They opened their eyes, only to immediately shut them again—the boat had slipped into and beyond the rainbow-colored coral as if by some trick of mirrors, or a magician who claims to swallow a sword, standing sideways and sliding the blade past the hidden side of his face. Passing through the solid, seamless wall made the children instantly nauseous; the colors warped, waned, and distended even as the coral itself seemed to stand still.

Feeling sunshine and the wind in their hair, Jai and Ceder opened their eyes and looked back. The wall was already behind them. "My head is swimming," said Jai, rubbing his forehead. "I feel like I got dunked in a whirlpool upside-down and inside-out."

"I think a whirlpool would have been a bit gentler," said Ceder.

"If you can't stomach a thing like that," said Why, pointing back to the wall with his cane, "I don't know how you expect to get through the *rest* of your adventures."

Coral Wing receded into the distance. From their present vantage point the children could clearly see the discolored scorch marks on the peak of Wingtip Tower. Many of the burns had long since healed over—the damage looked to be of ancient origin—but there were still dark spots here and there where the coral had not been able to regenerate.

"What was it Cliff said that burned the castle like that?" asked Jai.

"He never told us," answered Ceder. "He just said you can't blame the sun for every fire."

An octopus emerged shortly after they left the castle. The children were not sure if it was the same one from the harbor and they were too stunned by its appearance to ask. Its green skin looked like the fat on cooked meat. One of its eyes was covered with a purple patch made out of a shimmering fish scale; the other was an opaque ball of black ink floating around a misty white eye socket. There was a tattoo of an anchor with eight prongs on its forehead—this is where Jai and Ceder kept their sight focused while the octopus spoke to them, for maintaining eye contact with the exceedingly ugly creature proved too difficult. "What're *you* lookin' at?" growled the eight-armed pirate.

"Nothing," said Ceder.

"No one," said Jai.

"*Gmph!*" said the octopus. With its droopy eye it sized up Jai. "Nice tattoo, lad. But aren't ya a wee bit young fer a mark like that?"

Jai shrugged, looking anywhere else.

"Ya reckon to sail through the Sands o' Syn, do ya? *Gmph*," it grunted again. "Good luck wit that. Won't say it's a prime idea, myself."

Ceder was already itching for the conversation to end; that is just the unfortunate effect which pirates will have on some people. "We need to be there before sunset," she said tersely.

The blank, inky eye stared at her. "All right, all right, 'old yer noses." Neither of the children understood this expression and they half-expected the octopus to drag the boat undersea, as if the journey would be quicker that way. But all it did was wink at them—jet black ink leaked out of its eye as it did so—and simply say, "Anchors away," before dipping its bulbous head back underwater. The boat accelerated swiftly. The children looked over the prow to see the octopus towing them with its tentacles like a horse-drawn carriage.

"I finally understand what you were saying this morning about feeling like we're being pulled east," Ceder teased Jai with a smile.

The Royal Seal emerged from the sea right after the octopus ducked down, one hundred white and black seals swimming around the boat in a perfect circle. One seal in the troop had golden fur—the children supposed

this was the end of the chain of command. Each streamlined defender dove into the sea where the one in front of it had jumped out, so that the whole entourage resembled a corrugated wheel ever-revolving, not stopping in all the hours it took to reach the eastern shore.

II. Plainchant

"Ceder," said Jai, running his hand through Astray's fur conspicuously close to hers, "may I ask you something?"

"Yes?"

"Sorid used to tell me about you. Oh, not a lot," Jai hurried to say when Ceder's hand froze, "I mean, he told me there was a girl imprisoned somewhere above the tunnels, and that he put a curse on you, to keep you there. But you bear no markings like my own. You escaped without him knowing. I was just wondering—"

"If I'm really cursed?" She met his eye. "Yes and no."

"What does that mean?"

"When the unicorn touched me... something changed."

"A kiss from the King is no small thing," Why sang errantly, a phrase from an old tune on the wind, perhaps.

Jai batted the butterfly away like a mosquito. "Ceder," he said—he waited until he caught her eye

again, "how did you get away from Sorid?"

"What if I told you I just walked out the door?"

"That would be more believable than telling me we just sailed through a solid wall," said Jai.

Ceder bit her lip, lost in thought. A fiery glint flashed in her eye as she began to recite a plainchant verse:

To flesh run, By virtue of a bite. When the day is done, Live in fright.

Jai shivered from a chill in spite of the sun. "What was that?"

"That was the curse Sorid put on me. Or, not on me, exactly." She took a deep breath. "All I ever got to eat were apples. Well, apples and worms—oh, you know what I mean." Jai stuck his tongue out.

Ceder shook her head, taking a fresh start. "Sorid took every apple before he gave it to me and held it up in the sunlight. He put the curse on every one. *To flesh run, by virtue of a bite,*" she repeated. "I had to eat them or I would starve. That was all it took for the magic to flow into me."

"What does the other part mean?" asked Jai. "When the day is done, live in fright?"

Ceder took a moment to gather her words. "Every night of my life is like sleeping in ice water, freezing my heart. I have nightmares of the sea and the things in the deep that are as real as... any of this. Every morning I wake up covered in cold sweat from being eaten or slaughtered or torn apart a hundred times throughout the night. That's what it means."

Jai was on the edge of his seat. Why had leaned over Ceder's ribbon to stare at her upside-down. Even Astray seemed to be immersed in her story, his emerald eyes flashing a hundred shades of green.

"I spent my days huddled against the wall," said Ceder, "as far from the great stone stove as I could get. Sorid kept a huge fire roaring inside it. On top was an iron pan warming those red eggs that never hatched. He spent all his time huddled over the oven, basking in the glow of the eggs. I think he would have gotten up and sat on top of them if he could have.

"The Circle of the Sun has three doors, but I didn't know for sure where each one led: Sorid never left the room until I was asleep, paralyzed in pure fear, and he was always back by the time I woke up at first light. I suspected one door led to the tunnels because he always told me that he spent nights 'tending to the furnace.""

Jai frowned—if Sorid had spent his nights in the tunnels and his days ensuring Ceder did not escape from above, had the old magician never slept?

"A second door led to his tower atop the mountain," Ceder continued, "and the third door handle was covered in dust, never used. I thought it must lead outside, but I guessed it would take me to the orchard, which Sorid told me covered one side of the summit; he must have been talking about the other side, though, because when I ran through that door all I saw was water."

"But how did you overcome the nightmares?" asked Jai.

Ceder stared at Jai hard. "Before I went to sleep yesterday, Sorid told me a story I've never heard before. It was so strange... He spoke of something called Syn, and of the death of the Land of Lin. As if the world itself could die. He said everything was going to end in three days. Flesh, bone, sky, and stone. When I asked what was to become of me, he said I was to play a special role. His eggs were going to hatch, he told me, but they needed a beating heart to grow. He said he was going to cut out mine and feed it to the hatchlings."

Why's face went white in terror and he ducked inside Ceder's ribbon like a child hiding under his covers. Jai's jaw clenched in anger as he listened.

"Last night I was so scared by Sorid's story that I never fell asleep. I pretended to, I shut my eyes so he would leave, but the nightmares never came; I was more frightened being awake, being alive, than what any cursed dreams could have done to me. I laid there for hours making sure everything was quiet, then I got up, grabbed the eggs and the apple, and ran out the door without looking back."

"And that's when you bumped into me," said Jai, "without so much as a word of warning." Ceder laughed uneasily. "But what do the unicorns have to do with it?" asked Jai. "You said they changed something. Did the King lift your curse when he kissed you? What happened?"

"I—" she began, unsure how to finish, "—*slept*. It was... wonderful. I don't know how else to describe it. I was at peace. I don't know if I'm cured, though, or if the nightmares will come back now. I won't know until tonight. When *the day is done*."

"He must have been in his tower all last night watching the sky, looking for the comet," said Jai, looking up at the selfsame sight. "How else could he have missed the two of us sneaking away down below?" "We still don't know how Seaweed knew we would be on the shore," said Ceder. "Could Sorid have sent him to intercept us?"

Jai shrugged. "Seaweed did mention Sorid, but he acted so afraid. I don't know what to think." He furrowed his brow, chewing on a difficult idea. "Ceder, I just realized something. Seaweed took the apple you stole—if he eats it, he'll get a mouthful of Sorid's magic!"

Ceder grinned. "And so will that glowworm that was hiding inside. Poor little guy."

Jai laughed. "Why did you pick an apple with a worm in it, anyway?"

"They all have worms, Jai. It's just a matter of picking one that's not too big."

Jai grimaced.

"They all look big to me," said Why.

"Jai," said Ceder, "you still haven't told me how *you* got away. When I bumped into you, you were just standing on the mountainside like a moon-addled owl, staring at the sea."

Ceder already knew about the tunnel-minnows and the lava furnace, so Jai skipped right to the scene of his escape. "I got out through a small crack in the side of the mountain. It took me years to find it. Sorid was always fuming when he found me exploring instead of working, but I don't think he ever suspected I was memorizing every twist and turn in the tunnels until I could picture a map in my head as clear as by light. I found a tunnel one day a long time ago that smelled like nothing I had ever breathed. When Sorid found me there..." Jai trailed off, scratching his back absentmindedly as if an old scar had begun to itch. "But I never forgot how to find my way back to that draft of fresh air. The crack in the side of the mountain was just a few turns away from there. I always planned to sneak out with my wheelbarrow one day and use it to sail across the sea."

"Oy!" barked the octopus. "Won't last long on the river with wits like that!"

"I didn't know *he* was listening," Jai whispered to Ceder, embarrassed. "Well, I guess I was too scared to try to leave until last night, finally. Sorid told me, too, that these were the last days. He said he was going to feed me to the furnace as part of some sick ritual to make enough fire for Syn."

Ceder shook her head in disgust.

"Hey," Jai exclaimed suddenly with bright eyes, "this is great!"

"What? Why?"

"My lady?" said Why.

"Not you," said Ceder.

"Sorid never told me very much about the ritual," said Jai, "but from what you said about the eggs, this could be really great!"

Ceder was plainly not following.

"It sounds like the heat from the lava I carted into the furnace went up to fire the stove above, in your room. And, come to think of it, they're both probably part of the big stone pillar that holds up the mountain, down in the lowest part of the tunnels, in the middle of the underground lake."

Ceder arched an eyebrow—she had heard of no such lake or pillar. "What's so great about that?"

"Think about it! Sorid told me that *I'd* be burned in the *furnace* to make more fire for *Syn's* return, and he said he would give *your* heart to those *eggs* that were heating up on top of the *stove*. If the furnace leads to the stove, then Syn must have been inside the eggs you stole! Syn wasn't even born yet! That's what Sorid's ritual was all about!"

Ceder's expression immediately soured.

"This is good, Ceder! Remember how the eggs used to glow red last night? It all makes sense. That was Syn inside—two of them, one in each—but now they're gone! The King and Queen turned them blue. They're filled with water. Don't you see? We stopped Sorid! We killed Syn before it could be born again! The legend Sorid told us was true, but we stopped it! Why do you look like you're about to throw up?"

Ceder was nearly pale for a girl with skin so brown. "There were *three* eggs, Jai. I left one on the stove."

Jai reeled back and sat down, touching his forehead unconsciously. "But... but you and I escaped. If he needed us—if he needed your heart—to make the ritual work, then we've still won. He won't be able to hatch the last egg without us."

Ceder was unconvinced. "What if he doesn't need my heart to make it work? What if he just catches a bunch of fish and throws them on the fire? I should have taken the third egg instead of that apple. But I was so *hungry*, and I didn't think I could swim all the way across the sea with too many things in my arms."

The octopus shook its head but said nothing.

"Ceder, without that apple, we wouldn't even have a boat right now. We *had* to have it, in a twisted kind of way."

She forced a smile.

Jai took the enchanted eggs out of his satchel and handed one to Ceder. They sat in silence for several minutes, taking comfort in the gentle rumbling of the eggs and the pallid luminosity they emitted. Ceder took a drink, then raised the small crack in the blue shell to her eye. She had not yet taken the time to closely examine the perpetual squalls that raged within them. For a moment she was utterly absorbed. She lowered the egg. "Jai, why didn't you tell me what was inside of these?"

Jai was taken aback. "I thought I told you about the little storms inside. I'm sure I did."

"Why didn't you tell me about the *dragons*?" She was dead serious—the color drained from her face.

Jai pressed the egg in his hands up to his eye. She was right—he could not believe he had missed it before! Now he saw them clearly. The egg was not filled with miniature hurricanes, but with diminutive dragons rushing around the interior of the eggshell in endless cyclones; Jai had mistaken serpent for squall because the tiny spirits were formed of the water itself and were difficult to see at first. Their horned skulls and ridged spines were one with the turbulent, tea-cup-sized typhoons, there one second, gone the next.

Jai put the egg down. His skin was pale to begin with, now it was ghostly. "The King and Queen didn't destroy Syn," he mumbled in disbelief.

"They just turned it from fire into water," said Ceder.

They sat in silence, stunned. "Does this mean they're not a threat to the sea anymore?" asked Jai.

"I don't know," said Ceder, "but maybe we should stop drinking out of these for a while."

They put the eggs away and tucked the satchel under the bench, out of sight but never out of mind.

III. Last to Go

The Sands of Syn appeared at first as a roiling red haze hovering above the horizon, then the desert slowly crystallized into the more distinguishable profiles of smooth, sloping hills. Silhouettes of craggy mountains were faintly visible beyond the forbidding dunes. There was only one break in the shoreline where the river flowed into the sea. A green archway rose over that threshold—a statue of some sort—but Jai and Ceder were too far away to make it out clearly.

A tail away from the river the boat came to a stop. The octopus with the eye-patch emerged from below, scowling fiercely, but Ceder had the unshakable impression that it was trying not to cry. "So we're 'ere, by my eye. That's where the guardian's at. The Oldest Fish in the Sea. Never met him, myself, but I 'ear 'e's a bit on the cranky side. I'll keep an eye on ya, in case 'e don't take yer case kindly." And with that, the patcheyed pirate submerged.

"Wait!" called Ceder.

The octopus eyeballed the children as if their reluctance to leave had been the most predictable thing in the world. "Aye?" it asked gruffly, resurfacing.

"What should we say to the guardian?" asked Ceder.

"I've no idea, missy. Say what ya like. Most fish ain't too fancy about thee's and thou's."

"Will he know that the Coralute has given us permission to go ahead?"

"From what I've 'eard, aye, 'e'll know. Not that 'e'll care. The guardian does as 'e desires. 'e doesn't give a whit about Coral Wing, they say. Says it's false advertisin'. Now, good luck to ya two, I mean that. But remember, if ya *do* get past them statues, ya won't be in the sea anymore, will ya? Out o' friendly territory catch my drift? So watch out fer yerselves. And watch out fer each other. That's the only way ye'll make it." The octopus waited for them both to nod. "Right, off ya go. Out yer oars and bend yer backs. The river flows against ya, so ya best get used to blisters!"

Jai moaned in despair, looking at his hands.

"Thank you for pulling us," Ceder said to the pirate, summoning her best manners for this last uncomfortable conversation, though she still focused on its anchor tattoo as she spoke. "If you see the Coralute again, would you please tell him we're sorry we could not stay longer. It would have been nice to visit more of the castle and watch the celebration under the sea." This earned her a look of esteem from the octopus, but Ceder frowned, deeply troubled. "And yet, it hardly seems right to be festive when so many soldiers were injured in the fight, and the King and Queen—" she stopped herself short; she did not want to be the one to break the bad news to the surly pirate.

"Well, that's the curious part, ain't it?" said the octopus, giving her a queer eye, as if it knew she was hiding a secret. "I heard a wave o' gossip on the way 'ere. Seems there's been some kind o' miracle back at the castle since we left. There's a bowl o' pink medicine goin' 'round—a panacea, they say, a pink panacea fixin' all the soldiers up right as rain. Funny thing is, no matter how many fish drink from it, or how many wounds they pour it over, the dish won't run dry. How's that for a bit o' good, salty cheer?"

"That sounds pretty far-fetched," said Jai.

"Aye," said the pirate, "aye. Let's just say, I didn't believe in a lot o' things when the sun rose today, but I'll be believin' in a lot o' things when the sun goes down. By the 'oly Sight o' Silver, when the sun goes down, I'll wager fish can fly." The octopus swam away with a wave of eight silver hooks and wooden legs.

No sooner than that but the entirety of the Royal Seal vanished below the sea; giving the children one respectful nod, the golden-haired leader was the last to go.

Ceder handed Jai an oar and they began to row.

The Year One,

Two brothers awoke standing over the river. Ignoring the strange light that stirred them, they began fighting as soon as they could see, their fingers locked in a groping tug-o-war for a trinket which they slowly came to realize was no longer there. Something was amiss. Stupefied, they checked the water below and the wasteland all around, but the object of their quarrel was nowhere to be seen. The brothers sat down, each on his own side of the river.

They looked around, puzzled. The trinket was not the only thing missing. Where were the red sands? More importantly, where were their piles of gold? The whole world was wrong. The brothers looked at one another and snarled, but as dense as they were, they knew neither was to blame for the other's missing treasure they were both afraid of the water and would never try to cross the river.

They gazed at the sea. Had the waves washed everything away? Surely no ordinary rainfall could have wiped clean so boundless a desert. Whatever the cause, all that remained of the desert they once called home were endless tails of gray shale littered with large, broken bones petrified to stone.

The brothers gaped at the sky, noticing now that the air was cast in an uncanny light, as if it was both day and night at once. They stared in awe—there was a black hole in the sun. Only a rim of fire remained burning in flickering tongues around the dark disc. This is what had woken them, they knew—the sun, which they had never seen before; with its center blacked out, the brothers finally saw their world in the light of day.

To the far west, over the sea, the sky morphed red in a single heartbeat, alight from horizon to horizon.

The brothers turned from the coast and began marching to the mountains, each on his own side of the river. It began to rain. They quickened their step. In the mountains there were good places to hide. The rain did not bother them, nor the livid sky, but if the black hole left the sun, the brothers knew they could not be there to bear witness and yet survive.

They waited in dark caves for over a year. When they emerged the world was renewed, as if they had been sleeping all along. They shuffled along the riverside to the edge of the sea. Vast crimson dunes covered the wasteland, just as they remembered. They sat in the dark of night and waited.

When they were hungry they caught fish.

When a ship passed along they demanded a hefty toll and hid the gold below the dunes, amassing new hoards of treasure to replace what had been lost.

When the sun rose they burrowed into the sand and waited for dusk to fall again.

They waited by the sea night after night, dreaming of a trinket they had seen long ago which might one day drift within reach again. They waited, and a century slipped by like a river in the dark. Chapter the Ninth, **The Third to Last Day**, *In which the children hasten east.*

I. Back and Forth

Ceder blew a strand of hair away from her face. Jai wiped a bead of sweat from his nose. Rowing was hard work. As they neared the shoreline the influx of the river made each pull on the oars more difficult than the last. When they reached the green archway—the threshold to the river—the sun was low in the west.

The archway was in fact a pair of grotesque statues of two ogres standing over the river, joining hands at the top as they squabbled over some prize which was no longer there. Their faces looked like mashed apples and their eyes and mouths misshapen holes dug out with a blunt spoon. They towered over the entrance to the river, their upraised hands fifty fins high. Why, who had been flying about happily for much of the journey from the castle, returned to Ceder's ribbon nervously. Jai laid his knife on his lap, though he could plainly see the overgrown brutes were made of stone.

"Do you think they were alive once?" Ceder asked him.

"Sorid used to say ogres turn to stone in daylight," Jai replied.

"That's what I thought." Ceder glanced at the sinking sun. "But what happens when it gets dark again?"

Tied to the ogres' groping fingers were two ropes that hung parallel a fin apart, suspending a horizontal wooden board that drifted back and forth in the wind. Seeing no guardian, Jai and Ceder tried to row under the archway, but the boat bumped soundlessly into solid air. Again they tried, not understanding what force prevented their passage, but the boat bounced back each time as if unwilling to venture under the statues' outstretched arms.

Ceder tried knocking her hand on the invisible barrier; her fist rapped against the air without a sound, springing her knuckles away as if she had pounded on a drum. Apparently the wooden swing and the two ropes were the only objects which could pass freely between the sea and the river.

"Where is the guardian?" Why asked disdainfully. "These fish folk take their responsibilities far too lightly, if you ask me. The evidence just keeps piling up!"

"Do you think the statues are the guardians?" asked Jai.

Ceder shrugged, preoccupied; she turned to Why. "Yes, my lady?"

"Can you see the red beam in the west? Is it still looking for us?"

The butterfly flew away to scout. When he returned he shook his head. "I believe it is too far away now. I see nothing at all."

Ceder let out a sigh of relief and turned her attention back to the river.

"The signpost, the wishing well, the Coralute's horse, the wall of the harbor," Jai recounted, keeping tally on his fingers, though he was only holding up three, "I wish someone would just *tell* us what to do, for once." Astray stared intently at the sky, watching the comet's progress. As the shooting star passed over the Sands of Syn the cub turned to the children and roared, urging them to get moving.

"This is the only thing that can pass under the arch," said Jai, catching hold of the wooden board. "I guess that means we have to swing."

"What makes you think one of us will be able to pass through?" asked Ceder.

"Only one way to find out." With a foot on the side of the boat, Jai lifted the swing back from the boundary and tucked one leg in between the ropes.

"You're going to slam face first into a wall of solid air," stated Ceder. "You know that, right?"

"I almost hope I do," Jai grunted, his eyes trained on the river. He jumped, stuck his back leg between the ropes, and bellowed an adrenaline-fueled "*Woohoo!*" as he sailed under the ogres' arms and through to the other side. At the top his toes clipped the sky. All he could see were clouds.

He swung backwards to the boat, instinctively tucking his legs up to build speed. "Watch!" he called to Ceder, who was dumbstruck. Jai swung through the bottom and pumped his legs to build height, his feet skimming the water like shark fins.

"Watch me!" he shouted as he came back to the boat again, even higher. On his third time forward the swing rose parallel to the river and Jai let go all but upsidedown. "AHHHHHHH!" he screamed, suddenly terrified. He flipped over twice with his arms flailing and landed head-down in the river. Ceder was horrified; the Coralute had told them the river was boiling hot, a fact which only now snapped back into her mind.

Jai popped up right away, grinning from ear to ear. "Come on in," he called back to the boat. "Swing!"

She did not know what to say. "Isn't it hot?"

"It's a little warm, but it's nice. Come on-swing!"

"I couldn't!" she fretted.

"What? Why not? It's fun! Come on."

"But I don't even know how to swim!"

"So? Neither do I." Jai looked down at himself, noticing for the first time that he was treading water as

naturally as a baby duck. "It's easy—you'll get the hang of it right away."

"You have to help me onto the swing. I can't jump on like you did."

"Of course you can! Come on, Ceder!"

Ceder grabbed the swing apprehensively. She tucked one leg through as Jai had done. "I'll let go on *three*, but you have to count for me."

"Ready?" he asked her right away.

"...Ready!" she shouted.

"One!" sang Jai as Ceder took off without balking and flew forward, screaming—down, up, and back again to the boat, higher than where her head had been. *"Two!"*

Ceder shrieked and squealed as her toes mingled with the clouds. She threw her head back to see the sea below her.

"Four!"

"Jai!" she cried hysterically, laughing with delight. "Sorry, it's hard to count good when I'm using my hands to swim." Ceder let go of the ropes, diving off in reverse at the peak of her swing. She flipped once and did a half twist and another flip and dove into the sea without a splash. Jai could hardly believe his eyes.

When she popped up they swam together back to the boat. Passing through the invisible barrier from east to west—the direction of the current—presented no obstacle. With a boost from Jai, Ceder climbed aboard. "That was incredible," she said as she helped Jai into the boat, "let's go again."

"It's getting dark," said Jai, replaying her perfect dive in his mind beside his own appalling attempt. "We should leave soon. For safety, I mean." He tried to poke an oar under the archway, but the invisible wall was still in effect. "We need the stupid guardian!"

Astray leapt from the side of the boat onto the swing, using his momentum to glide through the threshold then back to the boat, mimicking the children.

"Watch this," said Jai with a mischievous twinkle in his eye. He grabbed the wooden board and gave the cub a zealous push, grossly overestimating the force required—the swing whipped forward like a sling and Astray went flying off on the far side like a slung stone, distantly tucking into a tiny ball and plopping pitifully into the river.

"Jai!" yelled Ceder.

Jai froze. "Oops."

"Go get him!"

Jai grabbed the swing at once and leapt off the boat, sailing forward at full speed directly into a solid blockade of air. The swing continued forward while Jai peeled off the invisible barrier like an egg yolk sliding down a wall. He crashed into the sea upside-down, unsure which way to start swimming. A white oar appeared before his eyes. He grabbed on and Ceder hauled him back to the boat.

Astray was already sunning himself in the prow by the time Jai got up and oriented. The children looked at the swing. It was no longer empty. Rocking gently back and forth was a dead, green fish.

II. Wordless Delight

Ceder picked up Astray and held the cub close against her body to dry him off. Jai picked up his knife. The fish was staring straight ahead with lifeless eyes.

"It's the Wishfish!" lamented Why. "We've been had!"

"It's the Coralute," said Jai, frustrated.

"Hello, again," Ceder said politely.

"Hello, yourself!" snapped the fish "The Wishfish? I've never met a more pompous, ignominious idiot! The Coralute? What does that wrinkled old windbag have to do with me? Nothing! Now don't just stand there, give me a push!"

Jai was not about to play along, especially if the notquite-so-dead fish was going to pretend that they had never met all over again. "We need to get past. I'm guessing you're the guardian—I should have seen that one coming. So will you help us or not? We might as well know up front."

"No passing! Absolutely not! Under no conditions, whatsoever! That's the rule! Has been for eight hundred years! Now push me!" "Why should I?" said Jai. He had been warming up to the Coralute, but the way the fish was acting now made him instantly unlikable again.

"I can't push myself, can I? Let's go, sonny-boy! I'm not getting any younger, here."

Jai thought for a moment, then nodded in acquiescence and pulled the swing back as high as his chin.

"Now we're talking!" said the fish. "Use those weedy little arms for once in your life!"

Jai put the jagged blade of his knife against one of the ropes. "We don't have all day."

"That's exactly what I'm afraid of!"

"If you don't let us pass, I'll cut the rope."

"Ha!" cackled the fish. "With what? That?"

Jai felt his hand buzz. He looked at his knife, which was no longer a knife at all, no longer sharp iron. It was a limp strand of wet kelp. He dropped it and stepped away from the swing, more than a little startled.

The wooden board swung forward unevenly and the fish hollered with boyish amusement. He slid off at the top and yelled "*Lookatmel'mflyyyyying*!" before belly-flopping into the river.

Gulping down guilt, Jai looked to Ceder. Her level gaze might have meant anything. He gulped again.

The guardian swam back to the archway and leapt out of the water, landing on the swing. He fixed the children with a withering stare. "This is the entrance to the river, which runs from coast to coast. It is besieged on every bank with danger. I say *besieged*, blast it! You can see the Sands of Syn, can't you? The last remnant of *Syn*. Do you know what that means, sonny-boy? Do *you*, girly-sue? I didn't think so! Well, I'll *tell* you what it means. Syn is the opposite of the open sea, an evil as untamable as wild fire, a monster no mortal weapon can match, though enough have been tried. *But Syn turned to sand a thousand years ago*, you're thinking. Don't be so sure of it!" Curling his whiskers, the fish grinned triumphantly as if he had defeated the children in a match of wits.

"You tricked us when you were the Wishfish, then you helped us when you were the Coralute, and now you're acting like you've never met us before!" cried Ceder. "Is this all some big game to you?"

"Absurd! I am not the defender of Coral Wing. I am not the ambassador of the well. I do not serve the fancies of the young. *I* am the Oldest Fish in the Sea. *I* guard the river, the most important job of all! Now show some respect for your elders!"

"How can guarding a river be more important than presiding over a wishing well?" asked Ceder, hoping to lure the disgruntled guardian into revealing something helpful. "How can it be more important than commanding an entire army?"

"If you read more, you wouldn't have so many ignorant questions! Do you even know where the river goes, girly-sue? Did they tell you what lies beyond the red desert, did they warn you? Do you know where the river will take you?"

Neither of the children could quite bring themselves to ask where.

"The river will take you home," said the fish. "It flows to the base of a mountain where the water runs red with fire, fed by the dark hand of Sorid Sunclaw. He will be expecting you, the Magician, if you go the river. He will call you to come home."

"The King and Queen wouldn't have sent us here if that was so," said Jai, though his voice cracked as he spoke and his arms were peppered with goosebumps. "Why should we believe you?"

"Ripples and tides, surf and spray, they are all different, but none is different from the sea itself. We fish—we old, wise fish—we know that a bubble from the bottom of the sea can never sink a boat. Good swimmers leave no waves."

"You're just making up nonsense, now," said Jai.

"So what if I am? I am the Oldest Fish in the Sea, I can do whatever I please!"

"What do we have to say to get this over with?" asked Ceder.

"Girly-sue, there's nothing you can say that I haven't already heard."

"Then what do we have to give you? Do we have to pay a toll? 'Nothing in the sea is free,' right?"

The fish appraised Ceder with a keen eye. "I doubt very much you have anything in your grubby pockets that I should value."

"Then what do you want?" cried Jai.

"I want to fly," spat the Oldest Fish in the Sea, his voice full of contempt. "Can you give *that* to me? I didn't think so!"

"That'll be the day!" laughed Why, earning a nasty glare from the guardian.

"But fish can't fly," pleaded Ceder.

"What's that?" asked Jai, pointing under the archway. There was something shiny in the water—a white flower petal drifting away from the boat through the invisible wall and into the river.

The fish turned to see what they were all looking at. "Quickly! Hurry up! Push me! Now!" he cried, his bulging eyes locked on the escaping petal.

"Let us through, first," insisted Ceder.

"Pass, then, *pass*, confound you! Just push me, *now*!" Ceder drew back the swing and flung it forward as hard as she could. The guardian whooped like a boy on his first sled ride, "*Watchmeflyyyy*!" as he sailed off the swing. He landed directly on top of the floating petal.

The Oldest Fish in the Sea burst out of the water into the sky, flying with a pair of bright, white wings on his back. He cackled like a madman and wailed with wordless delight. Then he was gone, diving into the clouds.

Speechless, Jai and Ceder watched him fly away. They turned to each other, then to the swing, and finally to Astray. The cub's jet black form was no longer the wispy shadow it had been for the better part of the day; every hair on his body was as starkly clear as the dark disc of the moon during an eclipse.

Astray roared and the children hopped to. They each grabbed an oar and, with a coordinated effort, guided the boat into the river. The invisible barrier was gone. Astray pounced into the prow with Why riding atop his head. The cub's dark mane and the butterfly's violet wings rippled in the wind.

As they passed underneath the arch of the ogres, Jai held the abandoned swing out of Ceder's way—a gentleman holding the door open for his lady. "Welcome to the Land of Lin," he said to her. She looked up at him with wonder in her eyes.

The sound of waves in motion As they break against this tower Is more potent than love potion And more peaceful than its power The smell of all the open sea Reminds me I am here It whispers I alone am free To walk on water far and near The sight of it - but my quill fails My words will never do A thousand wrinkled, satin trails An endlessness of blue And in my heart but one hope sails To share a sea with you

~the Dangler

II – The River

Chapter the Tenth, **The Night Before the Last**, *In which light swims in a round.*

I. Sucked Back In

Dunes surrounded the river for endless tails in every direction. Further east, jet black mountains loomed large in stark contrast to the crimson desert. Sitting side by side, Jai and Ceder rowed in silence until they were beyond sight of the sea.

"Do you hear that?" asked Why, putting one hand to his ear. "Someone is singing."

"No one would be singing in this wasteland," said Jai. "It's probably just the wind."

As they made progress inland the mounds of sand to either side of the river were each one larger than the last, forming an ever-deeper, snaking valley for the pink boat to navigate. The wind funneled between the dunes like a screeching hawk. Time slowed to a crawl, tracked only by the setting sun.

"I can't keep this up forever," said Ceder, rubbing her shoulders.

Jai had spent his entire life hauling an iron wheelbarrow back and forth; rowing was not fatiguing him as rapidly as it was Ceder. "Take a break," he told her, grabbing her oar, "have a drink."

Ceder scooped a handful from the river—despite the Coralute's warning, the water was not too hot to touch. While she rested, her eyes fell on Astray, as they so often did, and she noticed something about him that she had not seen before. There was a small patch of white hair at the nape of the cub's neck. It was no larger than a scale or two and would have been impossible to discern in the fading light but that it seemed faintly to glow.

"It's getting louder," said Why, cupping a hand to his ear, listening to the wind wash over the desert. "Someone is chanting. Slow, like a drum. I'm sure of it." The butterfly shook his head as if coming out of a trance and glanced up at Jai and Ceder. "Why, that's really rather frightening, isn't it? Perhaps I should go investigate."

"If you leave the boat," said Ceder, "I have a feeling it will be the last time we see you. Stay here, where it's safe."

"Not to worry you, my lady, but here on this river, in the middle of *this* desert, why, safe is the *last* word I would use."

Ceder took her oar back from Jai and they rowed together for a time. Astray sat between the children giving the occasional growl of encouragement whenever it seemed that the comet above was getting too far ahead of the boat. Ceder pointed out the white patch on the cub's back to Jai. Covered in sweat from the exertion of his double-duty with the oars, he grunted once, indicating that he had not noticed the white fur before, that he had no thoughts on it, and that if she had any questions, he did not have the answers.

The red glow of the landscape faded to a dull claret as the sun sank below the dunes. A rasping chorus emerged from the howling wind and a toneless, seething voice kept the beat, like thunder underneath a pounding rain:

Feel the air grow hotter! Dry you out as dry the land!

"You must have heard it that time!" exclaimed Why, greatly alarmed.

The tattoo on Jai's forehead flared like an ember. He collapsed forward off the bench, dropping his oar into the river.

"Jai!" cried Ceder. She pulled her own oar into the boat and knelt beside him. The boat jerked as the current reclaimed them, rushing back toward the sea. The glyphs on Jai's forehead were no longer aglow that flash had lasted only an instant—but his breathing was scathed and ragged.

The droning voice drew closer:

Feel the air grow hotter! Dry you out as dry the land, Peel your skin away with sand!

Ceder reached a hand into the river to scoop water up for Jai. She withdrew her arm with a sharp hiss—the river was scalding hot. Hesitantly, as if it might burn her hand the same as the river, she pulled out one of the enchanted eggs and lifted Jai's head so he could drink. When the water hit his lips the dark symbols on his forehead flared again, bright as red coals, and he spat the water out of his mouth like a fountain.

Ceder watched in horror as the rainbow of spitwater flew over the river to the sandy shore and sizzled into a tendril of steam; the Coralute had warned them not to give the desert a drink, but he had not told them what would happen if they did.

The Sands of Syn became deathly silent.

A voice the children knew all too well rolled low across the dunes, over and over, as if Sorid himself was marching across the desert with a thousand war drums at his back:

Feel the air grow hotter! Dry you out as dry the land, Peel your skin away with sand, And steal your blood for water!

The wind above the river funneled into a frenzied cyclone with the boat at its center. Endless tons of sand were lifted into the air, creating a tornado of red ash. Ceder clamped her hands over her ears and huddled protectively over Jai's body.

The river reverberated in the din like a plucked string. The red tornado swelled in size and speed until it began to suck up the water below, forming a whirlwind of scarlet ash and boiling steam. The current was thrown into a loop, rising into the swirling storm, and the boat rose with it. The voice of Sorid was all around them, chanting from inside of the tempest:

FEEL THE AIR GROW HOTTER! DRY YOU OUT AS DRY THE LAND! PEEL YOUR SKIN AWAY WITH SAND! AND STEAL YOUR BLOOD FOR WATER! Jai opened his eyes, squinting in pain. Ceder was kneeling over him, holding his head. The chanting stopped and the voice of their master said coldly, "I see you."

Strange shapes emerged in the turbulence of ash; gnashing teeth and the tips of horns, forked tails whipping back and forth, eyeless reptilian skulls, all growing larger and more solid as the storm expanded, sweeping up entire dunes with every rotation. The demonic apparitions separated from the tornado and flew out from the whirlwind for brief bursts before being sucked back in.

"Syn," said the voice of Sorid, exultant.

The red dragons screeched and thrashed at the disembodied voice of their master. Their forms coalesced and crystallized as the water in the tornado mixed with the whorling sands, spawning short-lived hordes of blood-red dragons that glittered like diamonds in the night.

"Eat them all," commanded the merciless voice of the magician.

A familiar voice cut through the storm, "EEEEEAT THIIIIS!"

II. Lighting the Way

Accompanied by stampeding thunder, rain erupted from the sky and charged into the red tornado like an infinite host of cavalry. The half-solid dragons snapped at the rain as if they could bite chunks of liquid from the air, but the driving torrents plowed through the insubstantial demons like light through darkness, dissolving tails, wings, and teeth with endless sheets of clear water.

A streak of green with white wings soared into the last lingering dragon skulls, obliterating them one at a time with thunderclaps like cannonballs. Everywhere the green streak flew, rain followed in waves thick enough for fish to swim through.

For several minutes Jai and Ceder had no idea what was happening above them. They knew only that the chanting melted away one word at a time, then the heat dissipated, and finally the shrieking wind faded. The river was flowing again.

"Was that the Oldest Fish in the Sea?" Jai asked Ceder in a breathless whisper.

She shrugged. "I think we have something else to worry about at the moment." The rainstorm immediately presented a new threat: the boat was filling up fast. The waterline was up to their ankles. They tried to clear the water out with their hands, but the rain fell faster than they could work. Astray jumped onto the middle bench and looked at the sloshing water in the bottom of the boat with obvious misgivings.

The river bloated to twice its normal width, rushing with the speed of a charging bull. Foaming rapids formed at every turn as though the current itself was mad with bloodlust.

While the children were stooped over, bailing out the rainwater, Astray bit a yellow petal from his necklace and released it into the wind. It floated away like a glowfly.

Lightning struck, illuminating the world! In the afterglow, Jai and Ceder saw that the Sands of Syn were

being washed away for as far as the eye could see. Only the tips of the tallest dunes remained, rapidly succumbing to the relentless rainfall.

The current doubled back on itself in the downpour and carried them away from the sea, running to the black mountains. The water ahead of the boat was strewn everywhere with broken rocks sticking out like a graveyard of giant bones.

Lightning flashed again and again! Wherever the jagged bolts hit the water huge explosions of sparks were thrown into the air, lighting the way forward. Ceder grabbed her oar and fended off the craggy rocks as they approached, ferrying the boat left or right with no time to think, acting on impulse.

Jai cupped water out of the boat as fast as he could. At one point he noticed what looked like a pair of purple tree leaves floating away from the boat. "Why!" Jai leaned over the side of the boat and scooped up the unconscious butterfly before he drifted away. Not knowing what else to do with their delicate companion, Jai tucked Why inside his satchel and resumed bailing water out of the boat, though the effort seemed preposterously in vain.

Lightning hit the water a dozen fins in front of the boat—before they sailed directly through the geyser of sparks the children saw that the river was flowing straight for the edge of a ravine, gushing over the side to disappear.

There was no time to turn. In the final moment before the boat reached the edge Ceder pulled her oar out of the water and knelt beside Jai. "Ready?" she whispered.

III. Down the Middle

Without pause or punctuation the boat launched over the ravine through all-encompassing darkness. They seemed to float in midair weightlessly, without time or space, and then, to Jai and Ceder's immense surprise, they landed almost immediately. Looking back, the ledge they had sailed off was no more than ten fins high; looking forward, their new location was far less preferable.

The mountains formed a circle around them to all sides, except for the small crevice through which the river entered the enclosure. The rushing water fell into a violent whirlpool that sucked every drop down its center into unknowable oblivion.

Jai grabbed Ceder's oar to combat their acceleration toward the center of the whirlpool. The paddle was ripped out of his hands at once and sucked away into the vortex. "We'll never make it out alive!"

"Why did the King and Queen want us to take the river?" Ceder cried frantically. "Were they *trying* to kill us?"

"That's it!" said Jai. He took the waveglass compass out of his satchel—the gift the King and Queen had left them. The directional needle was going haywire.

"What are you doing?" Ceder had to shout to be heard.

"Cross your fingers," said Jai, and he threw the compass into the eye of the whirlpool.

The rain ceased at once.

Lightning struck behind them, sending a detonation of water and electricity into the air. The boat scaled

closer to the center of the vortex, only a handful of rotations away from falling into the gaping black hole.

Astray stood in the prow, digging his claws into the pink wood for purchase. He roared into the cycling storm, though his voice was drowned out by the rushing water pounding against the cylindrical escarpment.

Jai and Ceder slumped into the bottom of the boat. Whatever help Jai imagined the compass might have provided, he had been wrong. There was nothing else they could do.

"Ceder!" he shouted in her ear. "What?" she yelled back. "I have to tell you something!" "What?" "I—"

Lightning struck into the very heart of the whirlpool, crackling and fizzing like a wasp caught inside a jar, and then the entire brilliant bolt vanished down the vortex. At once the swirling water sped up and began to glow with a bright yellow phosphorescence. The amplified spin threw the boat to the outer reaches of the enclosure, where it smashed against the walls of the cliff, threatening to splinter apart.

Astray continued to stare ahead with the lethal concentration of a dog chasing his own tail. There was no more lightning, no thunder, no rain.

The boat smashed into the mountains and Jai saw a hairline crack appear along the bottom of the hull—another jarring hit would split them in two, right down the middle.

"Jai, what is that?" Ceder pointed to the center of the enclosure.

Something was dangling down from the air above. The children had to squint to see what looked like a thread—or some manner of line—shimmering in the glow of the supercharged water. A gleaming hook hung at the end of the line, two or three fins above the mouth of the whirlpool. The hook swung like a pendulum over the vortex. Impaled on the sharp tip was a wriggling glowworm.

The children guessed what this meant at once. *"Somebody up there is fishing!"* they shouted, laughing like a pair of lunatics at the absurdity of the idea.

Instinctively they understood this was their only hope, but neither Jai nor Ceder could think how to use the line to their benefit short of trying to jump onto it, which would surely be a suicidal endeavor. Jai bellowed into the sky at the top of his lungs, hoping to be heard, but there was no reply.

Then Astray leapt from the boat.

Ceder reached out for the cub before she could even say his name. The glowing white patch on his back streaked across the darkness like a trail of incandescent paint brushed across the very air. He caught the dangling hook with one claw before the line swung back over the whirlpool. His tail was so close to the black hole that living shadows were sucked out of his fur by the insatiable vortex. When the line swung free, Astray pulled himself up. In one acrobatic, curling leap, he skewered a pink petal onto the hook and then launched himself back into the air. He landed with perfect timing in the prow of the ever-circling boat.

The fishing line reeled away into the blackness above.

The spinning water decelerated, the lightning trapped within fading. The boat veered to the center of the whirlpool.

Streaking down from the darkness an impossibly long serpentine creature with a head like a half-moon scythe plunged into the boat, looped underneath the middle bench, and coiled itself into a pulsing knot. The creature stretched up, trying to hoist the boat out of the water. Its body swelled like one big vein pumping too much blood.

The vacuum was more powerful—the boat dropped several fins in a freefall, stretching the serpentine creature down like taffy, but rather than descend into the black hole, the hull formed an unexpected plug in the vortex like a cork in a bottle. Freezing water shot everywhere, diverted from its natural course. The huge creature reared up again. When the boat finally pulled free of the suction a sound like an upside-down burp burst out in the enclosure, echoing in a round.

Silently their serpentine savior lifted them to safety. Soon the whirlpool was too far below to see. The world went completely black. All Jai or Ceder could feel was the spinning of the boat as they rose into the darkness.

The Year One,

When the fisherman arrived at the forest he had still not located the river. And yet, the river was not his ultimate goal—any body of water would do. If he found so much as a babbling brook or a small pond his beloved would be waiting for him; it did not matter where.

The forest floor was matted in thick fog. The fisherman wandered among the trees like a ghost in the gray mist, listening for the sound of whistling, which he knew would lead him to water. At last he heard it, a song consisting of three pitches. He followed the tune on the wind until it led him to a clearing. He glanced around in surprise—he had not expected to find this place again so soon. The river was but a moment away, he knew, but the clearing would serve his goal much better, if what his beloved had told him about the forest was true.

In the center of the clearing was a stone tower, thirty fins tall. He indulged himself to a rare smile—he would be able to change everything, after all. He would be able to see his beloved again and be with her always, forever.

The fisherman dashed to the tower and vaulted to the top. But for a narrow catwalk around the edge there was no ceiling, only a pool of dark, mystical water. He stared at his reflection—this was not a place where she could meet him, he knew at once; this was no ordinary well. The surface was the face of midnight, a mirror, or perhaps a doorway. The fisherman took a meditative moment to arrange his thoughts and then leaned over the well and made one simple wish.

He was no longer alone. Three fat, green frogs sat around the edge of the wall. One of them grinned, most hideous. "You would *Be with her?* Did you really need to waste a wish on such a simple thing? Will she not love you without our help?"

The middle frog licked its lips. "*Always and forever*, stranger? I didn't know you were the sentimental type. But we can't give you eternity. Are a thousand years not enough? There are laws, you see."

The fisherman heard the whistling in the forest abruptly stop. He knew the sudden silence meant the tree that sang had been unmade. His suspicion was confirmed when he looked up to the second frog and saw in its webbed hands a most unusual key. That could only mean one thing: the river was closed again, shut off from the rest of the Land of Lin. There would be no escaping the forest, not without his friends. His friends had all been washed away.

The third frog nodded to the water—the last answer to the fisherman's wish would be the most cruel. The fisherman looked down in the well. What he saw drove him mad.

In the water was a vision of his beloved. She was waiting for him, as she had promised, on both sides of the forest. She was looking for him, she was straining to see any sign of him near the river. But the forest was now closed, the fisherman knew. He would not be able to leave. His beloved would wait for him until her eyes bored holes in the river itself like screws into wood. Much to the delight of the three frogs, the fisherman keeled over. A single drop fell from the small hole in his forehead and landed in the water; through the mystic well, his beloved felt his pain. Her face appeared on the surface for a flickering instant and the fisherman saw her heart break as neatly as an icicle snapping off a roof.

He felt water leaking down his face, though he never wept. The shell he had made for his heart fell apart like shattered glass and he collapsed. At the very instant that his dark mask melted away like ice held over a fire, his lips touched the mystic water, a kiss for the vision of his beloved, a vision which rippled at once into his own reflection, midnight water flowing upwards, coalescing, melting ice in reverse.

When he pulled away, the dark mask was forged anew, hard as ice though never frozen, strong as iron.

The three frogs jumped off the tower.

The Spirit of the Sea had been right all along—the fisherman could not change anything. *There is hope*, his beloved had told him not so long ago. It was a lie.

Chapter the Eleventh, **The Night Before the Last**, *In which waves move a man.*

I. Telltale Signs

The boat ascended slowly, dwindling in circles. The children saw no light of stars or moon. It was beyond their wits to estimate how far they had already risen in the stifling chasm.

They dared not speak; the creature that was lifting them had not acknowledged their presence and the children thought best not to startle it, lest it drop them to their deaths. Jai felt like his stomach was imploding as he imagined what such a fall would feel like in the dark.

A voice peeped out, "Where am I? Oh no—*I've died!* Darn it all! Well, here we go aga—"

"Calm down, Why," Jai whispered, pulling the butterfly out of his satchel, "we're still alive, now be quiet."

"Then why is the air so thick? I can hardly move my wings!"

Jai took a deep breath and gagged. Why was right inhaling the pulpy air felt like swallowing stale water.

"Where are the stars?" asked the butterfly, growing hysterical. "Where is the sky? I'm suffocating!"

Jai was soaking wet, his tunic tight around his chest. He pulled the sticky cloth away from his neck, struggling to draw a breath. The silent, serpentine creature drew them higher and higher, showing no sign that either Jai's voice or the inhospitable air affected it in the least. The muted silence was dispelled by a distant rushing noise. Simultaneously, the darkness above them suddenly swam with spiraling shards of white light, faint at first in their blurring velocity, but clearer and brighter with every passing second.

"Ceder, get down," said Jai, choking, barely audible. "We're going up through ice!" He sprawled as low as he could and took one last deep breath before the air was altogether too thick to inhale. He was certain the approaching lights bore the telltale signs of an element he had heard about in Sorid's stories, treated with as much scorn as the old magician could muster. Jai recalled one verse in particular:

Ice, like the lice in your hair, will tickle. Ice, like mice on your skin, will prickle. If the sea brings the reaper, then I think it not fickle To fear me when I swear to you that ice is his sickle.

The air was cold. Jai let out his breath, unable to hold it any longer. Bubbles burst from his mouth and rose into the darkness like tiny balloons. He gasped, he retched, his mouth was full of water. *Water? Up here? Bubbles?*

The boat spun like a coin on a table and then it crashed into the spiraling shards of light. A frosty wind tore at the children, cutting to the bone.

Jai lay shivering in shock. It was Ceder's voice that brought him out of his daze: "Are you all right?"

He sat up. The boat was filled with water—that was the first thing he noticed. He breathed in and out slowly and took stock of their new surroundings. There was no ice anywhere and the enormous creature that had just saved them was gone without a trace.

Deformed trees created a secluded and deeply shadowed grove all around, black branches aglow with small, luminescent orbs as white as the moon. Directly below the pink boat was a whirlpool, tamer than the one they had just escaped and half the size. *Did we get pulled up through that?* Jai asked himself. *Am I crazy? Was the ice nothing more than the stars seen from under the water? But how could that be possible? The water should be falling down to the first whirlpool far below.*

The whirlpool was surrounded by a ring of tight stones which kept the spinning vortex neatly separated from the rest of what was an otherwise peaceful lagoon. The water was perfectly black but for where it reflected the comet above. The rainbow colors of the shooting star looked like fireworks on the calm surface of the lagoon.

Turning back to the boat, Jai and Ceder saw that where the shimmering creature had been wrapped around the middle bench, now there was only the fishing line they had seen far below. They hardly understood what they beheld, for the line was made of flowing water, running like a stream as thin as a strand of hair, never spilling out of its slender form.

Following the watery line with wide open eyes, the children saw that it ran to the tip of a wooden fishing pole. The liquid line ended at an iron reel set beside the handle of the pole, which was held in a pair of large, strong hands gloved in black leather.

II. Staring at the Moon

The fisherman sat on a stumpy log floating in the lagoon, casually bobbing up and down. His legs dangled underwater. The purple cape draped over his shoulder trailed into the pond like the train of some ghoulish wedding dress. His long-sleeved shirt was black with hints of silver lace leaking out at the cuffs. His fingers, like his arms, were long and lean, but he had a certain strength about him, a supple and unbreakable power, much like the thin pole he held, which, although bending severely, somehow held up the boat without snapping in twain.

He wore a purple scarf, frayed at both ends. On his head was a black hat with a brim as wide as an umbrella, giving the impression he was forever being rained upon. Between the top of his scarf and the bottom of his hat, shadows coved his face. He held the boat aloft without any sign of strain, contemplating what he had caught. No one said a word.

At last he exhaled a long, low whistle—the note he hit was downright sorrowful. Then he swung the fishing pole to one side of the small whirlpool and gently deposited the pink boat on the still waters of the lagoon.

"Thank you for catching us," said Ceder.

The fisherman stared at her then shook his head, startled, realizing he ought to speak back. "Oh! Let me see," he stammered. "You're welcome, certainly. But who...?" He lifted the brim of his drooping hat in order to inspect the children more clearly.

Jai and Ceder recoiled in shock. His face was dark glass, the color of smoke underwater, but it was no

mask, they were sure, for it moved as fluidly as molten metal when he raised one brow questioningly and then lowered the corners of his lips in a sad smile. He had no eyes, but only two vacant depressions where his eyes should have been.

Jai reminded himself of his own strangely tattooed skin and repressed the urge to judge the mysterious stranger by his face alone. "Who are you?"

There was a long pause, a wordless moment as attuned to the quiet lagoon as the hum of the whirlpool or the buzz of crickets in the trees. "I am gold without silver." The children tried to look inside his mouth to see what was behind the dark glass, but all they saw between his lips was a bubble of black air blocking the light. "I am a poor fisherman."

Jai and Ceder had not forgotten the Coralute's final warning: *Do not follow the fisherman*. They looked at the stranger suspiciously. He gave no sign that he intended to try to lead them anywhere.

"Do you have a name?" asked Ceder.

"If I did before I came here, I have forgotten it. Perhaps that is why I came here in the first place—to forget." He took a moment to think, staring at the moon. "You may call me the Dangler."

"The Dangler?"

"I..." He seemed at a loss for what else to say. He fumbled with his fishing pole, idly reeling in the line.

"Did you know we were down there?" Ceder asked at last.

"No." Another pause. "This is rather unexpected."

"What was that *thing* that saved us?" asked Jai.

The fisherman jolted at the abrupt question. "What thing?"

"What thing?" repeated Jai, stupefied. "How could you have missed it? It was big enough to fit around this whole grove! A gigantic, glistening snake with a head like a... a—" Jai curved his fingers in the right shape, trying to find the word for it, "—a hook."

"There are no lost monsters in this lagoon," said the Dangler. "There is only water, here."

"You're lying!" said Jai. "Something big—something humongous—just pulled us out of that whirlpool. It was *alive*."

"Alive?" echoed the Dangler. "That I do not doubt. How much life there is in a single drop of water!"

Jai glared at him distrustfully.

"Down there, where your line is hanging," Ceder pointed to the whirlpool, "there are no fish down there. They aren't even allowed in the river."

"Ah," sighed the Dangler, "that explains much."

"You mean you've never caught a fish?" asked Jai. The Dangler shook his head.

Ceder hesitated before asking, "How long have you been trying?"

"Oh, three or four hundred years, I suppose."

Jai and Ceder turned to each other with a start.

"And I thought *I* was old," said Why, stroking his wispy beard.

The Dangler frowned. "Yet I fear I am far older than that." The children remained silent. The fisherman pulled the brim of his hat down again and swung his pole back over the whirlpool, letting the line of pure water glide into the swirling vortex. He stared serenely into the rushing water. "Waves can move a man more than you know."

The children considered this and found it uninformative. "Why are you here?" asked Ceder, surprised to find her words stretching into a deeply satisfying yawn.

"It seems I was waiting for somebody, once, long ago, but so much time has passed and I never had a very good memory to begin with."

"I have a feeling you and Why will get along famously," said Ceder, rolling her eyes.

"You've been waiting for someone for three hundred years but you don't even remember who?" Jai asked as though he was the one slighted by this offense.

The Dangler nodded feebly. Jai stared at the strange fishing line, mesmerized. "Is that magic?" he asked, absorbed in the line's perfect elegance.

"What is magic?" asked the fisherman.

"Don't you know?"

"Don't you?"

Jai was not sure what to say. He thought he saw a flash of color behind the fisherman's opaque visage, but it was gone in a heartbeat.

"If there is magic in this line," said the Dangler, "and I were to cut it in half, would I have twice as much magic as before, half as much, or none at all?"

"I'm not very good at counting," said Jai. "Shall I just guess?"

The Dangler stared at his line. "Often the world seems to pass like a dream."

Jai looked around the lonely lagoon. "Yeah, I expect it would, spending all your time holed up in a place like this." He noticed something odd as he looked around there were no exits, no passage to the river. "Hey," he said to the Dangler, "how do we get out of here?"

The fisherman took his good time to reply. "I will lead you out in the morning."

Alarmed, Jai looked to Ceder, but she was fast asleep. Astray sat on her stomach, wide awake, staring at the comet. Why was snoozing atop the cub's head, lying against one fuzzy ear. When Jai looked back to the Dangler, he was leaning over his pole staring into the whirlpool as though he might catch a fish at any moment. Jai sighed and sat down next to Ceder, determined to keep watch throughout the night.

"I am an island," the fisherman said to himself, "but here are two children in a boat, washed up on the shore."

That was the last thing Jai heard him say.

The Year One,

In the river east of the foggy forest a silver fish smaller than any other eye could see waited for someone who never arrived on time. The fish swam in small circles, hour by hour, day by day, a spinning top in a world without gravity, until one day it bored a hole into the water itself and therein vanished.

In the river west of the forest an identical silver fish waited in vain for that same someone whom fate would surely delay. The fish swam in small circles, hour by hour, day by day, until it bored a hole into the water itself and therein vanished.

Chapter the Twelfth, **The Day Before the Last**, *In which a secret ingredient is found.*

I. Unearthly

Ceder woke at first light and peeked over the side of the boat, greatly surprised to find that last night had not, in fact, been a dream. Golden sunlight seeped through the twisted tree branches that enclosed the lagoon. White apples hung from every limb, but if Ceder thought they were aglow last night, now she could not be sure if it had only been the moonlight playing tricks on her eyes.

She turned to find the fisherman standing waist-deep in the water by the side of the boat, staring at her. She flinched back, unnerved to consider that he had been standing there all along.

"Oh, you're awake? Good," said the Dangler. "I'm making eggs."

Ceder rubbed her ears, not sure she had heard right. "Fried or scrambled?" asked the Dangler.

Ceder lurched forward to stir Jai awake. She grabbed his satchel before he could sit up properly and checked inside, fearing the worst, but to her relief the enchanted eggs were still safely tucked within.

The fisherman returned to his floating log, facing the whirlpool, his back to the children. "How many can you eat?" he called over his shoulder. There was a spark of vigor to his voice that had not been there the night before.

"I could eat a hundred," said Jai, yawning and stretching his arms.

The Dangler jumped in surprise. "A hundred! My word, a whopping appetite!" He stood up from his log and waded to the edge of the lagoon. "This may take a while," he said as he disappeared into the maze of dark trees.

Jai and Ceder looked at each other, stunned, then they broke out laughing. When they had settled down, Jai asked Ceder whether her nightmares had returned.

She shook her head. The corners of her mouth twitched up in a smile, dimpling her cheeks. "I think I'm cured, after all. Isn't that great?"

Jai nodded, then pretended to get a drink of water from over the side of the boat. He stared at his reflection in the lagoon. *If the King cured her, after all, why didn't the Queen cure me, too?* he asked himself. *Is it because of Sorid's mark? Can it not be erased? Ceder gets to live, while I dry up and die?*

"I dreamt, Jai. I've never had a *good* dream before. I dreamt all night."

"About what?" Jai mumbled sullenly.

"Unicorns. Wishing Wells. Castles in the sea. And then I dreamt we found a place where the water was pure silver."

Jai looked up at her, but Ceder had already shyly turned her eye. He sat on the bench next to her. Their bare shoulders met, so they sat perfectly still, neither wishing to change position, both too nervous to speak.

Why flew into the sky, overjoyed for a chance to stretch his wings out properly. He called down to the children that the view was indescribable, then he spent the next several minutes describing it. The children, for the most part, let the butterfly's words blow in one ear and out the other.

Astray leapt into Ceder's lap, seeking an affectionate hand. She ran her fingers down his head but stopped at the base of his neck where the white patch of fur had begun to glow the previous evening. The patch was small, no shape in particular. Ceder put her hand over the white spot. "It's warm," she said to Jai.

"Ceder, why do you think the King and Queen brought Astray to us?"

She thought about it. "Every time we get stuck, he jumps ahead to show the way. I think he's here to guide us. Like the stars that sailors use."

"If the King and Queen wanted to give us a guide, a working compass might have helped." Jai studied the mysterious cub. "But what *is* he? Where did he come from? And why was he in the middle of the sea to begin with? Not to mention those flower petals..."

Ceder swam her hands through the cub's rich fur. "I don't know, Jai."

"What are we going to do next?" he asked a moment later. "Where will we go? Did you notice there's no way out of here? We lost the river."

Ceder surveyed the lagoon, then turned her attention back to Astray, who gave Jai a sleepy grin.

The Dangler stepped out of the trees into the water with strides as high as a stork. In his arms was a small mountain of eggs, every shade of gray and brown, spotted, speckled, large, and small. He smiled widely; the children flinched—the sight of his dark glass face flexing and contorting was still a shock to behold. "I was only joking," said Jai, his cheeks flushing pink, "I can't eat that many."

The fisherman's smile slowly turned upside-down. He waded despondently to the whirlpool and dumped the mound of eggs into the swirling vortex with a dejected sag of the shoulders.

"Wait!" cried Jai. "We're still hungry! Don't throw them *all* away!" But it was too late—the Dangler turned around empty-handed. Jai moaned. Then the fisherman flicked his wrist—with sleight of hand too fast to see, he was suddenly holding an egg in between each of his long fingers.

The Dangler turned his back to the children, holding his arms aloft like a conductor beginning a symphony. He clapped his hands together smartly and the eggs shattered apart. He dripped the yolks onto the flat stones that surrounded the whirlpool then cast the leftover shell fragments into the spinning water.

The eggs sizzled on the hot rocks. The fisherman pulled an unseen ingredient from his tackle-bag, which he then proceeded to cut up and heap into the eggs. The children could not see what the fresh addition was.

All at once the Dangler picked up his fishing pole and, with a quick snap, sent the line of flowing water soaring gracefully through the air into the pink boat, where the hook stuck in the wood like a bur. He gave a sharp tug and the boat floated quickly over to the circle of stones at which he was preparing their breakfast.

At the same time as he retrieved the boat, the fisherman shot his other hand into his tackle-bag and produced three travel-worn, tarnished plates. With a skillful swoop, he scooped up three eggs onto each plate, then tossed the plates onto separate stones just as the boat sidled up.

The eggs were as thick as steaks, but Jai and Ceder were both disappointed to find that the fisherman's secret ingredient was diced apples—the tiny cubes gave off an unearthly white glow.

"Apples and eggs don't belong together," said Jai. "It feels like having the sun and the moon out at the same time."

"All things come together in the end," said the fisherman, "even the sun and the moon, even the sea and the sky, even fire and water."

Jai sniffed at the meal skeptically.

"Why are the apples here white?" asked Ceder. "Apples are supposed to be red."

"Red apples grow in the sun, white apples grow in the moon, and neither falls far from the tree."

"How can something grow in the moon?" asked Jai.

The Dangler pulled a glowworm out of his bait-bag and held it wriggling between his long fingers. The children clearly saw the native crescent mark on its head, dim in the daylight.

"That's much bigger than any worm I ever saw," said Ceder.

"Glowworms feed on moonlight," said the Dangler. "White apples are better for their diet than reds."

He put the worm away and then flourished a pair of tin forks in one hand as if they had been concealed up his cuff all along. With a deft toss he sent them flying directly into the eggs in front of Jai and Ceder, striking both dead center—the forks quivered back and forth like arrows hitting a target. "Eat up!" said the Dangler, sitting back on his log and casting his fishing line into the whirlpool once again.

Ceder poked at her food mistrustfully, clearly thinking about all the cursed apples she had been forcefed during her lifetime. "Eat *this?*"

Jai peckishly separated the diced apples from his eggs. Meanwhile, Astray gobbled his food down in no time and licked the plate clean, then looked to the children to see if they were going to finish theirs.

The fisherman was crestfallen that the children did not implicitly trust his cooking. "I thought you would be hungry," he sighed, looking so down on himself that Jai and Ceder both raised a bite to their lips, if only out of pity.

The eggs, it turned out, were expertly roasted. The white apples tingled on the tongue like sparkling wine. "I told you my story last night," said the Dangler, "now tell me yours. Why are you here?"

With their cheeks stuffed full of food, Jai and Ceder looked at one another, wondering whether it was a good idea to disclose the chain of trials that had led them to the lagoon. After a moment of silence, and primarily to avoid hurting the fisherman's feelings, the children opened up. In between mouthfuls, but mindful not to forfeit a single crumb to sloppy storytelling, they related to the Dangler the most outlandish elements of their adventure thus far: Jai told him about Sorid, Seaweed, and Astray's strange arrival; Ceder filled in their encounters with Ghazahg, Coral Wing, and the Sands of Syn. When they finished speaking they licked their empty plates clean as voraciously as had the cub. Jai picked up Astray's plate and stacked it on his own, handing the pile to Ceder; she handed them all back to the Dangler; he dipped the plates in the whirlpool to clean them, then slipped them back inside his bag. "You two had quite a journey," he said as placidly as though he was discussing the weather, "but I daresay the next couple of days will be even more eventful. Shall we be off?"

II. Sudden Motion

Jai and Ceder looked at one another, each trying to silently sway the other to tell the Dangler the unpleasant truth that they had been advised not to follow him. Jai looked down first, then he turned to the fisherman. "You can't come with us."

The Dangler stared at him, confused.

"Breakfast was great and everything," said Jai, "but we don't need any more help."

"Aside from me showing you the way out of here," said the Dangler.

Jai blinked several times. "Yes, aside from that."

"The river is dangerous," said the fisherman.

"We'll be fine," said Jai. "I have a knife."

The Dangler said no more.

Ceder could not bear the dejected cast of his expression. "You've been very kind to us so far," she blurted out, "but we were warned not to follow you. We don't know why! We're sorry!"

The Dangler took a moment to sort his thoughts, morbidly adjusting his pole by increments so small it could not have made a difference even if there were any fish to catch. "On the river, you will not follow me. We will all be following the current."

Ceder looked doubtful. Jai looked back and forth between her and the fisherman, determined not to miss the cues of another unspoken conclusion.

"And if I ride along behind you on my log," said the Dangler, "would it not indeed be *me* who was following *you*?"

Ceder was impressed—she had not thought of that. The King and Queen sent us to the river, and the Oldest Fish in the Sea told us it will lead us back to Sorid. If that's true, then what harm could it be to let the Dangler tag along? He might be more useful than he seems—there's something about him I can't quite grasp, like trying to pick up a fish with bare hands.

"Ceder?" Jai tapped her arm. "What should we do?" She turned to the Dangler. "Show us the way."

The fisherman ferried his log over to the boat. "If I just hook my line to the back of your boat, we can be along."

"Nonsense," said Ceder. "You can sit in the boat with us."

"Yeah," said Jai, "you can... *wait*." He turned to Ceder. "*What*?"

"You don't expect him to go the whole way sitting on that dumpy old log, do you?"

Although there was enough room for the fisherman, Jai was not inclined to share the cozy space that he enjoyed with Ceder, and yet neither could he bring himself to argue the point with her and risk her disapproval. "Not when you put it like that," he conceded. The Dangler looked from Ceder to Jai and back again.

"Come on," said Ceder. "We don't have all day." The Dangler lifted one lanky leg out of the water into the rear of the boat. The children saw for the first time that he wore long black trousers—soaking wet and clinging wetly to his legs—tucked into high leather boots with rusted silver buckles.

Water dripped off his clothes and formed a puddle in the bottom of the boat. Oblivious to the mess he was making, he pulled his cape in front of him and wrung it out in both hands like a wet towel. When it was dry, he threw it back over his shoulder, only to land behind the boat in the water again. "I know there is an exit around here somewhere." He spent a long minute turning around in circles. "Where is the dam?"

"The damn what?" Jai asked petulantly.

The Dangler gave him a warning look, then pulled a compass out of his breast pocket. He hunched over the dial and tapped it with one finger, trying to get a solid reading.

"Hey!" said Ceder, recognizing the waveglass object at once, "that's *our* compass! How did you get that?"

The fisherman looked up, foiled by the uncooperative instrument. "It fell out of the sky this morning while you two were sleeping," he informed her as if such occurrences were commonplace. "I caught it before it landed in the water." He held the compass out in his hand, offering it back to the children. "It seems to be broken. The needle points straight back at me no matter where I turn." "It's not broken," said Ceder, "but there's no way it could have fallen from the sky. Jai threw it in the big whirlpool last night, way down below."

The Dangler rubbed his chin in thought, then held the compass above his head, upside-down so he could still see the needle. It pointed steadily east. "There she is," he said under his breath, almost disbelieving. Showing his first sign of enthusiasm since the children had met him, he thrust his arm out toward the rising sun, pointing to a clump of trees and undergrowth that looked the same as all the rest around the lagoon.

"Oh, great," said Jai, "another invisible door."

The Dangler frowned. "Invisible? Can you not see the trees?"

"We're going through the trees?" Jai squeaked, picturing a headlong crash through the woods.

"Hold on tight!" The Dangler raised his fishing pole and whipped it forward. The watery line sailed through the air and the hook landed in a tangle of dense foliage. He gave the pole a mighty tug and the boat jerked into sudden motion toward the embankment.

Jai and Ceder ducked down just as the hull smashed into the undergrowth. The Dangler hollered with exhilaration as they burst through the barricade, knocking a wall of buried, moss-covered logs out of the way.

The logs and uprooted flora swiftly floated ahead of the pink boat only to disappear downward over a sharp horizon. The children had only seconds to see that the Dangler's lagoon was no more than an isolated pool and a grove of apple trees on top of a steep mountain summit. The boat tipped over the edge.

The Year One Hundred,

The sky was dark when the *Riverlilly* arrived at the eastern shore. Two green ogres eyeballed the boat covetously as it made its way toward them. They cracked the knuckles of their wart-infested fingers and told one another that they were not going to share such a colorful trinket as this, no, not after waiting as long as they had, through the grinding of a century. Behind the ogres a sea of rolling dunes sparkled with the gold that was stowed under the sands. The massive brutes were in the business of excising tolls from those who sailed the river; the coin they bullied from such hapless travelers—one hundred years' worth of ill-gotten gains-—was hoarded in vast piles underneath the desert.

The greedy ogres bent down and scooped the empty boat out of the water, fighting over who would keep it. No larger in their hands than a toy ship, the boat seemed to shrink amidst their fumbling fingers, now the size of a wheelbarrow, now an oak leaf, now the size of a flower petal. The ogres growled and snarled as their fight grew more vicious, their escalating fury honed to a keen edge.

The boat shrank to the size of a penny, then to the size of an El fish, and then it was gone, just as the sun peeked over the eastern horizon and dispelled the dark of night. The distracted ogres froze like ice, their flesh made stone, forming an ominous entryway to the river.

Chapter the Thirteenth, **The Day Before the Last**, *In which there is a hole in the plan.*

I. Invocation

The pink boat raced down the mountainside like a falcon diving in pursuit of its prey. Astray stood in the prow, leaning into the ice-cold spray, a figurehead on a galleon. Why held onto the end of the cub's tail to keep from being blown away. With his cape flapping like a small sail, the Dangler sat in the stern leaning back dangerously far, so much so that it seemed he must surely somersault backwards and out of the boat at any second. Jai and Ceder sat on the middle bench, screaming with exhilaration. The wind drew tears from their eyes and tore the ribbon out of Ceder's hair. Jai could not say why, but he felt a stab of loss to see it fly away.

A log from the dam they had destroyed jammed against the side of the river and stuck into the mud with its splintered end spearing back into the path of the boat. The Dangler whipped out his fishing pole and cast it in one motion—the hook lodged in the log—and then he whipped it back, pulling the water-laden timber up and out of the river in an arc to land behind the boat with a booming splash. Jai and Ceder swapped a look of amazement—the log had passed only fins above their heads.

As suddenly as it had started, their plunge down the face of the summit was over. The river meandered between barren mountainsides marred with cracks and fissures, like skin dried and split in the sun. The mountain peaks were blanketed in white snow so dazzling the children had to avert their eyes.

The boat cruised around a wide turn, revealing a massive waterfall a tail away. The cascading falls hammered directly into the river—there was no outlet to avoid it. "Hurry, get us to the shore!" Jai begged the Dangler.

The fisherman looked forward steadily. He pulled the brim of his hat down. "Keep your heads covered," he advised the children.

Astray slinked underneath the middle bench with Why clinging to the scruff of his neck. Jai and Ceder had just enough time to duck in the bottom of the boat and shield their heads with their hands. Waiting for the last possible moment before the pink prow reached the roaring falls, the Dangler whipped his pole back, hooked the same log he had rescued them from earlier, and cast it forward so that the log slammed into the waterfall twenty fins above the river. The impact of the timber crashing into the falls knocked a hole in the otherwise solid wall of liquid; for less than a second there was a gap like an arched doorway in the plummeting sheets of water. The noise was deafening and they were all soaked from head to toe with freezing mist, but the boat passed through the gap safely.

Jai lifted his head and peeked around. Everything was as black as the tunnels he had once called home. The din of the waterfall quickly faded behind them. Jai put a hand on Ceder's back, letting her know the worst was over at the same moment that he felt her hand on his own shoulder, giving a comforting squeeze. "Are you two all right?" came the quiet voice of the Dangler.

"I'm fine," said Ceder with chattering teeth.

"Yes," said Jai, shivering, "but a little warning might be nice next time you're going to do something like that."

"If I knew I was going to do something like that ahead of time, I would certainly warn you," said the fisherman.

"Astray?" whispered Ceder, timid of speaking too loudly in the dark. "Why? Are you both still there?"

At once the cub leapt into her arms. She was so used to catching him by now that she could do it in the dark. He nuzzled his velvet nose into her neck for a warm welcome.

"Never better," was the butterfly's proud reply, although the children could not see where he was, and his voice sounded shaken.

"We need light," said Jai.

"I think I can help with that," said the Dangler. From his tackle-bag he produced a wax candle stationed inside a glass lantern box. "Give me your knife," he said to Jai.

Jai took the blade out of his satchel but was reluctant to give it away. "Why?"

"Yes?" said the butterfly.

"Not you."

"To draw a spark," said the Dangler.

Jai hesitated. "It's very sharp. You have to be careful—it doesn't have a handle. Every edge will cut." He held the knife out in the dark. The Dangler grabbed the jagged blade unconcernedly and immediately let out a sharp hiss of pain.

"I told you to be careful!" cried Jai.

"I am not cut," said the fisherman, "but... this weapon is bewitched. I can feel it. I can almost *see* it."

No one spoke for a moment. The next thing the children saw was a crackling series of white sparks which they realized, to their horror, was the result of the Dangler drawing the blade of the knife horizontally across his glass mouth. It made a sickly screeching sound as he repeated the action again, left to right, running the blade surgically across his pursed lips. As he cut, he blew—softer than the lowest whistle—and the white sparks jumped away from his face to the wick of the wax candle. The candle gave off an eerie orange flare that cast the fisherman's face in hideous shadows, intensified by the low brim of his hat and his high scarf and the absence of eyes from the holes in his face. Jai and Ceder fell back into the cold water in the bottom of the boat, startled by the monstrous vision.

The fisherman was taken aback by their reaction. He lowered the knife sheepishly and tried to force a disarming smile. Jai and Ceder were astounded to see that the jagged blade had not made a single scratch on his face. The Dangler closed the lantern box and looped it onto the tip of his fishing pole, causing the wooden rod to bow ever so slightly as he held it aloft in front of the prow, lighting the underworld like an anglerfish in the deep of the sea.

Jai and Ceder climbed back onto their bench, offering the Dangler apologetic, shame-faced smiles. The fisherman handed the knife back to Jai. "This weapon is bewitched," he repeated. "What do you know?"

"Sorid used magic on my wheelbarrow so the lava wouldn't burn holes in it," said Jai. "I broke *that* piece—my knife—off of the wheel rig."

"What magic does your master meddle with?"

"It was a short spell."

"Say it," said the fisherman.

Jai stared at the Dangler, not wanting to be bossed around in front of Ceder, then lost his nerve and looked down. In a low voice he begrudgingly recited:

Whither shines the sun In waves of light, Let this body be as one, But sleep in endless night.

"Those are powerful words," said the fisherman. "Can you feel it? The chill? It flows out like a wave. Powerful words, which make this a powerful blade."

Jai stared ahead silently, unsure whether the fisherman was upset with him.

"Curses swim though blood like fish through water," said the Dangler. "If you cut a living thing with this weapon, you will stain them with its dark current."

"What would happen to them?" asked Jai, keeping his voice as level as possible. "What would happen to a 'living thing?"" He had allowed the rusty metal to cut into his own hand every time he held it. Ceder had fallen victim to its edge, as well, during their escape on the first night, a fact which he had yet to confess. The Dangler considered the invocation carefully. "I do not know the meaning of 'endless night,' but I would not want to be caught with such a dark curse in *my* cup when the sun came up. As for the rest of the spell, it sounds as though it renders its target impervious to the touch of the sun."

"So the sun couldn't hurt my wheelbarrow," said Jai, "but my wheelbarrow was never in the sun. What about the lava? That's what the spell was for."

"The domain of all fire is one and the same. A single spark and the wildfire it begets, one is the seed, the other the tree. They are one."

"That's like blaming the river when it's the rain that sinks your boat," said Ceder.

The fisherman gave her a startled look before continuing his thought. "As for the effects on a living thing, that is a difficult interpretation to make."

Is that why my curse seems to be getting better? Jai wondered in a tizzy. Have I balanced out one spell with another? The sun can't dry me out because I'm 'impervious' to it! He frowned. But that can't be right— Sorid's red beam still burned me, and besides, I've never fallen into any 'endless nights,' have I? Well, besides a life in the tunnels. His eyes lit up. The King and Queen! Could they have cured Ceder and I of the knife's 'dark current' when they touched our heads? It seems like the white unicorn definitely cured Ceder of the curse from the apples, so why not both? Jai looked at Ceder as though the answer might be written across her brow. But why didn't they remove the mark on my forehead and the magic behind it? And why is it getting better on its own? "What would happen if you mixed two curses together in one person?" Jai asked the Dangler.

"I presume it is a bit like making breakfast," said the fisherman. "You won't know how eggs and apples are going to taste together until you try it."

In his head, Jai tried mixing together the spell he had just recited with the curse Sorid placed on Ceder's apples.

To flesh run... whither shines the sun. By virtue of a bite... in waves of light. When the day is done... let this body be as one. Live in fright... but sleep in endless night.

The words chilled him to the bone; Jai was certain the combined effects of the two hexes would be far greater than their sum. He shuddered to imagine what twicecursed doom might have befallen Ceder if the unicorns had not intervened. *Would she have 'slept in endless night' when the sun came up? And been stuck in her nightmares again at the end of every day? Would she ever wake up? For that matter, what about Seaweed? I cut him, too, and if he ate that apple he stole from us, he's going to get a lot more than he can chew.*

II. The Hand of Darkness

The Dangler's candle illuminated a sphere of space scarcely bigger than the boat. Outside the sphere, shapes and forms were detectable only as wavering shadows.

The river narrowed to a few fins on either side of the boat. The current slowed and came to a stop. A peculiar sight greeted them: there was a hole in the water, no wider than a bucket. The water from the river flowed into the hole and disappeared. It was not a well, for there were no walls inside the hole. It was a pure black perforation in the realm of the visible.

The boat jerked to a stop. The Dangler had jammed the handle of his fishing pole down into the riverbed, acting as an anchor. He took the compass from his breast pocket—he had not yet returned it to the children—and held the dial in all directions, studying the haywire needle as if its perpetual rotation told him everything he needed to know. Finally, he put the compass away and returned his attention to the aberration in the river. "I should like to look into this before moving on," he said in a quiet voice, his eyeless gaze fixed on the hole in the water.

Jai and Ceder both nodded vapidly as if the fisherman's professional curiosity were inevitable.

"I will need my pole. You two must hold the boat in place. The water is shallow enough for you to stand and there is no undercurrent," said the Dangler, oblivious to the children's reservations, "and your clothes are already wet."

"You want us to get out of the boat?" asked Ceder, incredulous.

"In there?" asked Jai, looking at the river. "In *here?*" he added, gesturing to the dark cave all around them.

"Is there a problem?" asked the Dangler.

"What if we get sucked into that hole?" asked Ceder. "Nonsense. You've seen what a whirlpool looks

like-this appears to be entirely different. I would be

more than a little surprised if it sucked you down into nothingness."

"That makes me feel much better," said Jai.

His sarcasm was lost on the fisherman. "Excellent. Out you go."

As Jai climbed out of the boat, he realized the only reason he had not put up more of a fight was that he did not want Ceder to think he was afraid. She climbed overboard on the opposite side, giving Jai a look that told him she was every bit as apprehensive as he was.

The water came to their shoulders. The current was nonexistent, so close to the hole, which made the children wonder why they had to hold the boat in place at all. Jai and Ceder watched the fisherman expectantly, silently willing him to conduct his investigation as fast as possible.

The Dangler swung the lantern box directly above the hole in the river and instantly the cavern was filled with light, as if the abyss contained a convex mirror to reflect the candle's orange glow back out, magnified a hundredfold.

The children looked around anxiously. The top of the cavern was dripping with massive stalactites that were longer than the boat and sharper than broken glass. *"Shhhh,"* the fisherman whispered to the children, nodding to the stone teeth above as if one loud noise might bring them all crashing down.

The Dangler took the end of his watery line in one hand, holding the translucent hook between two fingers. He reached into his bag of bait and withdrew a plump glowworm. As he prepared to impale the worm on the hook, Astray jumped up next to him. The cub held a blue flower petal in his mouth.

The fisherman gave Astray a puzzled look, as if to ask *Why use that, when I already have bait of my own?* but he took the blue petal a moment later, saying, "Don't mind if I do," and speared it onto his hook. He restored the glowworm to his bag.

With one hand working the reel, the Dangler positioned the baited hook above the hole in the water. He let the line out slowly, lowering the cobalt petal one scale at a time.

Jai was transfixed by the fisherman's methodological process until a stirring in the dark caught the corner of his eye. He turned and looked up. The shadows of the stalactites, cast by the reflected light of the candle, were squirming like spider legs. A handful of the shadows swelled, stretched, and extended, crawling down the side of the cavern with a life of their own. Jai pointed the leaching shadows out to Ceder. If she had looked frightened climbing out of the boat, now she was petrified.

The Dangler stared at the hole in the water, which seemed to have as little to offer for sport as the lagoon he had fished in for centuries without a catch. "Odd," he muttered, unaware of the threat from above.

The wraithlike hand reached the cavern floor and crept its way toward the river.

The fisherman hunched over his unwavering line as if additional concentration was all that was required to catch a fish at will.

"We have to go," Ceder whispered urgently. "Wait," said the Dangler, leaning toward the hole. The shadow crawled closer, the fingers vibrating with the anticipation of snapping shut around fresh, warmblooded prey.

"Stop fishing!" Jai hissed.

"Almost..." said the fisherman, motionless.

"Ceder, this is crazy," said Jai, breaking their unspoken code of silence, "let's get in the boa—"

"Stay where you are!" the Dangler ordered them with unprecedented ferocity.

The children froze.

The wriggling shadow closed around the river.

Utmost concentration was etched into the Dangler's face. Jai dared not speak, but his mind was racing, wondering why the fisherman paid no heed to the advancing terror, and how he—Jai—and Ceder were to escape the cavern if the Dangler decided to keep fishing instead of defending himself.

Jai looked at Ceder. The hand of darkness would have them soon. *If the boat didn't stand between us*, he thought, *I would kiss her now, before death*.

The Dangler shouted "Ah ha!" and began furiously winding in his line, the iron reel screeching as he did so.

The children ducked under the water just before the black claws closed around the boat.

III. No Evidence

Ceder did not see if Jai made it down safely in time; the shadow had not found her yet; it did not look as if the fisherman had gotten away; the cub and the butterfly flashed into her mind—they had both been on the boat and were probably already abducted, or worse; she scrunched her face up with the effort of holding her breath, battling the impulse to surface and draw air; the dark claws could be waiting for her—she had to stay under, to keep hiding; she thought about Jai again—had he made it down in time?

She put a hand over her mouth to fight the urge to breathe, her other hand pushed up against the bottom of the boat, keeping her under. She was getting dizzy. She could hardly recall where she was, why she was here, in the dark, what she was hiding from?

Something clutched tight around her head and she panicked and coughed away her air and flung her hands up to tear herself loose but she was pulled easily out of the water like a weed from wet soil. As soon as her head broke the surface she gasped for air and started hitting and kicking, struggling to break free. Jai was laughing. She stopped kicking and warily opened one eye.

The Dangler had picked her up by the head with one hand and lifted her back aboard the boat. "What happened?" she asked Jai. He shook his head, shrugged, and pointed to the river. The hole was gone, and with it the infinite reflections of the lantern box. The cavern was pitch black save for the small sphere of light that the candle provided. The water was flowing again. The hand of shadows was nowhere to be seen.

The Dangler stared at his translucent hook as fondly as a father looking at his firstborn son. The children had not noticed before, but the delicate hook appeared to be made of glass.

"Is that *waveglass*?" Ceder whispered to Jai. He shrugged again.

The hook was glowing with a silver light. "Quick!" the fisherman barked. "Get something to put it in!"

"Put what in?" asked Jai.

"What else? A *fish!* Come on now, do not be dull! She could get away at any moment!"

"We don't have anything to put a fish in," said Ceder, but she knew she was wrong as soon as she said it. She looked at Jai's satchel, aglow with the sapphire light of the enchanted eggs.

"For the Sight of Silver, *hurry*!" cried the Dangler.

"Jai, give him one of the eggs," said Ceder.

Jai looked at her doubtfully, then sighed and handed one of the eggs to the fisherman. The Dangler dipped his delicate hook into the cracked hole on top of the shell. Quite at once the egg stopped vibrating. He handed it back to Jai and heaved a sigh of relief. "Imagine that," he said at last, "an El fish."

Jai looked inside the egg and saw that the raging squall had been quelled. There was no evidence of the unborn spirit of Syn—all he could see was a tiny speck of silver light moving back and forth through the clear water.

The Dangler leaned back with his hands behind his head and smiled like they were all on a picnic. The children could only stare at him, speechless that he should be so enamored of a fish that was too small to see, that he should not even acknowledge how an evil, spectral hand had almost stolen him away.

When he could bear it no longer, Jai asked, "What happened to the shadow?"

"Oh," said the Dangler, whistling a simple tune, "the shadow. Yes. I don't know." Jai and Ceder were

shocked. "As soon as I pulled in my catch I turned to show you two, but you had just ducked into the river."

"What happened to the hole in the water?"

"Vanished as soon as I reeled in my line."

"So you caught your fish, and the hole closed, and then the shadow hand disappeared," Jai clarified, "but where did it go?"

"And why?" added Ceder.

"Yes, my lady—I'll find it for you!" volunteered the butterfly.

"I wasn't talking to you," said Ceder, but Why was already gone.

IV. Light At the End

"Why!" Jai bellowed. "Get back here!"

"I see it!" shouted Why. "There it is! I see the hand of shadows!"

"Why!" shouted Ceder.

"Oh no!" Why cried in fear. "There are shadows *everywhere* up here!"

"We must press on," said the Dangler. "If the darkness descends again, get back in the river. The water is far safer than this boat." He jammed his pole in the river and began heaving them forward thrust by thrust to add speed to the power of the reawakened current.

Sounds of a struggle came from above—scuffling and scraping interspersed with Why's occasional shout of "Take that!" or "En garde!" Ceder bit her lip and looked for any sign of the butterfly's purple wings, but the darkness at the top of the cavern was impenetrable. "We can't leave without him," she said to the Dangler.

The fisherman hardened his brow but said nothing as he ferried the boat forward through the dark. There was a distant spot of light far ahead—an exit.

A bloodcurdling scream filled the cavern, a flash of red light burst overhead like ball lightning, and a shriveled black object fell from above, leaving a trail of greasy smoke in its wake. Before it landed in the river the Dangler cast his fishing pole and hooked the falling object in mid-air.

Now the children saw it was a severed hand of black bone with three long, reptilian claws. The Dangler's hook was pinned in the middle finger. When he whipped his line back, the hooked claw pulled away from the rest of the hand like a head that has been sliced clean off its neck but does not roll free until the body collapses.

The remainder of the black hand fell into the river and sank. The Dangler stared after it regretfully, stunned that it had been in two pieces, causing him to miss the catch, then he lowered the piece he *had* managed to retrieve over the boat for a closer look, exceedingly cautious not to let the foreign object touch anything or anyone. Jai and Ceder leaned in to see, terrified but fascinated. It was a single bone charred black as pitch. The marrow inside—exposed where the claw had been hewn free of its hand—glowed as red as the sun. A drip of molten lava leaked out, but the fisherman swung it over the river before the liquid fire could fall into the boat.

"Is that what I think it is?" asked Ceder.

"It's one of Sorid's claws," whispered Jai, hardly believing what was before his eyes. "It has to be. How in the world did it get *here?*"

The Dangler stared at the claw hanging on his hook. The heat it gave off was palpable. His elemental fishing line began to steam and drift away. "What would it feel like to have undying fire for blood instead of cool waves?"

It was unlike anything the children had heard the fisherman say before, full of sympathy and doubt; Jai was not sure if Ceder and he were expected to give an answer.

The black claw made a snapping sound, trying to clap itself like one hand in any effort to cause trouble. The fisherman asked Ceder for one of the enchanted eggs the one without the El fish—and used it to pour a steady stream of cold water on the undead bone. The severed digit lashed back and forth and steamed like smoke from a forge, forcing the children to turn from the heat, but the Dangler kept his hands in the core of the combustion like a blacksmith with skin of iron. The water ate away at the bone for more than a minute before breaking through to the marrow; the magma inside sizzled like eggs cooking in the sun as it was washed away.

The Dangler wiped a hand across his forehead—a bead of glass had melted and was dripping down his temple like sweat. "That sort of filth has no place in the river."

"What about the rest of the hand that fell into the water?" asked Ceder.

The fisherman stared at her. "I shudder to imagine what becomes of it."

"Can't you catch it?" asked Jai. "Isn't that, like, your specialty?"

"Fishing in a river this fast is as difficult as flying a kite through a hoop in a windstorm," said the Dangler, "but if we see it again I will try my luck."

Why floated back into view like a dead leaf falling from a purple tree. Ceder caught him as gently as a snowflake. His wings were torn, tattered, burnt, and branded. "*Oh*, *Why*!" she cried, "What happened to you?"

The butterfly's breathing was weak. "Alas," he intoned, "and woe is me! The dark fiend crumpled my beautiful wings. I shall never fly again."

Astray nuzzled the butterfly with his pink nose; Why patted the cub affectionately. A tear brimmed in Ceder's eye. Jai put a hand on her shoulder. The Dangler watched them with a blank expression and continued to ferry the boat toward the exit.

"But I got a piece of him!" boasted Why. "I cut off one of his heads! He'll not soon quarrel with a butterfly again." He held his walking stick over his heart and clutched it with both hands. "Good thing I always practiced my swordplay."

"Yes," said Jai, wondering how a twig could cut through bone, "good thing." Or had it been shadow?

Ceder broke out crying, "You were so brave! We never would have made it this far without you!"

Jai was not sure this was strictly true, but he thought it best not to belabor the point. Astray bit a pale purple petal free from his necklace. He laid it gently on the butterfly's body, blanketing him like a sick child. The glow of the petal seeped into the color of Why's tattered wings, illuminating them with renewed vibrancy, although the ragged rips remained. The butterfly gasped, his eyes shut tight. He sat up in Ceder's hand like he was sleepwalking.

"Why?" said Ceder. "What is it?"

He got shakily to his feet, using his walking stick for support. He held the purple petal close against his heart.

"You need to rest," said Ceder.

Why spread his wings.

"What are you doing?"

He turned to her and held out his cane without a word. Ceder reluctantly accepted the twig from his outstretched hands.

Astray roared into Ceder's hand, blowing the butterfly away. As soon as he was in the air Why fanned his broken wings, flying ahead of the boat in a crooked, lilting manner, carrying the purple petal away with him.

"Why, get back here!" called Jai.

The butterfly caught a stray draft of wind that took him swiftly to the light at the end of the tunnel. When the boat reached the exit and sailed out under clear skies, Why was nowhere to be seen.

The Year One Hundred & One,

The magma bubbled like stew in a pot. A severed black hand with two claws scuttled like a crab out of the liquid fire onto the underground shore. It flexed back, cracking its joints—it had fed the sprawling inferno for a century, refilling the lake of molten lava with its own seeping, red-hot marrow. Finally, bleeding smoke and flame, the severed hand dragged itself into the dark cracks of the bedrock. It took more than a year for the hand to find its way though the roots of the mountain up to the light.

The black claws emerged in a vast chamber filled with sunlight. There was a well in the center of the space that radiated sheer power throughout the mountain like the beating of a drum. The severed hand crawled to the base of the well, basking in the overflowing energy, and grew like a weed.

The claws extended day by day, then split, forking branches. Each end divided again, forming crude hands and feet. Where the third claw had long ago been severed, a tail sprouted. The stump where the black hand had met its original arm grew into a hideous knot of bone, an elongated tumor, and finally a skull without eyes, ears, or a mouth.

The black skeleton crawled to its knees and pulled itself up to the cusp of the well. It had no heart, but not all wishes come from a pure light within: the unquenchable thirst for power, the burning for revenge, the lust for chaos—these are dreams conjured in dark places. The skeleton reached its clawed hands into the water, which immediately began to boil and steam. It withdrew from the well, one by one, three eggs, each bright as a ruby. One dark wish, three answers; three eggs, one keeper, waiting to be born again in the heart of unholy fire.

Chapter the Fourteenth, **The Day Before the Last**, *In which the children stop to play a game.*

I. The Last Hour

The pink boat sailed out of the tunnel into warm daylight. There were no more mountains ahead of them, only rolling plains as expansive as the open sea. At any other time Jai and Ceder might have jumped out and ran barefoot through the grass, but now they took comfort in their close and silent quarters and thought only of Why, and what it meant to die.

Sorid had sung of death every day, yet the children's lives had been bleaker than that eternal sleep of which their master spoke. For them, life had promised more suffering than death, but now the concept took on a new dimension. They stared into the sky where he had disappeared. The King and Queen were dead too, they knew, but it was more painful to watch their friend fade into the distance—though he was just a butterfly—than to hear about the untimely fate of two unicorns from afar.

Jai cleared his throat, intending to say a word on Why's behalf, but he could not think what to say that would live up to everyone's satisfaction. Astray came to Jai's rescue and let out a low, grave roar to commemorate the passing of the butterfly. The children thought it was a fine tribute. They said no more.

Tail by tail, their grief began to go numb and they looked to the plains with brighter eyes, yearning to stretch their legs and explore; however, here where the earth was good—fed by endless water and unimpeded sunlight—the grass grew higher than their heads with edges as sharp as knives. Wherever the serrated stalks curved down over the river, Jai and Ceder prudently leaned away.

The fisherman whistled a quiet tune in harmony with the hush of the wind moving through the fields. Something darted through the grass to their left, a shimmering lavender bolt.

"Did you see that?" Ceder asked. Jai nodded. They looked back to the Dangler. He hastened the tempo of his tune. The wind running through the grass took on a life of its own.

Green clouds billowed on the horizon—a forest stretching as far north and south as the children could see. The Dangler's eyes widened and he stopped whistling; it was several moments before Jai or Ceder realized that the wind was mimicking the same song the fisherman had been piping, even now that he was silent.

A blur flew through the grass to their right, but faster still the Dangler whipped his pole and sent the watery line zipping after; the blur jerked to a stop; the Dangler flicked his wrist to snap what he had caught back to his open hand. Like a spool of thread, there was a small songbird wound up in the line of water, yet unharmed by his hook. The Dangler quickly untied her. The bird shook her feathers dry, sending water everywhere. "Why, what have we here?" the fisherman murmured to himself. "A little whistler."

Jai and Ceder drew back as from a ghost—the songbird was the same color as Why. The bird notched her head to one side and whistled a short phrase from the Dangler's despondent melody. Astray lifted his head to greet her, but she flew away from the cub in fright.

The forest snuck up on them quickly, though the trees were tall as mountains. A pea soup fog crept out to welcome them, shrouding the river. "In the woods," the Dangler said deliberately, as if he had taken all of the last hour to choose his words, "be careful what you say."

II. One of a Kind

The pink boat passed under the canopy into the fog. The tree trunks were covered in green moss, their roots growing into the river like humongous caterpillars. The river was wide and calm and here reflected the greens of the foliage rather than the deep blues of the open sky. Thistledown and cottonwood tufts drifted lazily through errant sunbeams. A seldom leaf floated down from above, spinning like a snowflake, each a different shape, as if every tree in the forest was one of a kind.

Looking around curiously, Jai thought he saw a stone wall far behind them, crossing over the river, but the fog closed in before he could be sure what he was seeing. *If there was a wall around the forest, we would have seen it when we came in!* he told himself, but he was unsettled nonetheless.

Summoning all his derring-do, Jai reached to grab Ceder's hand, but just as their fingers touched, Ceder began to say, "I don't like it here," concerning the forest. Jai heard only the first few words and pulled his hand back, embarrassed, and Ceder finished her thought in a surprised garble. She was too bashful to reach for his hand again. Her cheeks turned as pink as the boat.

Vines and hanging blossoms trickled down from above, some within reach. On the riverbank a rainbow of toadstools and ferns carpeted the ground. Despite the tremendous variety of life in the forest there were no birds, rodents, or bugs to be seen. Or heard.

"I think we can forget about finding any people here," said Jai, hoping Ceder was not upset with him for touching her hand.

"I don't see anything except the trees," said Ceder, "but it feels like we're being watched."

Both children slowly turned around—the fisherman was staring at them, as usual, with an unreadable expression.

Around a bend in the river a bridge came into view. It was a simple, attractive structure. In a way it resembled the boat, for the bridge was carved all of a single piece of wood. It spanned the river from side to side, gracefully tracing a third of a circle.

The Dangler stopped the boat by anchoring his pole in the riverbed.

"Why did you do that?" asked Ceder.

"There's more than one way to cross a bridge," said the fisherman, eyeing the water underneath it suspiciously, "and you never know how long it will take to reach the other side."

Jai looked at him askance. "What does that mean?"

"Let's ask *him*, shall we?" The fisherman cast a lanky finger at the middle of the bridge. There on the handrail sat a fat, green frog.

III. Around a Bend

The frog had bulging eyes and an engorged throat. Its skin was mottled yellow-green. It stared at the boat unblinking until the Dangler lowered his arm, and then it spoke. "Grrreetings!"

"Silence, you two," the Dangler warned the children in a low hiss. He addressed the frog, "Greetings to you, bridge-crosser."

"I do not cross the bridge," said the frog.

"Well then," said the Dangler, much louder, "Greetings to you who have built this fine bridge."

"I am not he who has *built* this bridge," croaked the frog forcefully, like he was trapping flies with his words.

"Well then, *Greetings!*" the Dangler fiercely bellowed, "ye guard of the bridge."

"Welcome, ye who go beneath me." The frog licked his lips. "But I do not consider myself so much a *guard*. *Guarding* is hard work."

"Then who are you?" asked the Dangler, in unfamiliar territory now.

"My name is Eany," said the frog. "I am a player of games."

"Ooh! What kind of games?" asked Ceder before the Dangler could shush her.

"Would you like to play, pretty girl?" asked the frog. "What kind of—" Ceder started to say, but the

Dangler clasped a hand over her mouth. Eany's eyes flashed furiously. Righteous anger rushed though Jai's blood as he realized that the fat, green frog had tried to trick Ceder into something—whatever it was—and so he said boldly, "I'll play your game, toad."

"No!" gasped the Dangler. "Silence!"

"Gooood," said the frog in a low voice. "Grrrand. Come here then, brave boy."

"Fine. How?"

Eany twitched impatiently. "It doesn't matter *how*. Swim! Jump! Fly!"

"I'll have to climb around. Can you wait?" asked Jai, feeling both his anger and his advantage slipping away.

"Jai, don't go up there," said Ceder. "This place has 'evil enchantment' written all over it."

"Yeah, well, I can't read," Jai replied defiantly, wishing inside that he could take back his challenge to the frog. "It's just a game," he added a moment later without conviction. Now that he thought about it, the frog and the bridge were beginning to scare him. "Actually," Jai said to the frog, trying to sound in charge of things, "I think I'll stay here. I'm too old to play games."

Eany stared at him with a hungry grin and Jai knew his change of heart was being rejected.

"Do as he says," said the Danger.

"What?" said Jai, looking back twice at the fisherman. "Why?"

"He will never let us through if you do not play, now that you have given a pledge."

"Can't we just cut through the forest," asked Ceder, "and leave the boat behind?" But as soon as she said it she knew it could never happen; somehow, in a way she could not define, they were tied to the boat as surely as the boat was tied to the river. Jai looked at Ceder but she would not meet his eye. He looked at Astray. The cub was gazing at the bridge. The only one who would look at him was the frog.

The Dangler grabbed Ceder by the top of the head as he had done to pull her out of the water in the cavern—and leapt high into the air. When he and Ceder landed in the stern of the boat, Jai, who had advanced to the prow when he challenged the frog, was bounced up like a rock from a catapult.

Jai inhaled sharply as he soared through the air. He landed precariously on the handrail of the bridge, circling his arms for balance like a tight-rope walker. He climbed down at once and stood next to the frog, adjusting his satchel nervously.

"Are you quite ready?" asked Eany.

"How do we play?"

"This is a friendly game we call river sticks," said the frog. "From this side, *here*, to that side, *there*. We drop them in, you see—the sticks, that is—and the first one to the finish line wins a prize."

"What prize?"

"Smart of you to ask, little boy. From me, my flute. From you... *an egg*."

Jai gulped and put one hand on his satchel. "No."

"You do," croaked the frog, "*not* have—" his eyes bulged freakishly, "—a *choice*."

"I'd cut your fat throat if I had my knife," said Jai, meeting Eany eye to eye.

"And where is your knife?" Eany asked smugly. Jai looked back to the boat.

"Go find a stick, *little boy*, or you and your friends will die of old age trying to find your way out of our forest."

Jai gave the frog his most menacing stare, which had absolutely no effect on the sinister amphibian. He turned and stalked to the edge of the bridge to look for a stick.

"Don't step a foot off that bridge!" the Dangler shouted.

"Peace, old man," said the frog, "I would not let my *prize* disappear without me."

Jai picked up a long stick that he imagined would slither through the river like a snake in the grass. He returned to the frog.

Eany opened his mouth and began to wretch and convulse until Jai thought he was about to choke to death, then a wooden flute popped out of his throat. The flute was a fin in length with three holes of scaled sizes.

"On the count of three," said Eany, "drop your stick. One!"

"Where's your stick?" asked Jai.

"I play with my flute. The day I lose is the day I stop playing. Two!"

"And that's not against the rules?" Jai asked meekly. Eany grinned sadistically. "Three!"

Jai dropped his stick, Eany dropped his flute, and they both raced to the other side of the bridge to watch and wait. The frog grinned as though he had already won. Jai tried to look confident, but he felt queasy all over. He was supposed to safeguard the enchanted eggs at all costs; he wondered what the King and Queen would do if they knew he had squandered one of them all because he couldn't keep his mouth shut.

It seemed that endless minutes passed with no sign of either stick. Eany began to whistle, guttural and ugly, a melody in fits and starts. The flute appeared below them, clearly in first place. Jai's stick never crossed the finish line.

"Give me my egg, stupid boy," demanded the frog, turning to Jai and fixing him with bulging, bloodshot eyes.

"You wish!" cried Jai, holding the satchel firmly behind his back with no intention of relinquishing anything.

"Funny you should say that," grunted the frog before jumping off the bridge into the river below.

"Ha!" barked Jai, triumphantly, but he immediately felt a tingling in his hands and discovered that one of the eggs was no longer in the satchel—it had vanished into thin air. "Hey!" he shouted after Eany, but the frog was gone.

III. Around a Bend

"Jump!" called the Dangler. "I will catch you."

Jai looked down doubtfully, wondering if the fisherman intended to catch him with his line and hook or with his hands. Confused, angry with himself, and worried that Ceder would be mad at him, too, Jai tossed caution to the wind and jumped off the bridge to the boat, twenty fins below. The Dangler caught him effortlessly. "I have the feeling," he said as he set Jai down, "*that* is a game which no one can win."

"He cheated!" said Jai. "My stick never even made it to the other side."

"Your stick sank right away," said Ceder, stonefaced. "It looked like you picked the heaviest one up there."

"Oh," said Jai, his cheeks on fire.

The Dangler removed his pole from the water and the boat sailed forward. They passed under the bridge without incident, although Jai noticed Ceder rubbing her forehead as they did so.

They sailed in silence but for the occasional chirp from the purple songbird, who sat nested on Astray's head as comfortably as if she were up a tree. The cub made no move to dislodge his new acquaintance.

A narrow wooden dock appeared ahead, stretching through the fog a third of the way into the river. At the end of the dock was a squat fisherman in a green tunic swinging his legs over the languid water. He held a sleek, black fishing pole in his clumpy hands. By the look of it no fish were biting. The squat fisherman eyed the pink boat charily, dry-wringing his hands on his pole. He licked his lips.

The Dangler placed a hand on each of the children's shoulders and whispered, "Speak not."

Without moving a muscle the squat fisherman's eyes followed them. He uttered no greeting. When the boat had passed beyond the dock, far enough that there was no chance they could turn back, the stranger said, "Nice weather, isn't it?" The Dangler eyeballed the other man's black fishing pole like a chef inspecting spoilt meat.

"Caught a *big* one, an hour back," boasted the squat fisherman.

"Did you," said the Dangler with no tinge of it being a question, no hint of wanting to banter.

"Sure did. Biggest I ever caught. Reckon you ain't never seen so big."

"You might be right," said the Dangler.

"Hmph," grunted the stranger.

The boat traveled on, leaving the dock far behind. The Dangler looked ahead, concentration carved into his face.

Around a bend a bridge came into view. Atop it a fat, green frog peered down at them.

"Is this the same bridge as before?" asked Jai.

"It can't be," said Ceder, "the river doesn't run in a circle, and we didn't see any tributaries along the way." Jai raised an eyebrow. "*Tributaries*?"

The Densler and show with his fishing

The Dangler anchored them with his fishing pole.

"Grrreetings," croaked the frog.

"And greetings to you," the Dangler said

deferentially, "game-master of the bridge."

"Ah, so you have met Eany, have you? No doubt you played with him, or you would not be here."

"This is so," said the Dangler.

"No doubt you *lost!*" sneered the frog.

"You cheated!" cried Jai. "I know you did!"

"Silence, confound it!" hissed the Dangler.

"Nonsense," said the frog, "we have never met before. Eany is forthright and fair in all matters, as am I. My name is Meany, but on Eany's behalf I am offended by your gutless accusations, stupid little boy."

"What of it?" demanded the Dangler, abandoning his complacent pretense.

"Another game, of course," said Meany, "for another egg. I know you have one. Denying it will only vex me further. Will you play, you ungainly abomination of a man, or will you send these puny flies to risk in your stead?"

"I will play," said Ceder, stepping forward.

The frog eyeballed her with an obvious appetite. "Then get yourself up here."

Ceder knew what to do—without a word to the Dangler she stepped to the front of the boat, ready to be launched to the bridge. Jai had his back turned the last time around and was quite startled at having his head gripped like a melon and at being pulled upward into the air with the Dangler's mighty jump, only to land a second later and see Ceder fly up and away, her arms spinning like windmills. She landed gingerly on the handrail of the bridge and climbed down at once, turning to the frog with her arms crossed.

The frog inspected her up and down, then belched and said, "You know the rules, you ugly little girl. Go fetch a stick before I spit on you."

Ceder forced herself to remain calm, to display confidence when she said, "As a matter of fact I've already got one picked out." She reached into her tunic and pulled out a twig that was small enough for a butterfly to carry—Why's cane.

The frog turned to the river, unconcerned by Ceder's ploy. He shook with a violent spasm, coughed—his

tongue wagged limply out of his mouth like a tarcovered snail—and regurgitated the same wooden flute that Eany had used. "On the count of three, we drop. One!"

"And no cheating," said Ceder.

"Hmph!" croaked the frog. *"Two! Three!"* He dropped the flute. Ceder dropped Why's walking stick, which hit the water a split-second sooner than the flute. They rushed to the other side of the bridge to wait.

"I hope that ridiculous twig wasn't special to you," said Meany, "because you're never going to see it again."

"Jai was right! You did cheat—"

The frog cut her off by whistling a harsh, choppy melody.

Ceder's heart pounded. *Is he calling the flute back to him? Is that how he wins?* "Stop it!" she screamed, but below them the flute had just emerged.

"So sorry," grinned the frog. Ceder swung her arm out to punch Meany in the throat but he jumped off the bridge before she could strike him. From the river he shouted back, "Ugly, stupid, little girl!"

Ceder watched him sink below the water and disappear, her blood boiling. *Now I know why Jai likes that knife so much!* She stalked back to the other side of the bridge.

The Dangler held his arms out and Ceder jumped. He caught her smoothly and set her down. She turned to Jai and with her eyes asked what she could not bring herself to voice. Jai answered with a curt nod: the second enchanted egg had vanished from the satchel. With her failure they had lost both unborn spirits of Syn, as well as the silver fish the Dangler had caught. Ceder turned to the fisherman. "I'm sorry. I know that was the only fish you ever hooked."

"I will catch it again," said the Dangler. His voice was grim. He lifted his pole out of the riverbed and the boat floated underneath the bridge.

Jai found himself yawning. They could not see the sun through the canopy and time passed without measure. From out of the fog another dock stretched into the river. "Keep quiet, now," the Dangler reminded them.

Another lumpy man sat on this dock, idly kicking his skinny legs in the river. He also held a black fishing pole and wore a tunic the color of slime. He watched the pink boat shrewdly, waiting until it was well past the dock before jeering, "Nice boat, fisherman! Very pretty shade of pink! Did your mother make it for you?"

Jai and Ceder kept silent. Astray stood at the side of the boat on his hind legs, growling from the back of his throat.

The stranger on the dock laughed snidely to himself. "I just caught the *biggest* thing you ever wished to see, fisherman!"

"I waste not my wishes on fishes," the Dangler coolly replied.

The man grinned to expose his runty teeth. "You can't catch anything, fisherman. You stink! We all know it!" He peeled into fits of rotten laughter.

The Dangler tightened his grip on the children's shoulders but they waited it out, clenching their teeth, and in another moment the dock vanished behind them. The Dangler unhanded Jai and Ceder and sat back as calm as a glass of water.

Hours passed in the span of minutes and minutes passed in the span of hours. They rounded a bend and the Dangler stuck his pole into the water. A bridge stood before them.

III. Around a Bend

"Grrrrrrreetings!" roared the green frog, fatter than ever. *"I am Miney! Would you like to play a game?"*

No one said a word.

The frog's eyes bulged in surprise. "You—you would?" he stammered, darting his eyes back and forth as if considering a hasty retreat into the woods.

Jai and Ceder and the Dangler all looked at one another, bewildered—none among them had spoken.

Astray turned to them and fixed the Dangler with his piercing green eyes. Instantly the children understood. The Dangler nodded. The cub turned back to the bridge. The children braced themselves to be grabbed by the head and sure enough, up they went; when they landed, sinking the stern of the boat low enough to let water in, Astray went flying toward the bridge. He landed delicately on the handrail next to Miney.

The fat, green frog did not look well. His eyes nearly popped out and beads of sweat trickled down his body in every direction. He licked his lips compulsively. Astray looked at the frog, but Miney could not muster the will to meet the cub's commanding gaze.

"Yes, yes, I know the rules," the frog croaked under his breath, his voice shriveled to a weak tremor. "It is *my* game, after all." He opened his mouth and vomited the wooden flute into his tiny, webbed hands.

Astray bit a green petal free from his necklace.

"One," said Miney, extremely slowly. No one moved on the boat or the bridge. "*To three!*" cried the frog, throwing the flute down before he finished saying 'two' and immediately hopping to the other side of the bridge where he sprang up to the rail and began frantically whistling the same melody as Eany and Meany.

Astray dropped the green petal casually into the gentle breeze. By the time it touched down to the river, partially hidden by swirling eddies of fog, Miney's flute was halfway through the race.

Ceder grabbed Jai's hand nervously. They could only guess what prize might be at stake this round—anything in the boat, any one of them, might simply disappear as soon as the flute won.

The frog's harsh, spit-spewing whistle grew more and more frenzied. The sweat leaked from his skin like melting ice.

What happened next was very sudden. A sound splintered up from the river like a voice cracking high to low. Astray was launched through the air in a great arc, propelled by something crashing through the underside of the bridge. The cub landed in Ceder's ever-ready arms, but they both went tumbling backwards from the sheer force of his flight.

A tree had thrust its way up from underneath the bridge where no tree or sapling or seed had stood before. It slammed into the bottom of the bridge, sending Astray into the air, and then the bridge and the tree both shimmered at the same time and the tree grew up and the bridge grew with it, conjoined. Soon the tree was as tall as any in the forest, but it was fundamentally unique in one regard—there were three holes in its trunk.

An impossible sight met the children's eyes: where the new tree grew out of the water, the river forked both left and right. Both streams ran their own course into the distance as if they had been flowing separately since the Dawn of Time.

A gust of wind made its way into the holes of the miraculous tree, filling the forest with a reedy melody that was eerily similar to the tune the Dangler had been whistling when they first entered the fog.

The fisherman was spurred to action by the momentous outcome of Astray's game with Miney. "We have to get the El fish back!" he cried, pointing down the right fork of the river where the children saw one last glimpse of the fat, green frog receding into the forest at a mad pace. "*After him*!"

The Year Two Hundred,

The black skeleton sat by the well, cradling the ruby red eggs like a mother hen. It never considered leaving its only home—how could it? A skeleton has neither a heart nor a mind. Other than the rhythmic pulse of the well, all it felt, all it understood was the sun passing overhead every afternoon, flooding its empty chamber with light.

With no instinct other than to make its way to the source of the light, the skeleton left its cave one day and began to go west, crawling at first, then stumbling, finally walking, following the warmth of the setting sun. It left the eggs in the mountain.

The skeleton made its way west, always steering clear of the nearby river yet unable to avoid it entirely, for they traveled in the same direction. Any passers-by who saw the man of bones gave a wide berth and made straight for home to lock their doors and shutters tight.

A full season after leaving its cave, the skeleton came to a place where the river drained into a hole in the water. When the sun passed over the unnatural abyss, the hole reflected the light back a hundredfold. Feeling the overwhelming warmth, the skeleton waded into the river and approached the hole. It thrust its hand into the hole as if it could grab the sun itself like a red apple from a root in the ground.

When it withdrew its arm the skeleton's clawed hand was no longer there. No cut or crack, the hand was simply gone, like the water that fell down the hole. As the sun set the skeleton crawled out of the river and continued trudging west. It did not—could not—see the dark monstrosity that grew out of the hole behind it, although it surely had a hand in its genesis.

The skeleton did not eat or drink or tire. At night it stopped walking and stood stone still until morning. It arrived at the edge of a great forest, but the canopy was so thick as to exclude the light. Rather than pass into the darkness the skeleton walked around the woods, a journey of untold time.

When it found its way back to the river on the western border of the foggy forest, it resumed its mindless trek toward the setting sun. It crossed fields that were covered in razor-sharp grass, but the skeleton passed through unhindered; the lush vegetation withered and burned wherever it came into contact with the black bones.

Beyond the plains were mountains with snowcapped peaks that clipped the clouds. The skeleton had a choice: climb over the mountains or go under, following the river through a lightless tunnel. It would surely have chosen the former, where it could feel the sun strongly, but the skeleton sensed the presence of another hole in the water and so it walked beside the river into the heart of a dark cavern.

When it found the second hole in the water the skeleton once again knelt and, having never learned its lesson, stuck its remaining hand into the hole, as if it could retrieve the one it had already lost. When it withdrew its arm its second hand was gone like a shadow in the light.

Undaunted, with no knowledge of pain, the skeleton recommenced its march west until it exited the cavern through a massive waterfall. A full year after beginning its journey, the man of black bones took the first step into a desert of blood-red dunes.

Chapter the Fifteenth, **The Day Before the Last**, *In which the key is in the air selfsame*.

I. Leading Away

The Dangler pulled his fishing pole out of the riverbed and the boat coasted forward in the swift current, following the fork of the river down which Miney had fled. He stuck his pole into the water again and used it to push off like a ferryman. Over and over he did this; his pole dipped into the water less deeply with each thrust.

When they had traveled a tail from the broken bridge the boat bottomed out. Neither Jai nor Ceder anxiously sitting in the prow—were prepared for the sudden stop. They lurched forward and flew out of the boat, landing face first in the water.

"Get up, this is no time to rest!" whooped the Dangler as his shadow soared over the children like a cloud passing under the sun—he jammed his pole in the ground between them and used it to vault himself off the boat over their heads. Without looking back he sprinted away, lifting his knees to his chest with each stork-like stride. His purple cape billowed behind him as he ran. "Follow me!"

As Jai rose from his knees, Astray leapt off the boat, bounded off Jai's back—sending him rudely back down into the riverbed—and into Ceder's ready arms. She dashed after the fisherman. "Come on, Jai, what are you waiting for?" Jai looked up from the ground with mud on his face, wondering what else could go wrong for him, then he sprang to his feet and ran to catch up. The lavender songbird zoomed ahead, whistling a high-spirited tune for their chase through the fog.

The fisherman skidded to a stop and looked left and right for Miney. The frog had disappeared. In a fluid motion the Dangler took out the waveglass compass and held it inverted high over his head, then turned sharply to the right of the river and vanished into the foliage, staring at the dial in the air rather than where he was planting his feet.

When Jai and Ceder arrived at the same spot a moment later they found a small brook leading through the undergrowth. They could not see the Dangler through the dense greenery, but a trail of shaking leaves suggested he had gone in the direction of the brook.

"Maybe we shouldn't follow him in there," said Jai. "You remember what the Coralute told us."

"We're not following him," said Ceder, stepping between the trees, "we're following Miney, ultimately."

"Do you really believe that?" asked Jai, swatting the fog away from his face like a swarm of gnats. "We should have kept that compass, after all, in case we can't find our way back."

Pushing aside ferns larger than their bodies, they gradually made their way deeper into the woods with no guide but the trickle of water leading away from the river. "Are we even going the right way?" asked Jai.

Ceder blew the hair out of her face. "Miney must be following this brook."

"Do you think he'll lead us to the other two frogs, the ones who took our eggs?"

Ceder shot Jai a look of surprise. "Jai, there's only *one* frog—it was the same one each time."

"It was not."

"It was too."

"Was not!"

"Of course it was! Why would there be three different frogs who all look the same, sound the same, and play the same game?"

"I don't know *why*," said Jai. "Probably the same reason there were three dead, green fish in the sea who all looked the same, sounded the same, and toyed around with us the same way each time."

"There weren't three fish!" said Ceder, amazed that Jai had not come to the same conclusion. "The Wishfish, the Coralute, and the Oldest Fish in the Sea were all the same one."

"No, they weren't."

"Yes, they were!"

Arguing back and forth as they ran, the children crashed through a last barricade of ferns into a wide, well-lit clearing. The Dangler was standing ahead of them, rubbing his chin between his forefinger and thumb, deep in thought. He was staring at the tower.

II. Safe Inside

There was music in the air. It was not the whistling of the three-holed tree, although the song was the same. It felt as though there were hidden voices all around them, all humming the same dissonant harmony in a round, but when Jai or Ceder turned to look where the closest notes seemed to originate, they found, like an echo in a circular room, that they could not pinpoint the source of the sound.

The tower stood in the middle of the clearing. Made of faded gray stone, it was perfectly cylindrical and had no visible doorways, windows, or stairs.

"Is this where the toad came?" Jai asked the Dangler, although the answer seemed obvious.

A long pause preceded the fisherman's surprising reply: "Up there." He pointed to the top of the tower.

Ceder tilted her head back, taking in the entirety of the stone structure. It was a full thirty fins tall. "How did he get up?"

"How else? He jumped," the fisherman said distastefully, as if the frog had played foul in his last leaping effort to escape.

"What do you think is up there?" asked Jai.

"I don't know, but I intend to find out."

"How are we supposed to get up?"

"Not we. *Me*." The Dangler backed up to the edge of the clearing. He pulled his fishing pole out and held it level with both hands, pointed directly at the tower. He whistled a descending note, as if letting all the pressure out of his body, then he sprang into motion, sprinting straight ahead with bounding, herky-jerky strides. With his glass chin held high, his cape caught in the wind behind him, his pole held out like a jouster's lance, the fisherman's instantaneous speed was breathtaking.

At the last possible moment before dashing his pole against the tower he dipped it down, wedging the tip into the corner where the foundation stones met the earth. The fishing pole bent unnaturally in a huge bow as he was about to rush headlong into the wall. The pole snapped back to its original form so quickly that the Dangler, who arched his own body lithely and kicked his legs up, was vaulted high and straight into the air. It made Jai and Ceder laugh to see his silhouette against the sky, umbrella hat and flapping cape, seeming to trot sideways up the wall, and then, just like that, he was on top of the tower.

He flailed his arms wildly for a fraction of an instant—the stones atop the tower were wet and slippery—before regaining his balance. He gave one look to the children to assure them he was all right, then he turned to the center of the tower.

The tower housed a deep well of water. Only a narrow catwalk lined the inside of the ramparts. The water was the color of tarnished silver. The surface was perfectly still.

Between the ramparts three squat, bald fishermen in green tunics sat staring at the Dangler. All three held glossy black fishing poles but none of them had yet dipped their lines into the water. They were all three panting and struggling to catch their breath, as though they had all just finished running and jumping great distances.

"Fancy meeting *you* here," snickered the first fisherman between wheezes.

The Dangler regarded them each in turn, then tipped his hat and said, "Fancy that."

The second fisherman spat off the side of the tower, aiming for Jai and Ceder. "There ain't no fish in this hole," he said to the Dangler. The Dangler stood his pole upright and ran the watery line between his fingers. "Good. I am not angling for *fish*," he said as he reached into his bag of bait and produced a plump worm.

All three of the squat fisherman went red in the face, a mass of jowls quivering with indignation. "There's only enough room for three up here, *stranger*," said the third fisherman, chewing on the final moniker as if the Dangler were anything but.

The Dangler looked him in the eye, then he scanned the otherwise empty top of the tower. He turned back to the third fisherman and raised his brow quizzically.

The fisherman's eyes bulged at the Dangler's silent audacity. "What I mean to say," said the squat fisherman, "is there's only enough room for three *lines* up here. The water won't allow a fourth. You try it, *stranger*, and see if you don't get sucked right in." The other two fishermen chuckled at this; before the Dangler had time to bait his hook, they all cast their lines into the water, grinning smugly.

The Dangler stared at each of them in turn, then he carefully and deliberately poked his hook through the body of the glowworm. A drop of green blood gelled around the hook. He slung the pole over his shoulder, ready to cast it into the fray. "I *would* hate to get sucked into this most mysterious pool," he said to the fishermen, "so you will agree with me it is fortunate *mine* is no ordinary line. I do not think the water will mind if I have a try."

As the three fisherman gawked disbelievingly at the Dangler, he winked at them and gently cast his pole

forward. The hook and worm fell into the dark water without a sound.

The water rippled out from the center. The turbulence was reflected on the faces of the squat fishermen, all three of whose eyes and throats were bulging disproportionately. Their faces streamed with sweat as they leaned over their poles, anxious to be the first to make a catch.

The Dangler checked his line calmly and began to whistle. The three fishermen stared at him hatefully but said nothing.

"Ah, here we are," said the Dangler several minutes later. He reeled in his line. The bald fishermen all stared, mortified, as the Dangler's catch broke the surface of the well. The first fisherman—who, perhaps by some trick of the light, was now looking rather more like a frog than a man—screamed in fear as his own fishing line jerked forward. He fell into the churning water and disappeared.

"Eany," said the Dangler, then he drew his catch up to his hand. The glowworm was gone—in its place the hook was speared through the cracked opening of a luminous blue egg. The Dangler winked to the two remaining fishermen and tucked the enchanted egg into his bag. Without a word he hooked another glowworm onto his line and cast it into the mysterious well.

If they had been angry before at the Dangler's intrusion, the squat fishermen were livid now. They leaned over their poles with every muscle shaking in tension.

The Dangler, taking great pleasure in his sport, resumed his carefree whistling. It did not take long, by the measure of an angler's patience, for him to secure another catch. When he felt the gentle tug on his hook he smiled widely and reeled in his line. "Here we are," he said happily as his prize emerged from the opaque water.

The second squat fisherman, whose skin had taken on a hue that looked more amphibious than human, was ripped forward off the ramparts with a stout pull on his line and he fell into the dark water, croaking fatally.

"Meany," said the Dangler. He brought his catch in. He took the second enchanted egg off the hook and held the cracked end up to his eye. A faint silver light shone from within the sapphire shell. The Dangler sighed deeply, relieved that the El fish was still safe inside. He tucked the egg into his tackle-bag and fixed his gaze on the last remaining fisherman.

The third fisherman bristled with rage, his cheeks and forehead as red as any apple. "There's nothing left for you here, *stranger!* Go away! Be gone!"

The Dangler appeared to consider this option, but at last he shook his head and said, "I think I will stay and keep you company. After all, there is plenty of room up here now." He held his empty hook between thumb and forefinger, about to bait it with another glowworm, but he paused, thinking better of the idea. Instead, he tipped his black hat up and pulled from underneath it a pink flower petal.

The squat fisherman was apoplectic when he realized the Dangler intended to use a flower petal as bait. "What nerve have you, *stranger*, to do what it is you do? You're a trouble-maker, nothing but!" "And you, *sir*," scoffed the Dangler as he hooked the petal and sent it into the water, "are a fraud of a frog of a fisherman! Now close your mouth and pray you do not come to the same end as your brethren."

"In this forest, there is no end," said the last of the three frog fishermen.

III. Resolved

The hour stood still as the Dangler and the squat fisherman competed for a final prize, but it was the Dangler's line time tugged first. It pulled sharply but quickly went slack. Confused, the Dangler reeled his hook in as fast as he could, wondering if his catch had freed itself and swam away.

As the Dangler pulled his watery line out of the well, the third fisherman was jerked forward, but he did not fall in, anchored between ramparts by his bloated posterior. He clung greedily to his black pole, unwilling to let go even as the line continued to pull him closer to his doom.

The Dangler drew his third catch from the water, but what came out of the well was nearly as difficult to fix an eye to as his watery line: stuck on the hook was a swathe of shadow that flapped back and forth in the wind like a tattered flag, as dark as midnight, immaterial as a cold breath.

"*Impossible*!" cried the final fisherman, scales away from succumbing to his fate.

The Dangler tried to pluck the shadow off his hook, but his fingers passed through the ribbon of darkness like so much smoke. "Have you ever seen such a catch?" he asked breathlessly.

The fat fisherman's eyes were rabid. He licked his lips, fighting against the force that sought to suck him into the restless well. "You'll pay for this!" he squealed. "In our forest, everything comes back around! You'll pay for this, *stranger*!" And then he popped out of his tight seat and fell into the dark water.

The Dangler turned around and jumped off the tower. When he landed, Jai and Ceder heard a sound like a bottle of water being shaken up and they saw drops of oily liquid fly out of his knees like sparks from flint.

The Dangler stood up uninjured and showed the children the shadow he had caught. It was somehow familiar, straining their eyes, slipping into and out of focus. Before they could examine it more closely Astray let out an undulating roar which blew the shadow free from the Dangler's hook. It disappeared at once in the bright sunlight.

The Dangler gave Astray a peculiar look. He shook his head to clear his thoughts, then he showed Jai and Ceder that the enchanted eggs had been safely recovered, with both Syn and the El fish hale. "We must return to the boat," he said to the children, setting off through the ferns. "We have been in this forsaken forest far too long already."

Jai and Ceder rushed after him. "What was on top of the tower?" asked Ceder.

"Trouble," the fisherman grunted.

"How did you catch that shadow?" asked Jai.

"Timing," said the Dangler.

"It was magic, wasn't it?"

"Who can say?"

"Well, it sure looked like magic," said Jai.

"What does magic look like?" asked the fisherman. "Can a bat see it in the dark? Can a wool fish smell it in the water? Can a man hold it in his hand?"

"Is this a trick question?" asked Jai.

The Dangler suddenly laughed for the first time that the children had ever heard. It was a hollow, deeply stirred sound, with an echo of joy as fragile as the skin of a bubble. "Magic itself is a trick—how could a question about it be any different?"

After that the children followed him in silence as they ran through the forest. When they got back to the boat the Dangler supervised them in pushing the vessel free of the riverbed all the way back to the woodwind tree, then he used his fishing pole to ferry them down the opposite fork in the river.

An hour later they arrived at a wall. It was thirty fins tall, made of the same gray stone as the tower. The wall ran north and south as far as they could see, curving inward at the horizon, suggesting it ran in a colossal loop around the forest. *Did I see a wall before or not?* Jai struggled to recall.

The river ran undeterred through a culvert in the base of the wall, but the opening was far too small for a boat or a person to squeeze through. In the center of the wall, at head-height, was an inlaid statue of a fat frog with tightly sealed lips hinting up in a satiated smirk.

"That's a little creepy," said Ceder.

"A dead end," Jai despaired. "We're done for."

"Not so," said the Dangler, studying the wall, but he stood as still as a scarecrow.

"Then where are we?" Jai finally asked.

"We are in a place that time has left behind," replied the fisherman, "or perhaps a place that has left time behind. Either way, I should like to be leaving now."

"Can you jump to the top, then lift us all over?" asked Jai.

"Or swim under it?" posited Ceder.

The Dangler took a moment to think. "I have a hunch that cheating our way over or under this particular barrier would set us back far more than it would take us forward."

Jai looked to Ceder to see if she understood this brand of geometry. She shrugged and gave him a sympathetic look—she was as stumped as he was. But the fisherman had proved adept at solving problems in the past and so they waited patiently to see what solution he would invent for this obstacle.

The only sound in the forest was the whistling of the wind in the trees, far in the distance, and the omnipresent *hush* of the river. The air grew cold, a shade darker. The stone wall defined the edge of the forest—they could not see the sky to the west over the top of the stones; the comet, more gloriously colored than ever in the fading twilight, passed over the wall out of view. Astray roared desperately and looked to the children. Ceder ran her hand through his fur but the cub shook her away.

Ceder found herself staring at the glowing petals of his necklace. She tried counting them on her fingers. "Jai, have you noticed that Astray doesn't have nearly as many petals as he did yesterday morning?" "*Well*..." Jai replied, trying to come up with a quick excuse for why he had not paid more attention to a flower necklace.

"You haven't been taking them, have you?"

"Hey!" he said defensively. "Why would I take them?"

"Then where did they all go?" she asked, for Jai and she had, by one coincidence or another, been looking elsewhere almost every time the cub released one of his petals to the wind or the water. They had seen him give three to the Wishfish, one to the Oldest Fish in the Sea, and fasten one to the Dangler's fishing line when they were spinning around the whirlpool—as well as one for Why before he took his final flight—but they had missed all the rest.

"I don't know," Jai said at last, "but I *have* noticed that the white patch on his back is getting bigger. Maybe that has something to with the missing flowers."

Ceder gave his proposal a patronizing smile but her eyes were dismissive.

The Dangler, stymied by the impassibility of the stone wall, began to whistle the same tune as he had when they arrived in the forest. The purple songbird, never straying far from the boat, lit down on Jai's shoulder and happily joined in harmony with the Dangler, but she sang in a mismatched range much higher than the fisherman.

Jai had a sudden idea. He had noticed when they were near the three-holed tree that he could hear three distinct notes to the song that the wind made as it blew into the hollows—one low, one high, one somewhere in between. He pursed his lips and tried to whistle, but his throat was too dry. He scooped a handful of water from beside the boat. He was aware that his mouth was not as painfully parched as it had been the previous day, but he gave it no thought, too excited to put his musical theory to the test. He formed a small circle with his lips and blew as hard as he could. Try as he might he could not produce more than a wheezy hiss.

Ceder watched him with a growing smile. It looked like he was imitating a puckerfish. When his cheeks and forehead flushed like plums with the effort she could not help but laugh out loud. "What in the world are you doing, Jai?"

He was resolved not to tell her. She had unraveled the riddle of the signpost at the wishing well and he wanted to show her that he could be clever, too. He continued to blow through his pursed lips until he nearly passed out from sheer exertion, feeling far less impressive than what he intended.

"Jai, if you're trying to whistle like that flute-tree, I think you need to squeeze your cheeks in more. Like this," she said as she reached out and laid her hands on his face, squishing his mouth between her palms.

Jai's heart raced at the touch of her hands and before he knew it a sustained pitch was escaping from his lips like steam from a kettle. Ceder seemed to have figured out his plan; as Jai maintained his exhalation, Ceder mushed his cheeks in and out, drawing a different key from his lips with each fine adjustment she made, trying to match the third tone of the whistling tree.

When Jai hit the right note they knew it at once. His voice and that of the Dangler and the songbird merged

into one. The melody flowed as naturally as running water.

The stone frog in the wall opened its eyes in shock. As if it were fighting every urge to do so, the statue's grinning mouth creaked open ever so slowly.

Astray roared impatiently.

The mouth of the frog expanded to an impossible size, large enough for the boat to pass through. The Dangler unanchored them and they promptly sailed through the frog's open throat. The song from the whistling tree faded away as the pink boat passed through the wall, leaving the forest behind.

The Year Two Hundred & One,

The flesh of mortal men burst into flames at the merest touch to the Sands of Syn, but the black skeleton walked through the blood-red dunes as though it was strolling a garden. The sand slipped away beneath its feet like slimy stones on the seafloor, thwarting its pace, but impartial time saw the determined skeleton at last reach the western coast. It could travel no further in pursuit of the light, save by marching into the sea itself. The skeleton stood next to a large, green archway as the sun set.

In the morning it swept its forked tail over the crimson ashes, for there was a fiery power latent in the desert which the skeleton could sense as surely as the heat of the sun. As it sifted through the dunes next to the green archway, the skeleton discovered vast piles of gold coins, but it let them fall back into the sand, disinterested. It stood at the edge of the shoreline, neither sitting nor sleeping, only waiting for those hours of the day when the sun was strong.

Countless ships passed by; if they noticed the sandswept skeleton, the sailors either assumed it was a statue—like the green archway—or a demon, and then they sailed away as quickly as they could. But men are each one greedier than the last and sooner or later a ship was bound to pass with a captain whose love of gold outweighed his fear of devils. When such a captain saw the piles of treasure littered beside the river, like clockwork his mouth began to water. The crew of his ship, informed that to touch the red sands with their bare skin would bring instant death, lifted the gold coins into their ship with the flat ends of their oars.

After all the gold had been loaded the crew threw chains around the unmoving black skeleton—thinking it a relic, and therefore of value—and dragged it aboard before returning to sea.

Months later, when the unlucky boat reached the western shore of the open sea, the captain and his crew were dead to the last man. Those who had dared touch the skeleton's body were burned as if by Syn itself, and when the skeleton began to stir and pace about, the rest of the crew lost their nerve and dove overboard, making fine meals for a host of hungry wool fish in their wake. With burning sails and a hull charred black wherever the skeleton set its feet, the ship crashed into the rocky coast and sank. The skeleton crawled its way out of the shoals and up to the shore, steam rising off its body like smoke from a doused bonfire.

It walked west, as always, but it was not long before a familiar sensation overwhelmed it—it was close to home. It could feel the heat from the lake of fire under the earth. When it returned to the hollow mountain the skeleton picked up the three red eggs, still lying where it had left them, and huddled close to the well for solace after so tedious a journey.

The skeleton had traversed the Land of Lin from one side to the other; it had experienced the river, the mountains, the desert, and the open sea; most importantly, it had learned of the existence of mankind. Revitalized by the well, the skeleton grew again, but not in the fashion it had before. It grew like a man. A crack split across its skull—a crude mouth—and it uttered harsh language in imitation of the sailors' speech. When it cursed, flames licked out from the core of its skull.

It ventured out of its cave for days at a time, exploring to the north and south; it never tried to follow the sun west again, for where had that brought it but back full-circle to its home? The skeleton stalked through the roads of distant villages in the dead of night; it hid in shadows by the side of the road and listened to the stories of weary travelers. It learned more and more of men and their ways, and of fish, and of magic, and of the Land of Lin itself. Lastly, it learned of Syn, who had turned the sky to ash centuries ago. In the ever-burning fires inside the skeleton's skull a plan was forged.

It had heard people say that fish love nothing so much as a fresh apple. It knew from experience that men love nothing so much as gold.

The skeleton pulled down apples from the orchard that lined the west side of its mountain. Though it was blind, the apples were easy to find, for they grew like the seeds of the sun, blazing as red as hot coals. Then the skeleton crossed to the other side of the mountain where the open sea lapped against the rocky coast and cast the apples into the water. It never took long for those mermen that lived among the sunken ships there to find the skeleton's tasty treats. It fed the fish everyday until they grew so dependant on free apples that they would have crawled out of the water for one more bite.

When the skeleton stopped feeding them the mermen nearly tore each other apart in their wild hunger. "Gold," the skeleton said to them—its first true word. The mermen understood; there were vast piles of coins in one of the sunken ships below the sea. They brought the recovered treasure to the skeleton and it threw them more apples in exchange. When all the gold had been salvaged from the seafloor the skeleton returned to its mountain, ignoring the pleas of the fish to feed them once more, and once more after that. It never returned to the coast and those mermen who had grown so addicted to the earthly fruit were driven to ever deeper depths of hunger and depravity.

The skeleton took the gold to the villages north and south of the river, but men are less forgiving of appearances than fish. They barred their doors and windows and would do no business with the man of bones; that is, until it bought a dark cloak with which to shroud itself, covering its terrible, inhuman face. After that the skeleton's coin was as good as anyone else's and people lined up far and wide for the chance to do business with a demon that no one had to look in the eye.

"Dig," said the skeleton to a group of poor workers who would do anything for money. They followed it back to its mountain. It pointed to the ground below their feet. "Dig," it ordered them all.

The workers did not dig so much as they excavated. The bedrock of the mountain was virtually impossible to chisel away, but there was an ancient network of tunnels under the mountain filled only with loose rubble and sea-cement; the workers spent the vast majority of their time clearing out these tunnels, though none dared ask the skeleton to what purpose it put them to this task. As the workers toiled, the man of black bones brooded in its lair above them, forever hovering over its prized eggs and basking in the power of the well, which it would permit no one else to approach. The skeleton's affinity for the power of the sun grew with the passing years, reinforced by the light that flooded down through the top of the hollow mountain every day. In time, drawing on the power of the well, the man of bones found it could create sparks from the mere idea of fire.

When the diggers uncovered the foundation of the well deep under the mountain, the skeleton bade them clad the stone structure in iron and rebuild it into a running furnace. Years later they discovered a subterranean lake of liquid fire far below the surface of the earth, marking the end of the tunnels. The black skeleton set the workers to a new task: hauling wheelbarrows full of magma from the lake of fire to the furnace they had helped fabricate. The skeleton gave them a new name, too: tunnel-minnows.

Its ability to speak progressed quickly. In time, no one in the tunnels could remember a day when their master had been no more than a mute monster. Now, shrouded in a sable cloak, spewing curses like a sea captain, it was impossible to tell he was not a man at all.

When his hoard of gold was finally depleted he persuaded the tunnel-minnows to keep working by other means. If anyone abandoned their position, the skeleton put a bony hand around their neck and reduced them to a heap of ash. The cowering slaves began to refer to their cruel master as the Magician, and none defied him.

The black skeleton led the strongest, most ablebodied slaves back up to the light of day and forced them to endeavor a new project: the construction of a tower atop the hollow mountain. It took decades to complete, but when the soaring tower was as tall as men dared build, the magician climbed to the top and felt nearer the sun than ever before, amplifying the latent power that seeped through the marrow of his black bones. He raised his arms to the sky as if praying to the source of all heavenly fire. The sunlight condensed around his body and the magician, like a living conduit, redirected the power from above into a blazing red beam that he swept back and forth across the far horizon, setting fire to all it touched.

The magician banished his broken-spirited towerbuilders back below the earth to replenish the dwindling number of tunnel-minnows. The slaves lived out their days confined in the dark. There were even those who bore children in the godless labyrinth. Entire generations of their sons and daughters were delivered, endured, and died without ever seeing the world beyond the walls of their cave.

When their numbers had fallen to a handful, the magician selected the smallest and weakest one among them to come up to his lair, a child too small to fight back. He said he needed a beating heart close at hand. From that day on the child would live in fear of unholy fire.

As the years rolled on, a rumor spread over sea and land claiming the resurrection of the Son of the Sun.

Chapter the Sixteenth, **The Last Night**, *In which a handful of flowers are not what they seem.*

I. Callous

A cold tide of darkness washed over the pink boat as it emerged on the far side of the stone wall. An empire of thorns rose over both sides of the river, a thicket of petrified wood so unchecked in its propagation that it rivaled the mountains for size. Converging fifty fins over the river at its lowest point, forming a vaulted corridor for the boat to pass under, the tangled thorns blocked out the light of sun and comet alike.

"Where are we?" Ceder asked the Dangler.

"This can only be one place," said the fisherman. "We are in the Soridwood."

"Hey," said Jai, "I thought you didn't remember anything from your old life."

The Dangler regarded the thorns pensively as the river carried them under the deadly thicket. "I remember it no more than I recall the name of the sea. It is only a word to me."

"Why is it called the Soridwood?" asked Jai.

"It was said, long ago, the Magician had a hand in its making."

Jai waited for him to elaborate, but it was Ceder who spoke first. "Look at the thorns," she said. "Do they remind you of anything?"

Jai gazed at the snarled thicket. Every sprig of nettles grew in sets of three, every set bent like knuckled claws. As the twilight faded to dusk, he peered beyond the thorns to the stems that supported them—it was difficult to be certain, but it appeared as though every branch and limb was itself part of a triplicate, repeating infinitely to points so thin his eye could not detect their tips.

"They all look like hands," said Jai, aghast, "with three claws." He put a hand to his forehead, dreading another flash of pain where Sorid's curse marked him.

Ceder studied his tormented expression. "We'll be safe if we stay in the boat."

"Unless your master knows we are here," said the Dangler, "and decides to close his hand, once and for all."

Jai shuddered at the callous imagery. "You have a real knack for knowing what to say, sometimes."

In tetchy silence they sailed through the corridor of overreaching thorns until at last, in a smooth, quiet transition, the boat grinded to a slow stop in a bed of wet silt. The Dangler plumbed the depth of the river with his fishing pole and found it no more than a fin to the bottom.

"Should we turn back?" asked Ceder.

Astray answered with a firm roar, denouncing her.

"I agree," echoed the Dangler. "Backtracking to the forest is not a choice."

"Why not?" asked Jai.

"Did you not see? The door closed its mouth again."

"But we can't sail forward," said Jai.

"Correct," said the fisherman. With one high step he climbed out of the boat and stood shin-deep in the water. He took the compass out and held it before his face in silence for a long moment, then sighed and put it away. "What are you doing?" asked Ceder.

"The river is the only road," the Dangler said resignedly. "If we cannot sail, we walk. Come now, one foot at a time."

The children shared a skeptical look, but they joined the fisherman outside the boat. The Dangler secured his line and hook under the foremost bench, locked the reel, then strode forward until the line drew taut. He stiffened, leaned like he was walking against a strong wind, and trudged forward with the pole slung over his shoulder.

The silt at the bottom of the riverbed bunched up in front of the hull like snow before a shovel as the Dangler pulled. "I could use a hand," he grunted irritably—the children were wading casually by either side of the boat, assuming the fisherman would do all the work. "This is harder than it looks."

Jai and Ceder mumbled a lame apology and grabbed a hold of the boat, adding their trifling strength to the haul. They slogged along in silence, their progress hardearned and painfully slow. Jai's blisters from the wishing well tore open and he had to fight not to cry in frustration. Ceder kept her chin down as she labored, doubting whether her tired effort helped at all.

They took breaks one at a time to sip water from the river. It was full of silt but it did the trick. Ceder watched Jai intently as he drank. "Your tattoo hasn't flared since the desert," she said to him, "and you haven't been spitting water out, lately."

Jai felt a quickening thrill that she had been paying such close attention to him. He suppressed the wide grin that his face tried to make. "Our first night, the seawater tasted like sugar. The next morning it tasted like ash; I guess because we were sailing away from the Circle of the Sun. But it's been getting better ever since we left the wishing well."

"That's not what you wished for, is it?"

"I can't tell you," said Jai.

"Why not?"

"If I say what I *didn't* wish for, you could ask me questions until you eventually figured out what I *did* wish for. It's the same as telling you, and then it would never come true."

"Jai!" she laughed, "it would take me forever to ask you that many questions!"

He shrugged. "We have all day, don't we?"

"Just tell me if you think you're cured."

He sighed and shook his head. "I think it's only getting better because we're heading back home. I mean, not home," he stammered. "You know what I mean."

Ceder nodded. "But why would you have started feeling better at the wishing well? We were still sailing *away* from the Circle of the Sun, there."

"I've been thinking about that," said Jai. "All I can guess is that the signpost we circled around—the one with the spinning arrow—somehow brought us a lot farther than we realized. What if—I know this sounds crazy—but what if it actually wound us halfway around the world?"

Ceder frowned.

"Hear me out," said Jai. "When we were at the castle, looking at the Circle of the Sea, the tiny model of Coral Wing was a lot closer to the eastern coast than to the west, where we came from—Cliff had no idea how you and I got across the whole sea in one night. And as soon as we actually went around that signpost, Sorid's red searchlight lost us, as if we were suddenly somewhere else, too far away."

Ceder thought it over. "That actually makes sense. As much as anything around here makes sense. It's a shame, though—all this time we've been so eager to see magic and when it finally happens we don't realize it until the next day."

"It's like the Coralute told us: such is life."

"Such is life," said the Dangler, another low echo, "and life is such. Of much do I think. I think too much." Jai shuddered but he could not have said why.

II. To Admit Defeat

After an hour of grueling work they had managed to tow the boat through the wet silt no more than half a tail. The Dangler stopped pulling. "The river has run out," he informed the children. "We cannot continue."

"So we can't go forward and we can't go back," said Jai. "Where does that leave us?"

"Right here," said the fisherman. "At least for the night."

Jai and Ceder lapsed into silence. Spending a night under the Soridwood was an altogether different prospect than sleeping under the stars, as they had at sea and in the Dangler's lagoon. They climbed inside the boat and sat down in the bottom with their knees hugged in for warmth. Astray tucked into Ceder's lap. "Do *you* have any ideas?" she asked the cub. He lifted his emerald eyes to her. The only sound he made was a content pure as she worked her hands through his fur.

Jai watched them, lost in thought. The Dangler paced back and forth, fore to aft, not willing to admit defeat. "Do you have your knife?" he asked Jai some time later.

"Why? Do you think we can cut our way out of here?"

"No," said the fisherman, "or someone would have done it before. But it is all the same to me to try."

Jai handed him the knife. The Dangler took the blade, visibly suppressing a shiver as he touched the cursed metal, and immediately set off down the river.

"Jai," Ceder whispered when he had gone, "we shouldn't have let him go alone."

"What? Why not?"

"What if Sorid gets him?"

"Sorid's not here!" Jai hissed, looking over his shoulder nervously. "He's probably still a thousand tails away."

"That didn't stop the shadows by the hole in the water from trying to grab us! And the Sands of Syn! He wasn't there, either, but he was in control, wasn't he? Imagine these thorns turning into another tornado of dragons all around us!"

"Ceder, that has got to be the absolute last thing I want to imagine right now," said Jai, "or ever," but his blanched face showed that her fears had already stolen into his mind. "Just because this place is named after him doesn't mean he's here."

The children heard splashing and looked over the side of the boat. Scuttling along the shallow riverbed was the severed black hand with two claws that had fallen into the water earlier that afternoon. A thin stream of liquid fire leaked out of the hand's stump and trailed behind in its wake. Jai and Ceder ducked out of sight. The black hand crawled alongside the boat, following the river east. It disappeared in the same direction as the fisherman.

"Now you've *got* to go after him," Ceder said when the dismembered hand was out of sight.

"We can't," said Jai. "We can't follow the fisherman! That's what the Coralute told us, straight from the King and Queen."

"You'd be following Sorid's hand," said Ceder, "not the Dangler."

"How many ways around this warning can you possibly find, Ceder? Wait, what do you mean 'you'? You mean *me*? What about *you*?"

The Dangler returned while the children were still debating whether to go help him or not. He whipped Jai's knife down disgustedly into the ground, sinking the blade fully in the silt.

"Did you see—" Ceder tried to ask, but the Dangler flashed an angry look at her.

"I saw it! Oh, yes! But how can anyone cast a line in this tangled mess?"

"So... no luck with the knife, either?" asked Jai.

The Dangler grunted miserably. "It would take a year to cut through ten fins of this insidious atrocity."

"There must be something we can do," said Ceder. "We could tunnel..."

"Roots," said the Dangler.

"... or could climb over, carefully ... "

"The thorns are sharp enough to cut glass."

"If you've got any more candles," said Jai, "we could just burn this whole freaking place to the ground."

"And where would you flee with a thousand flaming thorns raining down on your head?" The Dangler shook his head fatally, then reached into his bag and withdrew two white apples. He tossed them to the children and returned his silent musing to the river.

Jai and Ceder ate their meager meal in small bites, keeping their thoughts to themselves. And when children are quiet, their stomachs are full, and the lights are out, it is never long before they drift to sleep. The Dangler took off his cape and laid it over them to ward off the cold.

The fisherman sat astern with crossed legs, reclined against the rearmost bench, his droopy hat pulled low over his face. He betrayed no hint whether he slept or sat awake in statuesque meditation throughout the night. The songbird nestled down atop his hat and tucked her wings tightly to her body.

When everyone else was still, Astray crept out from underneath the Dangler's cape and leapt to the riverbank, walking beside the water until his way was barred by a wall of thorns. He bit a white petal off his necklace. For all it sparkled it might have been a snowflake.

III. All Angles

Ceder woke up in the middle of the night to an uncomfortable sensation that felt like her face was being rubbed with moist sandpaper. When she realized it was the cub licking her cheek, she lifted him away. She smelled the flowers even before she opened her eyes, an aroma so overwhelming she knew at once it could not be coming from Astray's necklace, upon which only a handful of petals remained. As soon as she looked around, she pinched Jai's arm. "Jai, get up, *get up! Look!*"

In place of every thorn there grew a frail white lily, turning darkness into day like a bright snowfall in the middle of the night. Jai and Ceder could barely see one another amid the pervasive sheen emitted by the newborn blossoms.

Astray nuzzled his nose into Ceder's neck, then looked into her eyes. "Thank you," she whispered to the cub. "It *was* you, wasn't it?"

"Ceder, look at his back," said Jai, nodding to Astray. The glowing patch on the cub's neck had spread up to his ears and down his spine, curling around to the tip of his tail. The white fur gave off the same soft radiance as the lilies that had transformed the Soridwood.

The children sat in one another's silent company savoring the beauty of the night until it dawned on Ceder that they should tell the Dangler what had happened. She tapped his shoulder to wake him up.

The fisherman lifted his head at once. He had not been sleeping at all. A golden flash of color appeared for an instant behind the dark bays of his eyes.

"We're not stuck anymore," said Jai, smiling.

"Why do you say that?" asked the Dangler.

"Well," Jai began, realizing at once that he had not thought things through very far, "the thorns are gone, so..." The fisherman wore a sober expression. "The thorns are gone, but their intractable roots remain. I still see no passage forward."

Astray jumped out of Ceder's arms over the side of the boat. He cantered along the riverbank to the spot where the Dangler had flung Jai's knife into the ground, then turned back to the children and gave an inquisitive growl.

"He wants you to follow him, Jai," said Ceder.

Jai thought about leaving his cozy spot next to Ceder for the frosty night air and the icy water in the riverbed, mixed with the outside chance of Sorid's severed hand sneaking up and grabbing his ankle. He also knew if he got up, he would not have the nerve to sit down so close to Ceder again. "No thanks. I'm good here."

Astray roared at him impatiently.

"Okay, okay," said Jai, rising from his seat, "I'm coming." He climbed overboard into the water, clenching his teeth at the freezing jolt. When he reached Astray he leaned down to inspect his knife. "*This better be worth it,*" he said under his breath to the cub.

Jai's sluggishness fell away in a heartbeat as he wrapped his fingers around the cold handle of the blade and pulled it out of the ground. Whatever miracle had caused the Soridwood to beget flower blossoms in place of thorns had worked its magic on the rusty knife, as well. What had been a short piece of metal was now as long as Jai's arm; the scrap-iron had grown into a larger version of the smaller weapon. Where before the handle of the knife had been a twisted corkscrew, those same twists had expanded so that a hand could fit comfortably inside without spilling one's own blood. The formerly jagged blade was now the serrated edge of a deadly sword.

"Great," said Ceder, crossing her arms, "just what he needs—a bigger knife."

Jai held the wondrous object before him, speechless, examining it from all angles like a boy inspecting his best gift on a holiday. He had dreamt of owning a sword all his life; now he was paralyzed with the realization of that dream. "My hand tingles," he mumbled.

The Dangler said, "Go ahead," and Jai knew what to do.

He swung the blade in a wide arc. He twirled, halted, pirouetted; he slashed, parried, thrust. A bead of sweat formed on his brow, cool in the night. Following the rhythm of the sword, Jai leapt forward and whirled the blade into a cluster of white flowers. The petrified stems fell apart, broken glass, while the fragile lilies lingered in the air. Jai stopped and stared.

He dashed back to the boat. "Come on!" he cried. "We're free! We can get out of here, now!"

"Before you go rushing off," said the Dangler, "allow me to inspect the blade."

"What? Why?" asked Jai, eager to go put his new plaything to use, at the same time dreading that the Dangler might take the sword away, saying it was too dangerous for a boy.

The fisherman held out his hands and Jai complied he sullenly handed the weapon over without argument. The Dangler held the sword hanging vertically by the handle between thumb and forefinger as though it was a recently caught fish that he intended to measure. He sniffed it suspiciously. He wiggled it about. He muttered indecipherable observations under his breath. Finally, apparently satisfied, he relinquished the sword back to Jai. "The curse is gone," the fisherman announced at last. Then he stood up, climbed out of the boat, and marched east through the shallow water. After several strides, he turned around and gave the children a sly wink. "Well, are you coming, or not?"

IV. Down Sharply

Jai and Ceder ran after the fisherman with Astray and the songbird close at their heels. When they caught up with him he was standing before a wall of lilies that barred the river like an overgrown garden gate. He stepped aside to allow Jai to take the lead.

The sword danced among the flowers alive, the iron flashing brightly, and it was all Jai could do to keep up. A flurry of lilies filled the air, a winter storm. Black stems, thick and thin, crashed into the shallow river as Jai cleared a path of twenty fins through the formerly impassable brambles. He might never have stopped, so caught up in the pulse of his movements, if the Dangler had not put a hand on his shoulder, recalling him to his senses.

Jai looked down. He had almost stepped into a hole in the water—the fisherman had pulled him back just in time.

The children stared at the hole. It was identical to the one they had encountered in the cavern that morning and it had an equally arresting effect on the river. Water drained into the abyss and vanished from sight. Ceder leaned over the hole and peered down; weak-kneed and nauseous, she threw a hand to her forehead and Jai had to pull her back before she fell over, too.

"How can there be a hole in water, anyway?" she asked defensively, steadying herself. "How come it doesn't just fill up?"

The Dangler fixed her with a penetrating stare until Ceder felt that the fisherman's gaze was boring a hole of its own into her mind. She turned her eyes away.

The Dangler held his fishing pole in front of him, preparing to bait his hook. Before taking a worm from his bag of bait, he looked to Astray. The cub had already bitten another cobalt petal off his necklace—the last of its color—and was offering it to the fisherman. "I would like to try my luck again," the Dangler explained to the children as he accepted the cub's gift, "if you can tolerate a short wait."

Jai figured the Dangler was going to take his time over the hole whether they minded the delay or not, and that it was unlikely to be 'short,' so he nodded dumbly in acquiescence and sat down on the riverbank beside Ceder.

In near-total darkness the Dangler pierced his hook through the luminescent blue petal and dipped the line into the hole. Working the reel with expert patience he lowered the unusual bait little by little.

While the children watched and waited, quickly growing bored, Ceder picked the petals off several fallen lilies and ran them through a plucked-free strand of her hair. She tied a knot in the loop and lowered the necklace over Jai's head. His cheeks flushed and he pretended to busy himself picking loose chips of black wood from the edge of his sword. Astray watched the scene unfold with dry amusement.

The Dangler jerked like he had received an electric shock. "Ah ha!" he exhaled in triumph, reeling in his line as fast as possible, racing against some frantic clock.

All the flowers began to fall. For a moment the world was serene, quiet and perfect, and then a great din of breaking branches, snapping stems, and rupturing roots conquered the quietude as the Soridwood crumbled apart like a house of cards. A chunk of wood larger than the boat crashed into the ground next to the children, sending an explosion of silt and smashed lilies everywhere.

"Back to the boat!" the Dangler bellowed. "Now!"

Ceder pulled Jai to his feet and they took off at once. Astray and the songbird zipped ahead of them, but the Dangler remained behind, leaning over the hole, unwilling to quit until he had caught what he came for. "Not again!" Jai wailed when he saw the fisherman was still prioritizing his pastime over their present safety.

The distance to the boat was not far, but the run back seemed to last forever. Fragments of the thicket fell all around, creating a chaotic contrast to the thousands of slowly falling flowers. Jai and Ceder dodged left and right, back and forth, mice in a maze asunder. The river reawakened and buffeted them back one step for every two they took until at last, hand in hand, they arrived at the boat—or the boat arrived at them—and dove inside. They hid under the Dangler's cape as if shielding their eyes would protect them from the raining destruction. The river rocked back and forth in shockwaves from the wreckage. While yet cowering under the fisherman's cape, they heard his wavering voice call out, "The egg! Where is the second egg?"

The Dangler landed in the boat like a meteorite. Ceder flung the satchel to him and watched as he deposited another silver speck of light into one of the enchanted eggs. He shoved the satchel back into Ceder's hands—both eggs were as tranquil as sleeping babies—then he grabbed up his pole, preparing to cast at a moment's notice.

"What is it with this guy?" Jai groaned. "Can't he ever stop?"

The Dangler cast his line high into the air and hooked a black branch that was on a collision course for Jai and Ceder. He whipped his pole back like he was cracking a whip, jerking the falling fragment off its trajectory to one side of the river. Jai nearly swallowed his tongue in astonishment.

The Dangler spared no time to check on the children—his every drop of concentration was vigilantly fixed on the sky, scanning the hailstorm of falling brambles to determine which posed the deadliest risk. Over and over he cast his hook high and far to rip plummeting shards of wood out of harm's way before they smashed onto the boat. The songbird joined the fray without hesitation, her courage a rock, darting in and out among the raining ruins and whistling to the fisherman whenever his back was turned to an imminent threat.

The children clenched their eyes shut, expecting to be pulverized at any second. The Dangler's mad vigil seemed to last all night, but finally he dropped into the bottom of the boat and said, "I only missed one."

Jai and Ceder could hear nothing but the gurgling of the river. They lifted off the cape. Staggering heaps of solid debris lined both sides of the river, but these were quickly carpeted with lilies. Within minutes the landscape looked like flowering hillsides in full bloom, not the ruinous cemetery of a far-reaching empire of bracken and nettles.

With a long, winding whistle, the songbird fell from the sky, spiraling down crookedly with a broken wing. The Dangler caught her in his open palm, then lowered her to a gentle perch on the tip of his fishing pole, held low so the children could see better.

The songbird shuddered and twitched involuntarily. Jai and Ceder were unsure what to say, whether to say anything at all.

Astray leapt up and deftly snuck a purple petal into the bird's beak, then latched onto the fishing pole and bent it down sharply, releasing the pole and the little bird like a slingshot. She disappeared into the dark sky in the blink of an eye. The glowing petal in her beak left an indigo rainbow in the night before the wind came to sweep it away.

When the last lily had fallen to the ground, the Dangler turned his stony gaze heavenward. "The stars are bright tonight," he said to the children. "Look there, to the west, the constellation of the Flying Fish." Like chalk on a black slate, he traced the outline of a cluster of stars with the end of his fishing pole. "Look, above us, the Holy Tree. And to the east, dimly, the Great Fountain. Look still, farther east—as bright as can be, the Riverlilly." With his pole he drew the shape of a ship without sails. "Do you see it? These two stars—" he tapped them both, "—are its passengers." But when he looked for an answer from the children he saw that they were sound asleep.

The Year Three Hundred & Thirty-Three,

The forlorn fisherman wandered the forest for a time without account, walking in circles, crossing bridges. After leaving the wishing well he made his way to the river, but his beloved was not there. The forest was closed. The world was walled away, locked outside the loop.

When he encountered the fat, green frogs in the forest they jeered at him and disappeared. He tried to find the tower again to wish away his fate, but with the woodwind tree unmade the shortcut to the tower was forever concealed. There were not even any fish in the river so that he might ply his sport to pass the years. Utterly alone, his madness grew with every step he took.

For a mind that marches in circles, there is no flow of time, and a mind without time cannot be trapped by hours that run in a ring. When the last enduring sparks of selfhood and sanity, memory and motivation flickered out of the fisherman's mind, he stepped out of the trap, a starving prisoner sliding between the bars of his cage.

The fisherman walked out of the fog into the light of day. He was free of the forest but his mind was lost. As though summoned by magnetic force he made his way west, drawn inexorably to the distant sea. When he reached the desert of red dunes he found he could not pass on foot. The sands burned hot enough to vaporize his entire body.

He found a fallen log in the mountains nearby and set it upon the river. This would be his boat. He required nothing more. When he reached open water the sea itself bent over backwards to see him safely to Coral Wing.

He was taken at once to the King and Queen, who welcomed him as an old friend. The fisherman stared blankly ahead and gave no sign that he had ever seen two unicorns in his life, or that he was any more impressed than if they had been a pair of shrimp. Nevertheless, they were determined to show him every comfort the castle had to offer. They gave him the highest room in Wingtip Tower. From his window the view of the sea encompassed all the world.

The fisherman ate only apples and drank only water. To guests he seldom spoke and what he did say was abstruse and esoteric. He talked of the past and the future, of the sun and the moon, of life, of death, of magic, and of love. Yet these are not issues that sensible fish adhere to and it was not long before he had no guests at all but for the King and Queen and the devoted jesterfish who brought his apples to him.

There was a fountain of clear water in his room. When he was alone the fisherman often stared into the fountain as a man stares into a flame, removing his mind to a bygone time. He would press his lips to the water as if in so doing he might steal one more kiss from the sea. When he pulled his face back the water in the fountain froze in perfect stillness, mirroring whatever image he held in his mind, whether of fish or flowers or the King and Queen themselves.

Castle servants carried the frozen statues away, hundreds by the day and more. If they complained of the tedious chore to the King and Queen, they were rebuked and ordered to accommodate the fisherman's every wish.

In gratitude for all their patience the fisherman made the King and Queen a special gift from his fountain—a small compass with a unique attribute: it would only point to water. He told them the idea came to him while looking out his window. The King and Queen received this gift with haunted recognition, and stowed it away out of sight until the day should come that they could make a gift of it to someone else.

As the years rolled on, a rumor spread over sea and land claiming the return of the Man in the Moon.

Chapter the Seventeenth, **The Last Day**, *In which ice is spun into a silver stream*.

I. Echo from the Mist

Lilies spilled over the sides of the boat. When Jai woke up he blew the flowers away from his face with a snort. Astray poked his head above the surface and wrapped himself around Ceder's shoulders with his tail curled under her nose—she woke up sneezing a moment later, then fixed her attention on Jai. He shifted uncomfortably under her steady gaze.

"What are you looking at?" he finally asked her.

"You're getting tan," she said. "You were so pale the first morning."

"Oh," said Jai, not sure if this was a good or a bad thing to a girl.

"Your eyes don't look so squinted all the time, either. You must finally be getting used to the sun. You spent the whole first morning looking like you ate a sour worm in your apple!" She pinched her eyes shut narrowly, mimicking him.

Jai splashed her with a wave of lilies and before he knew it they were both throwing the flowers all around and laughing like children without a care in the world.

"That looks like fun," said the Dangler.

Jai and Ceder stopped immediately. They had assumed the fisherman was asleep, if not forgotten him altogether for a fleeting moment. He was sitting in the same lumpy posture as overnight. His fishing pole was in his hand, the line trailing into the water, but he seemed unaware that he was holding it.

"Good morning," said Ceder. "You fishermen are early risers, aren't you?"

"The sun has to set before it can rise," said the Dangler.

"Sometimes I think you don't sleep at all," Ceder said half-jokingly, watching to see how he responded.

As she had not posed a question, he did not respond at all.

"Why did everything fall apart last night?" asked Jai. "Did you do that? Remember how we talked about giving us a little warning?"

"The Soridwood began to fall the instant the El fish took my bait."

"The same type of fish from the first hole we found?" asked Ceder. "You caught another one?"

"See for yourself." He nodded to Jai's satchel.

Ceder took out the enchanted eggs and handed one to Jai.

"No, one at a time," said the Dangler.

Ceder grabbed the egg back from Jai. She raised it to her eye.

"No, no, two at a time," corrected the fisherman, shaking his head.

She lifted both eggs at once, holding the cracked openings to her face like the eyes of an inside-out mask and... a sea of calm silver held her gaze, a paradise seen through holes in a wall between worlds. She froze—this was a face she was looking into; she was peering through ancient eyes into a secret place, into someone's own spirit, a strange sight she felt so near the verge of understanding, a horizon she could almost reach out and touch.

Jai was sure a spell had taken hold of her. After trying to talk her out of her trance, he grabbed her wrists and lowered the enchanted eggs from her face.

Ceder stared ahead as though she was seeing the river and the boat and Jai in a dream.

"What happened?" he asked.

She shook her head in disbelief. "You have to see for yourself."

Jai looked at her cock-eyed. "After you just got hypnotized like a spring chicken? I don't think so."

"Jai," she held the eggs up to him, "trust me."

He took a deep breath and slowly raised the blue eggs to his eyes, resolving to drop them at the first sign of trouble. That was the last thing he remembered.

Where am I? The water was pure silver, the sky frozen twilight. Ceder lay beside him, or some ghost of her, some ageless spirit hiding behind a porcelain face. She smelled of rainy flowers. He gazed at the stars in the water. Where the water is silver, everything in the sea is free. These were not his own thoughts. He had no thoughts. He had no body. He was looking through another's eyes. He knew that he could reshape the world with but a blink, if he chose, to erase worlds and create worlds at his will. He looked at the girl. What was her name again? Something short. Short and lovely. Lilly? No! Where had that come from? Where was he?

Ceder wrestled Jai's arms down. "It's my turn," she said. He held the eggs out of her reach, struggling to regain his senses after being snapped out of the peculiar fantasy. Surely just a fantasy. "Put them away," snapped the fisherman, "and give me the bag. The Sight of Silver will steal your hearts if you look too long, if you have not already."

"What the spell was that?" asked Jai.

"What did you see?" asked the Dangler.

Jai tried to put it to words but ended up only shaking his head, still lost in the recollection.

"What *are* the El fish?" Ceder asked as she tucked the eggs inside Jai's satchel and handed it to the Dangler.

"Identical," said the fisherman as he draped the satchel around his neck like an apron.

Ceder scowled.

"Have *you* looked inside?" Jai asked him. "It's like seeing a whole new world."

"One at a time is all I can manage," said the Dangler, "and the experience lacks depth."

As they sailed on, the children thought about the vision they had seen in the enchanted eggs and wondered why the Dangler would not look into both at once and witness the mysterious beauty. When Jai and Ceder caught each other's eyes, they blushed and looked away.

The fisherman disrupted the children's daze with a quiet whistle, then he nodded to alert them to two dark forms following the boat, one in the river, one in the sky. An enormous fish was coming up strong from behind; above, silhouetted by the sun, a gigantic bird of prey—a roc, Jai thought—was diving at the boat with its wings tucked back like a falling star, its beak as sharp as a cutlass.

The Dangler was jerked to his feet as the beastly fish bit his line and swam under the boat. He stumbled forward, trying to lock the reel as he tripped over the middle bench. His line stretched taut, yanking him all the way into the prow where he might have been pulled out the front like a rag doll if Jai and Ceder had not grabbed onto his boots at the last second and held him back.

The fish jumped out of the river. Ceder gasped—it was bigger than the boat, barrel-chested, and had a long beard of crusty shellfish and clams that clattered like symbols when the river kraken hit the water again at full speed.

"It's going to drag us straight under!" Ceder shouted.

The Dangler cackled like a madman, unconcerned that he might be pulled out of the boat, but bodily opposed to letting go of his pole.

"He's nuts!" yelled Jai. "I think he'd actually thank us if we just let him go."

The bearded fish jumped into the air again and then dove swiftly at a deep angle. The boat dipped down. Cold water sprayed up on both sides as the prow cut through the water like a harpoon. Jai looked back over his shoulder—the roc was closing in fast on the boat, a blur under the bright sun. In a moment of morbid curiosity Jai wondered whether it would be more painful being eaten by a giant bird or a giant fish. *Such is life*, he heard himself think, *and life is such*.

"Let go!" Ceder shouted to the fisherman.

Jai heard her with a start and let go. The Dangler flew forward out of the boat. Ceder lunged, caught him around both ankles, and flew out of the boat in sequence. Jai grabbed Ceder's feet and braced his own legs under the bench. At the head of their tightly linked line the unstoppable fish dove deeper and deeper until the boat was pulled entirely underwater, just out of the reach of the roc's outstretched talons—the last thing Jai saw was that the great bird's feathers were a familiar shade of violet.

Jai felt the lilies instantly swept clear of the boat as icy water gushed in. He clamped his eyes and his mouth shut reflexively, but the river swirled up his unplugged nose and when he gagged for air he swallowed more rushing water. *We're going to die, just like that?*

They traveled down for more than a minute before the boat leveled out and passed through a wall of cold mist. When he opened his eyes and found he could breathe again Jai considered seriously whether they were, in fact, quite possibly all dead. The boat floated along a subterranean river which, to his imagination, would serve as a fitting passage to the underworld.

Following their chaotic descent underground Ceder found herself upside-down in the back of the boat. She quickly scrambled upright and brushed herself off. Astray had already resumed his preferred position in the prow, keeping lookout. The glowing petals around his neck gave the dark river an otherworldly ambience and highlighted a cluster of lilies in the water that had been swept below the earth alongside the boat and now seemed too timid to venture off on their own. *I know how they feel*, Ceder said to herself.

The Dangler lay in a heap in the hull, making no move to adjust himself. The bearded fish was gone. It had torn the elemental line off the fisherman's pole. Jai noticed the necklace of lilies that Ceder had made him was gone, too. "You realize you almost got us all killed?" he asked the Dangler crossly.

"Actually, Jai, this might be a good thing," said Ceder. "We're not on the river anymore. When we get out of here we can go ashore anywhere we want, instead of just drifting along all the time in the boat without a say in the matter. We'll never have to see Sorid's tower again! We'll never even go near it!"

Jai slowly conceded a smile. "Sounds good to me. No one ever said we had to stay on the river until we died."

The Dangler laughed at them derisively. "Do not count your eggs before they hatch."

"What's that supposed to mean, you bizarre lunatic?" Jai asked at once, with a touch more anger than he intended. *He* did *just nearly kill us all!*

The fisherman laughed again, a cold rattle in the dark. "Some problems have a way of multiplying when you least expect them to."

The darkness faded in favor of a silver mist swimming over the river. Phantom fish darted through the mist like fair-weathered faeries, in and out, here and gone. "Aren't you going to try to catch one?" asked Ceder, smiling brightly, hopefully, but the Dangler did not reply—indeed, he seemed not to know what to do with himself as the boat drifted through the mist. He fidgeted in his seat like a child told to sit still. He took the compass out repeatedly and held it over his head, then tucked it back into his pocket with a disappointed sigh, only to check it again seconds later, as if the haywire needle might begin working properly at any moment. When his fishing pole caught in the riverbank, the children at first thought it an accident born of restlessness, but, using the anchored tool to haul himself to his feet, the Dangler carefully climbed out of the boat. For the first time that day the children saw his back.

There was a severed black hand sinking its thorny claws into the nape of the Dangler's neck—the three gnarled fingers had the same volcanic, crusted skin as the dark hand the children had seen fall into the river by the first hole in the water, then again more recently scuttling along the riverbed in the Soridwood. *That* hand had lost its middle finger in a battle with the butterfly; the hand in the fisherman's spine had all three long claws in tact. As Jai and Ceder looked on in horror, the dark hand flexed and squeezed, causing the Dangler to spasm rigidly. "I knew I missed one," the fisherman said dryly.

The black claw flexed again and the Dangler jolted in pain. Jai stood up at once and held out his hands. "Give me the satchel! We'll pour the eggs over your back, like you did to the cut-off claw you caught when Why got killed!"

The fisherman unhanded the boat. Leaning heavily on his pole as a walking staff, he waded through the lilies into the mist. The intransient fish fairies flitted after him in curiosity. "I would not risk pouring the El fish away for all the apples in the world."

The pink boat floated smoothly downstream as the Dangler receded into the distance. "Hey," said Jai, "where are you going?"

"Stop," Ceder called after his fading figure, "we'll come with you!"

"No," said the fisherman, an echo from the mist, "I must go alone."

This time the children did not follow.

II. Fixed as Stars

The ground underneath the Dangler's feet crunched lightly. There was frost everywhere. He advanced with careless haste, eager for the end. He held the compass in front of his face. The needle spun faster than ever. A soft light filled the mist as it swept itself into a ring around him.

A statue of pure ice lay before his feet. The statue was a woman without eyes. The fisherman fell to his knees. Her toes were small drops of rain; her ankles slender rivulets; her arms two silent streams; her neck a quiet glen of curvy grace; her elfin face the captivation of every sailor smitten with the open sea; her hair the perfect waterfall. Her beauty was the mist, which filled the air. Where her eyes ought to have been were instead two round recesses in her countenance that were quite as out of place as holes in running water.

With shaking, failing arms the Dangler held the eggs up as if to crack both at once over a frying pan. The light from the two El fish beamed out and cut through the mist, a pair of fencing searchlights.

The hand of black bone in the Dangler's back clenched its claws together, squeezing so hard that a spurt of glowing magma swelled up and shot out of its severed stump. The fisherman arched back in pain, dark water spraying from the wounds in his back. With a quivering effort, he fought to lean forward far enough to pour the contents of the enchanted eggs into the empty eyes of the statue. The clear water flowed into the holes in her face and spilled down her cheeks. The Dangler did not stop pouring until he collapsed, finally wrenched to the ground by the vice grip of the claws in his spine.

The El fish passed into the eyes of the statue. She blinked once, looking at the fisherman prostrate on the ground next to her. Then she began to melt. As her body lost mass her eyes remained fixed on the Dangler. "Saerin," she whispered, "you found me."

He said her name, "Silver," and she smiled like the sea on a windy day. The Dangler slid one hand beneath her head. A flash of gold appeared in the dark depression of the fisherman's left eye, then it jumped to the right eye, back and forth. The silver fish in the woman's face stared adoringly at the golden sparkle behind the Dangler's mask as she melted away to her last drop. A strand of her hair was all that remained where she had been—one watery strand, cupped in his hand where he held her head.

The Dangler raised the enchanted eggs over his hat, drenching himself with endless rain. He rose to his feet and took a lurching step forward, then fell to his stomach, face down, the black claws bleeding him dry.

"Thank you for the flowers, Saerin," said a voice behind him, "lilies are my favorite." Before he could spin around, a cool hand touched his back, stilling him like a bell. He gasped and shuddered as the three long claws slid out of his body.

The Dangler took a deep breath and turned around. No one was there. The hand of black bone hung suspended in mid-air in a cloud of dense mist. The three dark fingers twitched like a fly stuck in a spider web. The mist thickened until it sparkled like a diamond and the black claws were crunched into dust.

"Where are you?" asked the fisherman.

Before him the mist swirled together in the shape of a woman. "Do you still love me," she whispered in his ear, "though you can never touch me?"

He raised an arm to her face. His fingers passed through her. The mist reformed. "I loved you when I knew neither your name nor my own," he said to her. "I am empty without the sea."

"I will never grow tired of hearing you say that. Oozing charm, my old Saerin."

The Dangler stared at her, utterly confused. "We have met before?"

She threw her head back and laughed. It was a quiet sound. "I believe that is why I love you so much: reliable as any river ever was. And far more handsome."

The Dangler turned his hands up helplessly. "Who are you? Who am *I*?"

"Waves and mist are not so different, after all. You and I, we are very much the same."

"Please," his voice cracked, "what are you saying?" "We have had this conversation a thousand times a

thousand times and more. Will you ever remember?"

He shook his head with regret. "I would give all my gold for a memory of you."

She stared at him, her body drifting apart then coming together, all but her eyes, which were as fixed as stars in the sky. "Do you remember kissing me at the wishing well?" The Dangler furrowed his brow, trying to summon any memory of such a thing.

"Do you remember waving goodbye to me in the rain?"

He hung his head. The depth of sorrow under her words was more than he could bear.

"How can you forget me," she pleaded, "and say you love me still?"

"I have no answer," he said, "but that I love you."

She dropped her face into her hands. Tears formed in her silver eyes and fell through her wraithlike hands to the ground.

"Tell me," said the Dangler, "if we have been through this before, what happens next?"

"I tell you each and every time: you leave. You wave goodbye to me in the rain. You kiss me at the wishing well. A loyal Dwor fish brings you down the Secret Stream, and you wake me up. Then you leave again. Over and over, you leave, from the Dawn of Time to Dusk of the Last Day."

"But... I have seen no wishing well."

"In the forest, Saerin. Think!"

He rubbed his chin. "Are you a ghost of one I loved?"

"I am the one you love. I am the Spirit of the Sea. I am all the water you have ever touched and beheld, every fountain, pool, and drop of rain; all these are my domain. Soon this mist will float away, and I with it, but while it is here I am as real as you or any fish."

"I have just come from the river, and... and before that I have been alone in a lagoon for longer than I can remember. Where were you then?" "Saerin, did you not see with your own eyes? It was no illusion that I lay frozen at your feet, here, and have been so for all but a thousand years."

"But why? How came this to be so?"

"I cannot remember when or how I froze any more than a woman knows when she is passing into a dream." The mist that formed her body began to drift away.

"A thousand years," he repeated. "Are you truly so ancient?"

"The sea is deep, my love, but how deep is the water? The river runs fast, my love, but what is the speed of the water? I may sleep in a body of ice for a thousand years, but I can no sooner put an age to my essence than you can tell me what water would look like without the seafloor to support it, the current to move it, or the wind and the sun to tease it into vapor and ice."

She was little more than a face in the mist, now. The Dangler bowed his head. "Please, not so soon. Stay with me. Were you made of mist or magic, I should love you no less."

"I cannot remain here after the mist fades. The nature of water is to go where it may, even in places fish cannot follow. That is all I can do."

"Then we can be together when I return to the river?" She shook her head, throwing off mist like smoke in

the wind. "When you leave, you will find the river afflicted with the fingerprints of a demon. There, I cannot flow freely."

"But I will find you after that?"

"Only here. Only now. And in another thousand years."

"In any pool or brook I might see you!"

"Were it all so simple!" cried the face in the mist.

"I will change our fate!" he swore to her.

"Ever do you promise me," said the Spirit of the Sea, "and I will look for you to try. But I fear what happens before will have happened again, and I will be frozen long ere you find me. My heart will break and all the waveglass in the world will fall into puddles of my tears."

"How can this be?" the Dangler asked desperately. "Time flows like a river. It does not turn in a circle."

"Time is a wave as well as a wheel," she said. "We are like two passengers in a boat, buoyed up and down by the motion of the sea, never going anywhere but that the world spins underneath us."

"Impossible!" said the fisherman. "Impossible that I could ever forget this, forget you, or these words, this story!"

"Impossible," she mouthed at the same moment as the Dangler said the word a third time. She winked at him. "Whether every spoken syllable is the same each time around—who can say? It does not matter if the boat is pink, only that it need not sink."

"The boy and girl!" the Dangler exclaimed, having forgotten all about Jai and Ceder. "They can change all of this, then, by what they do?"

"No," she said, shaking her head. "Boys and girls cannot do anything at all but hold hands and enjoy the ride."

"How did this all begin?" he pleaded. "How will it all end?"

She laughed gently and ran one finger across his cheek, fogging the glass. "My dear Saerin, trying to

figure out where the Land of Lin begins is like trying to sail to the end of the world; it has no beginning, no end, and you will always end up right where you began."

The Dangler's face was a mask of disbelief and anguish.

"If you would witness the truth of my words," she said, "ask the children what they have named the boat in your absence."

"Is there no hope for us?" he begged her. "There must be a way!"

She faded to a wisp. "There are three wishing wells in the Land of Lin. They are the foundation of our world, bridging sea to sky." Her eyes twinkled like starlight, silver pinpricks. "I have been there, Saerin. I am the stillness at the bottom of the sea. But I have been to the top of the sky. I have bathed in uncharted constellations." She smiled but the Dangler could barely see her.

"They must be beautiful," he said, "if one could see them so."

"Yes."

"Do I really say that every time?"

"You do."

He paused. "Well, it is a charming thing to say, is it not?"

She flung her arms around him, bursting into scattered puffs of mist. Her voice whispered from the last breath of vapor in the air, "If you can find the third wishing well in time, there is hope."

The Dangler felt a cold kiss on his lips, but Silver was no longer there.

III. Pointing to the Sun

Taking a long count of silence, the fisherman gathered his thoughts and walked back to the river. The pink boat drifted toward him at just the right speed for him to climb aboard with one step.

"We thought you were dead," said Jai.

The Dangler buried his face in his hands.

"You vanished into the mist hours ago," said Ceder, "and we've been sailing straight as an arrow ever since. How in the world did you get ahead of us?"

The Dangler did not reply. He leaned over the side of the boat and stared into the water, seeing only his reflection. He put his hand in the river. It was uncommonly hot. He turned to the children suddenly. "What have you named the boat? *This* boat! Tell me, I beg you, or I may be undone."

Jai looked to Ceder, shocked—they only had the idea to name the boat in the last hour while the Dangler was off by himself, lost in the mist. Ceder smiled at the fisherman innocently. "The *Riverlilly*. Do you like it?"

"Did you hear me speaking of the stars last night?" the Dangler asked her pointedly. "Tell me the truth! Did you hear me give the names of the stars?"

"I don't think so, no," Ceder stammered, startled by his sudden intensity. "I guess we fell asleep pretty fast. Why do you ask?"

The Dangler sat back, stiff as his fishing pole. "It seems that I have an old name, as well. Once upon a time I was called Saerin of Silvermourn. Those days come again." The children did not know what to say. "Cliff would absolutely flip out if he heard this," Jai whispered to Ceder. "It would blow all those crazy theories of his out of the water!"

The underground stream—the Secret Stream, socalled—moved at a brisk pace. In a moment they were greeted by the sight of a dazzling waterfall. The stream flowed directly through the cascading falls before mixing with the light of day.

The Dangler stared darkly at the waterfall and pulled the brim of his hat down. He made no move to guide the boat to safety. Astray hid under the foremost bench and the children crouched and covered their heads as water pounded into the boat like the river itself had been flipped on top of them.

When they were free of the falls Jai and Ceder eagerly looked east to see what wild new lands awaited them. The river ran true to the base of a mountain and disappeared inside a yawning tunnel. The mountain looked like a pyramid pointing to the sun. On its summit was built a tower as crooked as an old finger, raised high into the sky, casting an early morning shadow over the river, enveloping the boat. Above it all, the moon was slowly creeping in front of the sun, a silhouette like a deep hole in the heart of all heavenly fire.

A beam of blazing red light speared out of the crooked tower, aimed directly at the boat, and a seething voice rumbled down from the top of the mountain, gaining like an avalanche until it spilled over the river: "Children, I see you."

The Year Six Hundred & Sixty-Six,

No one could say for sure why the fisherman left Coral Wing. On a dark night when the sea was asleep he took his leave of the castle and walked away across the surface of the water as if he had never heard such a feat was impossible. His footfalls left no tracks. When he found himself at the mouth of the river he did not tell the guardian where he was going or whence he came, but the Oldest Fish in the Sea let him pass irregardless out of respect for his elders.

The river led the fisherman to a raging whirlpool. Inconsolable in his unrelenting melancholy, he leapt into the black hole and was sucked into oblivion.

He drowned in darkness in infinite space. He had stepped off the moon and was plummeting through limbo—nothing else could fall so far. Down, darker and darker.

There is hope. There is hope...

He awoke in a secluded lagoon. He could not remember how he had come to be there. He cast his fishing line and sat back, staring at the water.

Chapter the Eighteenth, The Last Day, In which fire reigns.

I. Out of the Light

The pulsing red beam made the air buzz like a swarm of flies. As the searchlight flooded over the boat Jai's breath seized in his throat and he collapsed. The ring of dark runes on his forehead blazed with a red-hot glow and a tendril of smoke coiled up from his skin where the cursed tattoo was branded.

Ceder dropped to his side and held his hands. Through her closed eyes she saw an endless field of scarlet light, all-pervasive, all-encompassing, focusing to a pinpoint in the center of her forehead.

In the back of the boat the Dangler soaked in the red beam like he was savoring his last sunset. The heat poured on. His glass face began to bubble. He sat and stared ahead as if he felt no pain.

Ceder peeked an eye open to locate Astray. The cub was in the prow. He bellowed a seditious roar at the red light before seeking shelter under his bench. Ceder looked one last time at the fisherman, heartbroken that he should do nothing to save them.

A shadow in the air passed through the red beam, lending the boat a breath of respite from the inferno. Ceder craned her neck back to see a gigantic bird of prey looping through the air to make another run past Sorid's searchlight—it was the roc they had seen earlier before being pulled under the river. Ceder used the breath of refreshment to move Jai to a less exposed position in the bottom of the boat, but still the marks on his face seared red-hot. The skin around the arcane symbols cracked like volcanic crust and split open. He whipped his head from side to side in violent paroxysms while Ceder tried to hold him steady. "Do something!" she cried to the fisherman. "It's killing him!"

The Dangler did not show any sign he heard her. Liquefied beads of dark glass dripped down his cheeks. He stared at the water, muttering cravenly. "Is the ship named after the stars, or the stars named after the ship? Does sea mirror sky, or sky reflect sea? What came first, the dragon or the egg? Three wells... three frogs... three days..."

With a piercing screech the roc executed a sharp turn and wheeled around behind the boat with its talons stretched wide. Ceder's eye bulged in fear as she ducked down from the diving predator.

Showing off the strength of wings wider than the boat was long, the great bird reared in its flight and pulled up fast as it reached the river. With one deft talon the roc grabbed at the fisherman's head.

Ceder shrieked as she saw the roc pull the Dangler's head clean off his body and stick it on the end of his own fishing pole, but when she looked back she realized at once it was only his hat. Held high over the boat, the wide-brimmed cap acted like an umbrella on a sunny day, casting the boat in a crucial canopy of shade. The roc returned to greater heights.

The unexpected act immediately galvanized the Dangler. He stepped forward and knelt over Jai,

carefully keeping the shade from his hat balanced over both children. Jai's tattoo stopped flaring, but the heat had been too severe for him to recover from as quickly as he had in the past. His skin was cooked black around the dark marks. Streaks of charred blood made a mess of his face like eggs let to burn on the bottom of a pan. He took a weak breath but did not open his eyes.

"What do we do now?" Ceder asked the Dangler desperately.

The fisherman studied Jai's face. Like a man taking inventory of his weapons before a war, he assessed the steaming river, the orchard-plaited countryside, and the apocalyptic sky, where the sun and the moon were crossed like a chain link, dueling for the preeminence of the zenith. He turned back to Ceder. "It is only if you look to escape that you will find there is nowhere to run. You were told where all this would lead in the end. No turning back now."

Ceder stared at the fisherman with growing unease, but it was not his grave words that alarmed her: without his hat to conceal him, she saw his bare head for the first time. *I shouldn't be surprised,* she told herself, *it's exactly the same as his face. His skull is like a crystal ball!* She covered her mouth as the strange truth dawned on her. "You're made of waveglass—some kind of dark waveglass! Someone in the castle told us Saerin Silvermoon was the only one who could make that."

He stared at her blankly. In the distance, Ceder heard the sound of the sea beating against the far side of the mountains. Astray leapt onto the bench between her and the Dangler and sat still, waiting. "We were told that Saerin was a friend of the fish," Ceder finally said, "but you are a fisherman. That is at odds."

"Yes, very odd," said the Dangler, denying nor confirming what she said.

"We were also told not to follow 'the fisherman,' whatever *your* name may be," she said bluntly. She knew her words were harsh but she had no fear that he would do any harm to Jai or herself. "Now, here you are, telling us the only thing we can do is sail back to Sorid's keep."

The Dangler rubbed his chin between his thumb and forefinger, impressed by her acuity. "Indeed. Go on."

"The thing is... I believe you." Ceder looked down at Jai. "But he's going to die, isn't he?"

"Who said anything about dying?" the fisherman asked mildly. "Not everyone dies in the end."

"Sorid will kill us if we return."

"How can you be sure? Has he ever killed you before?"

"Of course not," said Ceder.

"Well, don't you think you would remember if he had?"

Ceder stopped short of what she was about to say as the fisherman's idea wormed its way inside her head. She sat back, unsettled, and cocked her head to one side, staring at his impassive face.

The purple roc dove in front of the searchlight again, pulling the distracted beam away from the boat for brief spurts, but always the red light returned to the river, where the beam gradually narrowed its focus solely onto the Dangler's upheld hat—thick steam cascaded off the black felt. "I would be moderately astounded if it caught fire. It's very wet," said the fisherman, appraising the makeshift shield, which burst into flames just as he finished speaking.

The roc swooped down over the river, covering the boat with its expansive shadow, bearing the brunt of the red beam on its back. It beat the flames off the fisherman's hat with one powerful pump of its wings. Astray gave their selfless defender a thundering roar of encouragement. The bird of war screeched in agony as its majestic lavender feathers smoldered and turned black at the tips, but it flew as level as still water, protecting the pink boat from the deadly gaze of the magician.

Ceder pressed her ear against Jai's chest, listening to his heartbeat. The Dangler cleared his throat to get her attention. "Is there anything else you would ask of me before I take my leave?"

Ceder looked up from Jai, almost fearing to ask, "Aren't you coming with us?"

"If only there were two of me," said the fisherman. With that, he took the smoking hat off his pole and put it back on his head—the level shadow of the roc still blocked them from the red light. The Dangler reached into the folds of his soiled garments and retrieved a cupped handful of water—Silver's last strand of hair. He poured the water into the iron reel on his pole, all but a drop, which he draped between his fingers like a thread of spider silk, ran along the length of the pole, and looped through a hole in the tip. Finally, he brought the end of the watery line to his lips and grazed it with a humble kiss; when he pulled the line away a brand new waveglass hook hung from his fingers. "I have an appointment to keep," he told Ceder. He stood up, rocking the boat.

"What if this big... *bird*... flies away?" cried Ceder. "Sorid will kill us!"

"You will soon have other things to worry about than being caught in the light."

"What! Wait! Will we see you again?"

The fisherman stared right through her. "Look up," he said in farewell, "when the moon climbs in front of the sun." Then he whipped his pole out blindly with one hand and cast his hook into the branches of a distant apple tree. As the boat sailed forward, the Dangler allowed himself to be whisked away by his line like a feather in the wind. He cranked the reel faster than ever, pulling himself to dry land before gravity could drop him into the boiling river.

From the shoreline he gave the children a tip of his hat, then he turned and stalked off through the trees. Ceder could not believe he had abandoned them so abruptly. Astray summarized her feelings for her with a mourning roar that carried across the river like a kite with no string. She reached a hand into his fur for comfort and saw that the cub held a pink petal in his mouth.

The Dangler returned through the trees—he had heard Astray's call! Ceder squeezed Jai's lifeless hand, certain the fisherman had experienced a change of heart and would escort them into the mountain, after all. On the riverbank, the Dangler watched the motion of the boat, waiting for the perfect moment to cast.

He snapped his arm and Ceder saw, as if in slow motion, the shimmering line flash out and the waveglass hook pierce through the center of the cub's pink petal. Reeling in the petal to his outstretched hand, the Dangler gave the *Riverlilly* a formal bow and then stepped backward, receding into the orchard with an air of finality.

The searchlight swung off the back of the purple roc and set the riverbank awash in heat waves, but the fisherman was already gone. The apples that were bathed in the red beam swelled and burst apart like small bombs hanging from the branches. Ceder caught her breath, then she saw a dash of purple streaking up the mountainside, dodging from one tree to the next. As the Dangler made all speed for the crooked tower atop the summit, overexcited apples exploded one step behind him in the blazing heat of the scarlet searchlight.

Ceder did not know if it was the distant sound of the sea or her own rushing pulse, but she was sure she could hear the beat of deep, low drums as the boat sailed out of the light into the mountain tunnel.

II. Deep Breath

The *Riverlilly* sailed through the dark without a sound. The three remaining petals on Astray's necklace were still aglow, but their light was drowned out by the patterns of brilliant white fur which now interlaced across his body but for a ribbon of shadow on his tail and a dark, fuzzy area around his emerald eyes.

With sweat and blood streaking down his face, Jai stirred and sat up shakily next to Ceder in the bottom of the boat. His tunnel-trained vision adjusted quickly to the darkness. He saw that the Dangler was gone. "He took a petal from Astray and then sprinted up the mountainside with Sorid's spotlight hot on his tail," Ceder told him. "He said he had an appointment to keep."

"Oh," said Jai. "Well, that's pretty weird, isn't it? An appointment? For what? Some kind of... *ritual?*"

"Jai!" Ceder gave him a dirty look. "It seemed like he was heading for the tower. That's where the red beam was coming from. I think he might be going to pick a fight."

"Good," said Jai, "let's hope so. That way you and I can sneak out the other side of the tunnels before anyone notices we're here."

The beat of drums tempered the air. Hoarse chanting, like flint striking stone, rang in harmony over the beat. It was a sound, the children realized in hand-held unison, that they had heard every moment of their lives. What had once seemed to be silence to them in the lair of the magician was never truly so; they had grown accustomed to the beating drums all their lives, tuned them out, turned them down, ignored them, but now the music—if it could be called such—was louder than ever, now the chant was as slow as the tide. Only at sea or sailing the river had they learned what it was to be free of its call, but now they were home.

The children were fully conscious of the fact that they had returned roundabout, after three nights and three days, to the one place they had spent their lives trying to escape. Soon, they knew, they would come face to face with fire. But for now, in the dark, in the boat, they could drift along for a moment more and enjoy a breath of free air, hard-earned and humid though it was. "Jai, where does the river end?"

"Ceder, if I had known there was a river down here, I would have sailed out on my wheelbarrow years ago."

"But didn't you say there was a lake down here, somewhere?" she asked.

"Yeah, but it's not the kind you can see your reflection in."

A flickering red light appeared far ahead of the boat. Jai sniffed the air delicately. Ceder noticed him do so and, in curiosity, took a deep breath. She heaved forward and choked on the sulfurous fumes in the air, invisible in the dark.

Jai patted her on the back sympathetically. "I forgot to mention, you should hold your breath down here as much as possible."

Ceder spent the next several minutes fighting for air, finding the least painful method to inhale was to draw in a thin stream with pursed lips, as if she was whistling in reverse. Jai watched her flounder, bemused, while holding his own breath for minutes at a time in perfect, long-practiced stillness.

By the time Ceder acclimated herself to the acrid netherworld that had been Jai's lifelong prison, the tunnel and the river came alive with light as bright as smelted gold and they were at last able to see where the underground current came to an end.

"Ohhh, now I know where we are," said Jai. "I've never been up here, but now that I think about it, it does make sense there would be a river leading into the waterfall." Ceder slapped her hand against her forehead. "Maybe we should have followed the Dangler, after all," said Jai. "This is going to get bad." A tail away the river shot out the end of the tunnel into a gaping cavern and fell into a subterranean lake of molten lava, forming a waterfall that burned into steam before it ever reached the bottom. In the center of the lake Jai pointed out the massive stone column that rose from the magma into the bedrock above the cavern. "That's the pillar that holds up the mountain," he told Ceder, but she was barely listening as she searched for an escape from their impending doom. Without oars or a long pole, they had no way to stop the boat, and there was nowhere in the tunnel to set foot if they disembarked.

"Jai, we have to swim for it!" she cried as they approached the end of the tunnel.

"The river is boiling hot, Ceder. And the current would carry us to the edge of the waterfall even faster than the boat is now."

She stared at him. He was right, of course, but staying in the boat would take them over the edge, as well, and the wooden hull would form a pyre around their bodies before they sailed half a tail through the lake of fire, if they even made it down the waterfall alive.

"Jai, look!" She pointed behind the boat to the water.

The severed black hand with two claws was in the river, chasing the boat, swimming with its pair of fingers like a tiny man practicing the butterfly stroke.

"Why won't that thing die?" Jai yelled.

"Could it be here to help us?" asked Ceder.

As if in answer to her question, the black hand swam beside them, climbed its way onto the boat, and crawled up the side, leaving fingerprints of dancing flames wherever it touched the wood. The hand crouched down then sprang through the air for Jai's face, its claws flexed wide like an eagle's talons.

Jai froze, certain both his eyes were about to be gouged out by a pair of scalding hot pokers, but Ceder stepped in front of him and batted the dismembered claws back into the river with Jai's scrap-iron sword.

Jai looked at her in awe. "Ceder! Wow! How-"

"It's coming back," she said grimly. The black hand was already swimming tirelessly for the boat, unfazed by Ceder's blow. One side of the *Riverlilly* was up in flames where the hand had left its tracks.

Ceder perched in the stern where the fisherman had so often sat and waited with the sword for the bony hand to get closer. She raised the blade to stab it away but Jai pulled her into the bottom of the boat, shouting, "Get down! We're going over the edge!"

They both screamed in terror as the boat shot out the end of the tunnel and sailed over the side of the underground cliff, soaring straight down into the lake of liquid fire.

Flexing every cord and tendon in his body, Astray roared loud enough to send waves into the crusted magma below. The pink wood under the children's feet softened and melted, morphing into something as soft and fragile as a flower petal but as large as the boat, flattened out like a flying carpet. Buffeted up by pockets of hot air rising from the magma, the *Riverlilly* coasted over the lake of fire to a rocky ledge on the far side of the cavern. Behind them, Jai and Ceder saw the black hand fall over the edge of the waterfall, snapping its two fingers in disappointment before it stretched into a crooked swan dive and plunked into the lake. The *Riverlilly* shimmered like a new star and solidified back into a boat. The children were thrilled to see that the recent scorch marks on its side were fully healed. Even the hairline crack in the hull from the night of the twin whirlpools had fused together, good as new, during the transmutation. But their joy was fleeting they had no need of a boat, now.

Astray leapt into Ceder's arms as she climbed ashore. Jai picked up the sword and looked for his satchel. *The Dangler had it last!* Cursing under his breath, he followed Ceder out of the boat. She hopped on her tiptoes, surprised at how sharp the rocky ground was, but Jai's feet were born for it. He walked forward boldly to investigate the single, pitch-black crack in the cavern wall. It led into a lightless tunnel.

"If you can lead us back outside the same way you escaped three nights ago," Ceder said to Jai, "then maybe we can drag the boat behind us and set sail again for Coral Wing. We can stay there as long as we want to this time."

"Bad news," said Jai, stepping back from the crevice. "I've never been here." He pointed to a far corner of the cavern where a similar rocky outcropping sloped into the lava. "I lived on *that* side. *This* is the side Sorid appeared from when he came down to check on me. He stood where we are now, then walked across the fire to me like the lake was made of ice."

Ceder stared at the radiating heat waves rising over the glowing surface of the lake, the molten stone swirling together with the red-hot magma. "He walked across *that*?" Jai nodded dumbly in time to the haunting drums. Something under the waterfall had caught his eye. Unsinkable, the black hand emerged from a cloud of steam and lifted its severed stump like a wolf tasting the scent of its prey in the air.

"I'm really starting to hate that thing," said Jai.

Rather than pursue the children, to their immense relief, the black hand crept across the surface of the magma to the pillar in the center of the cavern. It halfswam, half-scuttled around the column over and over, gaining speed as the magma was whipped into a small cyclone around the gray stones.

"Hey," said Ceder, "those stones are the same as—" A blob of oozing lava flew out of the churning tempest and landed right where Ceder was standing before Jai knocked her out of the way. They both rolled back to the wall before looking up. Bucketfuls of magma flew in every direction, thrown from the cyclone like spray from a whirlpool, but it was the bloating clouds of black smoke that scared Jai the most. He grabbed Ceder's hand and pulled her into the crack in the cavern wall, leading her a dozen steps into the dark before she jerked back to a stop. "Jai, hold on! The boat!"

"We don't have time, Ceder! If that smoke gets in this tunnel, we're dead! Now *run*!" He pulled her into motion. Astray fell from her arms as she sprinted to keep up with Jai. The cub ran ahead of them both, the fastest one of all.

The smoke did not seem to catch up to them so much as to thicken out of the air all around, as if it already occupied every turn of every tunnel and was merely waiting to be woken like some long-slumbering ghost.

"Smoke rises," said Ceder, panting, waving the black ash away from her eyes, "it will lead to the Circle of the Sun!"

"Ceder, when this place fills up, we won't even be able to open our eyes, let alone hold our breath long enough to find the way out. *Keep moving*!"

Astray took a sudden turn in front of Jai. His white fur left a streak in the black smoke—a torch shining through a thick fog. Jai followed the bright trail, pulling Ceder behind him. She barely kept up, covering her face with one hand, coughing with soot in her lungs, struggling not to collapse.

The cub took one turn after another, back and forth. Jai ran after, following the glowing path through the darkness. After several minutes of running and stumbling he realized they had left the smoke far behind them. As he took a brief moment to catch his breath he felt the mountain tremble. Loose gravel slid down the tunnel walls like rain on a window. "That's new," said Jai, struggling to keep his balance as solid stone vibrated beneath his feet.

"It's that blasted hand again!" said Ceder. "It's going to start some kind of a meltdown, I just know it!"

Astray gave them a thundering roar, a warning—the smoke was creeping back. "We should keep going," said Jai. But it was only around one more turn that the cub led the children. At the end of the tunnel was a wooden door. A bright orange light seeped through the cracks around the doorframe. Jai and Ceder froze. Astray jumped into Ceder's arms. The cub had not gazed at her so affectionately since the first time she said his name. He bit free a heart-shaped pink petal and laid it in her hand, licked her cheek once, then sprang out of her arms to Jai, who fell down in surprise—it was the first time in three days the cub had pounced to him instead of Ceder. Astray rubbed his head into Jai's chin, then bit off his last pink petal and left it in Jai's hand. The cub dropped to the ground. A lone petal remained around his neck, a familiar shade of violet.

The orange haze sneaking through the doorframe intensified to an angry red. The source of the scarlet searchlight was in the adjacent room. It had to be, the light was so bright! The children backed against the tunnel wall. A voice behind the door said, "I see you, tunnel-minnow."

Jai dropped to one knee and put his hands to his forehead, clenching his eyes tight as the fresh scabs around his tattoo split open, revealing a ring of whitehot fire burning underneath his skin. He bit his tongue to keep from screaming and stared wild-eyed at Ceder, begging her to put him out of his misery, betraying a single, suggestive glance to his sword.

Ceder lifted her hand instinctively and raised the glowing pink petal to Jai's face. The black ink hissed and Jai recoiled, but the primary shock eased into a soothing coolness as Ceder wiped the soft flower around the dark tattoo in a circle, leaving a trail of pink foam behind as if the petal was a sliver of soap.

Jai stared up at her as she tended him. Using a scrap of her tunic, Ceder rubbed the pink lather off his forehead. His skin was still scarred and inflamed, but the cursed mark of the magician was washed away at last. Behind the children the red light under the doorway abated, shifting its attention elsewhere, a rat led away by its nose.

Jai closed his eyes, seeing only perfect darkness in his mind. He took a deep breath. While his eyes were closed, Ceder kissed him. He looked at her in surprise! She winked, once. Jai realized he was holding his breath like a blowfish.

With an impatient growl, Astray reminded them they were not alone. Ready to go, the cub sat next to the door nearly touching the wood with his nose.

Glaring at the cub, Jai pointed his sword at the door, wondering what was the best way to cut it down. *I had better not get the blade stuck in the wood on my first try*. He leaned his head to one side, picturing the damage he would do. *Did she really just kiss me*?

Ceder stepped in front of him. "Jai, there's no lock." She put her hand on the door, waiting to push it open. "Tell me when you're ready."

III. Run Dry

Jai thought about the first night he met her, before their headlong sled-ride down the haggard mountainside. The scar on her forehead was all but invisible now. Jai grinned—he still had not told her the mark was even there. *She probably doesn't even realize that she always touches it when something twisted happens to us.*

"Ready?" Ceder asked him again. He did not say the word this time, but nodded. Ceder pushed the door open.

A tremendous draft of smoke gushed up from the tunnel behind them, drawn through the doorway into the Circle of the Sun, sucked up by the vacuity in the top of the mountain. Astray streaked into the room, a white blur. The children waited for the smoke to thin before stepping through.

The room was bigger than Jai had envisioned from Ceder's story—the hole at the top of the mountain was wider than the Dangler's entire lagoon. High overhead, up through the chamber's namesake opening, they saw Sorid's crooked tower pointing to the sun like one big disjointed claw. And high atop the tower, nearly a speck to the children's eyes, they saw the fisherman looking around with one hand shielding his eyes from the sun.

The great stone stove in the center of the Circle of the Sun was a small tower in and of itself. Atop the stove was an iron grill. On the grill was a frying pan. Tottering around on the pan like a living spark in a shell, Jai and Ceder saw a ruby red egg with a zigzag crack down its middle.

Cloaked in sable blacker than the night, the magician of the hollow mountain knelt with bowed head before the flames of the eternally-burning oven. He heard the children's footsteps and rose slowly to full stature. A forked tail splayed out under his cloak like a pair of snakes looking for a small animal to swallow.

Huddled together inside the doorframe, Jai and Ceder held their breath as Sorid the Synclaw slowly turned around. "Come to me, children," said the magician. They did not move a scale. "Three days at sea and you are bold enough to disobey your master? Your hearts beat with fire, now, I feel it—a wave of heat. You will make a fine offering for Syn. Come," Sorid said, "come and stand before the flames."

Ceder pulled Jai to one side, quietly edging along the wall toward the door that she knew led to the sea, the exit she had escaped by three days past.

The magician continued to face the doorway they had been standing under. "*I see you!*" he shouted, raising his arms. His cloak fell back from where his hands ought to have been, revealing bones that were cut off at the wrist on both limbs. The light from the sun condensed around him and flashed red, then a beam of blazing light blasted out of the magician's severed arms directed at the wooden door. Sorid stopped the assault just as suddenly, sensing he had missed his target. The door was engulfed in flames.

"He's lying!" Jai whispered to Ceder. "He can't see us without my curse!"

Sorid heard him. The magician turned in an instant and fired the red beam at the children. At close proximity, the intensity was greater than anything they had experienced before. Jai swung at the beam futilely with his sword. The iron blade began to glow and he dropped it, hissing in pain, his hand branded. Then he let go of Ceder as they both broke to different sides to get away from the scorching searchlight.

Pressed against the wall they ran in circles like frightened mice, each in opposite directions. Sorid swung his beam after Jai, following the patter of his frantic footsteps. When Jai and Ceder met on the far side of the room, Jai grabbed her hand and turned her around before she ran headlong into the sweeping light. "You cannot run away inside a circle!" Sorid bellowed. "You were never free! You never will be! You will give your hearts to Syn! I will cut them out and hold them beating in the flames while your bones roast over the coals!"

The pounding of drums seemed to come from all around, echoing every footfall. Skeletal chanting filled the chamber, groans and grunts coming from nowhere and everywhere at once, never saying a true word in a mindless hymn that wound the beat inside the mountain to a frenzy.

Jai eyed his sword as they ran. Ceder looked to the two remaining doors, trying to tell them apart in the billowing smoke and rapid change of directions. Jai let go of her hand to make a dash for his cooled-off weapon.

Sorid swung his arms wide of one another, suddenly splitting his deadly beam in two, pointing at Jai and Ceder both. Jai missed his sword as he dodged the second beam, stumbling into a bushel full of apples. Sorid heard the crash and converged both rays on the epicenter of the sound. Jai rolled away under the crossing lights by the nick of his nose. The spilled apples swelled in the scarlet blaze to twice their size and blew apart with staggering force, splattering the walls of the room with burnt applesauce and black seeds.

Jai ran to Ceder and pulled her down to the ground as Sorid intersected his beams over their heads, not realizing they had ducked directly in front of him. The magician stopped and listened, holding his arms level, spread like wings, then slowly he moved the red lights inward, converging inevitably on the children. "Ceder, get behind me," Jai mouthed soundlessly. "When both beams hit me, run to the door and get out of here."

"Jai!" she hissed silently, then understanding hit her with a blunt thud: she was going to lose him, right now.

Sorid closed the twin beams into one all-consuming ray just as Astray crept up from behind and sunk his teeth into the magician's tail. Sorid lurched to one knee, forfeiting the concentrated red light back to the sun. The magician thrashed his tail back and forth in fury, throwing the cub the length of the room hard against the wall. Astray dropped to the floor unmoving.

Jai stood up slowly, his sword in hand, silent as a shadow. Ceder was now on the far side of the room, motionless, undetected. Sorid had not refocused from the cub's surprise attack.

Jai heard a piercing screech and looked up. The purple roc was circling the mountain in a wide loop, held at bay by the thick smoke that continued to emerge from the top. Jai saw the Dangler, too. With his shining line hooked over the ramparts of Sorid's tower, the fisherman was repelling down the crooked wall, but was still far from the Circle of the Sun.

Sorid turned toward Ceder as if he could hear her heart beating. "I know you stole my eggs, you nasty little thief. I could feel when you broke them, three moons past. There is only one left, but I have a riddle: How many sparks does it take to start a fire?"

Jai raised his finger to his lips, signaling to Ceder across the room to remain quiet. She rolled her eyes. Jai pointed to Sorid and drew his finger across his neck. Ceder waved her hands to say *No! Terrible idea! Don't* *go near him!* but Jai waved her off and took his first silent step toward the middle of the room.

Ceder put her hands together in a silent prayer, begging Jai to back away. He nodded confidently, solemnly, and took a second step forward.

"I only need *one*," said the magician, "one beating heart for the fire to give life to all-powerful Syn. Speak, one of you, and I will let the other swim away. Now is your last chance, else you will burn together forever in a grave of red ashes."

As the magician uttered his final, drawling ultimatum, the room went dark. The moon had centered at last in front of the sun, swallowing the light. Red tongues of fire circled the dark disc like fluttering petals on a black flower. Sorid spun around, utterly surprised by the disappearance of the light.

His climb down the tower complete, the Dangler peeked over the hole in the top of the mountain, a hundred fins above the children. "Look out!" he called down to them, waving like he was trying to stop a ship on a foggy night, "I see the Magician!"

Sorid swung his arms up at the fisherman, but his power had run dry under the eclipsing of the sun.

Sensing the magician's disadvantage in the half-dark, Jai sprang to close the distance between himself and his old master. A forked tail leapt for Jai's heart; he rolled under the attack, stood up strong, and swung his sword at Sorid's head. The serrated iron instantly heated up and glowed orange. With no handle to protect his hands, the skin on Jai's palms sizzled and popped, but he could not yet let go, not with the blade buried only a third of the way into the magician's neck. The hood of Sorid's cloak fell back and he stuck his face out at Jai, grinning like some hideous jack-o-lantern, deep fires ablaze behind a shell of bone.

Jai pulled the sword free with a tortuous effort and swung it again even as the skin on his hands turned brown with searing burns. He screamed in pain as the blade cut halfway again into the spine of the magician. The iron was red-hot and Jai sensed in another moment it would soften so much that he might as well wield a strand of seaweed.

Sorid leaned forward, a fin away from Jai's face, and exhaled a gust of hot fire that engulfed Jai's upper body even as Jai ripped his weapon free, pulling so hard he spun in a circle and sent the blade whirring all the way around and back through the last fraction of the magician's neck.

The fire spewing from Sorid's mouth burped and sputtered out.

Jai dropped his white-hot weapon and stepped back in disbelief that he himself was not dead and burnt to a crisp—the threads of his tunic were smoldering, the tips of his hair were singed, but the accidental pirouette before his final swing of the sword had saved his face from the brunt of Sorid's dying gasp of foul flames. But his hands were burned so badly he could not feel his fingers. A dull pain traveled up his arms and throbbed through every vein in his body.

The magician teetered backwards and bumped into the stove, knocking his disconnected head free to the floor. The head rolled out of the hewn-off, sable hood that had shrouded the demon for centuries. Seeing his master's entire face for the first time, Jai stepped back in fright. There was no flesh or skin or blood. The tarblack skull was a freakish hybrid of man and reptile without eyes or nostrils. The mouth was a jagged crack in the charred bone, nothing more.

Sorid's body shuddered once, finally, and then a fountain of white-hot lava exploded from his severed neck, forcing Jai and Ceder back to the wall.

The decapitated head on the floor grinned sadistically and began to chant in time with the drums.

IV. Into the Open

The body of Sorid rose up to its full height, inflated by the droning incantations of its own severed skull on the floor. The rest of the sable cloak fell away in rags, revealing a twisted, crooked black skeleton with smoke rising from its limbs and glowing magma oozing from its joints. The headless skeleton stumbled one way then another, gushing white lava like a geyser out of its cutopen spine. The liquid fire burned through wood and stone alike wherever it splattered.

The Dangler cast his line down through the top of the mountain and tried to hook the frying pan atop the stove, but his waveglass hook turned to steam in an instant, then the thick smoke leaving the chamber pushed the fisherman back from the cusp of the hollow and the children could no longer see him. The mountain quaked again, more violently than it had earlier, jarring everyone off their feet.

Jai and Ceder crawled to one another, worming away from the black skeleton, but the severed head heard them scraping across the floor. Its chant dropped in pitch and the obedient body whirled around like a dancer cued to a single, sustained note. It took an unsteady step toward them, compensating its balance for the shaking of the mountain, wobbly as a sailor without his sea-legs.

"Jai, look," said Ceder, pointing to one of the doors on the far side of the room. It was open just a crack. "Astray is gone!"

"We can get over there!" mouthed Jai. He crawled toward the door.

She grabbed his ankle, stopping him. He jerked away until he saw it was only her. "We can't go yet," she told him.

He stared at her in disbelief. She nodded to the center of the room. Jai followed with his eyes. The crack on the third egg of Syn split open and a premature puff of fire whiffed out, taking the form of a fledgling dragon whelp before floating apart like smoke.

"It's really going to happen," said Ceder.

The reptilian skull of the magician chanted the same guttural tone over and over, driving its weak-kneed body step by step across the floor, lunging blindly after the children, spewing its fiery lifeblood in all directions.

"We have to destroy that egg," Ceder told him, and her tone made it clear this was a strict vow.

"Easy," said Jai. "Don't dive into the oven. No ritual, no beating heart for the big fire monster, no problem."

"It's already hatching, Jai."

"It might not crack all the way open without a live heart getting fricasseed on the stove. Sorid said he needed a heart for the ritual!" "What are we going to believe—what Sorid told us or what's right in front of our eyes? We have to stop it while we still can."

Jai clutched his charred fingers in a tight fist around the pink petal Astray had given him. "You're right," he said bleakly, "wait here," and before she could react he popped to his feet and sprinted to the stove, leaping over a gushing torrent of white-hot lava that cut Ceder off from following him.

Jai reached up to grab the frying pan but the fire in the stove responded to the presence of his racing heart and the flames in the iron grill flared out and knocked him back to the floor. He tried again but was unable to near the frying pan without the unholy fire roaring to life and throwing him down.

Jai turned around, looking for Ceder, not knowing what to do. The black skeleton stood between them. It sensed it was in some sort of final standoff. Sorid's decapitated head was intoning one long, rumbling low pitch; the ethereal drums beat like hummingbird wings; the walls of the Circle of the Sun shivered as if there was a hand vice-gripped around the very heart of the mountain.

"Ceder, get out while you can!" Jai shouted.

The headless body lurched at Ceder and she bolted to one side, dashing along the wall in the direction of the open door. The skeleton spun around on one heel and took a step toward the stove, toward Jai.

Jai felt the pink petal grow hot in his hand as he recalled every form of torture Sorid had put him through, every lie, every scar, every hour of hunger and thirst and witless fear. As he watched the deformed body of black bones advance, a burning itch for revenge filled Jai's blood. He opened his hand—the petal was as bright as a red coal, the color of his anger, blood-red.

Jai stared into the open flames. *She left. She left!* He held the petal up. *And I will die!* Smoke spilled out of the oven, a salivating beast starving for the red-hot flower.

Ceder popped up beside Jai and held his free hand. "Not without me," she said, gazing up at his expression of total astonishment. Before their eyes the petal in Jai's hand turned from ruby red to pink and pink to sapphire blue as Jai's anger flowed out of him in a single breath.

From the corner of his eye Jai saw the apple bushel that he had knocked over was now upturned and curiously squirming like an impatient child hiding under a box. At the same time, he realized Sorid's chanting had become extremely muffled. "I just wanted to shut him up, for once," said Ceder with a twinkle in her icy blue eyes.

An instant later the wooden bushel exploded in a fiery conflagration of bone shards, splinters, and black seeds. Jai looked at Ceder, baffled. "I stuffed a few apples in his mouth, too," she admitted. "It seemed fitting. I guess they popped."

The body of the black skeleton collapsed like a puppet with no strings.

A resounding crack filled the room as the third egg of Syn split wide open down the middle.

The children turned back to the great stone stove. Ceder bit her lip and squeezed Jai's hand. His dark eyes were full of wonder as he beheld for the last time his hand in her own, held tightly together, white and black. "No!" the Dangler called from above, fighting through the smoke at the cusp of the hollow. "Get away from the well! It must be me! For the Sight of Silver, it must be *me*!"

Before the fisherman's words could reach the children Jai leaned close to Ceder and kissed her on the cheek, then thrust the heart-shaped blue petal into the fire.

The Year Nine Hundred & Ninety-Nine,

The King dove among the charred shipwrecks in search of a fish. Anyone with a gnawing hunger for an apple would suffice and there were always plenty of mermen around the coast with such an appetite. He quickly found someone who would suit his needs. The King did not bother asking the name of the fish he found—names were irrelevant this close to a new beginning. Using the fine point of his horn to underscore the magnitude of his orders, the King commanded the cowering creature to collect the smallest, most rot-infested boat at the bottom of the sea and tow it to the surface; there, he was to wait for two children on the shore.

Countless tails from the coast the Queen waited for the sound of a small splash. Hers was a rescue mission. The one she was charged to save would be as difficult to spot as a shadow in the night, she knew, but the Queen had faith that there would be lights to show her the way when the time came. It had been a long time since she had seen the one she must save. Her heart raced. She longed to see him again, but she knew it would be bittersweet and all too short.

In the deep of the sea a wyrm began to stir. Its thousand-year stasis in endless night had come to an end.

In the hollow mountain the man of black bones told two children—the last descendents of the slaves who dug his tunnels and built his tower—that they had three more days to live before they found their end in flames. The children listened in mortal fear and vowed to escape that very night.

To the stars above the coast a comet without her colors rose and began her three day flight around the Land of Lin, carried as ever by the wings of the West Wind. The cub at her side felt her go missing before he awoke. Shedding a single teardrop as he slept, the little lion fell off his bed of moss on the turtle's back and crashed into a hard world of dark water, headfirst. Chapter the Last, The Last Day, In which a shadow wanes.

I. Only One

The severed hand of the black skeleton whipped the liquid fire and molten rock into a compressed hurricane around the pillar that stood in the center of the underground lake. The tempest swelled, all its pressure forced inward to the eye of the storm, a vice squeezing a beating heart—the column buckled inward from the stress, about to implode, when a sudden sapphire light shot out from behind the gray stones. The pillar bulged, filled with a surging power driving up from a depth with which the lake of fire could not contend, and never could.

The Dangler stared down into the top of the hollow mountain and cringed as Jai and Ceder were consumed in the nucleus of the eruption. A screaming jet of cerulean water blasted from the foundations of the great stone pillar, up the brooding furnace, through the eternally-burning stove, and out the top of the Circle of the Sun. The fisherman whipped his head back as the water rocketed past him into the sky with the frying pan and the egg of Syn balanced atop the fountainhead like a ball on a magician's nose. The Dangler saw a red reptilian head poke out of the broken shell as it passed him on the way up—he immediately cast his line. The hook snagged into the waterspout like it was a giant beanstalk and the fisherman was hoisted up and away.

As the liquid column ascended, the Dangler reeled himself up to the fountainhead, repelling off the pressurized tower of water with light-footed, vertical hurdles. In his race to the frying pan he had no time to consider the parallel fates of the two children or the magician. Already he scarcely remembered their names.

The jet of water burst through the low-lying coastal clouds just as the Dangler reached the top of the spout. He picked up the iron pan. Both halves of the red eggshell were empty. With a deep groan, he turned around.

Slowly beating its wings, learning how to fly for the first time in an epoch, a dragon whelp made of dancing flames rose from the white clouds. The heat from its pumping wings turned the top of the water jet to a haze of steam. The Dangler sank down to his knees in the vaporized column as if mired in quicksand.

The white-hot eyes of Syn stared into the mirror of the fisherman's face and his waveglass features began to melt like wax. He raised his free hand to his mouth and touched his lips to his fingertips as if blowing a kiss to someone afar, then he plunged the ordained hand into the mist at his side.

Staring back into the eyes of Syn, into the white-hot light, the fisherman was illuminated as he drew from the waterspout a giant crescent scythe of razor-sharp waveglass. Darting through the water that filled the Dangler's body a single golden fish raced like a wave of light through the arm that held the scythe, into the fingers, holding tight, then back to the shoulder, raising up, into the wrist, snapping forward with a twist of his golden tail so the blade of the wicked waveglass weapon arced through the air and severed the head of Syn from its flickering, gaseous body.

The falling head puffed into sparks that trailed away. The white light faded from the fisherman's form. He knelt down, planting his fishing pole and the handle of the seven-fin scythe to either side of him while he caught his breath. It had only lasted a moment, but the heat from the small dragon's gaze had melted a wormsized hole clean through the Dangler's forehead. Water leaked out the hole in a thin stream for a brief moment then subsided. He shook his head experimentally, then shrugged.

He felt his back begin to bubble. He looked over his shoulder. The red dragon rose above him with three heads setting the sky ablaze where before there had been only one.

II. Stumps

Astray was halfway down the mountainside when it erupted. The devastating blast threw him into the air but he landed running and dashed toward the sea. Behind him, boiling water mingling with molten lava gushed out of every door and crack in the mountain.

The cub reached the shore and streaked to the upturned wheelbarrow lying next to the water. He dug furiously underneath one side of the abandoned cart until it rolled upright, then he leapt into the iron shell before the lethal tide of liquid fire seeped over the beach. As the water level rose, the wheelbarrow was lifted off the ground and carried away from the coast. Any other craft, any other hull would have melted through on the spot riding those red currents out to sea, but the wheelbarrow was unaffected. Astray stood in the prow of his tiny ship and stared high into the sky at the lights he was chasing.

All three heads of Syn roared in unison, torching the fisherman with plumes of fire. The Dangler leapt from his perch atop the sky-high fountain and ripped the curved blade of the translucent scythe through all three necks at once. In the air he unhanded the waveglass weapon and it dissolved into drops of rain; next to him, the three decapitated heads of the dragon gnashed in vain at the fisherman and fizzled into sparks.

The Dangler aligned himself headfirst as he fell, holding his arms ahead in preparation to dive into the sea a hundred tails below, his fishing pole pointed down in front like a diviner's rod honing in on the exact point he would hit the water. His reflection rushed up to meet him fast enough to send ripples to the surface.

With a screech like a rusty knife on glass, the purple roc flew underneath the Dangler and caught him on its badly burnt back. The fisherman balanced in a crouch, ready for anything, uncertain what purpose had prompted this unexpected ally to pluck him from the sky. The roc adjusted its wingtips ever so slightly—the Dangler recognized an attention to fine detail that he innately understood and respected—and they were suddenly flying upward again. Syn flexed its wings back like full sails in a headlong wind. Nine furious heads of a hydra writhed like a bag of eels, flashing teeth of white fire and roaring waves of carnelian flame. The hydra flew around the erupting fountain in a wary circle, never turning its back to the jet of water.

The Dangler lowered in his stance between the roc's wings like a man preparing to jump off a galloping horse. When they were within range of the fountain he cast his hook into the liquid column and leapt off the bird of war's back.

The roc veered sharply away from Syn but it could not escape the notice of nine pairs of eyes. The hydra exhaled a barrage of fireballs that enveloped the purple bird in a primrose cloud as it careened toward the sea. When the cinders faded away the roc fell lifelessly out of the leftover smoke straight down fifty tails and landed with a crunch of broken bones in the bed of a rusty wheelbarrow sailing out to sea.

The Dangler's boots touched down on the massive geyser. He unfastened his hook with a snap of his wrist and, before he fell, cast his line around the waterspout in a wide circle. He caught the hook in his free hand and attached it to the reel, securing a giant leash around the liquid column. Finally, he leaned forward and pressed his lips to the spray.

The pillar of water crystallized into blue glass at the fisherman's kiss and shot out the top of the volcano like a spring, sucking up any and all remaining power the well had to bestow. With the fisherman saddled behind the front end of the solidified fountain, holding onto the improvised reins for dear life, the frozen spout banked into a barrel roll. The Dangler whooped in excitement as he was spun around in a spiral. His hat flew off when he went upside-down but he caught it again on his next spin around. When the corkscrewing waveglass leveled out, the crystallized water had unwrapped itself into a flat-backed creature shaped like a titanic stingray with broad, turquoise wings and a barbed tail curled up like a fishing hook.

The Dangler jerked the impromptu leash to one side, steering his flying creation away from the red dragon, over the open sea. Syn bellowed with rage and gave chase, blasting streaks of fire through the sky like harpoons from the deck of a whaling ship; the stingray's waveglass wings were perforated with cauterized holes everywhere the scarlet spears struck true. Before it ever had a chance to fly the ray was sinking fast. The Dangler checked over his shoulder—Syn had nearly caught up to them.

Thunder tolled ominously across the dark sky. The sea roiled and clashed as the almighty fire of the great dragon heated the surface of the water to a fever pitch.

One of the hydra heads lunged for the fisherman. Without compunction he delved his hand into the newly-created stingray's back and pulled out a fullmoon battleaxe made of waveglass, all as matter-offactly as drawing a sword from a scabbard. With one heaving chop he sliced off the dragon's head, knowing full well it would regenerate three more as easily as a spark spreading fire.

The other eight heads, emboldened by the first—and soon joined by its reignited progeny—stretched forward to rip the fisherman to shreds with their hellish teeth. The Dangler flung the melting battleaxe through the necks of three overreaching heads like it was a pinwheel, then he pulled an egregiously oversized, spiked ball and chain out of the stingray's back, forming each individual link of the frozen chain in a split-second of single-minded focus.

The heads of the hydra surrounded the fisherman in a ring of fire. He swung the spiked ball in a wide circle, plowing through every outstretched neck in sight. The chain burned away after one rotation and he let the rest of the weapon leak away in his hand. Ripping on his fishing pole, he steered the flying leviathan in a tight circle, but the sky was ablaze at all turns, a burning barn cutting off every avenue of escape.

The body of Syn flashed like a bolt of lightning and split apart into three sections, a devil's trident of scarlet torches, each with nine long necks with nine roaring heads of their own. Forked tails and smoking wings thrashed and beat without mercy. The ring of fire around the fisherman folded, expanded, flexed into a sphere, a globe of enclosed flame, trapping the cerulean ray and its rider in the middle.

The fire began to constrict. The scarlet flames condensed into a sparkling garnet, packing all Syn's wrath inward to fry the fisherman alive.

Thunder tolled again and with it the clouds tore open and rain fell so thick that the sea and sky were indistinguishable. The torrential downpour glanced off the sphere of Syn's carmine fire like brittle teeth off a turtle shell.

A green blur with white wings flew down with the water from the stars above, sheathed in a cocoon of

driving rain as a meteorite is wreathed in fire. The Oldest Fish in the Sea blasted through the dragon's diamond armor, the red sphere shattered like a crystal chandelier, but shards of a flame are quick to reunite.

In the brief instant before Syn coalesced, the Dangler spurred his flying steed out to clear skies.

The crystalline shrapnel of the dragon's broken body evaporated from its condensed form to fill the sky with sheets of gaseous fire. The unholy hydra, raw flame and red light, was completely unharmed but mindlessly, vengefully enraged.

The Dangler dipped his waveglass steed's reins, allowing the stingray to swoop low and skim over the tumultuous sea. With a side-armed throw the fisherman flung the Oldest Fish in the Sea's limp body into the water. The river-guardian's white wings had been burned away to a pair of smoking stumps—the Dangler had barely caught him in time. The not-quite-so-dead fish glanced along the surface of the water like a skipping stone, lifeless.

Breezing low over the waves on his waveglass steed, the fisherman held his chin high as if he could feel his beloved's fingertips brushing his face in the cold spray of the clashing sea, then he dipped the depleted ray down into the water, cutting through the crests of the storm-ridden surface. The leaking leviathan absorbed every drop of water it came in contact with, refilling the holes in its wings and replenishing what volume had bled away. Reanimated, the Dangler pulled his steed into a steep ascent, ready for another round with immortal Syn.

III. Three More

Astray nudged the fallen roc awake. Its massive body was far too big for the wheelbarrow. Its broad wings hung limply to either side, dipping into the sea. Singed feathers and drops of plum blood fell into the water. A ring of silent, shaggy fins closed in, drawn to the undefended flesh.

The cub pounced on the roc's chest, forcing it to breathe. Its body shook in a wretched spasm. Astray bit the final petal off his necklace, stuck his head between the roc's beak, and dropped the petal down its throat. He pulled his head back just before the deadly beak snapped shut. The bird of war gasped and jolted upright as if shocked awake in the middle of a gripping dream.

Balanced precariously on the front lip of the floating cart, Astray looked apprehensively at the circling fins in the water, then he turned up to the roc and roared like a fully grown lion. The great bird pumped its wings, using the surge from the cub's bellow to gain the height to fly, but the downward thrust it reciprocated as it lifted off drove the bed of the wheelbarrow underwater. The roc coasted away into the east. The iron cart sank.

Wool fish closed in from all quarters, drawn to the bright white cub like moths to the light. Sensing a rare beast and a fine feast, they bared their teeth—row after row as sharp as rusty knives—and swarmed.

Syn raised its plethora of heads like the feathers of a peacock's tail, splayed wide in full brilliance before all the sea. It roared a fountain of flames from every set of jaws, each plume even higher and more grandiose than the cerulean fountain that the fisherman had tamed and transformed only minutes ago.

The Dangler soared in and out among the necks of the dragon, hacking off heads left and right with an ungodly arsenal of waveglass weapons that he summoned into existence with scarcely a moment's thought. Encouraged by the unrelenting rain and the sight of the moon eclipsing the sun, he created his frozen armaments ever larger and more elaborate: javelins, halberds, broadswords, maces, overflowing warhammers of solid, translucent, turquoise glass, stronger than stone. He launched them all recklessly through the sky, knowing he was sure to hit any number of writhing necks in every direction. The fisherman bellowed in fury as he fought, knowing he had found the third wishing well too late, knowing he was doomed to another thousand years of sorrow and madness before he could try again.

Every head he cut away grew three more, every tail he hewed off forked anew from the splice, growing twice as sharp. A hundred heads stretched out to meet him; a minute more, three again for each of those. The Dangler's arms spun like windmills, scooping up one blade after the last. When he saw a gaggle of heads before him all in a row, he hefted a jousting lance as big as a battering ram from the water where the stingray's backbone would have been. The ray faltered and lost speed like a stallion kicking loose a horseshoe, but the Dangler held the waveglass lance level and drove it splintering and splashing through as many of the hydra's heads as he could manage before the weapon melted away.

His victory was short-lived, the tide of the battle overwhelmingly against him. He was well above the clouds and Syn had spread its unlimited essence into an ocean of fire above the sea. The Dangler knew he would not be able to dive to safety when his waveglass steed finally melted away—Syn would toast him to a crisp if he fell freely through the air. In futile rage he wrenched an enormous whip out of the water inside the stingray as if he had pulled out the liquid spine of his steed's tail. The leviathan shrank, having sacrificed so much of its volume for the fisherman's unceasing assault on Syn; soon its wings were barely large enough for the Dangler to stand astride on. Crouching down like he was surfing on a single piece of driftwood, the fisherman cracked the tail-length, waveglass whip like a fearless liontamer, forcing a hundred hungry flames to back away.

A seemingly infinite horde of reptilian heads rose up to circle their prey. The Dangler cracked the whip again, but Syn was no longer startled by the deafening snap. The fisherman flung the remainder of the weapon away with no further recourse. All he could see was an ocean of fire and the heavens up in smoke. *A thousand years*, his beloved had said. He touched his heart, sensing the end had come at last, and he felt a quiver, though it was not his own. "The eggs!" he cried; his hand was on the satchel, still strung around his neck like an apron. The enchanted eggs were shaking like angry fish. He had forgotten all about them in the midst of the fray! In a heartbeat he pulled the two blue eggs out of the scrip. He held them high over his head with one hand like a conductor stilling his musicians before the symphony begins. When he brought the eggs crashing down the sapphire shells shattered on the stingray's frozen skin, but the fisherman thrust the unborn spirits of Syn's brethren inside his steed.

Instantly the ray's waveglass wings rippled out and stiffened with new life. The torso ballooned, the tail regenerated. Inside the leviathan's body the twin spirits of Syn raced after one another in a circle, one pulling, one pushing, forming a single, infinite loop that gushed out pure water like the sun shines light.

The Dangler ripped back on his fishing line, pulling the revitalized stingray into a climb above the clouds. Below him, the ocean of fire rippled inward and gathered into a demon of ten-thousand heads. The Dangler urged the stingray on, leaning into a wide circle, drawing the hydra into a chase. Syn wheeled around in pursuit, chasing the barbed tail of the stingray even as the leviathan flew around behind the great dragon, until it was impossible to say who was hunting whom.

Infused with the pulsing power of a pair of primordial spirits, the waveglass ray grew twice as fast as Syn could spread its wild fire. The Dangler veered his steed left, then right again in a semi-circle, curling back in a vast figure-of-eight. He passed under the hydra at their first intersection, over at the next, pressing for more speed, more power, flying in a blurring circuit, a ray of blue water racing the red dragon, a ray of light. Just before impact the Dangler jerked back on the reins, causing the stingray to pull up with its wings fanned out like an open palm ready to catch a ball. Without slowing, Syn crashed headlong into the leviathan's grasp, but the fisherman allowed the perfect amount of leeway in the makeshift leash so that the water absorbed the cataclysmic charge of fire without bursting apart. Obeying a flick of the fisherman's smallest finger, the colossal stingray closed its wings around the red dragon, curtains drawn at the close of a show.

The fire was snuffed out of the sky with a loud hiss, wet fingers pinching a candle out. Ten-thousand candles. A scarlet light could scant be seen through the layers of waveglass that constricted the hydra. The Dangler wiped a melting bead of waveglass from his brow and took a well-earned deep breath.

And then the moon rolled away from the sun.

IV. To Fall

The sun blazed forth in resplendent glory, as red as a beating heart. The inextinguishable dragon roared in righteous fury from the confines of the stingray's folded wings. The Dangler urged his steed to hold fast, to squeeze tighter, to compress the monster to glittering ash just as Silver's diamond mist had destroyed the bone claw hand of Sorid in the Secret Stream, but the unborn brethren of Syn could not contest the power of a demon that had a heart of its own. Yet enclosed, Syn drew on the full power of the sunlight that shone through the waveglass walls of its prison—the core of all fires flared and burned white-hot, gushing out blinding plasma like an overflowing wheelbarrow.

When Syn reared up and broke through the leviathan's choking hold, the hydra's three branching bodies and innumerable heads and limbs merged into one all-powerful force of nature. Syn stretched its wings from horizon to horizon. It lashed its forked tail against the surface of the sea like a kettle drum. It stretched its head up to empty space. With talons like red-hot iron the great dragon grabbed the wings of the waveglass stingray and tore them off like a cruel child torturing a butterfly. With soldering jaws it bit the head and tail off the leviathan and flung the rest of the leaking body away.

The torso of the wingless, headless stingray flew through the air, bleeding water out both nearly-pinchedshut ends. The Dangler saw the unborn spirits of Syn gush out of the broken ray's body and stream away into the sky, flowing from one drop of rain to the next, fading away like a cold breath in the wind.

The Dangler popped to his feet on the falling pillar of frozen water, running in place to keep his balance like he was on a spinning log in the water. He ran so fast the waveglass rolled through the air, a carpet unfurling beneath his feet, but as he took each stork-like stride forward the frozen carpet unrolled in the opposite direction, carrying him backwards. In front of him, the unrolled surface cracked like a frozen lake and fell away.

Above, Syn stared at the open sea and the green lands beyond as if deciding which one to eat first, then it lifted its soulless, white-hot eyes to the sky, perhaps wondering whether it could reach up and eat the moon, when it saw the comet. The great dragon stared with a seething intensity at the shooting star, perceiving the last and only real power that might stand a chance of halting the spread of the fire. Syn reared back to strike a deadly blow.

The Dangler saw the threat to the comet. He reached under his hat and pulled out the pink petal he had taken from Astray an hour past, hooked it to his fishing line, and cast it as high as he could.

The wool fish closed in. Astray looked up and saw a pink light in front of his face. It was a petal sinking to the seafloor. He saw no line attached; the line was made of water, invisible in the sea like a shadow in the night. The petal drifted past him, casting the jagged teeth of the flesh-eating scavengers in rosy light before they snapped their jaws shut.

His tail was pierced first, and he was suddenly being reeled away toward the surface. Below him, where the pink petal had just twinkled out of sight, the cub saw the ring of wool fish ramming their snouts into one another, all biting the same suddenly empty space at the same time.

The petal at the end of the Dangler's line soared like a bird, reeling out a tail and more of the slender, liquid line of Silver's hair. Gusts of hot air whipped the petal back and forth; it shimmered briefly then expanded diagonally and flattened to catch the wind, more a kite than a flower, given the conditions.

The pink petal caught the great dragon's eye only by the fisherman's most excellent and finely-honed attention to detail in the adjustments he made to the line of the kite, as though he was back in his lagoon waiting patiently to lure a fish throughout the centuries. And still he ran upon the spinning cylinder of waveglass beneath his feet, only vaguely aware of the fact that the water was nearly run dry and the carpet unrolling underneath him would come to an end as abruptly as the edge of a cliff.

Syn turned its head down from the comet, mesmerized by the glowing kite. Its white-hot heart buzzed like a giant dragonfly inside its chest, ravenous for the seductive, magic flower.

The unrolling waveglass came to its last drop. The Dangler took his last step on the frozen carpet and fell backwards off the edge. His purple cape billowed up and ensconced him like the shell of an egg as he fell a thousand tails to the sea, staring up at the rain, at the pink kite zipping after him, and at the furious red dragon diving straight down in rapid pursuit.

As Syn shot after the falling petal, hypnotized by the glowing lure just out of reach, the great dragon assumed a streamlined form in the sheering wind. Its heat condensed around its white-hot heart, its body crystallized like a red diamond, fire as hard as stone. Jaws without hunger closed around the pink petal.

The sea below the fisherman began to twist. The water spiraled out, a whirlpool in reverse, throwing a

circular ripple away from the axis that grew to a tidal wave. In the center of the spiral there appeared first a wooden pole with an arrow on top. Then, as the liquid helix untwisted, a shape like a fin appeared, burnt black, which grew into a huge tower of living coral. Before the arrow on the wooden pole could spin around three times, Coral Wing jutted out of the sea within view of the western coast. The pinnacle of Wingtip Tower speared up in between the falling fisherman and Syn and drove itself deep into the great dragon's breast. Torrents of plasma erupted from the demon's goring wound and spilled down the sides of the tower.

The Dangler fell all the way to the sea with a crash that sounded like the water itself shattered to pieces.

Pulled to the surface by a line dangling in a well that was a day behind, in a forest that ran in a circle around the river of time, Astray broke into the light of day. Next to him was a large turtle, its shell made of wavewashed and faded stones, mud, and sea-cement. "Gahhhhh," the turtle yawned, "at last."

The final ribbon of hazy darkness from the cub's tail had been reeled away, and with it the last petal from his necklace was returned to the sea, where they all found their way to the stars in the end.

He was pure white, as brilliant as a star himself. He cast no shadow on the gray stones as he sat down in the moss on the turtle's back and stared up at the sky, waiting for the comet to fall.

"She should be along shortly, my lord," said the turtle. "Never fear—we'll catch her. Always do."

V. Arms of the Sea

Syn violently beat its wings against the sides of Coral Wing, struggling to break free. The living coral shrieked and shrilled as ancient burns turned black all over again at the dragon's touch.

The sea around the castle turned inward with a will of its own, focused on Wingtip Tower. The water swelled up and rose into huge summits on either side of the narrow castle. The cresting waves smashed into one another, climbing higher until the water achieved a height to rival the beating wings of Syn. The arms of the sea, at last taking shape as the crushing claws of a gargantuan king crab, clamped onto the flaming wings of the dragon and reared back, pulling Syn's white-hot core deeper onto the sharp pinnacle of the castle. Syn thrashed its tail and whipped its head from side to side, but with its wings immobilized and its heart pierced it could not break free.

Infuriated, the red dragon bellowed freakish, insatiable bloodlust. Then it saw a light as bright as its own heart floating on the back of a turtle far below. Syn grew still, staring at the white light. It slowly opened its jaws, silently stretched its neck down to the surface of the sea, spread its teeth, an endless inferno of white-hot lances all poised to center on the undefended white light, ready to kill, hungry to kill, no longer mindless but thirsty to kill, to close its teeth around the white light. The comet fell from the sky and blew through the back of the demon's head like a cannonball filled with rainbow-colored fireworks. The blaring explosion rocked the sea from coast to coast and filled the air with ash as thick as rising yeast.

Through the smoking jaws of the decimated dragon fell a delicate flower with soft petals of all colors. Never a comet at all, only a flower carried up one night and lowered down three days later by the gentle wings of the wind. She landed softly in the moss on the turtle's back.

Lion nestled his nose against Lilly. She received the kiss with a glow. No sooner than that but they fell asleep.

"Consider your wish granted," said the stone turtle, giving the stray cub a fond look. "See you when you wake up."

Jai and Ceder fled through the dark. They passed through an obliterated doorway, down a steep, lightless shaft, then through a series of endless tunnels. Jai led the way. He had haunted these subterranean corridors in a former life and would never forget the design of their twists and turns.

The mountain quaked and the walls crumbled in and collapsed, but the inseparable pair continued to navigate the stifling labyrinth with unparalleled speed and surety. They raced through a gaping cavern filled with eddies of liquid fire and molten char, then through a long, dark channel, and finally out to open water. The sky was thick with rain. A small sea of apples floated in the floodwater like flotsam from a sunken ship—an orchard had lined this side of the summit less than an hour ago. The trees were all underwater now.

As Jai and Ceder surveyed the extent of the cataclysmic destruction, the *Riverlilly* popped up to the surface next to them, expelled from the maze of tunnels by the same force that shook the mountain to its core. They gave the boat a push toward an old friend in need, then dove to deeper waters to begin the last leg of their journey home.

Adrift in the turbulent sea, the Dangler's head knocked against a piece of wood. He looked up, halfconscious, and saw the boat. He pulled himself aboard with his last drop of energy and collapsed in the bottom with his fishing pole clutched in his hands, a talisman to ward off any further reincarnations of unholy fire.

He saw a woman's face above him in the stormy sky. She seemed to be weeping, but she was difficult to see in the rain. The fisherman waved goodbye to her without a word—the heat of Syn had melted his mouth shut and turned his lips down in an exaggerated frown. Streaks of melted, now-cooled glass lined his face, a mask of frozen tears. He waved to the woman in the rain, and then he fell asleep. The flames of Syn had dried him out. He would not wake up for days, not until he was refilled with that which gave him life, one kiss of the rain at a time, drop by drop upon his forehead.

The Oldest Fish in the Sea swam to the stone turtle. The sleeping cub on the turtle's back was bright enough to be seen from the stars. "Don't you have a job to do, fatso?" the Oldest Fish in the Sea sneered at the turtle. "Every fish in the sea will spot you!"

"That's only because *he* brought the whole castle here," said the Wishfish in defense of the turtle, pointing an accusatory fin.

Singled out, the Coralute scowled. "The Royal Seal is patrolling our perimeter. And if you didn't think it was a good idea to move the castle, you could have said 'no' when I asked to use your arrow!"

The Wishfish rolled his eyes. "Stop the mighty Coralute from getting his way? That'll be the day!"

"We all have a job to do," said the Coralute. "Don't get mad at me just because mine is the most essential to the well-being of th—"

"Ha!" barked the Oldest Fish in the Sea. "Guarding the river is more important than anything either of you morons busy yourselves with."

The Coralute sighed and shook his head.

"Should we wait for the King and Queen before we go?" asked the Wishfish.

"Let them swim!" said the Oldest Fish in the Sea bitterly. "There are no crowns around those pretty horns yet! And besides, it's all their fault I lost my new wings!"

"Without them, you wouldn't have had any wings in the first place!" cried the Coralute in frustration. The Wishfish cleared his throat. "Three turns of the arrow should do it," he said to end all digression. "We'll all go back east together and then head our separate ways after the castle is back where it belongs."

"Agreed," said the not-quite-so-dead fish three times. They all cast a last look at the stumps of the river guardian's white wings as if wondering what could have been.

"And what about the boy and the girl?" asked the stone turtle, blinking sleepily. "What of them?"

"Like I said," barked the Oldest Fish in the Sea, "let them swim!"

"The Coralute will keep an eye on those two until they settle in," the Wishfish said to the turtle, "but don't expect them to come visit *us* very often. *Some* things never change."

"Then they lived?"

"Of course they lived!" said the Wishfish irritably. "Wake up! I still have to grant their wishes, don't I? They did pay me, after all, and they still haven't told anyone what they asked for. As if anyone at all couldn't figure it out."

"Imagine that," the turtle said with a prolonged yawn. "And... what *did* they wish for?"

The fish's whiskers curled up in a wide grin, but before he could answer, the sea spiraled into the base of the wooden pole to which the spinning, white arrow was affixed, and Coral Wing, the stone turtle, and the pink boat, drifting near enough by, vanished like stars in the light. Beneath the sun dark days will seep Into your boat and here you sleep The world will be reeled to a fight A battle cast as fire encircles night When the fountain rises once again From the mountain, ash will fill the end Two children in a boat must save the sea? Who will I tell that it should have been me? What law can there be in the Land of Lin If three days of magic rule all herein?

~Saerin Silvermoon

An Ending, The First Day, The Year One, In which a thousand years pass like a dream.

From the Dawn of Time to Dusk of the Last Day in the Land of Lin there has been, there is, and there will always be a boy named Lion and a girl named Lilly, each as beautiful as summerset, sage as time unwound, more magic in their smallest fingers than all the spells of wry old warlocks, wizards wise, or wishing wells.

They made their home in a forest where the sky was forever cast in silver twilight, but the frozen sunset was a curiosity they both ignored and forgot. They stayed in their forest a thousand years and a single night beset them not. In the enchanted evening they passed their time without a care, inseparable but for the running and the hiding of their play, and only once would they succumb to sleep and in so doing lose their neverending day.

No wheel has an end Runaways flee to the sea The dark delivers a friend One question sparks three An arrow stands alone Two ends come together Water is reduced to stone Ill-tidings roll in like bad weather Brewing storms are an unborn beast The children hasten east Light swims in a round Waves move a man A secret ingredient is found There is a hole in the plan The children stop to play a game The key is in the air selfsame A handful of flowers are not what they seem Ice is spun into a silver stream Fire reigns A shadow wanes A thousand years pass like a dream

~J. Evans

Author's note: If you enjoyed *Riverlilly*, you might like my second book, *Pence*, also available on Smashwords.com.

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