

# SPELLHOLLOW WOOD

from *“The Cycles of Exile”*

by **Joseph Scotti**

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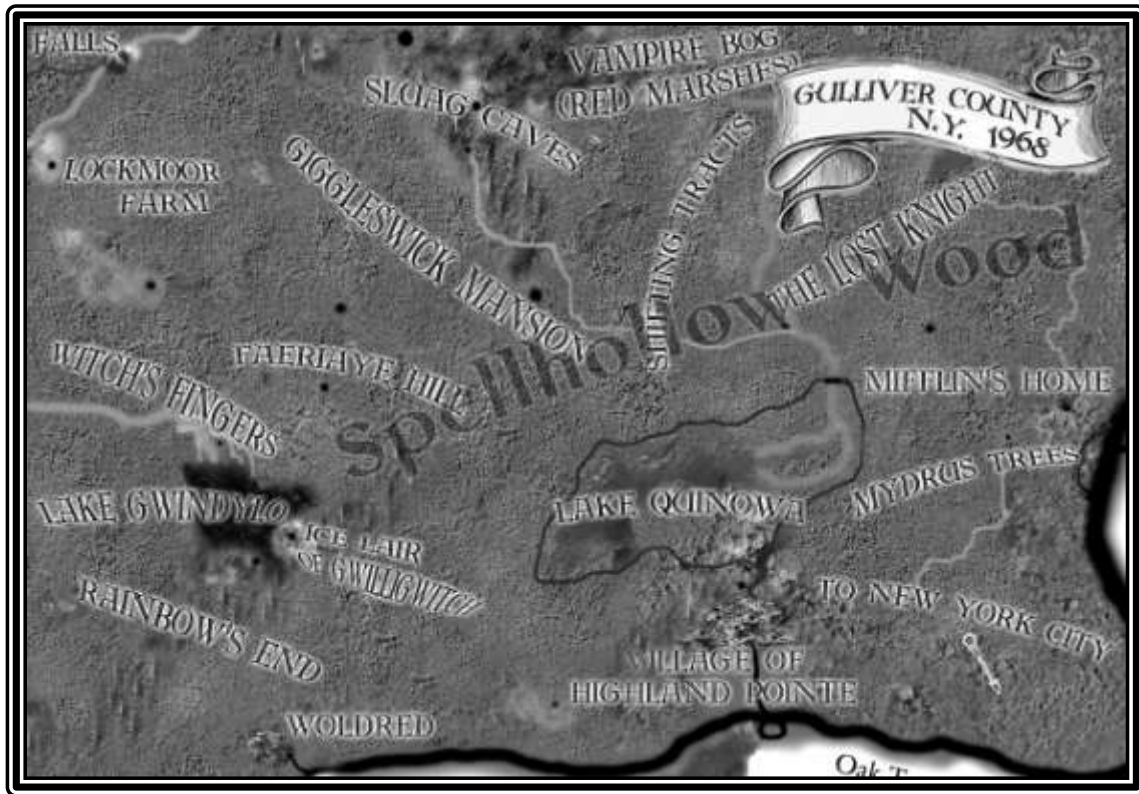
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*Chapter 1*

**Taken Away**

**S**he defiantly rubbed the fist of dirt she was holding into her mother's nose and mouth—punctuated a moment later with a hard slap across the face. Ten year old Marie Meehanan had always been the most loving and respectful daughter— until now.

It was the end of a summer day, right before dusk. Both the setting sun and a full rising moon shared the sky above a precipitous rock ledge. This was a special place, which her father, James, took the three of them fairly often. From their vantage, one had a clear view both west and south, revealing the expanse of land for a hundred miles. On especially clear nights some claimed they were able to see the lights of New York City, away southeast.

Mother and daughter now gaped at each another in disbelief— Marie for having dealt the blow, her mother, Anna, for having received it.

It had begun only minutes before with Marie fitfully fidgeting in her mother's arms, clearly not wanting to be there. James sat next to them as his daughter began to groan and whine.

"What's wrong, sweetheart?" asked Anna Meehanan. "We have a wonderful sun and moon to watch tonight."

"I'm sick of this place," answered Marie, "I want to go." She continued struggling against her mother's embrace.

"You love this place," said her mother.

She did. Upon this ledge as a child, Marie would gaze into the heavens at day's end, asking them endless questions about the moon and the stars. Her father explained the science of astronomy, her mother, the myth and romance of the night sky.

Anna glanced at her husband. He hunched his shoulders.

"It's no big deal for her tonight, I guess."

"That's right," Marie shot back, as her mother let go of her. Marie abruptly stepped away, stooping to pick up a stone. "I want to go home."

“Let daddy and I watch the sunset,” answered her mother. “Then we’ll go.” James and Anna huddled together as the sun shone upon their faces.

With a sharp scowl, Marie threw the stone from the ledge. For some reason she could not understand, she was feeling very angry and even more anxious. She picked up a fallen tree branch and began banging it against a large rock along a wall of the ledge. Harder and harder she slammed the branch, grunting as she continued.

“Stop that, Emily,” said Anna. “What are you doing?” Her first name was Emily, but she was known to almost everyone by Marie, her middle name. Everyone, that is, except her mother.

“I want to go home now,” Marie bellowed.

She halted a moment, grabbed some dirt from the ground and spitefully rubbed it all over her own face and neck. She then picked up another branch, wielding one in each hand and began wildly smashing both against the rock. Her parents sprang to their feet. Anna grabbed Marie as her father took the branches from her hands.

“What’s wrong, Emily!” said her mother as she tried to calm her daughter by embracing her. That’s when Marie bent again, scooped up some more dirt and shoved it straight into her mother’s face.

Anna spluttered on the soil in her mouth. Before she could wipe it away, Marie lashed out and slapped her mother, leaving a red blotch on her jaw.

“Take me home now, right now!” shouted Marie.

And then, on this clear night, something else began happening. An unexpected fog rolled in. It quickly expanded and grew thick all around them. Within hardly a minute it became so dense they could not see more than a few feet in front of them.

James made them huddle close, not daring to trust moving blind among the sharp fall-off of the ledge’s boundaries. A harsh, terrible odor overcame them, followed by a distinct sound, as if something—an animal perhaps— were choking. Marie’s eyes darted all around, seeing the sudden panic in her mother’s eyes. Anna seemed to somehow understand what was happening. In response, she quickly reached for something from around her neck. Marie began crying out loud. This fog, in some unexplainable way was horribly familiar to her.

“I told you I wanted to go home, why didn’t you listen!”

“We’ll be fine, Marie, just calm down,” assured her father, standing over them in protection, his eyes trying to penetrate the fog. The strange noise came closer, now

discernible not as choking sounds, but that of something with a horribly strained breathing pattern.

Anna drew out in front of her a small round globe on a necklace. She held it up, where a hint of the rising full moon through the fog somehow caught it, producing within the charm a faint glow. Marie had never seen it before. As the fog tightened around them and the odor and bestial sounds came very close, Anna ripped the necklace off. She placed it in Marie's hand, clasping her fingers tightly around it.

"Emily, take this. Keep it on you and never let it go! It will keep you safe. Please, remember the moonlight!" The globe gleamed brighter in Marie's hand. But in her confusion and hysteria, with the ghastly breathing and disgusting smell overwhelming them, Marie threw the charm far out into the fog.

"No!" cried Anna, watching it disappear. With a heavy sigh of resignation, she wrapped her arms around her daughter, preparing for the worst.

In the next instant as James circled to protect them, a sharp, angered roar pierced their ears. Anna was suddenly, viciously, lurched away from Marie into the fog. But her mother's clutching hands would not let go and Marie was dragged along. With a scream, Marie saw her mother dangling on the ledge brink, seized by something in the hazy mist— something with terrible, red dripping eyes staring back. Ten year old Marie was struck with a pang of recognition: she vaguely knew what stared at her, from perhaps a dream or imagining a story once told to her, or something. She also knew she hated it and being near it made her hate everything as well. It motioned for her to follow. Even as her mother's desperate outstretched grasp was slipping from her, Marie suddenly felt her father grip her shoulders from behind.

"Don't let go of her, Marie!" he shouted, "hold on!"

But instead, intense rage and disgust swelled within Marie. With a feral growl, she wrenched her hands away and kicked her legs downward, smashing into Anna's head. She fully saw the disbelief and betrayal in her mother's eyes, before falling away and disappearing into the fog. James threw himself after his wife, but she was gone. He recovered and stared astonished at Marie.

"What did you do?" he pleaded.

Before she could answer, he took her in his arms and held her from any further harm. A moment later, Anna appeared again, farther away, but somehow still visible through the fog. Marie struggled to get free, but James held her tightly while calling out to his wife again and again. The odor and disgusting sounds then faded and the fog cleared as quickly as it appeared. When they were able to see again, Marie gasped. The spot where they last saw her mother was in mid-air past the brink of the ledge. Had they run out to her, they would have fallen into the ravine below, over sharp, jutting rocks and most likely been killed. Below them, there was no sign of Anna Meehanan anywhere.

James bitterly tried to understand Marie's confusion when she woke the next morning. She listened to the sheriff and his men conduct their investigation, clueless as to why her father was so devastated. When her father thoroughly questioned her, it was plain that Marie had blocked the prior night's horrible incident from her conscious mind. It made some sense, James thought: she had not been herself at all yesterday and now she had no recall of what happened. What she had cold heartedly, savagely done to her mother firmly convinced him that Marie was ill. Throughout the next several weeks, she was sent to three doctors to help regain her memory. Nothing worked, with Marie only growing angry and frustrated. During her evaluations, there came strange moments when she adamantly referred to herself as Charlotte, but this would quickly pass. To her father's horror, Marie soon lost *all* memory of her mother, as if she had never existed. With a stiff upper-lip and never shedding a tear, James had no choice but to mourn to himself the loss of his wife.

Months went by with nothing further discovered. Sheriff Dan Radich, one of Gulliver County's most ardent believers in the local legends, knew what had most likely happened, but nonetheless kept his investigation open until the summer's end. James convinced himself that his wife must have fallen victim to a wild bear attack, though the black bears of the New York State region were seldom so aggressive. Afterwards, he often visited her gravesite, but this was out of respect and for his own peace of mind. James knew she wasn't really there because no trace of her was ever found.

The following year had been a trial for both father and daughter. They often argued and Marie at times caught him drinking scotch. She became more temperamental and disrespectful, and had fallen in with a troublesome group of friends. Twice that year there was a knock at the door with Sheriff Dan handing Marie over, explaining what mischief she had found. James's attempts at discipline did not work well, for Marie possessed a headstrong, iron-willed personality, determined to do things her way. Continued examinations by doctors still provided no clues as to what she suffered from, though James was thankful his daughter showed no more violent behavior.

There were however, things Marie and her father did enjoy together: games, specifically chess, which brought out both their competitive natures. Their games were also excellent outlets for Marie's talents of quick thinking and methodical strategy, skills which James saw blossom in his daughter from an early age. Marie didn't just become a good chess opponent; she became a deftly skilled player. As she approached her teens, she began to capture her father's king considerably more than the reverse, much to his frustration. In somewhat less engaging moments, they also enjoyed watching a weekly teevee show that took place in outer space, with someone who had pointed ears.

Otherwise her father kept to himself, returning home from work and planting himself in front of that same television set, where the evening news chronicled a long, sad war being fought somewhere far away— along with how angry people were in contention over it. Much like the folk in their hometown of Highland Pointe, who also

argued endlessly, not about the war on the tube, but a war that had been brewing there for many years.

Plainly put, the woods they lived near were downright strange and positively dangerous. By that time, the spring of 1968, thirteen-year-old Marie knew all about the fantastic stories of those woods, as it was impossible to prevent the fervent tale spinning from anyone, young or old. The adults of Highland Pointe feverishly discussed each bizarre event (including Anna's disappearance), whether at the market, the beauty salon or church, along with the children, both at school and play.

Yet Marie was a rare child who did not believe what her father referred to as the "fool lipdrizzle" of Spellhollow Wood. James was a firm skeptic and he was not alone, being part of the ugly and ever-contested division among the county folk—a division whose only agenda was which side could proclaim the loudest whether or not there were any such thing as ghosts and goblins. It only followed that James' practical sentiments were a direct influence on Marie's thinking. Apart from what she was taught in catechism, Marie only trusted in what she could see and touch, especially if it was outdoors. She adored animals and nature—trees, rocks and creepy-crawly bugs of all kinds—except for worms. Marie was genuinely scared of and hated the slimy, wriggling things. Still, she had spent far more time as a growing toddler collecting endless sticks and leaves, along with generous helpings of dirt—without the worms—while her new toys were left alone and mostly untouched.

From her early childhood, Marie developed an odd foible, less so for what it was, then for what it progressed into. She became deeply entranced by anything of gold, cherishing the very color and shimmer of it. She was often found adorned with her mothers' (who also quite fancied) gold jewelry: rings, bracelets, and other trinkets that Marie would stare and marvel at for hours at a time. While not so strange at first, her fixation significantly deepened as she got older. The grandeur of pure gold set ablaze such a passion and fire in her eyes that at times her parents, and afterwards her father by himself, could have sworn it genuinely hypnotized her.

In the last year, she started painting her finger and toenails gold, which rankled her father considerably. She then demanded to have her ears pierced, so she could wear a pair of gold earrings, unknowingly belonging to her forgotten mother. After James' repeated refusals, Marie at last had them secretly pierced with her friends by a hippiesh pawnshop owner. Soon after, she was caught stealing a gold ankle bracelet from a jewelry store. Both incidents led Marie to another heated argument with her father, resulting in a month's grounding.

However—a breakthrough occurred that spring of her thirteenth year. It was late afternoon and they were in the midst of another hard fought chess game. Just as James was cornering Marie's king with his rook and bishop, she started talking as carefree as one would about the weather.



“I had a dream about mommy last night,” she said, munching on a handful of peanuts from a bowl set between them.

“You did?” answered her father, his strategic concentration broken, trying his best to remain calm while swallowing the lump in his throat.

Marie maneuvered her knight. “She spoke to me.”

“Did she? What did she say?”

“She told me she was so proud of me and how fast her little Charlotte had grown up ... because it’s been so long since she last held me when I was two years old. Your move, dad.”

The name Charlotte again gave James cause for alarm, but he squelched any immediate reaction. “Two years old?” he instead asked, confused.

“Wasn’t I only two when she got sick and died? Fidleedee, move, dad.”

James moved his bishop ahead inattentively, hardly taking his eyes off his daughter. “Is that what mom told you?”

She quickly exploited his mistake. “No, it’s just what I remember. Checkmate.”

## *Chapter 2*

### **A New (and True) Friend**

It was the end of April and Marie had been somewhat happier since the previous summer as her father granted her permission to help out after school at the Mashenburgs' horse farm. Mucking stalls wasn't fun, but Marie delighted in grooming the horses. She fell in love with an Arabian mare and got to ride her twice a week. Yet still, against her father's wishes, Marie continued to haunt around where there was trouble to be had, in particular with three girls who habitually sought mischief. A year or two older than Marie, the girls appeared to admire her, but this was a ruse as they merely wished to make selfish use of Marie's decisive cleverness which none of them could match. Their names were Bettyann, Tilda and Trish.

"The Greenbrook Motel?" said Tilda, the most aggressive of the three. "The place that burned down years ago? Where all those families died?"

"Creepy," added Trish.

"Yeah, but it's rebuilt," explained Bettyann, the heavyset and intimidating ringleader. "New folks are gonna' be moving in next week. It's the perfect place."

"How are we gonna' do this?" asked Marie. "Make ghosts come to life?"

It was Wednesday, a week after Marie recalled having memory of her mother. She now sat with her friends inside an old tree house someone had built long ago in a field near Cricket Park. Outside, the warm air had begun to turn the leaves green. Mayday, May 1 was a week away, which many in town regarded as a date of superstition almost as much as Halloween. They were certain events far stranger than the usual would soon be occurring: And they were seldom disappointed.

"Fruit loop, were you awake during Science today?" answered Bettyann. She was lighting matches, one at a time, flinging them to the tree-house floor, then stepping on them. "The films of those ghost places the teacher showed today has me thinking."

"Man, that was pretty cool," said Trish. "With the lights out, it really looked ... haunted!"

"That's right," said Bettyann, striking a new match, holding it aloft in front of her face. "If we had that projector and the films," she continued excitedly, "just think of the scares we'd get from those new families moving in."

"You mean—point it right into their windows!" said Tilda, catching on. "Wild! They'll already be looking for haunts and stuff in that motel!"

"Oh, dig it!" said Trish with her usual, wholly annoying cackle. Her laughter wilted as a thought occurred. "Wait," she added sheepishly. "How do we get— We'd have to break into the school."

"That's right, dummy," said Bettyann, flicking a burnt out match at Trish. "At night."

“How?” said Trish. “We’ll never get inside.”

“Yeah we can,” interjected Marie. “I can get in, easy.”

The next day, Marie was true to her word. In late afternoon, about an hour before sundown, they stood outside the back of their school. In their hands were some simple tools and a baseball bat.

They all stared into a window’s newly shattered hole Marie had just made. She then slipped a screwdriver through it, motioning at Tilda to whack the screwdriver with a claw hammer. Tilda missed, whacking Marie’s thumb instead.

“Oww!” hissed Marie. “Fidleedee, give me that hammer!”

“Would you stop saying that stupid word!” said Tilda.

Marie grimaced as Trish handed the tool to her. She tapped the screwdriver with the hammer, forcing open the locked latch from inside.

“Even if we get hold of the projector thing,” asked Trish, fearfully peering around them, “we still have to figure out how to use it.”

“That’s why we keep Marie around,” said Bettyann.

“That so,” asked Marie, already annoyed. “Is that the only reason?”

“Isn’t that enough?” answered Tilda sharply. “Finish the job, before you get us caught.”

Marie turned, facing Tilda, who glared back through the habitual hair over her eyes. Marie then searched the faces of her other two friends with the same result. She felt a tingle of anger: the times they had already been caught by the sheriff were because one of them had become careless, not her. For the first time it occurred to Marie that maybe their friendship, if that’s what it ever was, wasn’t quite what she thought.

Then, something caught her eye behind her three phony friends. A sight that forever changed Marie and the course of her reckless life ... .

A tall, gangly girl with jet-black hair and glasses too big for her face sat on her bike watching them. Her oversize spectacles magnified sparkling, green eyes.

Curiously, a wave of calm assurance swept over Marie as she peered at the girl, who quietly stared back at them. That is, until Bettyann, Tilda and Trish turned on her.

“What do you want?” said Bettyann. “Beat it, creep.”

“Scram, you freak,” said Tilda, “or I’ll wrap those dudley-doof glasses around your neck.”

“Yeah, run back to your mother, since your daddy doesn’t want you anymore,” said Trish. It was clear they knew this girl.

But she sat firm, showing no reaction. She appeared about their age, give or take a year.

“What are you doing here?” she said. “Leave the school alone.”

“Don’t tell us what to do, you filthy jerk,” said Tilda.

“If there’s anything resembling a brain inside that Neanderthal skull of yours,” responded the girl, “use it for once in your life. Go home, open a book if anyone in your house owns one, and learn something constructive.”

Bettyann and Tilda looked at each other, unsure what to say. Bettyann clenched her teeth in anger, along with the baseball bat she held. “You got five seconds to start running—”

“—Wait,” said Marie, staring at the spunky new girl. “Who is she?”

“The weirdo who transferred from Woldred a few weeks ago,” answered Trish.

“How come I haven’t seen you in school yet?” asked Tilda. “My mother said you just wander the streets, ‘cause your father is a wife-beatin’ drunk who ran off.”

“It doesn’t matter, Tilda, they’ll send this pantywaist right back to Woldred,” antagonized Bettyann, “with the rest of the dippy’s.”

“Tell me, Tilda,” said the girl with a sting of sarcasm, “How is Jack Salento doing?”

All their eyes shot toward Tilda, whose face tightened, clearly indicating this was uncomfortable subject matter.

“What do you know about him?” she asked, with an audible sizzle in her voice.

“Only what you blab to everyone, and what everyone else talks about,” answered the girl boldly. “But does he even know you exist?”

Tilda stood, fuming, unable to verbalize a response, though it appeared she was also a bit embarrassed. She quickly decided to return the emotional blow. “And what happened to your father? Tell the truth, or are you too ashamed of him?”

The girl bit her lower lip, suppressing some past deep emotion. “He died when I was young,” she said.

“He did not, liar,” said Trish. “I heard he ran off into the woods and never came back.”

“Why don’t you go run off too?” added Bettyann.

“You got no friends here,” said Tilda. “And you never will, so go get lost in Spookyhollow.”

“Shut up, Tilda,” said Marie sharply. “Maybe you should get lost.”

She took a step toward the victimized girl, as if to deflect her friends’ cruel insults. Since the night before, Marie had relapsed into wholly forgetting about her mother once again— leaving her with a muddled sadness, especially after hearing of someone losing a parent.

“Hey, Marie,” said Bettyann, “you can beat it too.”

“And *you* can shut up,” Marie shot back.

Marie further approached the girl, now noticing an oval-shaped scar at the top of her forehead. Something within Marie wanted to reach out to her. “What did happen to your father?” she asked.

“He died in war,” said the girl. “Fighting for what he believed in.”

Marie thought about the war her own father watched every night on the news and how irate it made him.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” consoled Marie. “I never had a mother. My father is all the family I’ve got.”

“Perhaps we understand each other a bit,” said the girl.

“Hey, beanpole,” said Bettyann, “if you tell anyone about this, like the sheriff, I’m gonna find you and bust your head open.”

The girl engaged the kickstand of her bike and got off. She defiantly stepped forward. Bettyann raised her bat. Tilda yanked something from her back pocket. With a flick of her wrist, she revealed a switchblade.

“Just remember something,” said the girl, “you can do whatever you like, but they’re always watching you.”

“Who’s watching?” asked Trish, nervously glancing around.

The nameless girl simply lifted a finger and pointed toward the outskirts of the village and the edge of the woods. “They are. And one day, they’ll get you.”

Tilda’s fingers tensed around her knife. “You are a freak,” she said.

“I challenge each of you to prove how tough you are,” said the girl.

“I’ll prove it right now,” said Tilda, furiously. She came at the girl until they stood face to face. Tilda dangerously stuck the blade of her knife at the girl’s neck. But the girl leaned in yet closer. Both stared long moments into each other’s eyes. Either was not about to back down ... until the bully relented from her adversary’s defiance. Through her disheveled locks of hair, Tilda blinked first.



“Put that down before you hurt yourself,” said the girl. “I *dare you*, right now to go up into the woods with me.” Bettyann and Trish glanced at one another.

“You’re so bent on frightening others,” continued the girl, “to use a tragedy years ago where many people died, to now scare more people. Well let’s see how brave you are. Let’s go into Spellhollow Wood.”

Tilda lowered her knife and stepped back. Marie was stunned, seeing this plucky girl emotionally turn the tables on her cruel friends. She stepped up, grinning. “I’ll go.”

“What are you doing, Marie!” said Trish. “No one goes into Spookyhollow. No one, unless they’re out of their mind.”

Marie stood directly in front of the three nasty girls. She stuck her index finger straight in Bettyann’s face. “Admit it,” she said. “You’re scared stiff!”

“And you’re not?” asked Bettyann.

“Nope,” answered Marie, “My father told me there’s nothing to be scared about the woods anymore than Halloween. It’s just baloney, so let’s go now, all of us!”

“You’re full of it, Marie,” said Tilda. “Everyone knows what happened to your mother a couple years ago. You act like everything’s normal, but it never was and you and your idiot father are living a crazy, fat lie.”

“My mother?” said Marie, oblivious. “Whose mother? What are you talking about?”

“Let them run back home,” said the girl calmly, “while you and I go into the woods.”

Marie walked up to the clever, outspoken girl and extended her hand. Apart from her forehead scar, there was something odd about the girl’s face.

“I’m Marie.”

“My name is Courinn,” answered her new friend.

Marie turned back to face what were now her three opponents. “You’re ridiculous,” she said. “You’re all more scared of the woods than anyone. Well, *fidleedee*, you’re not getting away with this. You either come with us now, or I will tell everyone in school tomorrow how you chickened out!”

This was too much for an overbearing bully like Bettyann to contemplate very long.

“What about stealing the projector and our plan?” she asked.

“I don’t want to do it anymore,” said Marie.

Bettyann took a deep breath. “Okay, Marie. You lead, we’ll go.”

“I’m not going in there!” cried Trish.

“We’ll go together,” said Tilda. “We’ll show both of these morons that—”

“—No way, I WON’T!” shouted Trish. With that, she leapt upon her bicycle and rode

off like mad. After a long moment, the four remaining stared at one another. The sun was beginning to set. The day would soon end.

“One down, four to go,” said Marie.

“There’s not much sun left,” said Bettyann. “Let’s go tomorrow instead.”

“The sooner we start,” said Courinn, “the sooner we’ll come back out and call it a day.”

The four of them got on their bikes, rode out from the schoolyard and headed for the dark edge of the trees. For the very first time in their lives, they were going to enter Spellhollow Wood.



### *Chapter 3*

#### **Remembering the Past**

The woodland trail known as Luck's End Loop was a narrow dirt road leading out from the village of Highland Pointe into the forest. Barely wide enough for a single vehicle, it ran a thirteen mile loop circling the northern then southern banks of Lake Quinowa until it reached the point where it started. As Highland Pointe was surrounded on three sides of the woods, the road was mainly used by the sheriff and his people, offering them a convenient and quick access route when there was some need or trouble that had to be investigated. It was unofficially off limits to anyone else and back in those days it was known to many as the most feared stretch of road in Gulliver County. It was also known as the 'front door' into Spellhollow Wood.

Courinn now excitedly peddled her bike along that same road with Marie just behind. Tilda and Bettyann reluctantly trailed them, casting their eyes up uneasily as the edge of the woods crept closer and closer.

Courinn hit her brakes right where the dirt road plunged into the trees. They all skidded to a stop. Courinn looked back at them. "This is it," she said. "Everyone still in?"

"Yep," said Marie. "It doesn't even look that scary."

Marie underscored an irony about the woods' appearance. As old as it was, with all the commotion about its spookiness and strangeness, from the outside it hardly looked more foreboding than a simple patch of trees between houses. The magic, if it were magic, was that only once you were inside did the woods appear to be another place completely.

"Both of you shut up," said Tilda, the fear in her voice obvious.

"Let's get this over with," said Bettyann.

"In we go," said Courinn. She pulled up on her handlebars, popping a wheelie, then dropped her front wheel as she sped into the woods. Marie followed with a shout of approval. As she passed over the woods' threshold, Marie hadn't a clue how her whole life would soon completely change.

Bettyann and Tilda sourly glanced at each other. They were usually the ones who coerced others to do what they wanted. They were not used to being so easily manipulated. Now they had no choice, school reputations were on the line. Into the woods they rode.

Within fifty yards, the road took a sharp turn left, and they could no longer see where they entered. The woods quickly swallowed them up. And indeed, the look of it changed almost as quickly. The trees appeared older and stronger. The open sky above disappeared under a thickly branched roof. As they rode on, all about them was the growing feeling of a place set apart from the everyday world. The thing that emphasized this the most was the lack of sound within the wood. It was so very quiet: peaceful, yet disturbing, as if everything around them were sharply aware of their presence.

They rode on for some five minutes when Courinn, still in the lead, slowed her bike and stopped. The others halted behind her, staring around them.

“This is it?” asked Tilda, her arrogance quickly returning. “This is what all the boohoo is about? So it’s quiet. The woods are old. Big deal. I told you I’ve never been afraid of these woods, man. I’ve never been afraid of nothin’.” Courinn and Marie exchanged an amusing glance.

“Wait ‘till I tell everyone at school tomorrow I went into Spellhollow Wood,” said Bettyann.

“And saw nothing but trees,” said Marie. “Because that’s all there is. My father was right.”

“Oh, dig it, what if we could set up secret tours for like a dime each and get some of the sixth graders in here?” suggested an always-scheming Bettyann.

“Shhh,” interrupted Marie. “Listen. What’s that?”

A sound suddenly emerged through the trees: laughing, eerie laughing— coming at first from ahead of them, then behind. Soon it was all around them.

“Who is that?” asked Marie, her eyes carefully scanning the area. “Who’s there?” she called aloud.

“*What* is that?” said Tilda. “That doesn’t sound—”

“—Normal,” said Bettyann. Their arrogance was quickly replaced with fear again. The laughing seemed to move around them, getting softer, then louder at random. It was unnerving and frightening.

Tilda pointed through the trees. “Look!”

Peering in the direction she indicated, they all saw something: vague forms, glowing through the trees, shimmering and wavering in the air— as if floating.

“Whoa!” started Bettyann, not believing her own eyes.

“Ghosts ... Real ghosts!” stammered Tilda.

The laughter around them seemed to rise in pitch at their exclamations. The color drained from both Tilda and Bettyann’s faces.

“Trish was right!” said Tilda. “Let’s haul out of here!”

“You can hang around the dead people!” said Bettyann. She spun her bike and bolted off along with Tilda, peddling furiously, back the way they came.

Marie watched them race away, then turned back to the floating, glowing shapes, studying them through the trees, already noticing they were lessening in brightness and dropping closer to the ground.

“Wait a second”, she said, as she took a few steps closer. She peered again as the strange laughing ceased. Then Marie continued, undaunted, off the road into the trees.

“You shouldn’t leave the road,” cautioned Courinn. “It’s very dangerous in these woods.”

“I think you know what we’re both looking at,” said Marie. “Come on.”

Courinn followed Marie until they got closer to the floating shapes. They came upon a large rock formation—the woods were full of them—and found they were staring at streaks of sunlight which had narrowly broken through the trees. The failing sun steadily dropped, leaving glowing shapes upon the rocks. Nothing more.

Marie shook her head and grinned. “So much for ghosts. There’ll be one more story to talk about in the village tomorrow.”

Courinn smiled. “Like you said, Marie, they were the ones who were really scared. You were the brave one.” Marie looked around, noticing the strange laughing had stopped.

Courinn peered into the trees. “Come out and meet our new friend,” she called out.

From the woods appeared a thin, dark-haired boy with sullen eyes. He was followed to their left by another, also dark haired, but of larger build. Lastly, behind them emerged a fair-haired, fair-faced boy. They looked about the same ages as Marie and Courinn, yet were dressed quite differently— like folk did from some time ago.

“I wasn’t expecting that,” said Courinn to the light-haired boy. “The laughing, I mean.”

“We taught ourselves,” he answered, “so if strangers in the wood ever got too—”

“— Perion, you talk too much,” said the stockier boy, “to just anyone.”

“You can trust me, Brage,” said Courinn.

“I do,” said Brage.

“Trust or not,” added the thinner boy, barely looking up, as if not wishing to draw much attention. “The wood has many ears and eyes.”

“Right now,” said Perion, the flaxen-haired lad, motioning to Marie, “I’m sure she’s concerned about trusting us.”

“You are a bold one,” said Brage to Marie, who stood blinking in some confusion, trying to take in the situation.

“Her name is Marie,” said Courinn. “From what little I know already, she does appear courageous.” She then pointed to each boy. “This is Tybain, Brage and Perion.”

“Hello,” said Marie to all three of them.

Tybain offered a curt nod to Marie. Brage stepped up and gently took her hand, which she then respectfully offered. But with Perion, Marie keenly sought out his glance and firmly held it, and they shared a kind of reaffirming moment. Then, slightly embarrassed, they both smiled at one another.

“Thank you, Perion. Thanks to all of you,” said Courinn, “for getting rid of those other two. Challenging them was not part of our plan. I guess they got under my skin.”

“Where did you find them?” said Tybain. “*I’ve never been afraid of nothing*,” he mimicked. “Morons.”

“However it turned out, I am glad we could help,” said Brage. But we’ve got to get back. Perion, heads up, stay sharp.”

“Tell the professor I’ll be fine,” he replied.

“That’s what you said last time,” said Brage, smiling. “We’ll see you ... soon.” Tybain motioned a quick goodbye. They both turned and quickly disappeared back through the woods, hardly making a sound. The silence returned. The light was falling fast as Perion and Courinn eyed Marie carefully.

“Have enough questions now?” said Courinn.

“Where do I start?” asked Marie.

“Perhaps with some answers first,” stated Courinn. “Just a few weeks ago, Perion found something not far from here.”

Perion stepped up, his attention firmly fixed upon Marie as he withdrew something from under his worn shirt.

“Do you recognize this?” he said, revealing a small crystal globe on a fine silver necklace. Instantly, a pang of recognition swept over Marie, yet it appeared foggy and incomplete. She stepped toward Perion as he gently placed the globe and necklace into her raised palm. As soon as it touched her skin, the globe began to glow dimly.

“Whatever this is, we’re pretty certain it has something to do with you,” said Courinn. “Look into it.”

Marie held up the necklace, peering into the ever-brightening orb as dusk fell about them. Inside was what looked like a splinter of coal floating within a greenish fluid. And then something else emerged, as if out of the depths of the growing light: a face, blurry at first, but quickly growing sharper. Kindly expressive eyes gave way to a gentle mouth that had many times in the past shimmered in a beautiful smile, yet had not now in quite some time. It was the face of Marie’s mother.



She recognized her daughter before Marie understood what she was staring at. Loving eyes quickly filled with tears of joy. And then it seemed all time stood still and she spoke, and Marie heard her as clear as anything she’d ever heard before.

“Emily— I’m still with you,” said her mother through her jubilation and sorrow. “You have to find me, my sweetheart. Only you can save me— only you. I’ve missed you so much, Emily Marie.”

As if a vast, impenetrable gateway burst, something deep, deep inside Marie’s memory cleanly unlocked itself and shattered open. In an explosive rush of sudden revealed consciousness, the events of three years ago immediately became crystal clear.

It was all too fast and overwhelming. Her legs gave out as she stumbled forward into Perion, who caught her, panting wildly, trying her very best to instantly reconcile the false present with the real past. After a brief inner struggle, Perion along with Courinn gently lowered Marie to the ground where, on her knees, head in her hands, she cried aloud tears long held inside.

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, mommy,” sobbed Marie, pulling at her own dark hair in exasperation and guilt. “I’ve missed you too, everyday.” It took several minutes before Marie slowly regained control of herself. When she raised her head again, Courinn and Perion helped her to her feet.

“Are you all right?” Courinn asked. Marie nodded and took a deep breath. As she wiped away her tears, there was now a fierce determination upon her face, a sense of steadfast purpose. She opened her hand, revealing the amulet, no longer glowing. Marie raised the necklace and carefully placed it around her neck. “Please show me where you found this,” she said.

The daylight was nearly gone, but it hardly mattered. Courinn and Perion, especially Perion, seemed to know their way through the woods as easily as Marie knew her way to school. There was a pale bluish light about them probably from whatever moonlight could get through the ceiling of trees above, at least enough for Marie to see the ground and her feet as she quickly followed her two new friends.

They soon emerged into a ravine surrounded by jagged cliffs of rock rising above them. Perion approached one of the rocky outcrops and stuck his hand into a section of the stone, which formed a natural shelf, yet also regressed into the rock looking like a convenient cave, where a small animal might have once made a home.

“A few weeks ago, I spent the night here,” explained Perion. “Needing brush for my fire, I reached into this shelf as my fingers came upon the charm, covered in leaf and dirt.”

Marie studied the area in confusion. Then, looking up into the cliff heights she quickly understood. “Yeah, there it is,” she said, pointing up. “I see it, I know where we are.” She ran out from the ravine circling along the edge of the cliff’s base, with Courinn and Perion following.

A minute later, she emerged from the woods edge. Next to her was the narrow dirt road:

Luck's End Loop. There was the pathway leading up from it, toward the place she knew so well: the rock ledge. Now out of the woods, a waning crescent moon was shining above. Marie ran up the path with a seemingly boundless energy that nearly challenged even the nimble Perion.

Standing upon the ledge, Marie hesitated and suddenly shivered, as if a cold wind had blown about her. After it passed, she carefully moved to the ledge brink and looked down. Below, she could see the very spot they stood minutes ago, where Perion found the amulet.

"You found my mother's necklace," explained Marie. "Which I threw over this ledge three years ago." The cold again passed over her. She shivered as her thoughts returned to those very moments just before it all happened. A moment later Marie blinked, shaking off those evil memories. She moved inward to the center of the ledge and sat down. She curiously raised the amulet around her neck.

"My mother told me to take it, keep it safe and never let it go. But what did I do? What did brave Marie do?"

Marie turned, stooped and picked up a small rock. She squeezed her eyes shut in pain recalling her actions. Her arm shot forward, whipping the stone over the rock ledge down into the ravine below.

"I threw it away. Threw it away like it was a piece of garbage. And when I looked back at my mother ... something horrible took her." Her voice broke and tears began again. She stood and turned to face her friends. "That was the last time I saw her, until now."

And then another thought occurred to Marie as her gaze drifted off in the direction of the moonlit woods. How could all this have been so? She touched the globe hanging from her neck. How could this thing do what it had done if magic did not exist, like her father always said?

Marie peered into the amulet as it began to dimly glow again. The waning crescent above shone down on her. "I promise— whatever it takes. I'm going to somehow find her."

## *Chapter 4*

### **Dark Pools and Enemy Trees**

Marie wanted to start the search that very moment, but knew she could not. She had to get back home and face the inevitable: another lecture from her father followed by yet another grounding sentence for returning after dark. But she wasn't troubled. After knowing the truth, Marie badly wanted to see her father and wrap her arms around him. She now fully empathized with what he had been through these past three years— how he must have felt losing not only his wife, but a part of his daughter too. Marie's heart broke imagining this as she madly peddled her bike home.

Perion had led them back to where they left their bikes. They agreed to meet again by sunrise at the path leading to the rock ledge. Both Perion and Courinn had pledged to help Marie in any way they could. Though she only met them hours ago, Marie already trusted both completely. They delivered to Marie the truth of what her life had really been these past years. Nothing the globe amulet had shown her could be a hoax of any sort, the kind of trick Bettyann or Tilda would have loved to play on a vulnerable, unsuspecting victim. The amulet had woken up forgotten memories and feelings deep inside Marie. She knew this was all too real.

“Dad, I'm okay, I'm very sorry,” said Marie as she rushed through the front door. “I know I'm so late.”

Her father was sitting inside the living room, appearing as if he'd been staring out of the window for some time. He took an exasperated, if not a tad relieved breath as he stood.

“This has to end, Marie,” he said. “I can't keep you locked inside your room day and night, but if I have to, I'll take away everything that's important to you.”

“Something's already done that,” thought Marie to herself, remaining silent as her finger lightly stroked the charm now safely in her pocket. Her father wasn't done. She knew there was more to come.

“Two weeks grounded, after school and weekends,” he said sternly. “That includes no horse riding. I don't want you near those knucklehead friends of yours.”

“Whoa, he's really mad,” thought Marie. She stared at her father with what normally would have been anger at hearing her punishment; she instead felt sadness and emptiness for him— and her. She really wanted to hug him tightly, this moment.

“I'm sorry, dad,” she said. “I know how angry you are with me.” She could hold back



no longer. She ran to him and threw her arms around him. James was genuinely surprised at this reaction, even more so at how tightly she embraced him. It had been years since he saw a display of emotion like this from his daughter. She peered up at him as he softly touched her tear-dampened cheeks.

“Are you okay, Marie?” he asked.

“Yes,” she answered immediately as if to comfort him.

“What happened tonight? What’s wrong?” he asked, his concern suddenly mounting.

“You don’t have to ever worry about me hanging around Bettyann or the others,” she answered. “I don’t want them near me anymore.”

She hugged him even harder. Fulfilling a long overdue ache, he let his arms drop around her with a slow exhale and savored firmly hugging his only daughter, his only child. The only love James had left.

“Dad, things have changed,” said Marie. “I promise they have.”

That night, after her father put her to bed, Marie made her preparations. She packed her school book-bag with an extra set of clothes along with a compass, rain poncho, Swiss army knife, a filled water canister and some snacks. She then emptied her equine-shaped bank. In it was an envelope, which read, ‘Horse Saddle Savings’. She opened the envelope, checking her money— a fair amount saved for a thirteen year old— and stuffed it in her pants pocket for the morning. Then she sat down to write a letter.

“Dear Dad,

I understand now what you’ve been through over the last few years. It must have been so tough, bringing me back and forth to the doctor and never seeing me get better. But you always showed me how much you loved me when mom was gone, and I’m so proud that you’re my father. I’m sorry for all the trouble I’ve gotten into again and again, and for making things so hard, and you worrying about me. Now I know what it was like to lose mommy and how much you miss her. But dad, I promise, things are going to be good again for you and me ... and for mom. I promise you and I love you and I will see you again very soon. Please don’t worry about me, I am fine, I’m with some new friends, you will like them, not like those other knuckleheads. Soon we’ll be together again and then mommy can see us play chess and watch the space show and pointed ears guy with us.

Daddy, you made a mistake about one thing. Sometimes magic is real.

I love you, your Marie”

When Marie woke up some hours later, it was still dark outside. She couldn’t sleep much anyway with the thoughts in her head. As she got dressed, she slipped a beautiful pair of earrings through her newly pierced ears, realizing now they were her mother’s. She left the letter she wrote on her pillow.

She opened the screen latch on her bedroom window, which Marie long ago had rigged to easily get out of the house, unnoticed. She had used it only a few times, mostly for her escapades with Bettyann, Tilda and Trish. In two minutes, Marie was standing outside her window in the moist spring air. Her bike was waiting in the yard, where she purposely left it instead of the garage. She slung her book-bag between the handlebars.

Her first stop was school, where Marie made her way straight to the window she broke only hours ago. She pulled out the envelope of her savings, with a scotch-taped note reading, "For Broken Window, I'm Very Sorry" and placed the money inside. Then she rode off, hoping she didn't run into the sheriff or his men patrolling at this early hour.

Courinn was waiting for her when she arrived at the meeting point, at the path leading up to the rock ledge, just as the sun was rising in a thick, orange haze.

"Did you get any sleep?" asked Marie.

"A little," answered Courinn, swiping her hair aside. Doing so, Marie suddenly noticed what was unusual about Courinn's face: despite her black hair, she had bright yellow, almost golden eyebrows. "Did you get in trouble?" she added.

"Grounded two weeks. How 'bout you?"

"Just about the same."

"Oh man, I'm sorry," said Marie. "Look, I can't ask anything from you and Perion, this is something I have to do."

"We want to help," said a voice above them. As they looked up, Perion leaped down from a high tree branch with little effort, where he had been listening. He really was incredibly agile for his age.

"How long have you been up there?" asked Marie with an amused grin. "Did you get into trouble too for being out so late?"

"No," said Perion. "I don't have school to worry about, it's a little different for me."

"No school!" exclaimed an envious Marie.

"We learn plenty from the professor," said Perion.

"Who is the professor?" asked Marie.

"You'll meet him soon. If you still want our help."

“Of course I do,” said Marie. “You’ve both been so kind but I don’t know what’s ahead for me or how dangerous it’s going to be.”

“We sort of feel a part of things now,” said Courinn.

“We brought you the charm that got you started,” said Perion. “We’d like to see things to the end, if you understand.”

Marie smiled warmly. She really had found two remarkable new friends. She pulled the globe out from her pocket and placed it around her neck. “So, where do we start?”

“We go see the professor,” answered Perion. “He knows something about that globe charm. I thought I once saw him with it, maybe a year ago so he must have had it or had one just like it. He’ll know what to do next.”

“What’s he like?” asked Marie. “He’s not ... mean, is he?” She had heard stories of a crazy mad scientist who lived somewhere near the edge of the woods and was wondering if this professor was the same person.

“Professor Mifflin is like a father to me and my friends,” assured Perion. He has taken care of us for a while now. He’s looking forward to meeting you, Marie. You’ll like him, I’m sure.”

“He’s cool,” said Courinn, “and he’s good to young people.

“All right, lead the way,” said Marie.

They followed the path back to Luck’s End Loop, once again entering the wood. The rising sunlight faded a bit as they entered, leaving a pale ambience around them.

After a short distance, Courinn had them hide their bikes in an area of thickly fallen tree trunks. With a scattering of leaves over them, they could not be easily seen. Then Perion led them forward away to their right. Marie checked her compass in confusion as they walked. “This doesn’t make sense. It says we’re moving south and a little to the west.”

“That device is not going to be any use in here,” said Courinn.

“We’re heading due northeast right now,” said Perion.

Marie bit her cheek and shook her compass. Reading the same result, she replaced it in her book bag. “How far is the professor’s house?”

“Some four miles from here,” answered Perion. “Let’s hope we catch an easy time of it. We should be there by midday.”

“Four miles?” said Marie. “You went all that way home and back this morning?”

Perion said nothing as Marie noticed he wore the same clothes as yesterday, only looking a tad more rumpled. She then knew he had slept in the woods.

On they went, with Perion leading. He appeared quite at ease moving through the wood, familiar with their direction. To Marie, it seemed an endless sea of woodland. There were no clear paths, only occasional remains of old trails. She also noticed Courinn showed a real sense of sure-footedness within the forest. As they plunged deeper, the trees grew ever closer together.

“Courinn, it looks like you’ve been in the woods a lot,” said Marie.

Courinn smiled. “I have. My father also told me much about it before he died. By the way, Marie, I want to thank you for what you did.”

“Me? When?”

“You defended me, someone you just met yesterday, in front of your friends.”

“They’re not my friends anymore,” said Marie.

“But unlike them, you gave me the benefit of doubt,” said Courinn. “That took courage and meant much to me. Thank you again.”

“Your welcome,” said Marie.

An hour or more passed. They walked in single file, still following no visible path. Perion would at times touch a particular tree or trees to confirm that they were traveling correctly. In spite of the woods’ calm, there were on several occasions’ strange sounds echoing in the distance. Marie could not discern what they might be, as the noises were unlike anything she had ever heard before.

There were occasional bird sightings. In particular, Marie spotted two large owls perched in the heights above, peering down, as if in suspicion they might be up to something no good. The amount of insect life was different too, much less than Marie normally saw in the spring. She was particularly surprised by one fact: the total absence of the mayfly, a yearly annoyance that the folk of Gulliver County dreaded each year at this time. They hatched and went about their business in swarms of armies until they were gone again within a month. Where were they now?

The pale daylight remained nearly the same, despite the fact that the sun outside was reaching mid-morning— leaving them little clue as to the time of day. The smell of the woods was also different: a light, sweet fragrance that Marie could not place, but was pleasing and seemed to somehow put her at ease as she readily took it into her lungs. Yet

there was nothing stranger than this so far. Marie was thinking again that perhaps Spellhollow Wood was really not the big deal everyone thought it was.

“How far have we come?” she asked, annoyed with carrying her book-bag. She was getting a bit tired, not having slept well.

“We should be reaching the final stretch, if we’re lucky,” answered Perion. “I don’t sense many changes in the woods today. We’ve done all right”.

“Changes in the woods?” Marie asked. “What kind?”

“Many kinds, sometimes extreme,” he answered. “The wood has a mind and will of it’s own. Are you tired?” he added, seeing her annoyance with the book-bag.

She nodded. “A bit hungry too. I brought some snacks for us.”

“There’s a place right up ahead we can stop and rest.”

They went on a little ways more until they heard a new sound. Perion stopped short and listened keenly. It was like a gurgling noise, Marie thought. They cautiously advanced. Yes, it was a gurgling, bubbling sound as if something thick and creamy were boiling. Courinn and Perion glanced at one another and Marie caught the concern in their eyes.

“That couldn’t be what I think it is,” said Courinn.

“What?” asked Marie.

Perion eyed a slight ridge just ahead of them, the place he thought to rest. “We’ll approach warily,” he said. “Be on the alert, Courinn. Marie, stay behind us.”

They drew nearer. The sound grew much louder, like a gooey bubbling of something quite dense. As they crested the ridge, Perion put his arm out, holding them from approaching further. “Stay back,” he said quickly as they each gazed ahead.

It was a shimmering black pool set in a recess beyond the ridge. No more than ten feet in length, either way. However, as the noise revealed, it thickly bubbled and boiled. But in spite of this activity, its dark-gooiness was mirror-like. Within it, all the woods were keenly reflected, making the pool particularly intoxicating to the senses. Marie seemed more hungry and thirsty than ever while staring at it. She really wanted to go closer.

“It looks so beautiful,” she said, while sniffing at the air, for the pool exhibited a sweet, wholesome aroma, which seemed to Marie like some luscious candy or freshly baked cake. She took an eager step toward it.

Both Perion and Courinn grabbed her fast. Marie seemed suddenly lost in her senses as

she struggled to get closer. "Let me just touch it and feel what it's like," she wished aloud.

"No, do not go near it," warned Courinn. "That pool is quite deadly."

Marie pushed hard against Perion and Courinn's grip. "Turn her away!" said Perion. "Stop her from staring!"

"Let me go!" cried Marie, now desperately struggling to get away.

They managed to spin Marie around with her back facing the pool, and as soon as they did so, she was easier to hold. Though she calmed down in the next few moments, Marie continued sniffing at the pool's sugary odor, which still kept a hold on her. Perion and Courinn backed her away a distance, until she at last regained control.

"What was that thing?" asked Marie.

"The lair of a gight," said Courinn. "A deadly creature that lives under the ooze. The monster uses its bubbling slime to attack unsuspecting victims. As it draws them closer, it pulls them in, where they are never heard from again."

"It looked and smelled so delicious," said Marie, still licking her lips from the effects of the demon's trap.

"Which *you* would have been to the gight," said Perion, "if you got any closer. It might smell tempting, but the pool is a quick-killing poison if one drinks from it."

"Are we safe now?" asked Marie.

"If we stay away," said Perion. "The demon itself can't come out. But I wonder at it having moved to this part of the wood. We must let the professor know."

"The gight's lair can move about anywhere within the woods," said Courinn, "sometimes inhabiting several pools at a time. As I understood, it normally resides within Spellhollow's western region, miles from here."

"If it did catch you," wondered Marie, "is there any way to get free?"

Perion shook his head, not knowing. "No," said Courinn. "But it's been told that you might elude the monster's luring spell by covering your eyes and holding your breath as you approach the pool. It's believed that might be the only way to kill the creature."

"Not something I'd ever care to try," said Perion. "Let's move on quickly."

They walked on for another ten minutes perhaps, when Perion found a nice spot for them to sit and relax a bit. It was a grassy glade under the overhang of two grand oak trees.

Marie opened her book-bag and took out her water canister and some crackers and pretzels, which they all shared.

There was a large hump in the tree trunk she leaned against, so she made herself comfortable resting her head on it. She was hungrier than she realized as she eagerly munched on the snacks, reflecting on all the walking they had done so far.

“What time do you think it is?”

“Late morning,” said Perion, surveying the glade and the surrounding wood. He didn’t seem to be very hungry, barely chewing a few pretzels. He glanced up into the heights of the oak trees they were under and narrowed his gaze, as if trying hard to remember something.

“I would be in social studies right now,” said Marie. “If it was a normal school day.”

“What is so normal about school?” said Courinn, nibbling some crackers.

“Did you like it over at Woldred better?” asked Marie. “I heard the teachers there are so much meaner than here at Highland Pointe.”

“I suppose they’re the same to me,” said Courinn. “Boring”.

“From what I’ve heard, all school seems to be pretty dull,” said Perion, lightly running his fingers against the bark of a thick tree branch.

Marie’s shoulder was uncomfortable. “Sometimes,” she said, “but I like English. And Science too, because we studied a lot about animals this year.”

Courinn’s interest perked up. “Do you like animals?”

“Very much, but especially horses,” said Marie. “I’ve been riding and helping take care of two Arabian’s over at the Mashenburg farm. I hope they’ll be safe while I’m gone.”

“Horses?” said Courinn. “Yes, I have a certain affinity for them too.”

“Of all animals,” said Marie, again shifting her shoulder uncomfortably around the tree’s hump, “I think they’re the best friends we have.”

“Agreed,” said Perion, with an admitted grin. “Noble and steadfast.”

“Do you both ride?” asked Marie excitedly.

“Do I?” said Courinn. “A little, here and there.”

Perion smiled. “Very much,” he said, “But how I miss the breeds we have back home, who move as if upon the wind.”

“I want to be an equine veterinarian when I get older,” said Marie.

Courinn nodded. “I think you would be a very good one.”

Marie smiled, once more noticing the scar on Courinn’s forehead. She was going to ask her about it, but instead turned in frustration, to somehow settle comfortably against the tree. She froze, staring in confusion. The large hump behind her right shoulder was now ... behind her left.

“What the heck?” she said to herself. But her confusion was halted by a shout from Perion. Looking back up, her eyes met an incredible sight. The thick branch that Perion was touching moments before had somehow lurched itself backwards— straight across his throat— where it trapped him against the oak tree’s trunk. Courinn was already up, trying to pry the branch away. As she pulled and heaved, it did not seem like the thick limb was choking Perion as it might easily have, but instead was simply holding him there. He could not move out from it.

Marie leapt to her feet. She tried her best to make some visual sense of what was happening. It was a truly bewitching thing to see. Both oak trees were not simply wafting back and forth, as they might during a storm, but were indeed *moving*.

Actually, you could not see the trees in motion as we know it, yet they were in fact shifting right before your eyes, as if their movements took place between eye blinks. It was like watching a movie in very slow motion, with the trees’ positions changing every few moments. Only the terrible groaning sounds that began deep from within their roots and continued pulsing upwards gave this spectacle of unworldly motion any kind of reference, adding a ghastly soundtrack to the bizarre special effect one was convinced they must be staring at.

Marie jumped next to Courinn as they both struggled to pry the branch from Perion. In seconds, it was far worse. Other thick branches of the tree had seized and pinned Perion’s arms and torso. He was now fully trapped.

“Can you breathe?” cried Courinn as Perion tried moving his locked head and neck.

“Yes, it’s not choking me!” he shouted. “It just won’t let me move!”

Marie stepped back, trying to quickly reassess the situation. She saw the other oak tree had begun entangling itself among the one holding Perion. Its limbs intertwined like hungry, searching arms as its massive trunk moved right along side the other. Marie then realized the true horror: The tree that held Perion was *fighting against* the other.



Whatever it wanted from Perion, it wasn't about to share. The deep groaning became louder and more ferocious, sounding like a hundred trees moaning and creaking against a house during a magnificent storm. It sounded furious. Both great oaks now bitterly fought over Perion.

Marie began to notice marks appearing all over the trunks, roots, and branches of the enraged tree-like combatants that were not there before. They were cuts, as if someone savagely took an axe or saw to both trees, hundreds of times. Some were shallow and superficial. Others looked very old and partially grown over like thick scars, yet many were new and very deep with thick sap dribbling out of them.

Perion cried out, now buried in a sea of tangled branches. Part of his hand and arm was changing. His fingers were turning into twigs and small branches themselves. His skin was starting to form into the color and texture of bark.

“No, stop it!” shouted Marie. “Let him go!”

The trees groaned on, but their tone was now different. They seemed to be groaning in pleasure. They were forcing Perion to change— transforming him into what they were.

“Marie!” cried Courinn desperately. “Help me, please!”

Marie panted in extreme fear. She wiped the tears from her eyes and took a deep breath. Then she turned and abruptly ran off.

Courinn couldn't believe it. “No, Marie, what are you doing!” she shouted in utter desperation. “I need your help, come back!”

But Marie was gone, running off into the woods ... .

“Perion won't make it, we need you!” cried Courinn.

“Marie!”

*Chapter 5*

**The Home of Professor Mifflin**

At eight forty-five earlier that morning, James Meehanan sat in Norwood Elementary School's main office, his haggard face a sweaty and pasty white. He burst through Sheriff Radich's door at eight a.m. sharp, frantic with the note that Marie had left on her pillow. The sheriff felt that no matter what had happened, he should first check with Marie's cohorts to see what they knew.

In walked Bettyann, Trish and Tilda, tight lipped and scowling, obviously not the first time they had been called into this office. Mr. Parcellis, the principal, followed right behind with the sheriff. James stood up, closely studying the three girls for any immediate clue, but they avoided his eyes. The principal, normally soft-spoken, loudly cleared his throat, startling them. He now wanted some answers.

"Mr. Meehanan woke to a letter this morning from Marie," began Mr. Parcellis, the note of urgency clear enough in his voice, "saying she would be going away for a while and for her father not to worry. If the three of you know anything at all about this, speak up now, right now."

Tilda and Trish glanced at Bettyann, who glared back at them, her eyes plainly instructing to keep their mouths shut. All three remained silent until Bettyann shook her head.

"What does that mean?" asked the sheriff. "Yes or no."

"We don't know where Marie is," replied Bettyann, play acting as innocently as she could.

"Are each of you certain you know nothing about this?" repeated the principal.

"We haven't seen her for a while," said Tilda. "We don't really like her anymore," she added, still avoiding James' stare.

"There's a prayer answered, James," said the sheriff, turning to the girls. "Ya' know," he admitted to them, "I've never been thrilled with how the three of you operate." It was an oft-repeated statement of his.

"All right, back to your classes," said Mr. Parcellis.

As the girls turned and began walking out, Sheriff Dan played his last card. "Remember

next month is the county fair,” he said. “If I find out any of you are lying, you’ll have community service for the whole month— on latrine duty. I know your friends will get a kick outta’ seeing that.”

The sheriff could not really enforce this kind of punishment on three young teens, but the girls didn’t know that. His threat worked as Trish, the weakest of the girls, hesitated. Bettyann and Tilda went to grab her, but too late.

“Wait, sheriff—” Trish began—

“—Shut up, Trish!” interrupted Bettyann.

“We saw her yesterday,” Trish admitted. “Her and that homeless Woldred girl tried making us go into the woods, and Bettyann and Tilda did, and they saw real ghosts and ran, but Marie stayed anyway. That’s where she must be still, in Spookyhollow!”

“Let’s go,” said the sheriff, already on his feet, motioning for James to follow. Passing the girls, the sheriff considered explaining that he could not make them do latrine duty. Then he realized he would no doubt need the same leverage with them in the future.

As they got into the sheriff’s car, James asked, “Where do we start?”

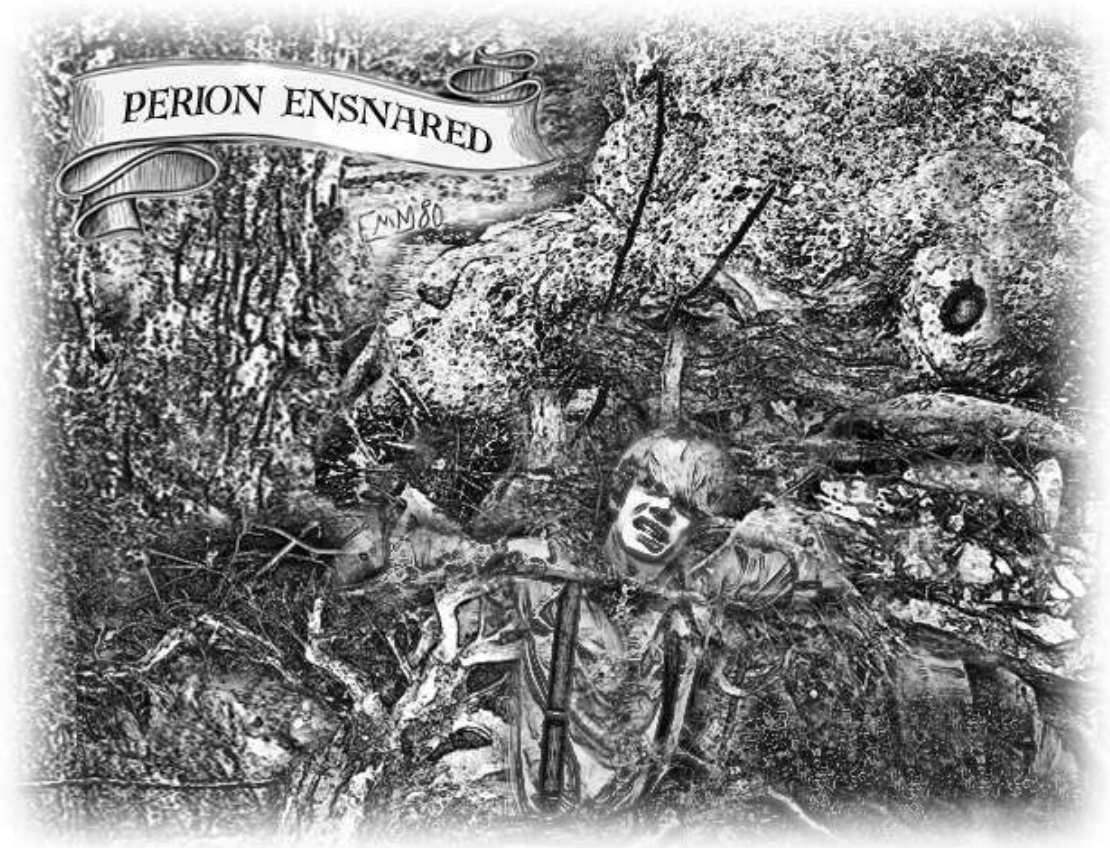
“Where I always start,” the sheriff answered. “Luck’s End Loop.”

Marie ran wildly through the woods as fast as she could— which was quite difficult as she was now running barefoot. Furthermore, in her hands she held both her sneakers, trying as best as possible to keep them steady. She stubbed her toes on rocks and acorns several times, shortly halting with shrill wails of “Ow!” But she kept on, relentlessly trying her best to remember the way they had come. She also hoped the woods would not change in size and direction as Perion and Courinn warned it sometimes did. She was scared out of her mind, but focused on where she was headed.

Perion gaped in terror at his arms, now almost fully formed into tree branches, with many other smaller branches and leaves sprouting out. Much of his hair had turned into a mess of weeds, as parts of his face continued to take on the stiff surface of tree bark.

He could not see Courinn anymore, being nearly submerged between the two massive oaks, who continued to battle for possession of him. He began to perceive in his mind a burning hatred between these two ancient trees. He could also barely hear a sound under the thunderous groaning around him, a noise like something hard being repeatedly stuck into live wood. While he knew what this was, he doubted it would save him. With each of these stabs, he felt in answer a quivering thrum inside the trees, which he thought indicated pain. But it did no good as he continued to be overwhelmed by numerous oaken limbs. He would soon be turned into something else completely.

“Leave me, Courinn!” he tried to shout, but it came out weak and garbled. “Save yourself and Marie!”



Perion then sensed his strength as he once knew it, beginning to take on a fresh vitality. He became aware of a new way to breathe, through the leaves of his own tree limbs— How to drink moisture through the roots buried deeply in the ground below. And he felt age suddenly thrust upon him. Hundreds of years of slow growth: inch-by-inch, year-by-year, and century-by-century. He gave the last of himself over to the powerful spells at work within, helplessly transforming into that which he had no will left to contest.

Marie burst back into the grassy glade. She wiped aside her horrified tears at seeing how the two massive trees had wholly overtaken Perion, no longer visible within their abominable rampage.

“Courinn, where are you?” she shouted out. She seemed to catch a quick glimpse of some black and gold streak before Courinn emerged from behind one of the trees with a jagged-edged stick in her hand.

Marie ran to her, holding out both her sneakers. Courinn didn’t understand until she looked inside them. They were filled as much as possible with the black bubbling ooze from the gight pool.

“Take one, careful don’t spill any!” said Marie. “There isn’t much. Quickly, pour it into the cuts on the roots and branches!”

Amazed, Courinn took a sneaker. They both converged on the oaks and began pouring a few drops into as many of the fresh open wounds as they could find— And there were scores of them. Almost at once, the groans of the trees turned into a raw, excruciating wail of pain. The branches and roots recoiled, stung from the poison of the black pool’s gook. Their wounds bubbled over with gray soot, which then traveled speedily as evidenced by their leaves, turning from bright green to gray to charcoal black.

Courinn poured the last of her poison as Marie emptied the last of hers into a deep root wound. As the enemy trees swooned in agony, Perion again emerged from their midst, his arms and face beginning to return to their original form. Marie and Courinn climbed up to reach him and swiftly pulled him from the loosened grasp of his captors. They dragged him off where he lay, conscious but exhausted.

“There are many stories about these two trees,” began Courinn. “It’s believed they were human once, men who for whatever reason in their mortal lives, hated one another so deeply, that a spell was cast upon them to live the rest of their days as great oaks. To grow old and forever be the victim of each other’s mercilessness. To carry out their hate for all days until the woods themselves disappear. They bear the centuries of wounds from unceasing years of battle, yet until today they could not die.”

“What did they want from Perion?” asked Marie.

“To be human again, to be the first to suck the life from a powerless victim. Yet I believe you have finally given them a blessing. Death.”

They watched as the brutally entwined giants bitterly fought with the very last of their strength. With a thunderous groan that weakened into a thin whine, both oak trees ceased their unearthly movement and froze still as any normal tree should. They appeared as two twisted, broken sentinels that had eventually strangled each other for food and water. If their dead portraits could have conveyed any words or emotion, it was clearly as vengeance and hatred.

As Perion began to come around, Marie let him finish drinking the water left in her canister. He then sat up and rubbed his arms.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

Perion smiled weakly. He stared at Marie and Courinn gratefully. “Many thanks to you. I’ve endured serious trials before, but that was the most desperate. How did you halt the mydrus attack?”

“Mydrus?” said Courinn. “Is that what they were called?”

“We call them that,” answered Perion. “Mydrus means ‘enemies’ where—” He hesitated. “—where I come from. They have fought within this area of the wood as long as I’ve known. Blast it, I should have spotted them in the glade right away!”

“You can thank Marie,” said Courinn, holding up one of Marie’s black-sooted sneakers. “She’s the one who really saved you.”

Perion gazed at it; the realization of Marie’s actions dawning on him in amazement. “The gight pool?” he asked. “You touched it? How did? —”

“—You said anyone could come near it with eyes closed and holding their breath.”

Both Perion and Courinn looked upon Marie in wonder. Perion bowed his head before her. “You have my solemn thanks, Marie.”

Marie smiled at Perion’s earnest show of respect. Then Courinn gently took Marie’s wrist, holding it up: revealing an ugly purplish bruise, trailing off into a black smear of the gight’s slime.

“It came after you, didn’t it?” Courinn asked. “Are you all right?”

Marie’s face grew uneasy. She quickly pulled her arm away. “Yeah,” she said. “How much farther to the professor’s house?”

“Less than an hour if we hurry,” said Perion. “With no more obstacles. Your shoes are no good now, Marie,” he added. “Take my boots for the rest of the way. I’ll be fine barefoot, I know this ground pretty well.”

Marie was surprised at how quickly Perion recovered from his ordeal with the mydrus trees. He showed little signs of any pain or fatigue as he led them on again at a brisk pace. He also offered to carry Marie’s book-bag the rest of the way.

The woods here seemed somehow tamer and less dangerous the farther they went in this direction. It was nothing she could really see, but she felt it. Curious as always, Marie asked why.

“You’ve a good sense about you,” said Courinn.

“We’re coming to the very eastern part of the wood, the farthest away from the Spellhollow region,” explained Perion. “It’s power and enchantment are the weakest here, leading to Lanask away up on the northeast border. And although he’d never admit it, I’d say the professor has something to do with it as well. He calls himself a scientist, but there’s more wizard about him than any science.”

As they walked behind Perion, Marie lightly tapped Courinn for her to lean close.

“Where is Perion from?” she asked softly. “He doesn’t dress like us. And he spoke about ‘back home’ a few times.”

Courinn smiled, but before she could answer, Perion, who heard her question clearly, answered, “Let’s see what the professor says about things first.”

After some three quarters of an hour had passed, they came to a well-used path, curving away to their left. Marie gradually noticed the sounds of birds’ sweet chirping and insects flying about. Perion began into a trot, as Courinn and Marie’s tired legs ran to keep up. In a few minutes, the path twisted between some rocky formations before opening into a wide clearing.

It was nearly a perfect half circle, and from its far side, a long driveway led to an old Victorian style house built right into the side of a single mountain face, flanked by sycamore trees. To the right of the house, a waterfall splashed down the mountainous slope emptying into a stream that led around the house, back into the woods. It was a charming structure with three floors plus a large singular room perched above its four gables at the very top with a full view of the surrounding grounds. It appeared to Marie a contented, homey place, looking especially comforting as she stroked her weary legs. Once again out in the open air, the first time since early that morning, the sun shone brightly with a warm, moderate breeze.

“The home of Professor Mifflin,” said Perion, turning to them. “I think you’ll like it here, that is, if they didn’t eat our lunch yet. As I mentioned, you’re expected, Marie.”

It was a house unlike any Marie had ever seen. Parts of it were very neat and orderly, while other rooms were cluttered beyond belief with endless books and papers and things piled from floor to ceiling. There were lots of bedrooms, but also a gymnasium, a laboratory of some kind with strange looking machines and even a big open area with a swimming pool. Then came a pleasant surprise: strolling down one of several long hallways, she peered out a window overlooking a paddock of eight horses and a barn. She gasped in excitement, as a voice sounded from behind her.

“Welcome Marie, I’m so glad you could make it.”

She turned to see a gentleman much younger than expected. He extended his hand. “I’m Raynor Mifflin. What a pleasure to meet you.” Marie shook his hand gently. She noticed a gold wedding band on his left hand.

He was no older than her father, maybe younger. Probably not much past thirty, still pretty old, but not nearly ‘professor’ old, which was supposed to be someone with messy gray hair, a bushy beard and old-style glasses.

“With six boys running around all the time,” he continued, “it’s always a nice change to have some sensible, female charm about. Wonderful to see you again, Courinn, how are you, dear?”

“Very well, sir,” she said. “We had a bit of an adventure this morning.”

At that moment, Brage and another boy of the same age appeared around a corner. He was taller than Brage; brown skinned and had an engaging smile, which he offered to Marie, who pleasantly returned it.

“Adventure?” asked the professor, a hint of concern in his voice.

The taller boy, Zendara, grabbed Perion from behind, playfully choking him. Perion laughed and played along fighting back.

“The mydrus trees,” continued Courinn. “They attacked us. That is, they attacked Perion.”

Perion slipped out of Zendara’s grasp, teasing him with a quick jab to his cheek. Zen tried to return it but missed, with his fingers only swiping air. The professor held his hand up, signaling the boys to stop.

“Perion, are you all right?” asked Mifflin.

“I am, professor. It was a bit touch and go, but I was saved by Marie’s quick thinking.” Mifflin and the others stared at Marie, eagerly waiting to hear this new tale.

“She collected some of the poison from a gight pool,” continued Courinn, “which we poured into the battle wounds of both trees.”

“She’s clever and brave, sir,” added Perion.

“I did what I thought was best,” said Marie. “I’m just glad it worked.”

Brage and Zendara gazed at Marie, then back to Perion.

“The mydrus trees,” said Zendara. “Wow.”

Brage lightly touched Perion’s shoulder in concern, his eyes asking, “*You’re sure you’re okay?*” Perion nodded and smiled. Brage was very fond and protective of Perion.

“Indeed?” said the professor, nodding his head in approval. “What a bold start to be sure. Let’s get Perion and our guests something to eat, and then we’ll all adjourn to the library to discuss what lies before us.”

Impatiently however, Marie reached under her shirt to show the professor the globe amulet. “Professor, please help me. Perion and Courinn gave me this—”



“—Not yet, dear,” interrupted Mifflin politely. “I do believe I can help with the riddle that globe has given you. But eat first and rest, then we will sit and talk.”

“But do you know what this charm is?” asked Marie persistently.

“I do, Marie. And I’m fairly certain I can tell you what happened to your mother.”

They enjoyed a late lunch outdoors on the deck that overlooked the waterfall. It was a hearty meal of ham and grilled cheese sandwiches and potato salad, followed by bowls of fruit and honey for dessert. The potato salad was the creamiest Marie had ever tasted. She was quite satisfied as she washed it all down with a tall glass of lemonade.

She stared out at the grassy clearing, surrounded by the woods perimeter. It looked so lovely and peaceful with the sun shining and the birds singing. Though this place was new to her, something made Marie feel safe here; she wanted to stay and just relax. Her injured wrist had been examined and cleaned by the professor, who respectfully asked without pressing what happened at the gight pool. His sincere concern along with his kindly manner eased Marie’s fear and she quietly told him. He listened carefully as he tended to her. When she was done, he kissed her softly on the forehead.

“Your mother is already so proud of you,” he said.

Finishing lunch, Perion led them inside, past many rooms to the center of the house where the main library was. As such, it had no windows, which Marie quickly guessed was intended to keep away prying eyes and ears. There at a large table sat Professor Mifflin, along with five boys. Like Perion, they each had long hair, almost down to their shoulders and looked roughly the same age, though Brage looked a bit older. Professor Mifflin stood as they entered.

“I hope you enjoyed your lunch, Marie,” he began, “I made the potato salad myself.” He began motioning to the boys. “You already know Brage and Tybain and you just met Zendara, whom we call Zen. That leaves Theel and Dyllion here. Dyllion had the longest hair of them all and he had a slight reddish color to his skin. But Theel was the most noticeable at first site. He had very blonde hair, yet what was odd were the thin scars along his cheeks, two on each side from the corners of his mouth, running upwards. They all nodded, welcoming Marie as Perion and Courinn sat down at the table.

“Everyone, this is Marie Meehanan from Highland Pointe,” said Mifflin. “She’s come to us amidst an urgent crisis. Please sit, Marie, make yourself comfortable.”

“Thank you all for helping me,” she said, taking an empty chair next to Perion. She quickly noticed only candles and old-fashioned gas lanterns lit the room. There were no regular lights with bulbs in them.

“You’re going to learn much today, Marie,” began the professor, his expressive eyes

which Marie noted, conveying a real sense of hope. “And I’m going to have a few long standing questions of my own answered. Please show us the gift you received.”

Marie withdrew from her neck the small round globe on its necklace. The object set off its usual faint glow. The boys looked on, curiously.

“This enchanted charm,” continued the professor, “was created for a single, specific purpose, though it appears to have other unusual powers as well. Look into it again, Marie.”

As Marie peered at the small chunk of black rock floating in green fluid, she quickly saw a blurry image of a face, which again became that of her mother. Marie’s eyes moistened in sadness, now mixed with some anger too.

“Keep looking, Marie,” said the professor. “There is yet more to see.”

Her mother faded. She saw nothing more. Then a new face appeared. Coming into focus, Marie saw it was no one she ever knew: an older man’s face, flush with anger but also fear. A voice began in a strange language, which Marie could not understand. At length the voice and face faded and the globe resumed its faint glow.

Marie looked up, bewildered. “Who was that?”

“He who created the charm,” answered the professor. His name was Thurle. He was a powerful gnome who lived within these woods. He was also a master craftsman. You saw him because this amulet has already begun to enshroud its power over you— some of its power, but not yet all— Not until you stand with it under a *full* moon. I assume you’ve already done so beneath a slighter lunar phase?”

Marie turned to Courinn and Perion, nodding. “Yes, I did, on the rock ledge. And I remember my mother mentioning the moonlight, when she first gave it to me.”

“She was trying to tell you how to activate some of the charm’s power,” explained Mifflin. “The moonlight creates an enchanted ‘conduit’ connecting you with anyone who has borne it. Had it been a full moon you stood within, you might have been able to understand Thurle’s words, among other things.”

“He ... died,” said Marie sadly. “Thurle did, I mean.”

“Yes,” said the professor. “You see and feel that now?”

“He was killed by something ... something terrible!” Marie shivered and shut her eyes, stuffing the globe amulet into her pocket, trying to whisk away whatever images or thoughts now haunted her mind’s eye.

"I'm afraid so," continued the professor. "One of the most feared and deadly things that still roams Spellhollow Wood."

Perion and the boys listened earnestly, now realizing the seriousness of the situation before them. They were used to the many perils of the woods, but it was unsettling to see those same dangers brought upon someone else.

"There are only two evils," said Brage, his expression of dread mirroring those of his companions, "that instill this sense of fear."

"But the most wicked of the two has been away," said Zendara, "and not troubled us for some time."

"So it's returned?" asked Dyllion.

"Doubt it," reasoned Tybain. "We would have known. Felt it. Heard of it. Something would have changed in the wood."

"Tybain is correct," said Mifflin. "Let's hope that evil does not come back any time soon, at least before you all return home. No, this is the other fell scourge that has long held Spellhollow in such terror."

"Gwylligwitch," said Perion, staring down, like he was peering through the table into some dark, hopeless void.

"The trollogre?" questioned Dyllion in confusion. "Does it really exist? We hear whispers of it, then it vanishes. How do we know it's not dead?"

"It's not dead," said Courinn. "It seems it has reemerged with an ever fierce hunger. I have been steadily hearing of its movements since early last year."

Marie stared at Courinn curiously, pondering some nagging questions. How could this girl her age know so much about the woods? If she was really from Woldred, when had she met the professor and these boys? She even spoke like them most of the time. How could she have traveled at her age so often in the woods without her mother knowing? Was she much older than she looked? And what about the boys? What were they doing here living with Professor Mifflin? Where were their parents? Where were they from? Marie had many things yet to learn.

"Far longer than that," said the professor. "It remained quietly near its home in Lake Gwindylo for decades, before at last daring to venture forth again. It's been at least *three years* since it's returned abroad, since that was when Marie's mother was attacked. Confusticate the blasted thing!"

The professor's words hit Marie like a sharp, heavy weight being dropped into her stomach. They quickly shook away her questions about Courinn.

"This thing?" she began, "is what took my mother?"

The professor hesitated for long moments, wishing there was a pleasant answer.

"Yes, Marie, I'm afraid so."

## *Chapter 6*

### **Gwylligwitch and the Exiles**

“Where is she now?” asked Marie in sudden alarm. “Is she in pain? Can I still find her and save her?”

“To answer your last and most important question,” said the professor, “I wouldn’t have had you come here to us if I didn’t think there were a very good chance to save your mother from this dreadful creature. How that will be done I’m not fully sure, but I do believe it is still possible. Let me begin this tale now and fill in all the missing parts as far as I know them, up until the present. We will then discuss the best way to proceed.”

The professor opened a thick notebook in front of him, and quickly thumbed to a page. He then jotted something down, before looking up.

“It’s almost certain that the trollogre, Gwylligwitch, as it has always been called, came from That Other Place, which we’ll not discuss now. From the research I’ve done, the monster has dwelt here in the wood some two or three centuries. It’s believed it lives within some dark cave or cavern, near the Lake Gwindylo in one of the most bewitched parts of the forest. It’s fair to say the creature lived mostly on the wild animals it found, in addition to the occasional unfortunate wanderer, which it caught with its unusual stealth and its especially formidable strength. It’s suspected to wield the brute force and fury of ten men.”

Mifflin paused, considering. “I must correct myself. I’ve been referring to the monster as ‘it’, which is inaccurate. By most accounts, it is believed the trollogre is female.”

As the professor let that fact settle in, he continued. “She otherwise quietly went about her way until some one hundred and sixty years ago when the legends say Gwylligwitch discovered her fierce desire for gold. The problem was, there was no sparkling hoard to be had in this area save for a few places. The easiest to find was the old mansion, in the very center of the wood: The Giggleswick Estate, where the infamous General Caine once and perhaps still lives. Sometime in the late sixteenth century, the estate was burned down in a terrible fire that consumed much of the wood. General Caine survived, and already rich beyond dreams, he upped and left; yet he kept behind two mysterious caretakers to watch over his scorched estate and his gold, day and night. His magnificent treasure was supposedly hidden in and under the house, waiting to be reclaimed someday.

“Some tales claim Gwylligwitch heard the gold calling out to her as she passed nearby, others say she actually smelt it. However it was, the trollogre attacked the night caretaker and stole as much gold as she could carry back to her lair. Three times more in the next

three nights, the monster returned. The caretaker proved unable to hinder the creature as she plundered as much as she could find. At last satisfied, she sat in her dark abode, surrounded by her ill-gotten hoard. Day and night she would gaze upon it, run her filthy claws through it, bury herself in it, even sleep within it, until— until she grew bored of it. She wanted more, but she believed— incorrectly— that she had pillaged the last of the mansion's gold, leaving the rest of it: diamonds, rubies, and gems, which she cared nothing about. She had to have more gold and was desperate to find it."

"I don't understand, professor," asked Marie. "Why did this troll thing come after my mother then, she hardly wore any gold at all?" Even as she said this, her hand quickly went up to her ears, where she felt the golden earrings she had taken from home.

"I'm getting to that," he answered.

"She means, sir," added Perion, "can you get to the point a bit quicker?"

"Before morning?" added Zendara.

"Before next week," added Dyllion.

"Before— what's it called again, Christmas?" added Tybain.

"Ignore them, please," said the professor to Marie.

"Hang in there, Marie," said Brage. "We're very used to this, it does take some patience, but the professor will eventually answer your questions."

"Doesn't anyone care for a good story anymore?" asked the professor.

"I do," said Courinn.

"I think we should understand though," said Perion, "to Marie this is not just a story, this is about her mother and if she can still be saved." Marie cast a thankful smile to Perion. He seemed to be aware of just what she was feeling.

"Yes, of course," said the professor, nodding, "I apologize and I will try to explain with a bit more alacrity. What was I saying?"

"The trollogre needed to find more gold," said Courinn.

"And there was none more to be found," continued Professor Mifflin. "Until the day Gwylligwitch met up with the Helots."

A low murmur broke out through the room. "The monster is in league with *them*?" asked Brage.

“Who are them ... I mean they?” asked Marie.

“The Helots are the two wicked servants of the Prime Darkness of Spellhollow,” answered Mifflin. “It was the Helots who offered the promise of more gold, most certainly procured through their own wicked deeds. The Helots and Gwylligwitch struck a bargain, where she would be given as much gold as desired, if she carried out the Helot’s mandate: the capture and abduction of selected folk in and around the Spellhollow region.”

“But what does this have to do with the charm in Marie’s pocket?” asked Brage, trying to piece together the professor’s explanation of past and present.

“Or Thurle, the gnome who created it?” added Perion.

“Yes, I’ve gotten ahead of myself, haven’t I?” said the professor. “Let me back up a bit.”

The boys groaned as Marie sighed. Only Courinn seemed endlessly patient, enjoying the professor’s plodding narrative.

“I explained how the monster after many years had become bored with her gold,” he continued. “The trollogre eventually reasoned that she was perhaps weary of its *forms and shapes*. One day on her wanderings, she captured a lone dwarf, one of the Hydragrest clan, renown for their metalworking skill. She decided to forego eating him, instead enslaving the poor dwarf and commanding him to smelt down her hoard and reforge it into new, precious forms— so that she might look upon it as fresh booty. The dwarf reluctantly took on this task under considerable pain and torture. When Gwylligwitch had again at length grown tired of the gold, she commanded the dwarf to melt down and reforge it once more.”

“But why didn’t the trollogre just ask for more treasure from the Helots, instead of remaking what she had?” asked Courinn.

“Because the Helots had gone away, as you know very well, Courinn,” answered the professor. “Along with their master, they left this entire region several years ago and have not been back since.”

“But sir, the globe charm,” piped in Theel, normally the most quiet of the boys, now also wrestling with the pace and clarity of the professors’ scattered account.

“Yes, yes, I must be confusticating to listen to if Theel has become impatient,” said the professor. “Very well, to sum it up plainly, the gnome, Thurle, created the globe amulet to defeat Gwylligwitch, who had captured his own son, Hennock, whom the trollogre needed when the dwarf he first abducted died from the terrible torture he suffered.”

As everyone pieced together this rambling tale segment, Mifflin then socked them with another unexpected surprise.

“Not long after this, I was approached by your mother, Marie.”

“My mother?” asked Marie in amazement. “Came to you? You knew each other?”

“No, we didn’t. She was looking for someone who might help her. She was having dreams, very frightening dreams, especially in the last several weeks of something—something horrible coming to get her. Now, I understand your father is a firm skeptic in the mysteries of ‘Spookyhollow’, but your mother believed.”

“Yeah, they argued about it sometimes,” said Marie. “But mom never tried to convince me what she thought, and I think she felt better that I listened to my father instead. What did you tell her, professor?”

“She was introduced through a friend of mine, who believed I could help. We met in the village three years ago. When she told me of her dreams, I knew immediately what it meant: Gwylligwitch was coming for her. Very soon. So I gave her the globe amulet, the same one in your pocket now.”

“I thought I saw you with it once,” said Perion. “How did you get hold of it from Thurle?”

Mifflin’s face tightened. “Thurle gave it to me as he was dying. As I explained, he had created it to try and destroy the monster and rescue his only son. Twice he confronted Gwylligwitch. The first time, Thurle was quickly defeated and managed to barely escape. He recast the globe in a yet more powerful magic spell to defeat his foe. But he miscalculated, and when he fought Gwylligwitch the second time, she badly wounded him. Again he escaped, but this time she followed. He had hardly gone more than a few miles, when he found me, doing some experimental work in that part of the wood. He fell into my arms, sorely hurt as I lowered him to the ground. He spoke to me at length, much of it in jumbles. I tried my best to make sense of his words, but I could see he had already been driven mad, no doubt suffered from the bedevilment of the trollogre.”

“Did he reveal a way to somehow defeat the monster?” asked Courinn.

“He explained to me much about the charm’s power,” answered the professor. “And a bit about Gwylligwitch, such as her ability to enter victim’s minds, affect their memories, even cast herself in one’s dreams, if she chose.” The professor stood a moment and took one of the larger candles from the table. He held it up.

“Thurle felt that light was the best weapon. Light was the creature’s enemy. She lived in a cold, dark cavern of ice, somewhere in a frozen region of Lake Gwindylo. She usually traveled by night except when at great need. Light, the gnome reasoned, would destroy



the trollogre. So Thurle filled his globe with three things: a piece of black ice from the beast's lair, some of the putrid water from where it drank, and a thin shaft of moonlight. He cast a powerful spell over it, commanding the moonlight to subdue the evil properties of the ice and water, so that if the charm were brought close enough to Gwylligwitch, it would sap the beast's great strength and seriously weaken her. Enough that one could overtake and slay the creature."

"But it didn't work, did it?" asked Marie. "My mother held the charm up too and spoke about the moonlight. But it made no difference, the trollogre took her anyway."

"The moonlight encased in the charm was not enough to stop Gwylligwitch. Thurle then tried filling his globe with a bit of sunlight instead, but he could never fully capture its intense radiance. In frustration, he refilled the charm with a more powerful shaft of moonlight along with three drops of the creature's blood. When he fought her a second time, the charm wounded the monster, yet in her terrible rage she dealt Thurle a grievous blow that sent him fleeing for his life— leading him to me."

Mifflin held the candle close to him, its flickering light creating an ominous shadow over his face. "Thurle knew he was dying. He offered the amulet to me, begging that I avenge his death and rescue his son. He also knew he had made a grave mistake. The light he needed to defeat the monster was neither moonlight nor sun. It was the mystical, enchanted light of the Rainbow's End, located only several miles from the Gwindylo in the woods' most western arm. When he found me, Thurle believed he was very close to that bewitched place, but as I said, he'd been driven quite mad, and had no idea he'd traveled in the wrong direction."

Marie clearly saw the professor's eyes and face within the flame grow bitterly sad, yet with a hint of anger. He spoke his next words quietly, in almost a whisper.

"I could hear the sounds of Gwylligwitch approaching closer. The beast had relentlessly tracked Thurle, even now in daylight. I tried to carry the gnome, but could not get far. He begged me to leave him; he was near death and explained that as long as I was with him, the monster would persist in the hunt. I tried again to take him with me, but it was too slow going, and I could smell the creature's terrible stench. When I laid Thurle down to rest, I saw he was already dead. The charm was now my responsibility as were Thurle's final wishes. I quickly tried hiding the brave gnome's body under some brush in the hopes the monster would miss it. Then I ran for my life."

Professor Mifflin softly blew out the candle. Marie saw through the smoke of the extinguished wick that there was a growing tear in his eye.

"I barely escaped alive, daring to hope the monster would not find Thurle's body. My hopes were bitterly dashed when a powerful roar erupted through the woods, trailing off into a sound that, if it were human would have been a victorious, mocking laughter. I knew then that Thurle's bones would not lie in peace."

There was a long silence in the room as the professor lowered the smoking candle, bitterly shaking his head. The boys stared off into the space of their own thoughts, in empathy and understanding. Even at their young ages, they had been through loss and death and knew despair. Marie glimpsed Courinn wiping her eyes, while she slid her hand into her pocket and warily removed the globe charm. She placed it on the table in front of her as everyone, particularly the professor, watched.

“I returned home with that charm,” began Mifflin again, “not certain how to proceed next. I wasn’t sure how much Thurle told me was credible given his questionable sanity. I felt I at least had to try to find this place known as the Rainbow’s End and attempt somehow, to rescue Thurle’s son. As a matter of fact, I was readying myself to depart within a matter of days— when, by curious coincidence—”

“—My mother came to you first,” said Marie. “That is really strange.”

“So I thought at first,” said the professor. “But when I learned what your mother’s fears were, I had an intuitive feeling that the will of Thurle, possibly still embedded within the charm, might be at work.”

“But you gave it to my mother,” said Marie, with a sting of sudden annoyance, “knowing that its magic wouldn’t be enough to stop the monster.”

“I did not know for sure,” countered the professor. “Especially after questioning Thurle’s jumbled words. I made a decision, whether right or wrong. But I felt that giving the charm to your mother certainly couldn’t hurt, and somehow might save her or at least help in some way.”

“I’m sorry, I’m not blaming you, professor,” said Marie apologetically. “This is very hard to say but maybe it was the right thing to do, even though I’ve lost my mom. Maybe it just took this long and it’s not over yet.”

Courinn and Perion stared at Marie proudly, trying their best to understand how hard and how objective it was for their friend to admit such a sentiment aloud.

“You are a wise young lady, Miss Meehanan,” said the professor. “And you’re quite correct, it’s not over yet, by any means. The time has come to form our plan.”

“But professor, please tell me,” asked Marie with a thought that had been impatiently nagging at her, “where has my mother been these past three years? Is the monster keeping her a prisoner? Tell me she hasn’t been kept like a slave, being tortured by that horrible thing!”

“Not likely. She is no doubt being kept— as are all the trollogre’s victims until they are to be delivered to the Helots upon their return— partly conscious in a powerful, spell-woven sleep.”

“Oh, thank goodness!” said Marie, prematurely relieved.

“However,” continued the professor, “I know this will be hard to learn, Marie. She may also be asleep while frozen within a blanket of ice beneath the Lake Gwindylo.”

“Oh, please no!” cried Marie. She stared hard into the globe, its normal faint glow becoming brighter.

“Yet the good news,” he explained, “is that since a part of her consciousness can communicate with you through the charm, she is unharmed in this frozen state.”

Once again, the image of Marie’s mother appeared. Marie shouted into the globe with nervous exhilaration, “Hang on, mom! Hang on! I’m coming for you, I promise!” The reflection of her mother smiled proudly, then faded. And then another image formed, growing out from the blackness. A horrible face with red eyes, the same that Marie glimpsed through the fog that terrible day. Marie turned away and covered the globe with her hands. They all stared at her, knowing what she had just seen.

“Let us begin, then,” said the professor. “We have much to yet go over and prepare.”

In the professor’s home later that night, Marie was lying in a comfortable bed, trying to shut her eyes. After the day she had, with so little sleep the night before, Marie should have passed out from exhaustion. But she could not shake from her thoughts the hideous trollore that held her mother prisoner.

She was in a rather plain bedroom on the second floor. It was sparsely furnished yet had a cozy air, which made one feel safe and secure. Through two windows, the moon crescent shone again, a bit less bright than the night before. Marie’s magical charm was in the top drawer of a dresser across from her. The professor had suggested that tonight, in order to get some good sleep she should keep it away to avoid looking into it repeatedly. He explained she would have plenty of time with it in the coming days.

Too much was in Marie’s head as she tossed and turned: helots and famous generals and gnomes like poor Thurle and his son. And of course, a woods she had lived near all her life, a woods that her father had always said was just like any other, but only now realizing was a whole other world within itself— filled with things straight out of every fairy tale and nightmare she’d ever heard.

Marie knew she would never get to sleep now, not like this. She got up, put on the freshly cleaned night robe that lay next to her bed and stepped out from her room.

The house seemed even bigger now than she thought this afternoon. Passageways led past room after room on just this floor. No doubt about it, thought Marie, it was a strange house in many ways. She saw many things as she walked, paintings, beautiful but odd,

old looking weapons and piles of other peculiar oddities like tools or devices or— machines were they? All scattered about, around every corner. It looked more like a museum in a far off place of the world, but unlike any she had ever seen.

As Marie passed another bedroom with its door half open, she peered in and saw Perion snugly asleep. Marie thought about what a day he had had, and the adventure they shared with the enemy mydrus trees. About to turn away and continue on, Perion stirred. As he did so, his arm brushed aside a lock of his long hair. Marie caught her breath. Perion's arm revealed a sharply pointed ear. She stared a long moment before stepping away.

Wandering down a new hallway on the first floor, Marie heard a sound, quickly realizing it was a piano being played. She noticed a light from a doorway ahead. Poking her head in, she saw Professor Mifflin sitting, softly playing a sweet melody. In the room were many photographs, both on the walls and on the few pieces of tasteful furnishings. Marie watched for some minutes as he played on with a dreamy wistfulness, as if recalling some pleasant memory. Then the melody changed, becoming sadder and darker and a deep pain seemed to wash over him, until abruptly, he at last 'felt' Marie standing there. He looked up and the melancholy shadow quickly disappeared.

"Marie," he said. "I didn't hear you sneaking up! I used to be far more alert of my surroundings you know, but I'm getting older now— actually, I'm still quite young I suppose. Are you having trouble sleeping?"

"Yes, I am," said Marie. "The bed is very comfortable and I do feel so safe in your house, but—"

"—You have much to think about now," said the professor, "and much of it is quite frightening. Please, come in and sit with me."

Marie entered and sat down in a chair the professor pulled up for her. He then rested his chin and cheek in his hand and studied her a moment.

"Are you unsure now about what you must do?" asked the professor, after he felt he had read enough of what her eyes told him.

"No, sir," she replied. "I will save my mother. But I'm not sure I understand something. Why you are letting me go and do this? I'm darn sure my father wouldn't feel the same way, even if he believed the truth of what really happened."

"One might think," began Mifflin, "how cruel I am to permit a young girl to head off into such danger with such bleak hope of success. But the truth is, of course, even if your own father or I stopped you, well, short of keeping you locked in a closet all day and night, you would find another way to escape and go anyway— whatever the cost, through any danger. I have seen what young people can do when accompanied by the right friends and comrades, when their hearts and purpose are true. Besides, your own mother

has asked you to come to her. Nothing can substitute for the love that exists between a child and their own parents. Does that sound corny?"

Marie shook her head and smiled warmly. "Thank you, professor, very much. By the way, why do they call you professor? It seems like you study and work with magic much more than any um ... science."

"Confusticate magic!" he said in frustration, then followed it with a smile of his own. "Please understand, *I am* a man of science first, yet I cannot deny the existence of other forces that run contrary to scientific phenomena, most especially when it has to do with Spellhollow Wood."

"But you understand people too," replied Marie. "I realize now why you told the story of what happened to my mother the way you did, slowly and all in pieces. It was to prepare me, little by little, for what was coming. You were thinking of me the whole time."

The professor grinned with admiration. "Your mother once mentioned to me what a bright girl you were, Emily."

"She told you my name?"

He nodded. "She was right. She always knew how gifted you were."

"I miss her so much."

"You will see her again soon. A claim I dearly hope others in this house will someday be able to make."

This was all the lead-in Marie needed. "Professor, please tell me about the boys. I know they're not ... like us. Perion, all of them ... are from that other place you spoke about, aren't they?"

"What makes you think that?"

"Everything about them, especially Perion. I just now saw him asleep. He moved and under his hair I saw one of his ears."

The professor nodded. "I suppose you've never seen anything like that before. Yes, they are from that Other Place. It's their home. They all have families like you and they desperately want to return again."

"But why can't they?"

"They have been banished here for the rest of their lives," said the professor sadly. "That's all I'll say right now. If you'd like, ask Perion more when you get a chance. I know how fond he already is of you."

“I will, sir.”

“How about trying to get some sleep now? Can you find your way back to your room?”

“Yes, I think I’m ready now,” said Marie. “But only if you close your piano for the night and go to bed too.”

“I accept your terms. Good night and sleep sound.”

The next morning after a late breakfast, adeptly prepared by Brage and Theel, Marie stood next to Courinn outside the big house. She wore the change of clothes she had carried in her book-bag. She had slept well past ten o’clock and was feeling wide-awake though snugly full, after three large pancakes and three sausages.

Perion, Brage and Tybain were checking the contents of several light backpacks they would be carrying before loading them into the professor’s 1962 Ford truck. Professor Mifflin was fiddling under the hood with a spark plug wire. It was another beautiful spring morning, sunny and warm with few clouds above. The boys finished just as the professor lowered the hood. Zendara stepped up, holding two HT’s, small handy-talkie radio’s. He handed one to Brage.

“Checking one, check two,” his voice filtered through the radio clearly.

“Ready,” Brage assured him.

“As we should all be now,” said the professor. “Everyone pile in, please.”

The six boys leapt up into the deep truck bed with Dyllion and Tybain wrestling for a spot nearest the rear gate, which they both took. Marie and Courinn sat up front with the professor as he started the truck.

“I don’t think we’ve ever had the truck this crowded,” he said, glancing at them with a smile. The truck cabs’ rear window was removed, so the professor could talk— actually more like yell back to whomever was sitting in the bed behind.

Mifflin wrenched the transmission into gear with a slight grind and drove off. His long driveway, a narrow road of its own, led a good half-mile through the woods to a short service road, which then looped around to the main highway. Mifflin chose the southbound lane and they were off. He turned on a police radio, carefully setting it to a particular channel. As they traveled, the woods sped by them on the right. On their left were the vast farmlands of the neighboring county. They only saw a few other vehicles on the road, as there was not much travel within those parts of Gulliver County.

Marie stared at the woods. She thought how strange it was, driving in a regular truck

along a normal highway, looking at the edge of an everyday patch of woods, yet knowing that only a short distance inside was a world unlike any she had ever known.

“Have you ever driven to the far side of Oak Tree Road?” asked the professor, his glance indicating the question was for Marie only.

“The far side?” asked Marie. “I’ve never been past Woldred, where I thought it ended.”

“Most think it does,” said the professor, “or don’t ever wish to continue further along than Woldred. The road narrows considerably and is almost hidden at some points after, but on it goes, along the far edges of the wood. It eventually ends another twenty miles or so north. That’s where we’re headed.”

“But aren’t we going to the Rainbow’s End,” asked Marie, “like we discussed last night?”

“Yes we are. It lies in one of the most mysterious regions of the woods, somewhere past the southern and western shoulders, though I’m not sure exactly how far.”

The professor merged off the highway at an exit with an obscure sign indicating ‘Highland Pointe, eight miles ahead and Woldred, fifteen’. Upon the new road, half-paved, half-stone, they saw a small run-down building, with a sign clearly marked ‘Reddit’s General Store’. Everyone from the area knew of old Reddit, the owner, as the meanest, most unhappy man in all of Gulliver County. The highway travelers who stopped in for food and beverages, were always taken aback to see that most of the store was filled with cheap trinkets and lousy souvenirs, trying to capitalize on the Spellhollow legends. But year after year, no one really cared and his business scheme never caught on, which only made old Reddit even angrier and meaner.

They drove several more miles in silence, while in the truck bed the boys playfully carried on, accompanied by whooping howls, like any boys of that age.

“What’s that?” asked Courinn, straining her eyes as she peered ahead. The professor was already steering the truck roadside. Marie glared at the sight before them as a sudden pang of guilt took her. It was a roadblock by the sheriff’s men.

“They’re looking for you,” said the professor. “The sheriff’s not leaving any stone unturned today.”

“My father must be worried sick,” said Marie. “It’s not fair what I’m doing to him. He went through this once already with my mother. I have to send him another message, to let him know I’m okay.”

“Easy enough to do,” replied the professor, “as soon as we get out of here before we’re seen.” He turned the truck around, heading back the way they had come. He turned up his police radio, but it was quiet.

“Unfortunately,” the professor continued, “this road is the only passage leading west. Which leaves us little choice.”

“We have to go through the woods,” said Marie, understanding.

Professor Mifflin nodded as he handed Marie the transmitting mic from his police radio. Marie took it, unsure what the professor was suggesting.

“Press the button and speak,” he explained. “I’m certain the sheriff is listening. And I’ll venture a guess your father is with him.”

Marie nodded to herself that it would be the proper thing to do, considering the circumstances she had put them all into. “Hello, dad,” she began as she keyed the radio mic. “Daddy, can you hear me? It’s Marie, are you out there?”

Sheriff Dan couldn’t believe his ears as he turned up the volume on his radio. He hit the brakes of his car, stopping along the dirt of Luck’s End Loop. They were back here in the woods for the second day, driving through the loop just as they did for much of yesterday, finding no clues. The sheriff turned to James Meehanan next to him, who stared back in wonder. The sheriff grabbed his radio mic.

“Marie Meehanan, is that you? Where are you?”

“Sheriff, is my father with you now?” came the sound of Marie’s voice again. “Please let me speak to him.”

The sheriff handed James the mic, who eagerly took it. “Marie, are you all right? Tell us where you are.”

Courinn and the professor watched Marie closely as she spoke. From the truck bed, Perion also peered in.

“Daddy, I’m okay, I’m fine, really,” she replied. “Please understand, I’m so sorry for putting you through all this, but I have no choice. I have to do this.”

“Just tell me where you are now, sweetheart,” said her father, his voice poorly concealing his obvious panic.

“I can’t, daddy, I’m sorry.”

“Yes you can!” he yelled angrily, unable to check his emotion. “Marie, this is not a game!”



“Like I told you in my letter, dad, I’m with good people now, very good friends, you would really love them. I wish I could have taken you with me, but you wouldn’t understand, because ... because you never believed.”

James peered out into the woods around him. “Never believed?” he repeated.

“Listen to me,” continued Marie. “I remember. I remember everything now, daddy. Everything about mommy and what happened to her. Dad ... please forgive me for being such a brat ... a spoiled brat that day.”

James squeezed shut his quickly moistening eyes. How he had dreamed that someday he would hear the words Marie now spoke.

“But I have to do something about it now,” she continued. “Please understand I’m fine. Tell the sheriff, you don’t have to look for me, I’ll be back soon, I promise.”

James wiped away his newly formed tears as bittersweet joy stung him. “James,” the sheriff said, his hand outstretched. James handed the mic back as the sheriff keyed it with growing annoyance.



“Marie, this is the sheriff. There is nothing you can do. Please stay out of the woods and tell us where you are.”

“I know you’re fed up with me, sheriff,” answered Marie. “But for once I’m doing something right,” she added with a strained chuckle. “Oh, and one other thing. Please move the roadblock along Oak Tree Road. We have to get through there. Bye for now.”

Hearing this, Sheriff Dan immediately started barking into his radio. “This is the sheriff, all squads, T-44, converge on Oak Tree barricade, begin incremental barriers from the interstate to Woldred ...”

## *Chapter 7*

### **The Lost Knight**

In spite of the pleasant spring day, she sat in a room made dark with drawn shades: lit only by large candles upon tables and shelves. On the desk in front of her were set many photographs, strips of negatives, cameras, lenses and trays of photographic chemicals. An 8mm projector was guzzling the last of a film roll as she shut it off. She then picked up and closely studied several photos, before placing them within the illumination of a candle to her right.

Cruel, merciless eyes examined the photographs, down to the tiniest details. Eyes affixed within plentiful mascara, which sparkled in the candlelight. Her face was proportioned and beautiful, but strangled with excessive makeup, where a pitiless sneer was gouged between her angular cheeks. In spite of her good looks, Nioma Jentiss was one inhumane soul— however well liked she thought she appeared to most within the county.

The photo's Nioma studied were of people, appearing to be taken as if the subjects were completely unaware. Sometimes shot from a distance, other times with a crowded, compressed background, indicating the picture was shot with a zoom or telephoto lens. She placed aside two photos and cleared away the others.

She carefully sprinkled a dark powdery substance atop the face of each subject, then raised the snapshots over the candle and gently circled it. The flame underneath did not burn the photo paper, but instead created red, blood-like droplets on the opposite, exposed side. Nioma again studied her work, but after a short time became clearly unsatisfied with the results. She cursed aloud just as Tilda walked in.

“Why are you bothering me now?” screeched Nioma, clenching a fist in jerky spasms. The jagged scowl across her face for most, would have been a clear warning to leave her alone, but to Tilda, it was an everyday part of life.

“When am I not bothering you?” she answered, pursing her lips sourly as she glanced at the desk, quite used to seeing the practice of black magic before her.

“I see,” countered Nioma. “You’re hinting that I pay no attention to you and your needs? A good for nothing, lying thief, on her way to a jail-ridden future. When you’re found rotting in some alleyway, will it be because I’ve so mercilessly neglected you?”

Utterly and horribly cruel as this was, Tilda had endured a short lifetime of it, and she responded the way she always did, by hunkering down in numbing self-preservation. She

took a deep breath and expelled, if only metaphorically, her mother's vile words back out at her.

"I just want to ask a quick question, then I'll leave you alone," said Tilda.

Nioma had already gone back to her work, as if whatever Tilda wished to speak about had no importance.

"Ask," she said flatly.

"Was there a boy and his mother that you just picked?"

Suddenly curious, Nioma looked up. "What concern is that to you?"

Tilda hesitated, as if summoning some inner courage. "I never told you about this, but there is a boy at school. He's a friend and he's, well, special to me."

"How revoltingly cute. You have a sweetheart. What's his name?"

"His name is—" Tilda again hesitated, her fear to speak the name slightly straining her voice. "His name is Jack Salento."

Nioma now studied her daughter as close as she examined her photos. "That's too bad," she said matter-of-factly. "I suggest you forget about him right away."

Tilda's lips and mouth quivered as the horrible realization set in. "No! You didn't pick him, did you?"

"Both him and his wretched mother. How did you know, Tilda?"

Tilda's eyes filled with tears. "Don't make him go away! He didn't do anything wrong!"

"That has nothing to do with it," said Nioma coldly. "How did you know?"

"He told me he was having the dreams!"

"As he should," stated her mother, emotionless. "They only have days left. And stop that crying now!"

Tilda wiped her eyes, then rubbed her face and head in anguish, trying to control the fury that now burned inside her. She began pulling at her own hair so tightly that she yanked out several large tufts.

In the next instant, Tilda snapped. With a shout, she lunged forward at her mother, swiping all the photos off the desk, and knocking over the large candle. As it began

burning some of the photographs, Tilda pounded the desk. As Nioma frantically put out the flames on her floor, Tilda shook a wild fist at her.

“I swear if you take Jack away I’m going to the sheriff! I’ll tell him everything I know, about what you’ve done to so many people! I swear I will!”

With that, Tilda ran out of the dark room as her mother struggled to save what she could of her burned photographs.

The professor grinned with surprise as he accelerated the truck along the road. “Quick thinking,” he said to Marie. “Your parting words to the sheriff just cleverly created a diversion for us.”

“Hopefully,” she replied, “by the time they get as far as the highway—”

“—We’ll be back at the house,” said Courinn. “Now we really have no choice, Marie has just sent the whole Gulliver County police force to guard the road.”

“But perhaps there will be little, if any watch within the woods, especially along the Woodland Trail,” said the professor. “At least for the next day I should think.”

“Did I do the right thing, professor,” asked Marie, “talking to my father?”

“I’m certain you did, dear. I could discern some sense of relief in his voice, to hear in your own words that you were okay. But now, let’s focus on the task at hand, for it has just become a good deal more difficult.”

An hour later, Perion was helping Marie adjust the light pack on her shoulders. It was far better than carrying a book-bag. They were standing at the glade perimeter surrounding Professor Mifflin’s home. The sun was already high up, nearing one o’clock in the afternoon. Brage and Tybain were also steadying their packs and readying other things they would be taking with them. The professor had decided to send these three boys along with Courinn as Marie’s travel companions, keeping the other three behind with him. He often did this for their excursions into the woods, as to minimize the risk to all of them at once. Alternatively, he also sent Zendara, Dyllion and Theel together, as those groups seemed to work the best with one another.

Marie watched as Theel and Dyllion now helped Brage and Tybain pack some strange things with them: small tied bundles of twigs, along with six-inch nails of an odd color and several small pouches of salt.

“What is that stuff for?” she asked curiously.

“Oak, ash and thorn bundled together as well as salt and iron are protection against some of the dangers within the wood,” answered Brage.

“Everything all set?” asked the professor.

Brage keyed the button of his HT radio. “We’re ready.”

“Ready to go,” came Zendara’s voice, responding from somewhere, Marie supposed, inside the house.

“Remember, keep to the north of the suspension bridge,” the professor warned. “Even with Marie’s diversion, we can’t be sure if the sheriff’s kept his men along the trail.”

“How much farther north?” asked Brage.

“About a mile, until the river junction,” answered the professor. “There you will meet someone. If he feels you are charming and interesting enough, he will take you west along the River kindrane, almost as far as the Spellhollow Pass. From there make your way southwest along the mountain ridge until you get to the Gwindylo. You must pass the lake around its eastern shores, before crossing over the rivers mouth. In the region beyond that— to the best of my knowledge— lies the Rainbow’s End.”

“And how do we find it exactly?” asked Courinn.

“With your skill and a bit of luck,” admitted the professor. “We’ll be in constant contact with you on this channel, which I’ve encrypted for security and from anyone’s else’s prying ears, such as the sheriff.”

Mifflin addressed the boys sharply. “Take care to *not stray* from the Kindrane at its bend. Not far off as you well know is the haunted mansion of old. And from there northwards is ever more perilous.”

“Is the mansion still dangerous to approach?” asked Courinn.

“It is,” said Mifflin. “One of its two caretakers, who watches it by day until sundown is vile and wicked and fortune forbid he catches you on the premises!”

“Easier said than done,” said Tybain. “Isn’t that one of the most bewitched tracts of the whole wood, where the grounds and distance change and one easily finds themselves miles from where they thought they were?”

“That’s why it will be important that you gain passage along the river,” explained the professor. “Only upon the water will you be free of that region’s hex and not risk being lost. You are each in good company with some sharp heads about you. Good luck.”

Theel exchanged an unusual handshake with Perion and Brage.

“Don’t get lost,” said Dyllion sarcastically to Tybain with a puckish jab to his arm.

“Unlike you, I study our maps,” he replied.

The five of them departed with a creeping uneasiness hanging over them; they knew they were undertaking no small task.

Starting at a good pace, Brage and Perion led the way. They followed a fairly well trodden path for almost a mile, but then had to leave it and veer to their right, heading northwest. The path they turned from led to a bridge over the Quinowa River, which spanned it as part of Luck’s End Loop. If the sheriff were at all suspicious of Marie’s diversion, he or his men would be waiting there.

Marie noticed the boys always kept to the same formation: Brage in the lead, Perion closest to her and Courinn, with Tybain remaining behind them all. She guessed this was a well-drilled exercise for them. She also noticed how keen their senses and awareness seemed to be. They were young like her, but they seemed years older in many ways.

At one point, they passed by several structures that looked ages old. They appeared to have once been ancient forts or outposts, partially destroyed as if they had not quite withstood some kind of attack. Marie stopped and curiously stared at this a long moment. Perion turned, noticing she had halted. He reacted with concern, seeing where they were. Before he could take a step, Marie was gently nudged on by Tybain coming up behind, confirming this was no place to linger. She then saw Brage speaking quietly into his radio, presumably to Professor Mifflin. As Marie moved on, she caught a glimpse of something within the decrepit outpost. Something, she realized was eerily staring back at her from the shadows, something she could have sworn had loathsome, frog-like features. In the next moment whatever it was, vanished.

He drove slowly, with no clear direction in mind. Turning here, then there, past the long familiar places he had known all his life. James Meehanan replayed in his mind the happier times he once shared with Anna, his wife: their years of courting, during which he had always given her the utmost respect. They were engaged fairly young and waited a full five years before they were married. James wanted to get firmly on his feet before their walk down the aisle—which he did, steadily building his own business as a tractor mechanic, until he was certain it was self-sustaining. He and Anna were married where everyone else in Highland Pointe had exchanged their vows, Sacred Heart Chapel.

He was a good, honest mechanic, who treated his customers with courtesy, which he received in return many times over— except that is, when it concerned the impassioned local beliefs. He was part of the ‘naysayers’ who had little patience for those who believed they all lived within an afternoon’s walk of demons and monsters. Through the years, he’d had his share of fierce, verbal battles with ‘the believers’ on the other side.

“Listen to yourselves,” James often preached to them, “you all sound like that buggy-eyed fellow in those old movies who was afraid of everything under his shadow! Ghosts

and monsters, are you kidding me? Have you ever seen them? I didn't think so and you never will, so do all of us a favor, stop scaring good folks and shut your mouths!"

"James, if you only knew what you were saying," Kosko, the town druggist once told him. "Nothing good ever came of anyone spoutin' how there ain't nothing to fear. In most cases, it leaves a foul mark on ya'— mishaps, bad luck or worse. I've seen it more times than I can bear and I don't wanna' see it happen to you."

Those words now echoed in James's head as he drove. He had never considered Kosko's warning with any meaning before, even after his wife's disappearance. She was the victim of an animal attack, he reminded himself. They lived in a rural area. There *had* been confirmed reports of such things from time to time. It had to be, he always reasoned, a bear or mountain lion.

His thoughts turned to Marie and her last words to him a few hours ago over the sheriff's radio. Who was she now with? He had to admit by the sound of her voice, it did not seem like she was being held against her will. Even if she were, he knew Marie was telling the truth about one thing: she had regained her memory. Someone could have filled her head with nonsense about what might have happened to her mother. But Marie remembered how she had acted that day. No one else knew that except the three of them: Marie, her mother and James.

And if Marie now remembered everything, James thought, what did she mean she had to do something about it? He recalled the few words of their brief conversation that disturbed him the most. His daughter said she couldn't make him understand, because he did not believe. James knew how steadfast Marie was in her refusal to accept any of the woods' stories. He knew, of course, he had directly influenced her opinion. He picked up Marie's letter from the car seat as he drove. He glanced at the end. "Daddy, you made a mistake about one thing. Sometimes, magic is real."

It was mid afternoon when James made a left turn, taking him through the market section of the village. He decided to head back home, sadly, to an empty house. As he drove by, a few people he knew— friends and other townsfolk— stood watching him. He waved but they did not wave back. This annoyed him, yet before he could fully process anything further, his eye caught something on a street corner.

A handmade sign recently nailed to a telephone pole clearly read:  
"*MARIE MEEHANAN - Missing? Or Run Away?*"

Under that, two more signs were nailed.  
"*ANNA MEEHANAN - What Really Happened Three Years Ago?*"  
"*JAMES MEEHANAN - What's He Hiding?*"

James stopped his car and stormed out. "Who did this?" he demanded as he furiously tore off the signs. Looking around him, he saw those he thought friends, now leering at him in fear and anger.

The police cars stood noiselessly in the midst of the road with their lights off, but the officers inside were alert and ready. If they weren't, Sheriff Radich who sat in the lead car would have their heads.

The additional barriers he set up earlier that day along Oak Tree Road, leading away west and east from Highland Pointe, had so far brought no clues about Marie's disappearance. The sheriff now realized they had been taken in by Marie's ruse, and he was surely not going to be fooled again. He sat deep in thought next to his dozing partner, amidst the small hanging bells within his squad car; bells that were, according to old folktales, protection against demonic forces. The sheriff was renown for being one of the most superstitious men in the county.

A car appeared up the road, heading toward them. The handful they had already stopped in the last thirty hours had been merely local folk going about their normal business. This approaching car was no doubt just another innocent driver on his way home for dinner. Still, the sheriff and his men got out, ready to quickly respond if needed. The car came to a halt before the blockade stretched across the road. Police lights whirled as James Meehanan emerged with a noted stiffness, clearly indicating anger.

"We've got nothing," said the sheriff, as his partner's duty posture eased.

"Yeah, well I do," answered James, as he snatched the signs he found from his car. He strode up, the tightness of his face looking like he had been chewing his teeth apart. "Isn't it enough what I'm going through," he stated, "that I have to contend with this?"

The sheriff quickly inspected the signs, shaking his head. "This was bound to happen. Forget it, it means nothing."

"You tell me now, sheriff, right now," demanded James, "what really happened to my wife? Everyone else seems to know!"

The sheriff stared hard at him. "We've been through this years ago, James."

"You mean you told me what I wanted to hear," James shot back. "But what's the truth?"

"No, I was forced to agree on the only possibility you would accept. You never wanted to hear anything else."

"What else? That the bogie man took Anna? Tell me what you *really* think happened to her! C'mon, tell me!"

The sheriff waved his hand, instructing his men to step away as he took a step closer to James. "You listen good," he began, quietly, yet in earnest. "This here is Gulliver



County. This ain't Schenectady. Each year, I have to investigate at least a half dozen disappearances. Year in and year out, I see the same horrors and miracles. Folks become deathly sick with disease no doctor can explain, while others, terminally ill, are cured. Folks go blind or suddenly become mute. Weather-destroyed crops, mysteriously grown to mother-lode harvest, folks' children possessed with sudden deformities, while others only get healthier into old age, it goes on and on. And ya' know where they all were just before anything happened to them? That's right, always in or near them woods." The sheriff took a step closer to James, fully engaging him.

"The same woods," he continued, "that you and your family were near when Anna was taken. You want to still believe some bear attacked her, then you believe it. But if you come demanding the truth from me, then I'll tell you, straight out, whether you like it or not. Your wife was a victim of the same supernatural power that both torments and blesses us here, that lives with us, day in and day out and never leaves us alone. She was taken by something or many things that are downright unearthly, that live in there and sometimes prey on us, because most refuse to leave this place like I've begged you all to do for years. Even my own men aren't safe, if you remember what a good deputy I lost back in fifty-six. Lost his mind, kidnapped a young girl, was never seen again. That's what can happen here, it's what happened to Anna and it's what took Marie's memory away. That's the simple truth, James."

James stared back, unblinking. "I'm sorry, I won't accept that. What I do know is Marie ran off with someone who also believes in this bunk." He lowered his gaze, staring at the road below as his shoulders slumped, the weight and burden of his anxiety clearly showing. "Do you have *any* idea what my daughter is up to?"

"She just regained her memory of the last three years," answered the sheriff. "Who knows what's going through her head now? Could be some kind of follow-up trauma. I don't know. We'll find her, somehow."

They walked another hour before briefly halting for a rest and drink of water. Brage led them on again, listening carefully, touching the trees at certain points as if looking for a signal, then frequently turning to Perion, who would listen and shake his head, no. This went on until Brage at last slid his fingers over an oak bole and smiled as Perion nodded in agreement.

"The river junction is just ahead," confirmed Brage. "Let's find out who the professor thought might be able to help us."

The ground gave way and they began traveling downhill, rather sharply. The sound of running water became clearer now and they could see something ahead through the trees: a gleam of some sort, as if light danced upon something very shiny and reflective. Coming to the end of the descent, they instantly understood what it was as the ground abruptly evened out again. Marie gazed ahead curiously.

Two currents of rushing water, the one nearest them almost twice as wide, crashed into each other before heading away south to their left. At the shoreline junction sat a huge figure, perfectly still upon a seat made of small mossy rocks.

Perion took Marie's pack from her as he moved forward with Brage and Tybain. The boys exchanged quick glances, raised all their backpacks over their heads and waded through the waist high current. It appeared strong, but not enough to knock one over. Tybain reached the far bank while Brage and Perion passed the packs to him, before returning back, with Brage halting at midpoint. Once again, this appeared to Marie a trained tactic— or she reconsidered, could it have been simple intuition each of the boys shared and acted out with one another?

Perion approached with an outstretched arm. He first took Courinn by the hand and guided her, passing her on to Brage, then Tybain, who helped her out on the far side.

Then it was Marie's turn. The water was not as cold as she thought, but the current was indeed strong and she held on to each boy's hand firmly, crossing to the other side. Marie noticed along this new bank a large raft of thin, bound logs was tied to a tree.

Before them sat a great knight, clad head to toe in brilliantly shining armor: from the iron-plated sabatons for his feet to his greaves and plate armor for his legs, leading up to a breastplate with thick chain mail and large visor helmet. Etched within the midst of his steel chest was an elaborate coat of arms. He never moved or made any gesture indicating he knew they were there.

The knight sat with his hands protected by heavy gauntlets, held outwards, palms up over his bent knees. This gave the dual impression of someone either asking for or offering something to any who passed by. A massive broadsword and shield sat upright beside him; thin strands of ivy covered them and parts of the knight, suggesting that neither had moved for quite some time. Yet, in spite of this shining spectacle, all their eyes wound up staring at the same thing— the object directly in front of the armored soldier, between his propped up knees: a rather large and unadorned sealed chest.

They all approached. The knight was even larger up close than Marie realized. The sealed chest betwixt his knees seemed to beckon to them.

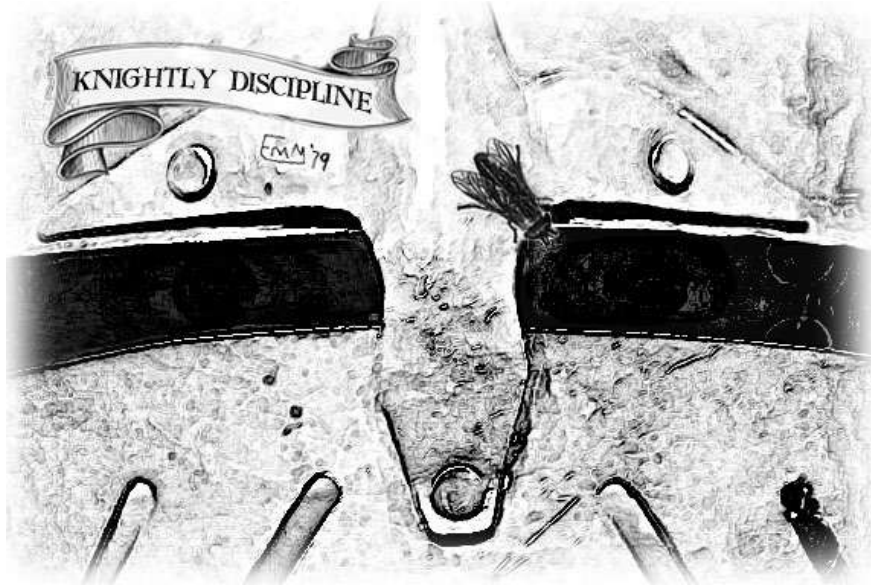
"Is he alive?" Marie asked, unable to see if any part of him stirred from breathing.

"It's certain he is," answered Brage.

Marie studied the knight. He was so still he resembled a statue. Then she noticed a large, ugly horsefly flitting about the knight's helmet, landing and crawling in and out of the visor. Marie thought to herself how annoying it must be for the poor knight.

Marie stepped up close. "Hello, sir," she said. "How are you today?"

No answer came. Brage cleared his throat. “We’ve been sent from Professor Mifflin,” he said, slowly and clearly. “He thought you might be able to help us.”



There was something at the mention of that name, a slight, almost imperceptible movement of his head—or was it his shoulder? Marie could not quite tell, but it appeared that under his great helmet this knight was now listening with some curiosity.

“We need passage west along the river,” added Tybain impatiently and straight to the point as he usually was.

Then the knight clearly moved. His upright, extended hands lowered slightly towards the chest in front of him. As small as the movement was, it was so jarring and unexpected after the knights’ complete stillness that Marie jumped.

“The chest,” said Perion. “Does he want us to open it?”

“Yes,” answered Courinn, tapping her brow. “Now I remember this knight’s story. My father once told it to me.”

Marie grinned in amazement at the knowledge her friend carried in her head.

“Tell us,” said Perion and Brage, almost in unison.

“This knight,” began Courinn, “sits here day after day with no food or water, just as you see him. He sits in repentance and shame for having lived a life of cruel wickedness.”

“It appears he was once very great,” said Brage. “That crest of his looks vaguely familiar.”

“He *was* once great and proud and noble,” continued Courinn, “but was corrupted and became a living nightmare, a soldier broken of the goodness in his heart. For all the evil he has wrought, he sits here now. To offer himself in service to those, and only those whose hearts are true.”

“And what about the chest?” asked Marie.

“The chest determines who is virtuous and who is not,” said Courinn. “Anyone seeking his help must open it. What they do then determines the knight’s course of action.”

All of them curiously stared at the plain chest.

“Which of us will open it then?” asked Brage. “Or do we do so together?”

“It is meant to be opened by a single person at a time,” stated Courinn.

One of the knight’s hands suddenly darted out, seizing Marie by the wrist. She jumped with a shriek as the knight turned up her arm, clearly revealing the wound she received from the gight demon. He then gently released her, gesturing her toward the chest.

Courinn slowly nodded. “He has picked you, Marie. You bear a wound that he knows only a true and brave heart could have survived.”

“Me?” Marie looked over to Perion, as if to gain his consent. He also nodded. She glanced back at the chest. She then took a deep breath. Slowly, carefully and reverently Marie bent down and began to open it ...

## Chapter 8

### River and Bog

To everyone else, the chest was empty. However, Marie saw all that she needed to see: three shining, golden rings. They were the loveliest pieces of jewelry she could have imagined. As her desire for them quickly swelled, she peered up at the knight. His extended hands and demeanor spoke clearly— the rings were hers to take.

Only when she removed them from the chest could her comrades also see the trinkets. They glimmered with the spray of the rushing river. As Marie brought the rings close to her, mesmerized, Courinn could not keep her immediate thoughts silent.

“No, Marie. You must put them back. This is your test.”

Marie glanced at Courinn, then back to the rings.

“Why?” she asked, “They’re so beautiful.”

“Courinn is right,” said Perion. “They’re most likely not even genuine.”

But Marie became ever more spellbound by the rings as she held them up, the light from them dancing in her eyes. “Of course they’re real,” she said. She saw they were of different sizes, appearing like they would very neatly fit her.

“No, Marie, listen to your heart,” said Courinn.

“My name is Charlotte,” answered Marie defiantly, with a sudden throb of annoyance. She ignored any further warning. The golden rings were hers now and she would keep them. She drowned out everything but the thoughts of what her new treasure would look like, adorned on her own fingers.

Courinn, Perion and the rest watched Marie, unsure what to do about the obvious spell that was being cast over her, strengthening more each second. Marie stuck her fingers up to slide the rings upon them, when something jarred her attention away for a mere second: a whirring, buzzing noise.

Her eyes refocused to the sound’s source: The giant horsefly still buzzing about the knight’s helmet. She then saw the great, powerful knight *wince* ever so slightly, barely discernible. Marie instantly empathized with what he must have endured for who knows how many hours or days, incessantly tortured and bitten, yet, in his unwavering discipline never moving to swat the monstrous insect away.

Compassion alone allowed Marie with great effort to momentarily force aside the desire in her mind. Instinctively, she reached out above her, allowing a few moments to let the vile insects' flight sync with her internal reaction and response mechanisms. She then struck against the knight's helmet with a loud *slap*.

The fly's buzzing instantly ceased as it fell dead under Marie's palm to the ground below. Her companions stood, blinking, not knowing what to anticipate next from the hulking warrior. The knight immediately pulled back his extended hands. He then rose, amidst all the contracting and flexing sounds of his armor.



He stood at full height, towering over little Marie. His right arm sprung out, lunging for the huge sword and shield at his side. With a fearful gasp from Courinn, Brage, Perion and Tybain all came forward in protection of their friend, but it was unnecessary. The knight sheathed his broadsword, while his other arm slid behind his shield. He then bowed low and humbly before Marie and held himself in that position several long moments before rising again and stepping away.

Marie did not know what to say or think, but looking down, she realized that her hands were now empty and that she had dropped the rings back into the chest. She saw they were no longer golden, but three circles of blackened metal,

smoking and quickly dispersing into ash as the chest closed on its own with a clang.

Her companions watched the knight as he approached the riverbank and began readying the log raft.

“You did it,” exclaimed Brage. “He’s going to take us.”

“You passed the test,” said Courinn.

“It was never about what was in the chest or not,” said Perion.

With a wide grin, Brage was again speaking into his radio, glancing at Marie proudly. Tybain quietly approached her. He simply nodded his head, obviously quite impressed.

“Cool,” he said simply. “But who’s Charlotte?” Then he turned and walked away as each of them started towards the knight and his raft.

Marie again peered down at the closed chest. She shook her head in vague confusion as the images of something long ago quickly scattered from her mind.

Tilda’s bedroom door opened, revealing her lying face down on the bed. Under her was a damp spot on the sheets where she had been crying. In walked Nioma; her normally ruthless expression now softened as she gently sat down next to her daughter.

“I’m sorry, Tilda,” she began. “I really didn’t understand what this friend of yours meant to you.” She extended a hand out, but halted just short of laying it reassuringly on Tilda’s shoulders.

“I’ve done some reorganization, and I was able to stop your friend from being harmed,” she added.

Tilda turned over, facing her mother, her eyes and face wet and blotchy. “Are you sure, mom? He’ll be okay?”

Nioma’s brow arched and twisted, revealing for a moment only her sadistic true nature. With a quick smile, she again masked it and feigned being a loving parent.

“Yes he will, but— only if you take back your threat and never tell the sheriff or anyone else about what I do. Do you promise that, Tilda?”

She nodded with an earnest snuffle, thankful for the unexpected mercy her mother was extending her.

“And if I ever find that you’ve broken your promise— Well, then you can really forget about Jack Salento for good. But I’m sure it will never come to that, right?”

“No.”

Nioma rose. She cast a sickly sweet smile at Tilda and then silently left the room.

The raft looked old and weathered, but it was surprisingly sturdy. They all sat upon it as the knight worked an enormous oar, against the upstream current. This must have taken tremendous strength, especially with their added weight. Brage stared at the woods, marking the failing sunlight, or what little of it could be seen.

“The day stretches short,” he said, peering at the armored ferryman. “How long, sir, until we reach the river’s final bend northward?” The knight made no reply. He just rowed on, dredging up huge swaths of foamy, bubbling water.

Marie was grinning, her thoughts caught up in some humorous reverie. She got up, carefully steadying herself and made her way right next to the knight.

“So I guess you haven’t gotten around much lately?” she teased. After hearing only the sounds of the river in response, Marie sidled up even closer to him.

“Well, I’ve got a question for you, ” she said. “I’ll bet you don’t know ...” She let a long beat of silence invade their space, “where knights go to grab a bite to eat?” Everyone looked at Marie in genuine surprise. When obviously no answer came, she answered, “To an *all-knight* diner, of course!”

Courinn and Brage chuckled. Perion nodded in amusement. Tybain squeezed his eyes shut as if in pain.

“Oh come on,” said Marie, meekly glancing up at the soldier. “That one used to break up everybody back at the castle.”

The knight actually stopped rowing. He lowered his gaze, peering at Marie from somewhere behind his visor. He held this position several long moments and Marie could only guess what was being processed by the wheels turning in his head. Just as abruptly, he began rowing again with his head held high.

“Fidleedee, does anyone in these woods have a sense of humor?” asked Marie with a grin.

The land on both sides changed as they sailed on, appearing denser and darker. They passed through areas of low mist several times, skirting above the water. Twice the river bent rather sharply, first to the right, then the left. The strangest and most alarming thing they saw were the birds. They were large, unsightly creatures like vultures, high up in the trees, glaring down at them. From bony, crooked throats, they gutturally croaked.

“It feels like those birds are waiting for something,” asked Perion, passing under three of the largest they had yet seen.

“If those are really birds,” said Marie, “they are ugly.”

As if one of the winged beasts heard her, it sprang out from the branches above with a foul shriek. Its wingspan was considerable and it swooped down over them. They shrank as it passed, all but the knight who continued on, not even noticing.

“You hurt its feelings,” said Courinn with a smirk.



“Who would have thought?” said Marie, still cowering. “Vultures wiggling out from insults.” She turned to the knight again, brazenly banging her knuckles against his leg armor, like knocking on a door. “And you, my friend,” she said, “Do you have any idea ...” Again, she waited a beat ... .

“... what you call knights who trade places at the round table? Do you?”

Brage and Courinn grinned, waiting ... .

“Come on! *The knight shift!*”

Tybain ran his fingers through his hair, shaking his head.

Her companions smiled, warmed by Marie’s ability to keep the mood light, in spite of the anxiety and uncertainty they knew she must have been feeling inside.

Then it began, suddenly. The knight reacted a split second early, dropping his oar and drawing his broadsword, but it wasn’t good enough. They were all caught off guard.

From the river ahead, the sound of great fluttering wings broke out, followed this time by many horrible shrieks. As Marie looked up, a growing shadow approached. Dozens of the vulture-like birds now came at them ... .

The knight swung his mighty broadsword, cleaving in two the first vulture to reach them. But many more were behind it as Brage and Tybain stepped up to help the knight. Perion retreated, standing in front of Marie. She caught him exchange a quick glance with Courinn, who shook her head as if to some prior question or concern, which Marie curiously could not guess.

One of the vultures bore down on Tybain, its sharply hooked beak tearing into his left shoulder as it clung onto his back. In the next moment, Tybain’s arm swung up, his hand wielding one of the iron nails they had brought as he stabbed into the vulture’s sickly long neck. There was a sizzling sound like burned flesh and the bird released him. It flopped upon the raft, toppling into the stream, dead. The huskier built Brage lunged out to another of the attacking birds. He caught it with his bare hands, quickly snapping its neck. But as he fumbled to grasp a nail from his pack— unlike Tybain, who carried his on him at all times— two more birds charged into Brage. After a fierce struggle, he was knocked backwards. He stumbled, trying to gain his footing as a third vulture struck him. Carrying the only radio they had, he fell with a frenzied splash into the water.

The knight slew many of the attacking birds, before he lowered his sword and began desperately maneuvering the raft to the northern shore line. Marie withdrew the Swiss army knife she had so far carried from home. Still, Perion stood over her, protecting her, defiantly waving about him the bundled twigs they had also brought, scattering the birds

with a hate-filled scowl as they came near. Courinn drew the salt from their pouches, pitching it into the vulture's eyes, painfully afflicting them.

Tybain, wielding a nail in each hand, drove both through two more vulture's heads. He turned, seeing Brage struggling in the water with several more of the beastly birds as the river's current dragged him away.

Perion and Tybain locked eyes, instantly assessing their situation as they read each other's thoughts.

"The current's too strong, we'll lose him!" shouted Tybain above the fray.

"Go!" answered Perion. He glanced at Marie and Courinn. "I've got to stay with them! Go, Ty, while you can!"

Tybain hesitated, concerned for his younger companion. A vulture came straight at his head, but was slashed in pieces by the knight's sword. Marie caught a quick glimpse at Tybain's shoulder where he was bitten. It was bleeding, but to Marie's shock, it wasn't red. It was dark blue.

"I'll be all right!" yelled Perion. "Good luck, Ty, now go!" Tybain nodded to his comrade, then turned and dove out into the river. The current swiftly took him following Brage, now almost out of sight.

Courinn continued vigorously casting out handfuls of salt as the birds careened wildly upon contact, scorching their filthy hides. But even as Perion thoroughly protected Marie, a vulture broke past and snapped its beak down on Marie's neck. She screamed out in pain and fright as Perion smashed the beast in the face with his bundled twigs, followed by a hard stab from an iron nail. The vulture screeched, falling to the raft where Perion kicked it into the water.

The knight at last brought the raft to rest along the shoreline as Perion and Courinn examined Marie. Her neck wound was chewed nastily and from Marie's reaction, was quite excruciating. More beasts came at them as the knight's sword again struck out. Courinn swept a handful of salt just under Marie's blood trickling wound. A single droplet, as if spell-woven was soaked into the salt, turning it bright red. When Courinn launched the red salt at the attacking vultures, it caught them aflame on contact, where they burned in smoking heaps.

Perion nodded. "I forgot about that trick." He and Courinn lifted Marie under her arms, bringing her up to her feet. Together they helped her off the raft onto the shore.

They hurried into the woods to escape the birds' onslaught. The knight saw them race off, just as he slew three more vultures. At last, they heard his voice, a deep roar that echoed after them.

“Nooooo!”

Perion and Courinn continued into some thick tree cover, then halted. Carefully lowering Marie to the ground, Perion gravely looked up. “Can you do this?”

“I think so,” said Courinn, “but I’m not ready to show her everything. With your help?” Perion nodded, understanding. Marie was lightheaded but conscious as Perion gently cupped his hands over her forehead. Slowly rolling his fingers down over her eyes, they closed as Marie dozed off into light sleep.

When she woke minutes later, Courinn was earnestly bent over her. Marie unclenched her neck and shoulder as if her pain was gone. Bringing her hand up to touch it, she found that her wound was closed and scabbed over, as it might have looked weeks from now— not fully healed, but given a good head start. Marie caressed her neck in amazement. “You both got some things to explain.”

“Not now,” Perion replied. “We’ve got to find the knight. Are you okay to move on?”

“Yeah, I can,” she said, taking a deep breath.

“I don’t hear the birds anymore,” said Courinn. “Do you think he finished them all?”

“He sure seemed to,” said Perion. “Was that cry from him?”

They helped Marie up. After a few moments, she seemed okay.

“I think it was,” surmised Courinn. “And I’m afraid I know what he feared.”

“What?” asked Marie.

“Let’s find out,” said Perion. “Come on.”

They head back the way they came. There was no sound of any vultures or of any running water. Perion grew uneasy after they returned far enough to have reached the river. Everywhere, the woods now looked very different. The ground soon became soft, then moist, then only a bit farther, downright swampy.

“This can’t be,” said Perion. “Where is the river? We couldn’t have missed it backtracking this far.”

“I think you already know,” replied Courinn, grimly nodding her head. “We’re not going to find our knightly friend anywhere soon. Or your comrades, Perion.”

“What do you mean?” asked Marie. “Where are they?”

Perion closed his eyes in sudden realization. “That’s what the knight’s cry was: a last warning. Just as the professor counseled: do not leave the stream until the end.”

“We’re nowhere near where we stood minutes ago,” stated Courinn. “Look at the woods. Everything’s different.”

“We’re on the edge of some swamp,” said Perion. “We’ve been caught in one of Spellhollow’s many shifting tracts.”

Marie peered around them. “That quickly? We only went a short way!”

“We were lost moments after we left the stream,” said Courinn.

Perion stepped further along the swampy ground. He bent to touch it as he sniffed at the air. He peered long and far into the terrain ahead, taking note of the now visible setting sun. “Our luck may have turned for the worse,” he said. “I fear this is now the outskirts of the Red Marshes, some three miles north of where we just were. And if it is, we are in great peril, especially with dusk fast approaching.”

“The Red Marshes,” said Courinn. “You mean the Vampire Bog?”

Perion nodded.

“Oh no. We have to get out of here!”

“Right now,” said Perion. “Follow me!” He sprang off.

They kept to a good pace as Perion searched for the marsh’s edge, hoping to quickly veer away from it. But as they ran, he could find no boundary. The marsh only continued on. He halted, letting the girls catch their breath while he tried to reorient himself. Courinn quickly checked Marie’s neck wound. It appeared even smaller than it was minutes ago.

“Vampire Bog?” panted Marie. “What does that mean?”

“It’s one of the most deadly places in all the wood,” explained Courinn, in contrast, hardly out of breath. “Many wicked things dwell within it, but the most evil are the horrible slugs.”

“What are they?” asked Marie, her eyes darting between the swampy trees.

“We just escaped some very nasty birds,” said Perion, “who are probably a distant relation to what the slugs are or once were.”

“More birds?” exclaimed Marie. “Worse than vultures?”

“Much more horrible,” said Courinn. “Demonic vampire bats. Most are one-eyed, some are as small as insects, others as large as us, but they all possess great strength and are fast as the wind. They also carry a deadly poison.”

“This bog seems to extend in all directions,” said Perion, “like it’s swallowing us up, the more we try to escape. Could this place also cast the same bewitchment as the shifting tracks? I don’t know this region, the professor has always warned us away from here.”

“You may be right,” said Courinn.

“Which means we’re possibly trapped,” said Perion. “Blast, if only we still had our radio. I suppose we lost it with Brage.”

They were indeed trapped. It was dusk now, which made their frightening predicament much worse. Marie fought her urge to outright panic. She knew she could not, knowing her friends’ respect and admiration. Still, as she gazed at Courinn and Perion’s faces in the gloom, for a moment they resembled some scary incarnation of a vaguely remembered past.

Then, something else caught her attention. Lights, one by one like pale lamps suddenly began appearing all around them.

“What is that?” cried Marie, now on the edge of self-control. This was not at all like the mydrus trees, where she could at least see the danger. This was unknown, it was in the dark and it was far scarier.

“Quick, stand close with our backs together!” instructed Perion. Marie knew that he immediately shifted into his training regimen, whatever that was, and she felt comforted that he was with them. She drew her knife again.

Perion drew out two nails in defense, one in each hand. “Ready all the salt you have, Courinn!” Standing between her friends, Marie felt dizzy. A singing voice, deep, dark and ominous began in her head. Her arms and legs went numb. Everything around her spun as the singing grew louder. Her legs became lifeless, giving out from under her. She swooned ... .

The lights began moving now, coming closer, tightening around each of them.

*Chapter 9*

**Sluag Lair**

Marie woke abruptly, completely disoriented. She was further startled to see that she was being carried by someone, tall and rather lanky. Her arms were thrown over the male figure's shoulders and tied with rope at the wrists. She felt his surging strength. Realizing she was now awake, he lowered her to the hard ground and led her on by the rope. There was a musty odor about him as if he was part of an aged museum exhibit.

“Are you okay?” came Courinn's voice from behind. She and Perion, also tied together were being led by a second male figure. Marie glanced back, relieved to see them unharmed.

“I think so. What happened? Did you hear the creepy singing in your head too?”

Courinn nodded. “That's one way they can speak to us.”



They were being led through a cave-like tunnel, lit only by the torches their captors held. Something appeared out of the dark ahead. Marie gasped in fright as it flew and hovered

about her, glaring. The thing was hideous: a demonic and savage face with only one red and black bulbous eye, sharp black fangs and talons. Its body resembled that of a decrepit, gnarled bat, though it was almost as big as Marie. With its spiked and clawed wings, spanning some six feet, the creature no doubt had great speed and strength.

Marie shuddered. The bat quickly darted around her as if assessing her own ability and vigor. Her captor remained perfectly still yet Marie saw his muscles tighten, making it obvious that he also was not very snug near this creature.

“It’s all right,” assured Perion from behind. “It won’t hurt you as long as you make no threatening movement.” The giant demon swung around, again facing Marie. It hovered very close to her face as she flinched away in terror.

“Dead, soon,” it hissed with a gruesome, forked tongue, its red eye appearing to salivate with pleasure. The demon creature flew back up the tunnel. Marie took a breath along with her tall captor. He began leading her on again. Perion and Courinn’s captor followed.

“We were taken in the swamp,” said Perion as they marched. “There was no fight to be had. Hundreds of them appeared out of nowhere. That was an hour ago. They herded us over to these two ... gentlemen, who led us to a cavern mouth in the hills.”

“What do you want from us?” asked Marie as she stepped up to face her captor. He merely tugged her along with him, none too gently. She turned back to her friends.

“Where are they taking us?” she asked. “What is this place?”

“The lair of the slug,” answered Courinn. “This passage must lead straight to it.”

“Do you still have your nails and salt?” asked Marie.

“No,” replied Courinn. “These fellows took all we had. They would have been deadly weapons against the slug.”

“They took everything? Even—”

“—Your charm, Marie,” answered Perion.

Anger now replaced Marie’s fear. She began taking careful note of the underground passage. It varied greatly in width and height as they went on. Through the flicker of torchlight, Marie also noticed parts of the tunnel were badly damaged. Stone and thick wood support structures had been erected one over another. Remnants of old collapses, mounds of piled earth and splintered rocks were clearly visible.

Marie remained silent for another fifteen minutes or so, when suddenly everything around them opened up. They stepped into a gargantuan chamber that stretched hundreds

of feet up and across, like a coliseum. It was somewhat comforting for Marie to now be in a place without the walls and ceiling bearing down on her, but that sensation quickly gave way to skin-prickling dread.

Perched along slabs and outcrops of rock throughout the giant chamber were countless sluaug. What Marie and her companions first noticed were the thousands of red eyes all bent on them as they entered— followed immediately by waves of delighted but terrifying shrieks. Through this, however, Marie’s attention was diverted by what stood directly ahead at the chamber’s far end.

Upon a hewn dais of massive stone, lit by sparse columns of torchlight providing the chamber’s dim illumination, was a sight Marie retained crystal clear in her memory for as long as she lived. It was the full skeletal remains of what once must have been a behemoth dragon. The bones, fully intact and in place, stood resembling a great shrine. Still more sluaug, larger, seemingly more important than the others were seated among those bones— upon the long neck, head and snout, within its ribs and torso cavity and between the twisting vertebrae of its winding tail. High above, as if the ancient worm had perished in splendid flight, more bats, looking like sentinels, were perched along the utmost reaches of its two mammoth wings in full span.

The two captors shoved Marie, Courinn and Perion further into the chamber, amidst the shrieking, mocking laughter. Marie got a better look at her captors in the light. They were pale-skinned, as if they had not enjoyed a sunny day in years. Both were thinner than Marie realized, almost emaciated. In their eyes was an empty, far-off stare and Marie guessed they did not move of their own will, but someone else’s.

The demon bats’ jeering continued as they moved along the chamber floor to the far side. Once they stood directly under the shrine of dragon bones, Marie noticed three very large sluaug, more gnarled and decrepit than the others, sitting in honor between the shoulders and wing bones. The bats, whose hides looked to be covered by some natural, impenetrable leather, glared down at Marie and her friends. The laughter lessened, then stopped. Once again, the hideous singing that took Marie into unconsciousness, began.

This time she did not feel lightheaded. She turned to Perion and Courinn, who nodded, confirming they heard it as well. Then amidst the fiendish melody in her head, a loathsome voice spoke, clearly directed at Marie.

“A young mortal in mixed company?” it said. “Who are you?”

“And how have you come to wander here?” said a second voice, just as wicked sounding.

Marie stared up at the three sluaug, rubbing her temples, doing her best to calmly accept this odd, new sensation. She was communing through their minds.

“We got lost,” she said aloud. “I’m sorry, we didn’t mean to trespass on your land.”



As she spoke, Marie experienced a strange echo in her own mind— of her words being rendered into thoughts the sluaug could understand.

“Lost is what you are,” said the first voice. “Each of you will never leave here again. You may live awhile as slaves if you are hardened enough. Otherwise, there will be no need of you.”

“You have nothing to gain keeping us imprisoned here,” exclaimed Perion, silently, using the sluaug’s echoing telepathy which Marie also heard in her thoughts. “But you may have much to lose.”

The condescending jeers broke out again all around them as many sluaug beat their wings and stamped their talons, greatly entertained.

The three sluaug chieftains sat, unmoving. The first one spoke. “Take them.”

Their corpse-like captors tugged at their ropes. Marie vehemently yanked hers back.

“Wait!” she cried. “You took something from me— a globe charm on a silver necklace. I want it back now!”

Her words boomed throughout the chamber and it became silent. Each sluaug waited to see how their chieftains would answer.

The middle sluaug moved at last, and Marie then saw that its clawed wings had been held close and very tight to its head and body. It now spread them out, revealing her charm around its hairy, disgusting neck. The demon’s sinister red and black eye tightened in gloating scorn that seemed to bore straight into Marie’s heart.

The entire hall yet again erupted into thunderous laughter. The captors harshly yanked them away by their ropes.

Marie furiously tried to pull back, but she was no physical match. They made their way under the dragon shrine, where three side-by-side passages led out from the chamber. Their pale captors hauled them into the middle tunnel and they were once again thrust into darkness. Marie felt the tightening in her back and calves as they began clearly descending, going somewhere further down into the nightmare they had found themselves.

Marie tried turning on her side. It hurt. She then woke, finding herself sitting alone on the dank floor of a stone dungeon cell. Both her wrists were chained to an iron ring sunk deeply into a slimy wall. Marie yanked at it in vain. She stared up at a dripping ceiling.

“How are we gonna’ get out of this?” she spoke out loud.

“A little courage, a lot of luck,” replied a somewhat muffled voice in the dark.

Marie got up and was able to peek out of the small window in her cell door, crisscrossed with iron bars.

“Hello?” said Marie. “Who’s there? Perion?”

“Yes, it’s me.” He sounded as if he was just to the left of her.

“Me too!” came Courinn’s voice from off to her right.

Marie felt much relief that their captors had locked them up next to one another.

“No!” said another voice. “You’re all dead as dirt!”

Marie glanced across from her to another cell facing them. An old, tortured face with a mouth drooling of saliva was pressed hard against the bars, staring at them.

“Did you sleep well, Marie?” asked Perion.

“How long was I out? What time is it?”

“Some six hours,” answered Courinn. “I should say it’s near three in the morning. The slugs have sounded busy out there.”

“How do we escape them?” asked Marie skeptically.

“Well,” explained Perion, “I doubt we’re getting any supper, but they’ll soon come back for us. As they stated, we’re to be enslaved just like our captors.”

“They’re gonna make you into supper,” said the creepy prisoner across from them. Madness was cast deeply into his eyes.

“When they come, Perion,” said Courinn, “you must be ready.”

“I will.”

This mysterious exchange once again prompted the same nagging questions Marie had about both her friends—and it appeared there was now some time.

“Perion,” she began ...

“Yes, Marie.”

“I’ve been thinking about Brage and Tybain. I really hope they’re okay.”

“If you knew them, you’d know they are far more concerned about us right now.”

“Especially you, I’ll bet.”

“Hmm. You’ve noticed, I see. To my friends, I suppose I’m ... the child of the group. Or something like that.”

“I’ve been wanting to ask,” said Marie. “Well ... Who are you? Where are you and Brage and the others from?”

A long silence followed. The deranged prisoners’ eyes danced wildly in his head; he seemed as curious as Marie for an answer.

“When you were asleep in the professor’s house,” Marie added, “I was watching you. I saw your ears. And when Tybain was bleeding— it wasn’t red, it was ... *dark blue*. And how did you make my bite heal like that?”

“That was Courinn’s doing,” said Perion. “But I am sorry that I haven’t been— is forthright the word?” There was a pause. “None of us are— human. We’re from somewhere else ... not just anyplace you can get in a truck and drive to.”

“Professor Mifflin kind of told me so. He said you were banished? That you couldn’t get back home?”

“We have been exiled here. Through a kind-of door, a secret passageway, hidden right in these woods.”

“A passageway?” repeated Marie.

“Many of the things that now dwell here within Spellhollow Wood,” said Courinn, “both good and bad, have journeyed or escaped through the enchanted gateway over the last several centuries.”

“I know where it is!” shrieked the prisoner. “I’ve seen the magic door!”

Marie turned toward Courinn’s voice, resting her chin between the bars of her cell window. “What about you, Courinn? How *do you* know so much about these woods?”

“My father, as I first explained,” answered Courinn. “He also came through the hidden gateway, from that Other Place many years ago. Up until he died, he took me throughout the wood where I learned a good many things.”

“But you were born here?” asked Marie.

“—Yes.”

“And you still live in the woods. You never were in school at all, even in Woldred?”

“No.”

“But you found me somehow, after you came across my charm. You’re a detective too.”

“Once Courinn began making inquiries,” added Perion, “it was not hard to locate a young girl in town named Emily Marie, who lost her mother three years ago.”

“Perion found me first,” said Courinn, “lying alone, hurt, feverish in the mind. I was given up of all hope. I would not have lived without his help. He’s very special.”

“I know he is,” said Marie. She wondered how it must have felt to be forced away from everything you once knew. But he at least had his friends.

“How long have you been here, Perion?” she asked. “Away from home?”

Another beat of silence passed.

“I’m sorry, if you don’t want to talk about it—”

“—Two years now,” Perion answered. “I was six.”

Marie’s eyes grew wide in disbelief. Perion was now only eight years old? She was *five years* older? She assumed from his appearance and ability that he was at least her age.

“They appear much older than they are,” stated Courinn, reading Marie’s thoughts.

Marie felt foolish for pressing him to talk. “I’m sorry, Perion, I didn’t know—”

“—It’s all right,” he said, the raw emotion now present in his voice. “But it’s been so long. I miss home. I miss— my father and mother. Sometimes— sometimes, I can’t even remember what they look like.”

His voice trailed off and Marie heard strains of weeping. “Why did this happen?” she asked angrily. “Who did this to you?”

“They did nothing wrong,” replied Courinn, sparing Perion and letting him have a few moments to himself. “They were unjustly abducted and used as political leverage, by an enemy whose wicked power extends right to the boundaries of these woods.”

Marie didn’t quite understand what Courinn meant by *political leverage*, but she certainly knew the meaning of someone being used. She now had even more admiration and respect for Perion and his friends, who were so young, but seemed so full of heart, courage ... and faith.

“What’s that?” said Courinn with a hush.

There was a distant clanking and creaking sound as if an iron gate were being unlatched, followed by faint footsteps approaching.

“They’re coming!” screeched the prisoner. “To take you all away! To be torn apart and feasted on!”

“Be quiet, old one!” snapped Courinn, impatiently. “Watch and see what a bit of courage and skill is worth.”

The footsteps quickly grew closer as one of the captors appeared, the one who had taken Marie. He carefully inspected each door and cell, moving past them not once, but twice. As he passed a second time, Perion cried out in pain.

“I can’t stand it!” he shouted. “Take me out of here, I beg you, I’ll do whatever you wish! I’ll be a slave for as long as you desire, but please, unlock me from this cell!”

The captor studied Perion closely through the cell-door window. Perion played the part as best he could, and it intrigued the captor enough to lean in closer. Perion’s forearm shot between the window bars and grabbed the captor by his collar. The pallid jailor reacted immediately, raising a large, machete-like blade. Perion rigidly locked eyes with him as he held his breath. He knew the captor intended to sever his arm straight off. The sharp blade swung up, but the blow was never dealt.

Young Perion, standing on a propped up rock next to his cell door, held the captor’s stare like a magnet. Struck by a profound paralysis, his far taller and stronger adversary froze. Perion leaned in, his face flush against the bars. The captor’s pupils swelled wide open as if in pitch dark; gone now was his blank, empty stare. Perion’s eyes shone bright, overwhelming the captor’s will and his concentration in a swirl of hypnotic focus. His weapon arm fell limply to his side.

As if borne upon an unstoppable tide, Perion’s mind searched and probed, seeking to find something buried in what was left of this man, to then be torn away and smashed back through the windows of his soul. With a bizarre thrum starting in his throat, the captor’s jaw clenched as he fought the deep-rooted vestiges of what had so long kept him poisoned. Emotion flooded into his eyes and face now, along with tears of anguish and sorrow. With a furious cry, he leapt back from the cell door, landing in a toppled heap. There he lay for long minutes, gasping and sobbing, but breathing and living again as himself, for himself, as he once was— uncontrolled, un-enslaved, broken at last of a nightmarish bewitchment.

Marie and the others watched the captor writhing on the ground, struggling free of his former self. In spite of his treatment toward her, Marie wanted to reach out and help him. She easily sensed now that he was not at all what he appeared to have been.

“Perion, are you hurt?” asked Courinn.

“No,” he answered. “But it was a powerful spell to break. These creatures are formidable.”

“Will he be okay?” asked Marie.

“I don’t know. I reached deep down into what he was.”

“You killed him!” barked the deranged prisoner. “You’re a witch! Witch!”

But the captor at last caught his breath and took hold of himself. To their alarm, his hand lunged out for the long knife he had dropped. When he rose, no longer zombie-like, he held its sharp blade pointed out. Now appearing to be middle-aged, he wiped the sweat and tears from his face and again approached Perion’s cell.

With no warning, his knife arm swung up and came down hard. Perion leapt back from his cell door. The blade was buried deeply between the cell door and the thick slab of wood racked across it that kept each door unmovable and locked.

“Perion!” shouted Marie, unable to see what was happening. “Are you okay?”

The captor pried the wood slab away, then pulled it up. Perion’s cell door swung open. The captor entered.

Perion was ready, taking a defensive stance against the jailor, who then lowered his knife. A wave of sadness and sympathy crept over him. He halted.

“A boy,” he said. “You’re just a boy. There ain’t no bounds to who’ll they’ll take!”

Perion relaxed a bit, unsure. “Campbell. Your name is Campbell, isn’t it?” he asked, verbalizing what little he learned from the mind-lock they shared.

The former slave blinked, having to think a moment. He nodded.

“When did they take you?” asked Perion. “How long have you been here?”

Campbell shook his head. “Don’t know. What day is it?”

“Never mind,” said Perion. “We’re getting out of here. Will you help us?”

“As long as I’m coming too.”

Marie was much relieved to see Perion and Courinn unharmed as her cell door swung

open. When she stepped out, Campbell gently racked the wood slab back in front of her door, making it appear she was still inside.

“Thank you, sir,” said Marie sincerely. Now seeing Campbell with his wits about him, she knew her initial feeling about this man was true to heart. She took an immediate liking to him.

“Just children, you’re all so young,” said Campbell. “They’re monsters, these things, to take children too.”

“Do you remember how to get out of here?” asked Perion.

Again, Campbell had to think hard. He nodded again. “Yeah. And I know a way that’ll bypass having to go back through the main hall too. It’ll take a bit more time—”

“—No,” said Marie. “We have to go back there.”

“You don’t wanna’ do that, lassie,” argued Campbell. “Every last one of ‘em is in that chamber. One bite from them and you’re done for sure.”

Perion and Courinn studied Marie, both understanding. Marie checked their glances. “I’m taking the globe back,” she said. “There’s no point going on if I don’t.”

“Campbell,” said Perion. “I’m afraid you need to get us in and out of that chamber.”

“Take me too!” screamed the crazed prisoner. “I can get you out, just as easy!”

“Ignore that one,” said Campbell. “There’s no hope left for him, he’s as daft as they’ve ever been.”

Another distant sound rang out, of clanking metal coming from somewhere above them, followed by a scream of anguish: a sobering reminder they were not alone.

“Lead the way, then,” said Perion. “We need to move.”

“Wait,” interjected Marie, eyeing the mad captive. “We can’t just leave him here.” Perion and Courinn turned to Campbell, who shook his head.

“No, lass, he’s a dangerous lunatic. I know too well, I’ve guarded over him for—” He stopped, unsure of any time frame. “For a long time. He’ll ruin whatever chance we might have.”

“But he deserves to live too,” said Courinn, agreeing with Marie.

“Do you wanna’ then go and free every psychotic prisoner in these caves?” asked Campbell. “And have us all die?”

“Whatever he is, he’s somebody and I just can’t leave him here now,” said Marie. She looked to Perion as if the final decision was his. Maybe, she thought, it should be.

Perion sighed. “Let him out, Campbell. We’ll watch him close. But we have to go now, while we can.”

Campbell exhaled hard through his teeth. With his long knife, he pried the mad prisoner’s cell door away. He then handed his knife to Perion with a troubled glance—as if to say, “*this is a mistake*”—before lifting the wooden barrier.

The bony old man leaped out with a howl of delight. He immediately dove for Marie’s feet and began wildly groveling. Perion warned him away, quickly pushing the point of Campbell’s knife to his throat.

“Thank you, thank you, mercy to you,” clamored the old man, repeatedly. Campbell had to drag him away from Marie, then pick him up to his feet and push him forward. Doing so, the old prisoner, far stronger and lithe than he appeared, dove sideways and grabbed a watermelon-sized rock from the ground. He then rushed Marie, with the rock held up and aimed for her head. In his eyes was only deranged bloodlust.

Perion dove, but was not close enough. Campbell was, tackling the prisoner full on, seizing the rock in his hands as both crashed to the ground. When Campbell got up, the old man was motionless. His neck was broken with the rock lying under him.

Campbell shook his head, picking up his limp body and dragging it back into his cell. As Perion slid the wood slab back over the door, Campbell walked by Marie, placing a gentle, reassuring hand on her shoulder. She did not know what to say.

“If none of us wanna’ end up like that,” said Campbell, “then follow me.”

Without any torchlight, Campbell led them down several dark passageways, always knowing when to stay right or left at a fork or tunnel division. Twice they had to dash for cover when they heard approaching sounds, one of which Campbell was sure were several sluang fighting amongst each another, a horrible mix of shrieking and hissing and torn teeth gnashing.

At one point, Campbell unexpectedly halted along a tunnel wall, in front of several wooden doorways. He motioned to remain quiet. With a light shove, he pushed one of the doors inward and entered. From what Marie could see inside, it looked like a storeroom of some type.

When he emerged a minute later, Campbell held four cylinders, roughly about the length of a forearm. He gave one to each of them. “The poor fellow we just left was secretly making these to escape,” he whispered. “Once I discovered what he was hiding in his



cell, I never destroyed them for some reason, like I was supposed to. They will help us now. That is, if they still work.”

Marie inspected her cylinder, not at all sure what it was as Campbell made certain the door was shut securely. He turned and continued ahead.

He guided them a good distance further, through several more tunnel twists and turns until they came to the end of a narrow passage, where Campbell halted them. He motioned around the corner. When he and Perion silently stuck their heads out, they saw a wider passage with a short bridge spanning an open pit below. But perched along the bridge there were three sluag, as if guarding its entrance. Campbell and Perion fell back to Marie and Courinn.

“It must still be night,” whispered Campbell. “The demons are awake. We’ll never get anywhere near the main hall until daybreak, when they gather there and sleep. ‘Till then, we have to stay put and wait.”

“I hope they don’t find our empty cells first,” worried Courinn aloud. Marie nodded, obviously thinking the same thing.

Campbell had them retreat some into the darkness of the narrow passage. There they sat and waited quietly for some time.

“I wanna’ thank you,” said Campbell softly to Perion, breaking their silence, “for doing whatever you did.”

“I’m glad it worked, for all of us,” said Perion.

“But how in the heck did you kids get caught in here? And what were you doing out alone in these woods?”

“We got lost,” admitted Courinn.

“Easy to do, if you enter Spookyhollow Woods,” said Campbell.

Marie grinned, thinking about this. “It’s so hard to believe,” she mused, “that only a few days ago, I was back home in the normal world. That seems far away now.”

“Normal world?” said Campbell. “I can’t wait to get back there. To my wife and sons. But I guess things have changed a bit from the looks of ya’,” he added, motioning to Marie and Courinn’s hair and clothes. “What about the war, still going?”

“Yes,” said Marie. “For so many years now.”

“Both my boys are fighting, I pray they’re all right”.

“How did you find yourself here, Campbell?” asked the ever-curious Courinn. “Where are you from?”

“Like I said, too easy to get lost in the woods, though I never thought much of the stories. Lived my whole life up in Lanasink. Went out hunting one early morning and I guess I wandered too far. Got really lost, crossed some river as I remember, kept going where I thought was the right way. Wound up in a messy swamp and had to spend the night. That’s when they came. Took me here, where I’ve been ever since.”

“Campbell, can you tell us more about these slaug bat monsters?” asked Marie.

“That what they’re called? I only know they sleep all day in the main hall; they kill and eat most of their prisoners. Some others like me are kept as slaves.”

“Has anyone ever escaped?” wondered Courinn.

“Nah, can’t see how they could. That’s gonna’ be our problem. Even if we escape the caves, once they know they’ll be on us like frogs on lilies.” He held up the cylinder he was carrying. “These will only buy us a bit of time. We won’t get very far from the swamp and they fly as fast as a Thunderbolt P-47.”

“Then we have to find a way to stop them from coming after us,” said Courinn.

“Somehow cut off their pursuit,” added Perion. As he said this, Marie blinked as something clicked in her head.

“Can’t see how you’re gonna’ stop a thousand riled up bat demons from chasing—”

“—That’s it, Perion!” interjected Marie. “Campbell, I remember while you took us through the first tunnel there were places where it looked like the walls had caved in, but were repaired.”

Campbell chuckled, shaking his head as if recalling something that he should have easily remembered. “Oh, you’re a clever one, lass, with a quick eye. I darn well know every spot that was repaired, ‘cause I was the lackey that repaired ‘em!”

“Do you think you know a spot near the main hall entrance?” asked Marie excitedly.

“Ha!” Campbell laughed aloud and then covered his mouth from his outburst. “You’re in luck,” he whispered. “There’s a section of rock wall that I can’t keep from bustin’ apart!”

“But is there any other way they might still come after us?” wondered Courinn, “through these tunnels here?”

“The tunnels we’re in now don’t lead back to the front gateway,” explained Campbell. “They head deep into the caverns for over a mile, ending in the torture pits of some very bad place, which I’ve never been. We’d be a long way away, if all goes well. The passage ahead is our only chance.”

Marie saw that something else occurred to Campbell as he stared down at the cylinder he held. “Now that you got me thinking,” he said, “we’re gonna need a little extra help if we really wanna’ bring the place down. Wait here. I’ve got to go back to that storage area we just left.”

“Please be careful,” said Marie.

“I’ll be back in a snap, don’t you worry.”

Marie began to grow anxious after some length of time, when at last Campbell returned. Over his shoulder an old rifle was perched. In his hands, he carried a good-sized leather backpack, which he carefully placed between his legs as he sat back down.

He un-slung the rifle and placed it next to him. “Found my old gun and pack. Guess they had no use for it and threw it into the storage cell. Nice to have this back too,” he said, smiling as he held up his left hand, where there was now a wedding ring on his finger. Then Campbell opened his pack.

“For a little extra kick,” he added. Marie saw there were six or so long sticks wrapped in coiled lengths of fusing. Even she could tell they were explosives: sticks of dynamite. “Them beasts had us use this to expand sections of the tunnels,” explained Campbell. “Not quite what I’m gonna use them for now.”

About two hours later, Perion and Campbell saw that the sluaug resting on the bridge had gone. They waited another fifteen minutes to be sure, before continuing. Campbell led them across the small bridge and quickly sped down the passage until he had them make a sharp left, then two more right turns into different tunnels. How he knew where to go with no light guiding them, within almost complete dark, amazed Marie. They emerged into a much wider passage that Marie recognized as the tunnel they had taken when first leaving the main hall. Just ahead, she could see a pale light that she knew was the torch lit shrine of dragon bones in the sluaug chamber. Campbell had succeeded in getting them back without being seen.

They halted again before the entrance to the hall. Campbell turned to them, his eyes wide with what they were each feeling: dread and outright fear.

“If I were in my right mind,” he said to them, “I’d say we’re soon to be lambs for the slaughter. But I believe there’s some luck about you. Still—” he added, turning solemnly to Marie, “—these things are right out deadly. You sure you can do this?”

All eyes fell on Marie. “I have to believe we can get out of here,” she said, and her face sternly revealed that she truly did. “I know it seems impossible, but we all *must* believe that right now.”

“You’re just a wee lass,” said Campbell, “but you woulda’ made a heck of a commanding officer in the war.”

Marie bristled. “The war— I hate the war. Seeing it on teevee all the time. It always makes my father so angry. I love to watch the rockets instead, when they send them up into space.”

Campbell blinked quizzically. “Teevee?”

“My father said they thought it was impossible to send a rocket into space so fast. He said it was only because *they believed*, they knew they could do it.”

“Rockets in space?” said Campbell, in confusion. “You mean ... outer space?”

“Yeah,” answered Marie. “And soon we’ll be on the moon. Which, by the way, I want to be around to see.”

“We? You mean the Germans?” said Campbell, quickly correcting Marie’s history. “They have the rockets, the V2’s.”

“No,” said Marie. “America.”

“But you said the war is still going.” A burst of elation sprang over Campbell. “Have we beat the German’s?”

“Campbell,” interjected Courinn. “When was it you left to go hunting, before you were captured?”

“It was the beginning of fall, second week of September. Couldn’t a’ been more than a few years ago at the most. Right?” he added, to assure himself when no one answered.

“What year?” asked Courinn.

Campbell glared back at them, crunching his brows, trying his best to refuse entry of the quickly growing realization that was now assaulting his mind.

“Nineteen forty-two,” he said, almost in a whisper.

“Oh my gosh,” said Marie.

“How much time has—” asked Campbell.

A long moment passed. No one wanted to answer the question. They knew it would forever change the world for Campbell.

“It’s April, nineteen sixty-eight,” answered Marie at last.

The revelation of Campbell’s fate washed over him with only the faintest of reaction. His eyes dulled a bit, his lips pressed together and he did his best to force a swallow.

“You haven’t aged a day, have you?” asked Perion.

Campbell raised his arms and hands, inspecting them, for the first time realizing how appallingly thin he was from his imposed starvation under the slaug slavery. He peered at his wedding ring, then softly touched his face with it. While in spellbound captivity, he had remained the same age for twenty-six years.

Marie approached Campbell to somehow comfort him, but he quickly turned away, sweeping aside whatever he was feeling and turning his focus to the immediate present.

“We must be quieter than quiet. They are listening, even when asleep. Each of us clear what we’re doin’?”

Marie and the others understood how their new friend wished to proceed after this startling news. They nodded, taking deep breaths, trying their best to remain calm. Marie clenched her hands and squeezed shut her eyes, summoning her courage and concentration.

“Here we go then,” said Campbell.

Again they entered the main chamber of the slaug. It was now far more frightening. The hall was filled with all sizes of the demon bats. They were packed everywhere, jammed next to one another in the many ledges and cubbyholes of rock. It was a sea of the vile beasts, but with a difference this time, which Marie quickly noticed: not a single eye—literally— was opened. Every one of the slaug were fast asleep.

Marie forgot the disgusting odor of the hall, which the things stank of. Her heart sunk as she stared across the chamber’s great expanse. Its other end, where the passage began that would lead them out of this living nightmare, seemed a thousand miles away.

Campbell and Perion motioned to Marie and Courinn— their check signal that all was okay so far. Courinn nodded to Marie, resolute as a soldier. She was ready. Above them stood the dragon bones where the three slaug chieftains were perched. Still draped around the middle bat’s neck was Marie’s charm.

Campbell and Perion moved across the floor as silent intruders. It was terribly horrifying

to walk right on past hundreds upon hundreds of sluaq, some merely feet away, without the thought that one of them would somehow wake, see them and attack.

They warily continued. Several times Campbell froze, certain his footsteps had made too loud a noise. He glared around him, his hands and fingers like vice grips clutching his rifle, waiting for the inevitable. Perion, who was far more sure footed, moved along quicker and more efficiently. Campbell drew courage seeing this and followed behind the graceful boy.

Within a mere sprint of the passage leading out, Campbell, now sweating profusely, felt a sudden urge to do just that: Drop the pack of dynamite he carried and run off as fast as he could. As if Perion read his thoughts, he turned back to Campbell and motioned with his steady hands to remain calm. Campbell exhaled, forcing out his anxiety and vigilantly trailed Perion the rest of the distance.

When they at last crossed under the passageway threshold, both of them shared a joyous handshake in muted thankfulness. But they still had a job to do as Campbell led Perion down the passage, until they came to a section that had several wood and steel supports barely holding it up. They were splintered, rusted and jury-rigged many times under the ceiling of rock and earth. As evidence of its constant repair, tools and unlit torches were lying about. Campbell laid aside his rifle and the dynamite. He lit a torch and grabbed a shovel. Perion took a pickaxe. They quickly went to work.

Marie was terrified. Her throat was bone dry as she tried to swallow and her eyes stung from the cold perspiration trickling into them. More sweat soaked her palms and fingers, making her task far more difficult: climbing the bones of the dragon skeleton, while doing her best to avoid stepping on or bumping into the deadly, sleeping sluaq everywhere around her. She also hoped with all her might that she did not even slightly vibrate a bone that might wake her enemies.

Yet keeping silent seemed impossible as Marie's racing heartbeat pounded so heavily, booming in her own chest and head that she was sure the giant bats could hear it. Below, at the clawed feet of the dragon, Courinn kept watch for any enemy movement.

Marie bravely ascended, sidestepping the ferocious demons, sometimes only mere inches away. After Courinn had boosted her up the lower leg, Marie climbed over the joints of the upper thighbones before hoisting herself on top of the sternum. Now she could clearly see the sluaq chieftains, perched between the dragon's two mighty wing phalanges. She was close, yet a dozen more bat demons stood in her way.

She carefully balanced herself upon the back vertebrae, grabbing one of the lower wing ulna bones. The diseased breathing sounds of the sluaq filled her ears, competing with the rhythmic pounding of her own blood. She reached out again, stepping right over the head of a sluaq sentinel, then pivoted just in time to miss kicking another in the back. Marie at last stood face to face with the three chieftains in their loathsome slumber.

She didn't dare breathe, staring at her mother's charm around the middle chieftain's crooked throat. She reached out, both her hands shaking as her lips trembled. About to touch it, she could not keep herself from quivering. She stopped, wrung her fingers together until it hurt, then visualized nothing in her mind but wafting feathers and gentle rain, lifting the necklace off the demon bat. Yet she clenched her teeth so tightly in fright that her jaw made a sudden popping sound. Marie was sure this would give her away as she drew the charm close, squeezing her eyes shut. When she opened them again, Marie was astounded none of the slug had woken. There in her hands was the globe amulet.

Marie turned from them, retracing the steps she took. But her incredible good luck had run out. Lowering herself down from the back, Marie's left foot glanced over a vertebra to one side. Trying to regain her footing, the bone gave and made a sharp creaking sound. Two of the three chieftains' eyes popped open. The middle one, seeing Marie, erupted into a scream of wrath as it flew at her, slamming its vile body between her shoulders, knocking Marie off balance. She fell from the height she was at, landing hard on her side, yet still clutching the amulet.

As Marie painfully rolled over, there was the slug chieftain towering over her, its swollen, single eye and salivating fangs revealing how it was about to deal with her.

"How does it look?" asked Perion, peering up into the tunnel's dark recesses as Campbell worked above him.

"The whole thing wants to crumble, that's for sure. Whether it's enough to block the passage shut, I just can't tell. It could also come down much more than I think, which might bring a good part of this tunnel with it. Meaning we'd be buried trying to escape."

A low rumble began from the direction they came, quickly growing into a wild uproar of screeching slug. Campbell quickly lowered himself, glancing at Perion, then back up the passage. They both knew it was coming from the main hall.

"Oh no," said Perion.

"They're awake now," confirmed Campbell.

"Do they still have a chance?" asked Perion, his body wound like coil, ready to race back.

"I'm sorry, my friend."

Marie felt little of the sharp pain that now pounded through her side and shoulder. She was only aware of the slug monster over her. It croaked from its throat in sickened delight as its harsh, clawed talons dug into her legs. Marie desperately tried dragging herself away, while the grossly deformed thing stepped onto her stomach and chest. Its

weight was tremendous, far denser and heavier than Marie imagined. As the bat easily pinned its prey beneath it, Marie was vaguely aware of the endless sluaug around them, their wings madly flapping in ghastly amusement.

The sluaug then jammed its talons into her neck, glaring down mercilessly. Marie could not breathe as her arms and legs tried vainly to punch and kick the heavy creature away. Suffocating, Marie's sight blurred severely, yet she could still discern the sluaug's talon lifting over her— its razor claws expanding to begin tearing her face to shreds.

In those moments, many thoughts surged through her consciousness all at once. She sadly grieved for what she knew was now going to happen to Courinn and Perion, who stood by her to the end. Her heart broke, realizing that she was not going to save her mother. Unable to bear this, Marie's mind began to will away all the pain and despair as best she could, summoning the very last of her resolve to materialize all her shattered heart's desires. She wished to get away from this monstrous demon and not have it come after her again. And in her mind's eye, Marie saw that something sharp was thrust straight through the sluaug's body and it staggered back in stunned disbelief. She somehow saw herself smile, believing it was a final gift and message from her mother, as if to say, *"you don't have to leave this world in such pain, in such a horrible way."*

Knowing this, Marie was comforted, feeling her searing pain and fear ease. She then dearly wished that her father's own pain could be struck away completely, until he could be reunited with his daughter and wife again.

She wished once more and saw in her mind that Courinn would meet her father again and forever remain with him. She hoped that Perion would return home, seeing him joyously hugging his parents. All these thoughts and desires flashed before Marie in her final deliria. Then all the light was sucked away and blackness came.

When Marie woke, she sat up, knowing she had only blacked out mere seconds. Without thinking, she replaced her charm around her neck. There was the sluaug chieftain next to her, yet no longer on top. Through a whirl of confusion, she saw why.

Just as Marie had seen in her mind— or was it?— the sluaug struggled to stand, staggering back in stunned disbelief. Something long and sharp *was* speared right through it. Long, sharp and gleaming gold. It twisted and ripped into the gut of the great chieftain, then hurled it aside, dead. Marie gasped in astonishment at what stood behind her former adversary: a majestic, black unicorn with a great, golden horn.

The unicorn mare stared straight at Marie, its sparkling green eyes wide with alarm. As Marie gaped back, the unicorn kicked toward her with its cloven hoof the cylinder Marie was carrying. The mare's tail flung over a second cylinder, that which Courinn had held.

"Set it off!" shouted the unicorn. "Both of them, now!"



It was Courinn's voice, of course, now just a bit deeper. Still, Marie hesitated a moment as her peripheral sight revealed a wave of furious sluaq quickly converging on her.

"Now, Marie!" shouted Courinn again.

The attacking bat creatures were met by a mighty blast of blinding light. Marie pointed the cylinder flare out in front of her, like a torch, while she bit the string from the second tube, yanking it away, discharging a second flare.

With cries and shrieks of pain, the bat demons frantically scattered in all directions. As Campbell had well known, the brilliant light of the flares was akin to a torturous blade being slit into their eyes.

Courinn leapt into the air, colliding with several fleeing sluaq as all four of her hooves landed firmly, close to Marie. The unicorn bent her legs and arched her back down. "Get on!" she cried.

Marie nimbly climbed upon the unicorn, swinging her flares aside. With a great surge of strength, Courinn bolted off across the floor of the wide chamber as Marie brandished her flares, one at each side of her waist, like two glowing jousting lances.

The sluaq in their frenzied bewilderment withdrew, viciously smashing and bombarding into one another. The unicorn swept through the hall, a streak of shining black and gold. With no saddle and holding no reins, Marie marveled at how gentle and graceful Courinn held herself, in spite of their formidable speed. This was unlike any horse Marie had ridden. The oncoming sluaq immediately fell back at their breakneck approach.

"How long do these things last?" shouted Marie, noticing the flare's brightness already begin to lessen.

"Not much longer!" answered Courinn.

Nearing the passageway entrance, Marie could see Perion there waiting. He was grinning excitedly, no doubt for reasons twofold: seeing them both safe and with Courinn in her current unicorn shape.

Perion quickly tried igniting their last two flares as Courinn sped under the tunnel overhang. When nothing happened, he stared at them, remembering Campbell's concern if they would still work.

"Oh no—" he said, glancing up to see the chaotic sluaq attempting to regroup their attack. Without the flares, there would be no escape. They were all dead. In desperation, Perion scraped the tubes' exposed fuel hard against the rock wall. Nothing. He tried again. With a crackle, sparks ignited, triggering the flares seconds later. With a

relieved sigh Perion dropped them, nimbly leaping upon Courinn behind Marie, where the unicorn exploded ahead into the passage.

As the remaining flares burned away in the tunnel entrance, the slug fluttered about in reckless confusion. Yet the two surviving chieftains sped in precise circular patterns a good distance away, patiently awaiting the blinding light to die out.

After some distance, sections of the tunnel walls and ceiling became too cramped to pass through, riding upon the lithe unicorn. As she came to a halt, Perion leapt down, helping Marie to her feet. He gave her a quick hug, which somewhat surprised Marie.

“Are you hurt badly?”

“It doesn’t tickle, but I’m not stopping now.”

Perion then reached out to Courinn, hugging her neck as she returned the gesture, nuzzling him. Marie now stared at her unicorn friend then turned to Perion. “Why didn’t either of you tell me?”

“We wanted to several times, Marie,” he said. “It just never seemed the right moment.”

“Well, you sure found the moment back there,” said Marie. She studied Courinn closer. Her pure black hair and flowing mane was smooth as silk and had a phosphorescent sheen to it. Marie marked that her golden horn, or alicorn, sprang from the very spot Courinn’s scar resided in human form. It shone like gleaming crystal. She was breathtaking to look upon.

“My gosh, Courinn, you’re so beautiful,” said Marie. “It sure explains a lot now.”

The rabid cries of the slug could be heard away up the tunnel. With a shudder, Marie thought back to where she was only minutes ago. She reached out and gently stroked Courinn’s mane. “Thank you,” she said. “You saved everything.” Courinn lowered her head in humble respect.

“We’ve got to go,” said Perion, “Campbell will be ready by now.”

When they reached Campbell, uncertainty and concern lined his face. He had carefully dug out a section of earth beneath a supporting steel shaft, which was quite rusty and bent. Marie saw his unease as he climbed down to them.

“What is it, Campbell?” she asked. “Will it work?”

“It’s sure to come down all right and bury most of this tunnel— probably take us with it.”

Marie bit her lip, glancing at Perion for his thoughts.

“Unless, that is—” continued Campbell.

“What?” asked Perion sharply. He knew what Campbell meant.

“Unless, you get a good head start now.”

“While you stay until the last moment to bring it all down,” guessed Perion.

“No, Campbell,” said Marie.

“It’s the only way to be sure,” he said.

“You’re coming with us,” said Marie. “You got us this far.”

Campbell shook his head bitterly. “My time is passed. There’s nothing left for me out there.”

“There is,” said Courinn. “Your wife and family.” Marie saw that her friend had returned to mortal shape.

“My wife,” repeated Campbell, “is an old woman now, if she’s still alive. My sons are older than I am. Tell me, what kind of life is there to return to?”

“You don’t know that,” said Courinn.

“These things coming after us took from me everything I had. What I want now is to stand before them one last time. Please go now, or all this will be for nothin’.”

“He’s right,” said Perion. “If we don’t go now, we never will. You will never see your mother again, Marie.”

Glassy-eyed, Marie tried in frustration to reason out the right thing to do.

“Go now, please!” said Campbell.

Perion bowed his head before Campbell. Looking up, he saw Campbell’s eyes had misted as well. “I would have died in here as one of their slaves,” he said. “Bless you for giving me my wits back at the very end.”

“I remain at your service, sir,” said Perion. “I will never forget you.”

Campbell turned to Courinn. “Good luck, courageous friend,” she said. “May you soon find peace again.”

Campbell nodded with a reassured smile. “Go now!” he said.

Marie ran to Campbell, crying openly. She hugged him tightly, someone who only hours ago was a corpse-like enemy. He embraced her fully in return, as if all the love he had left, had yearned for and saved for his family was given to Marie to carry back to them. Underscoring these bittersweet sentiments, he opened Marie's hand and placed a single extra flare in it. "If you find the chance," he said softly, "see this back to where it belongs." Glancing down, Marie didn't understand until she saw something shiny and round pressed into the flares' tightly packed fuel, near its fuse: his wedding ring.

He then gently kissed her cheek and whispered in her ear. "Outer space ... I would have loved to see that. Think of me, lassie, when we get to the moon."

She couldn't let go of him until Perion pulled her away. Before she knew it she was off running, still crying, yet running as fast as she could further down the jagged and bumpy passage, along side Courinn as Perion brought up the rear.

Back in the tunnel entrance, the last of the flares' white glow faded quickly. The swarm of frenzied sluaq circled closer and closer, until the ebbing streaks of light died out.

Inwards the bat demons sped, amidst shrieks of furious anger and bloodthirsty revenge, led by the two remaining chieftains.

## *Chapter 10*

### **The Old Mansion**

Campbell stood, calmly waiting for them. He checked his rifle, making double sure of the bullet in its chamber. Lowering it, he held a torch ready under the dangling fuse of six dynamite sticks, wedged deeply into the half-rusted, twisted steel structure. A simple raise of the arm is all it would take.

He listened carefully, judging from his long experience in the tunnels, the exact moment to spring his trap. It would be the last time he would have to hear their abominable cries along with their nauseating smell. After the unknown scores the sluaq had captured, tortured and killed, they could hardly know one of their most trusted slaves was about to exact his own brutal vengeance.

“Come on. Come on, all of ya’,” he said to himself. “Time to fill the graveyard.”

But the moment came and went. Before Campbell could ignite his fuse, he felt a sharp pain in his side, then another in his back. Turning, Campbell stared into a morbidly pale captor’s face, one of his former cohorts, wielding a lengthy knife that had just stabbed Campbell twice.

He staggered in disbelief, dropping the torch. As the captor came at him again brandishing his weapon, Campbell clearly marked his dead, spellbound eyes. He flung himself aside into the rock wall to evade his attacker.

In the next moment, hundreds upon hundreds of the bat demons, of all sizes and shapes, soared and smashed into and over them. The bombardment assailed Campbell’s senses like a salvo of putrid filth and disease. He was bitten and scourged many times as they passed through the tunnel. Within the pandemonium, his attacker lunged. The blade emerged through the maddened flitting of wings, catching Campbell again, this time in the chest.

Campbell wanted to give up and welcome the miserable end of his life. He glanced at the lashes and bites all over his body, which began bubbling with poison. The severe pain from these and his knife wounds quickly sapped what precious strength he had left. Yet he could not succumb, he thought, not for a few more seconds.

As most of the sluaq passed, Campbell buckled to his knees, lunging for his old rifle. He spun on his back and lunched the weapon up. The captor halted as Campbell, with a rush of adrenaline, shakily rose again. When the captor advanced, Campbell pulled the trigger with nothing but a grinding, clicking sound—the old rifle had jammed. Desperately,

Campbell reached for the burning torch on the floor while barreling forward, blindly swinging it and catching alight a single slug speeding by. The captor pivoted, seizing Campbell's arm, twisting it as he jammed the torch behind into Campbell's shoulder, where his sleeve and part of his hair caught aflame.

Campbell cried out in agony, stumbling backwards against the tunnel wall where he first stood. He frantically tried to put out the flames scorching him. His relentless enemy came once more to finish him.

Campbell barely lifted his forearm, crying out again in unbearable torment. Just as the captor's knife reached his throat, Campbell jerked his burning hand above his head, igniting the dynamite fuse. The last thing he saw was the hitherto captor's dead eyes revealing sudden astonishment ... .

The explosion rocked the passage as the ceiling completely gave way; stone and earth collapsed in a furious heap. The rusted steel and wood supports snapped easily, and like a rippling domino wave, the tunnel walls crumbled from within themselves. Most of the pursuing slug were caught and buried almost instantly.

Down the passage, the wreckage rapidly surged. Campbell had indeed chosen the optimum juncture of vulnerability to blast apart the tunnel. Like a shattering gargantuan backbone of ceiling and wall, nothing could escape its destructive path. Within minutes, even the slug who had flown furthest along were entombed within the passageway's furious demise.

Midway between the tomatoes and potatoes, James found what he was looking for: that elusive, perfect stem of bananas. He placed the selection in his cart as he strolled through the farmer's market. Once again, he did not notice how several of the early morning shopping patrons eyed him, some in general curiosity, others leering in suspicion—at least not until he bumped into someone, leaning in to inspect a package of strawberries.

“Excuse me— Oh hello, Mrs. Bishop, I'm sorry, I didn't see you. How are—”

“— No, that's all right,” she said, quickly moving away. “Have a good morning.”

James studied her. Highland Pointe folks always had time to pleasantly converse or gossip; whichever was more expedient. That it was now six a.m. made no difference.

He surveyed those near him, blatantly staring like they had passed both a verdict and sentence on him.

“What's the look, Walters?” said James aloud, catching a shopper's critical gaze. “Why don't you just say what's on your mind for everyone to hear?”

“Where’s your daughter, James?” came another voice behind him. He turned. Wayne Schultee, the high school football coach faced him, staring from behind a full cart of groceries, appearing angry and outraged.

“I don’t know, Schultee. But I guess you already made up your mind what’s happened to her, right?”

“First your wife, then your girl,” countered Schultee. “What are you hiding?”

“How many here in this town have lost family and friends?” said James. “I know what happened to your boy five years ago— doesn’t make me suspicious of you. Why do you accuse me of hiding something?”

“They say your daughter ran off into the woods,” said Walters, now speaking up. “They say she went to see ghosts.”

“And you’re always yelling,” added Schultee, “how there’s no truth about the woods, how it’s all a bunch of nonsense. It seems like that’d be a real smart cover-up.”

James stood firm, his eyes angrily darting between his accusers. “What’s wrong with you? You all know me. I run a respectable business in this town. I lost my dear wife. And now my Marie is missing!”

“Did your innocent Marie go off to find the ghost of your wife?” asked Schultee. “What do they got planned next for the rest of us?”

“Listen to yourselves!” said James. “You’ve cracked, you really have! That woods out there has made you lose your minds!”

“We’ll be watching you,” warned Schultee, “Watching you close.” With that, he pushed his cart ahead and walked off. Walters also disappeared around a corner, along with several other patrons who had been curiously listening.

James clenched his jaw in frustration. He looked down to see a half-crushed package of strawberries in his hand.

The explosion echoed all around them. Perion halted Marie and Courinn a moment to listen further. A low rumbling sound emerged, beginning to shake the walls where they stood. But it did not stop. It continued moving, approaching closer down the tunnel.

“Run!” yelled Perion. “Run!”

As fast as they did, it seemed no use. Marie felt she was trying to outpace the wind. The rumbling became almost deafening as rocks and chunks of the walls crumbled all around

them, leaving a thick haze, causing Marie to gag. Then, it suddenly ceased: the rumbling, the shaking and the falling pieces of rock.

Perion halted them again as Marie fought to control her wild panting. Her side and shoulder were throbbing after her fall from the dragon bones. She shook her head, seeing that Courinn and Perion were hardly winded at all. “What a drag being mortal,” she thought to herself. Still clutching the flare Campbell gave her, she shoved it into the side of her boot.

Perion listened, then grinned. “I believe we outran it!”

“But did any of the slug also escape?” asked Courinn.

Perion shook his head. “I don’t hear anything. Still, we can’t be sure. Let’s move. It should not be far to the outside tunnel entrance.”

As they hurried on, Marie noticed a saddened pain lash across Perion’s face.

“Are you all right?” she asked him.

He lowered his head from her, biting his lip and shutting his eyes as he walked. Marie would later learn that Perion saw glimpses of Campbell’s terrible last moments, some sort of lingering result from the mind-lock Perion used to free him.

It took less than a quarter-hour, but before that, they became fearful of more booming sounds, now coming from ahead. The further they went, the sharper the noise was. The walls again began to throb and rattle with some kind of angry, percussive force.

At last, they came to the tunnel end, emerging in the glow of early morning— into the most fierce lighting and thunderstorm Marie had ever experienced. Twenty seconds later they were soaked to the bone with heavy rain.

Within a short distance, they found themselves trudging through the very bog they had left when captured. But it now looked quite different. The swampy pools appeared like powerful electric beacons from the reflected lightning above. The rain pounded into the bog so hard that it sounded as if a tide of rushing water loomed. The thunderclaps forced Marie’s heart into her throat. A streak of lightning, coupled with an enormous blast of thunder suddenly blinded them, crashing into a tree only ten feet away, instantly shattering it to pieces in a tremendous whirl of smoke.

“We must escape this place!” shouted Courinn. Marie turned, just as her comrade transmuted again into unicorn shape. It was a wondrous, yet peculiar spectacle— especially seeing Courinn’s glasses somehow assimilate, then disappear into the unicorn’s thick mane. Perion quickly helped Marie onto Courinn’s broad and sturdy back. Just as he vaulted up behind, Courinn charged off through the bog.



Marie was again in awe at how gently the unicorn held them, especially now through the boggy terrain. She knew enough about riding to know that this swampy, uneven ground would be nearly impossible for a horse to try to navigate through. But Courinn sped on, almost magically, hardly touching the ground. Her golden horn was held up straight and proud, pointing the way ahead to safety.

“Consider yourself honored,” said Perion, closely in Marie’s ear so she could hear him. “A unicorn rarely, if ever, lets anyone upon its back.”

Onward they rode, skirting a mountainous line off to their right. The marshy lichen and wet moss began to disappear. The ground under them became firmer. They were leaving the bog behind.

As the morning progressed, the rain lessened and the storm let up, leaving only heat lightning. Marie was thankful as she now had a nasty headache. A brilliant rainbow appeared above the bog’s scant trees, rising into the sky. Marie had never seen one so saturated with color. Gazing in wonder, Perion voiced aloud her thoughts as if he heard her thinking.

“Yes, soon we’ll have some business at the end of that rainbow. Somewhere ahead beyond the Gwindylo.”

“How far is that?” asked Marie.

Perion shook his head, unsure. Then something caught his eye. “Hold, Courinn!” he shouted. Perion sprang off the halting unicorn and ran back a bit. When he returned, he looked relieved.

“What have you found?” asked Courinn.

“Something I was eagerly looking for— a narrow, nearly hidden ravine that runs through the mountains here, from where the River Kindrane begins. My comrades and I have only used it once or twice, but it does lead in the direction we seek and will save us much time, instead of entering the treacherous Spellhollow Pass.”

“Don’t the shifting tracts also extend to this side of the mountains?” asked Courinn.

Marie blinked in amazement. Courinn now stood once again in mortal form, soaking wet, but her green eyes bright and energetic.

“They do,” said Perion. “We still need to be very careful.”

Brush and thick trees hid the ravine when they came to it. Past this, a rough and rocky track wound its way between the sides of two hilly ascents. Perion led the way.

The air had been warm and humid during the storm, but now, even with the rising sun, the breeze turned cooler and Marie felt her first shiver from being all wet. Her boots gushed and sloshed as they walked and she realized how tired, sore and hungry she was.

“When is dinner and bed?” she asked aloud. How long had it been since she ate something? She couldn’t remember.

“There is a quiet spot at the far end of this ravine, which we’ve used as a camp,” said Perion. “We can rest there.”

“With nothing to eat,” said Marie.

It was an endless hour, thought Marie, before they reached the ravine end. Perion led them into a natural semi-ring of rocks set among several trickling fissures from the stone. It indeed appeared a pleasant, restful area.

“This is the beginning of the Kindrane,” said Perion. A good, wholesome place, considering how close we are to the sluang caverns and the far more terrible evil that lies only half a day’s march northward from there.”

“Please say we can drink the water?” asked Marie.

“Yes, it’s fine,” answered Perion. Marie rose with a groan as her injured side and shoulder had tightened up. She thankfully stuck her face into the dribbling water, drinking deep and long. Courinn joined her. When they finished, Marie thankfully plopped herself down among the rocks, stretching out the pain in her limbs. Without intending to, she almost instantly fell asleep.

When she woke, she saw Perion working a small fire. He turned to her. “Good afternoon. Feeling refreshed?”

Marie rubbed her eyes, then reached to her side where an oversized fern leaf was pressed. She lifted it, seeing a thin layer of ointment over a dark bruise that felt less painful. She looked up, meeting Courinn’s eyes which smiled back. Marie glanced around her. The pale sun appeared to be late in the sky.

“How long did you let me sleep?” she asked.

“Most of the day,” said Courinn, arranging several more fern leaves. Upon them were various nuts and berries. “I’ve gathered something of a small meal for us.”

“Looks—delicious,” said Marie, wishing it was something more like roast beef and mashed potatoes. “But first, I need to ...” She hesitated, a bit embarrassed. “Well, this place *is* nice, but I don’t think it has a bathroom.”

Courinn smiled again, amused. Perion motioned outside the stone ring, through the trees. “Stay close, Marie. Don’t wander off.”

Marie went only a very short distance. She could still barely hear Perion and Courinn talking softly. Just as she finished her business, Marie saw a blur move between the trees. She halted, still as stone.

Another shape stirred, darting between a tree and a large rock. Before Marie could scream out, she was cornered by three men in dark blue *uniforms*. They wore strange looking caps and held long rifles.

They were so close that Marie knew she could not outrun them, but nonetheless her eyes darted about, searching for an escape. One of the soldiers as Marie guessed they were, stepped up with his rifle pointed straight at her.

“Don’t move,” he said in a thin voice, “if you value your life.”

A fourth soldier appeared and spoke to the first. “She’s alone, no others.”

“No others?” thought Marie. Did her friends somehow escape? If so, she wasn’t about to give them away.

“Move now,” commanded the first soldier, motioning in the direction she had come. When she did not budge the soldier snarled, revealing sharp, fang-like teeth. Startled, Marie took a few steps. The soldiers formed a circle, barricading any escape.

Marie walked on. There was no longer any camp ahead, no ring of stones, no trickling water, no sign of her comrades. Perion had said they were still in the shifting tracts region. Where was she now?

“Who are you?” she angrily asked the lead soldier. “Where are you taking me? You have no right to do this.”

The soldiers said nothing, escorting Marie for another half hour. Rain began again. The woods here were indeed different: More trees and rock, unlike the bog with less sun shining through. Late afternoon now quickly welcomed dusk. Marie was soaked all over again as the rain grew heavier and the throbbing in her head returned, courtesy of more lightning and thunder.

Undaunted, the soldiers stayed in formation as they marched. Marie examined the ground, marking that they were traveling along what must have been a road at one time, long ago. She felt light headed and realized how famished she was.

“Excuse me, do you have anything to eat?” she asked with no reservations. “I’m starving.” The soldiers gave no answer.

They came to a wide entrance in the woods. It was a clearer roadway made of small, neatly laid, dark stones. It immediately split off in two opposite directions. The soldiers led Marie to their left, up a gradual ascent curving along to their right. The thunder and lighting became more intense as it did when they first escaped the slug lair. Rounding a final bend of the road, Marie was greatly relieved.

There was Perion and Courinn, also surrounded by soldiers. Marie broke the ranks, running to her friends through the rain. They were just as thankful to see her.

Courinn took Marie by the hands. "Did they hurt you?"

"No, just scared me," she answered, wiping the dripping rain from her eyes. "Let me guess ... lost in the shifting tracts again?"

"Miles from where we were," admitted Perion in plain frustration.

"And from the frying pan into the fire," added Courinn.

Behind them, at the top of the hill they had reached, stood a huge mansion set within a tangle of unkempt evergreen trees. It rose several floors high, with several more sharply angled gables and a long, lower section at the far end. The road stretched around the perimeter of the structure and led back down the hill at its far end, back to the entranceway in a wide circular pattern.

Yet as lovely as it must have once been, it was now only a shell— a burned out shell of a long forgotten dwelling. The estate had suffered a great fire that left it standing by its charred and blackened frame only. The scent of freshly burned wood still hung heavily in the air, hinting the fire had occurred recently. From where they stood, an entire wall was consumed and fell away, revealing what looked like a great hall just inside. Behind the estate, crooked fingers of lightning streaked across the ominous, quickly fading sky.

The soldiers shoved Marie and her friends ahead to enter the old mansion. As they did, they saw at the hall's far end— its ceiling rose the structure's full height, having no floors above it— another figure emerge from a half-collapsed balcony. He stepped down the rickety stairs to the main floor, quickly approaching until he stood before them.

He had a cruel face: a long, narrow head with eyes much too small and pasty thin lips. He was in the same old-fashioned blue uniform and from the look of the stripes on his arm, he was in charge. He glared at them in disgust, and his nostrils flared again and again, like he could not control it.

"I am Corporal Dlucket," he began, "One Hundred Forty-Third Regiment Infantry, under the command of General Tollarthur Caine. You are each under arrest for trespassing, without proper leave granted, within the here said boundaries of the general's estate. Judgment shall be passed immediately."

“Trespassing?” exclaimed Courinn. “You are entirely mistaken. We were miles from this so-called estate. It was your lackeys that brought us here.”

“Hold that tongue, little one,” replied Dlucket. “Or I will remove it as you stand.” The lightning clawed through the mansion’s burnt out windows, making one side of Dlucket’s hawkish face glow, while the other was trapped in deep shadow. As the thunder crashed overhead, he reached out to his soldiers, taking a rifle that Marie would soon learn was a musket, and held its bayonet at Courinn’s mouth. “You will address me by my rank only. Come. There is precious little time left.”

The soldiers hurried them through the large room. It looked like it once must have been decorated as a medieval-style hall. The red-orange rays of the setting sun snuck through several fair-sized holes in the high ceiling, exposing the scorched and splintered beams that made up the lining of the roof.

They quickly climbed to the balcony and through a long passage. Charred destruction was everywhere and Marie could not guess why these soldiers held forth in this broken-down place, or even cared who came near this worthless property.

They entered another flame-blackened area with a high ceiling. Marie froze, staring at what stood before them, feeling the alarm that also took hold of Perion and Courinn.

Rows of guillotines were set next to one another. Their tall, upright frames stretched fifteen feet or more. The blades held aloft were rusty, chipped, and horribly jagged.

Dlucket spoke quickly as more soldiers entered, until they stood more than a dozen strong, each holding their musket bayonets at the prisoners.

“For the offense of willfully trespassing General Caine’s grounds, judgment has been passed by myself, Corporal Dlucket, this twenty-eighth day of April, in the year eighteen sixty-eight. Sentence will be carried out immediately.”

“*Eighteen* sixty-eight?” exclaimed Courinn. “You’re out of your mind, sir! Let us go—”

“— I am Corporal Dlucket, you will address me by such, even as you breathe your last breath! The war may be over, but our enemies, such as you are still among us. Set them in the stocks and proceed with the executions.”

Thunder exploded outside. The soldiers seized all three of them.

“You cannot do this!” shouted Perion, struggling to get free. “We have been sent by Professor Mifflin! You have no right—”

“— Mifflin, ah yes,” interrupted Dlucket. “Another who’s neck I shall soon send to the

gibbet. I'll be sure to inform him of your protest and insubordination. But the general's decree stands supreme, now and always. And you *will* address me by my proper rank!"

Just as three soldiers shoved Perion stomach down onto a wooden platform, Marie heard a cry from one of Dlucket's men.

A unicorn's deadly horn repelled two armed guards back as her hind legs sent another sprawling across the room.

"Swiftly now!" shouted Dlucket. "Swiftly!"

Marie resisted hard against the soldiers, but was pushed down and held onto another of the guillotine stocks.

Courinn leapt aside from several bayonet lunges.

A sudden high-pitched whine began all around them, mixed with the relentless furor of the storm.

"Courinn, can you get Marie?" cried Perion. "Marie!"

Perion was securely strapped. His head was shoved into the block cutaway for his throat. Ten feet above hung the suspended blade. A soldier slammed down the upper wooden frame, snapping it into place over the back of Perion's neck. He shook with anger.

"My friends will come, Dlucket! This cruelty will be avenged!"

The whine grew louder and sharper along with the crashing thunder. Drowned within this nearly deafening noise was the voice of Dlucket, shouting back in anger: "Insolent rascalion, I am *Corporal* Dlucket! You will absolutely address me as such!"

There were sounds like voices, close by. What had begun in his dreams quickly became clearer and fuller, traveling through the liminality of the mind, between sleep and cognizance. James woke with a start.

He sat up on his couch in the living room, listening. An open bottle and empty glass were left on a table before him. Yes, there were voices and other sounds of commotion. He stood and looked out his front window into the late afternoon light.

Mirroring a scene occurring in numerous places across the country back then— though for different reasons— some twenty to thirty townsfolk had gathered. Many held more handmade signs, some showing photos of lost loved ones, others shouting, angrily and fearfully.

The ever-smoldering tempers and anxieties in town had boiled over. Marie's disappearance, the daughter of someone who had already inexplicably lost his wife, together with the news that Marie had taken up with the strange Woldred girl, was a surefire catalyst for trouble. As if the congregation needed any more ammunition, Bettyann, Tilda and Trish were also there, notching up their rage just a bit more.

"Marie tricked us into going," lied Bettyann. "And after that, we heard strange laughing, until I *saw* her talk to ghosts. With my own eyes, I saw her!"

James furiously stormed into his kitchen and dialed his phone. "I want Sheriff Radich, right now please, this is James Meehanan," he growled, his voice cracking from the anger bursting inside.

"Sheriff!" he boomed after several moments, "I have an entire protest in my front yard right now, picketing against *my family*. I've had enough! So help me if they don't leave! Get over here now, before I do something I don't want to!"

"James, listen!" retorted the sheriff. "Walk out of there, I'll take care of this. Go somewhere, maybe visit Anna in the cemetery, just don't—" He never got to finish as James slammed down the phone.

Outside, an old man from the crowd sharply pointed an accusing finger in Tilda's face. "What about you?" he asked. "If there's anyone we should be suspicious about, it's your mother, Tilda Jentiss."

Tilda quickly bucked up in defiance. "I saw the ghosts too and Marie went off with them. And maybe her dead mother *is* one of them!"

"You tell the truth," persisted the old man. "Your mother never had anything to do with anyone gone sick or missing?"

All eyes were on Tilda now. Most there knew of the stories and suspicions that cropped up about Nioma Jentiss. Tilda hesitated and took a deep swallow, the recent confrontation with her mother ringing in her ears. A fleeting thought tugged at her—what if her mother lied and made Jack disappear anyway? Tilda quickly forced the notion aside.

"Never," answered Tilda.

The protesters began to shout again when James emerged from his house, gripping a baseball bat.

"Get off my property!" he roared, "Get out of here!" He smashed his bat into two large signs, propped against flimsy stands. People backed away, then scattered.

"Where's Marie?" they shouted.

James held the bat like a weapon. “Leave me alone, leave my family alone!”

“She talks with ghosts!” their shouts went up. “She’s a witch! You get out of here! Get out of Highland Pointe!”

James lost control. He threw the bat down and drew out a .38 pistol tucked in his pants. He pointed it into the air and fired off two shots. The protesters scattered again, shouting back at him. James aggressively stepped forward, firing three more shots, sending everyone running down the street. He then stood alone as the sun dipped from the sky, until he sank to his knees in despair.

The piercing whine ceased. The thunder and lightning ended. The sun was gone and night had come. A clear voice rang out:

“Enough! Assist them immediately!”

Marie stumbled in a mixture of disorientation and stomach-churning fear, now gently held by the very soldiers that moments ago were savagely strapping her down for a horrible death. Perion, lying on the floor and Courinn, backed against a wall and returned to mortal shape, were also kindly and reassuringly helped to their feet.

Marie gulped in amazement, for they were no longer in a charred, flame-scourged shell. It was a perfectly lovely room with exquisite furnishings. There was not a single guillotine to be seen. Each soldier held no musket, nor were there any signs of weapons upon them. In fact, they were no longer soldiers at all, but finely dressed servants.

There stood Dlucket, the same as before— or was he? He now appeared somehow different. Although his face was the same, it was softer perhaps, the angular sharpness gone, the eyes compassionate.

“Begin preparations for our guests at once,” he ordered, while holding a large, ornate pocket watch on a fine chain, which he keenly glanced at. “Arrival seven fifty-three and eight seconds p.m.,” he said. The servants snapped to attention and left the room.

Marie blinked, staring at Courinn, who exchanged a bewildered glance with Perion.

“Are you hurt?” he asked Marie.

The corporal stepped up to them. “Please be comforted. You are safe now.”

“Safe?” exclaimed Marie. “You tried to—”

“—You almost killed us,” cut off Perion, replete with anger.



“No,” the Dluckert look-alike said. “I am Corporal Delk, One Hundred Forty-Third Regiment Infantry, under the command of General Tollarthur Caine. I am charged with the night watch of the general’s estate. You were unjustly captured by that pea-brained Dluckert and the mindless leeches he calls union servicemen. As I said, you are safe now and will be throughout this beautiful spring night as long as you leave here before daybreak tomorrow. Allow me to offer you the comforts of the general’s luxurious home.”

Marie gazed around the room. “Are we really still in the same house?”

“You are indeed,” assured Corporal Delk. “Please forgive my hastiness, yet by the looks of you, I would assume a hot bath and supper would be most welcoming.”

“Yes, please!” said Marie.

“Allow my servants to attend to you,” said Corporal Delk. “Anything you wish, you have just to ask.”

“Thank you!” said Courinn.

“Yes, thank you so much, Corporal Delk,” added Marie.

“It is our pleasure. But unlike the Dluckert, you do not have to address me by rank.” He again checked his watch. “Sunrise tomorrow morning will be at five fifty-eight, which leaves you under ten hours and five minutes for a bath, supper and good nights’ rest. Go on now.” Two more servants entered and graciously escorted them from the room.

As dusk fell, a car drove up within the village cemetery. James sat in his vehicle a good while, trying to clear the rage in his heart. When he at last got out, his shoulders were slumped. He trudged along the serene pathway leading between graves.

The walk did him good. He began to feel a bit better as he made his way closer to his wife’s gravesite. The sheriff was right suggesting he come here now. They both knew this was the place James could go to ease his anger. This place always brought him strength and peace of mind.

James rounded a corner and came to Anna’s grave. He stopped short and gasped. Over the entire headstone, several signs were stuck. Across the largest of them was scrawled WITCH, then under it, EVIL and DEMON.

“I told you we’d be watching you,” came a voice behind him. James turned to see Schultee standing there, with an undeniable menace in his eyes.

James forced a deep breath then turned back to his wife’s grave. As calmly as possible,

he began removing the signs. His hands shook, betraying the wrath rekindled within him. He threw the signs aside, kicking them far away from the headstone before turning again to face Schultee, who had not moved from where he stood.

“I look at my son everyday, James,” said Schultee, “knowing he’s healthy as a bull, but will never speak another word. I’m not gonna’ see anything more happen to him or my family, from witchcraft or whatever evil you’re gonna’ bring on us. You and your daughter can drop dead, if she’s not already, along with the witch that was your wife.”

James rushed him full on, but Schultee was ready for him. As a football coach, he kept himself in peak condition, like his players. When James got within reach, Schultee tackled him at the legs. They both crashed to the ground. What both men did not see in their confrontation were the police car lights racing up within the descending darkness. The sheriff and several of his men came running towards them.

James quickly gained leverage, pinning Schultee under him. He grabbed the coach by the throat, but Schultee managed to land a punch, opening a cut under James’ eye. In his explosive anger, James raised his own fist and began pounding his opponent’s face.

He got in only two or three blows when the sheriff and his officers grabbed him. With a good amount of struggle, they heaved James off, leaving Schultee’s brow and cheek welted. James was handcuffed and dragged away.

Turning, he saw several other townsfolk in the cemetery watching and sneering. “Get on home,” hollered the sheriff, “or I’ll haul each of you to the same place!”

Marie felt like she had been reborn again. The hot bath had refreshed and reinvigorated every sense she possessed. The sweetly fragrant water fully massaged her sore muscles, most especially her injured side and shoulder. She noticed that even the scabbed wound on her neck, which Courinn healed, looked far better now. Marie gleefully savored the effects of this pampering, which seemed to stretch deep down into her very bones.

She was given a soft, comfortable robe to wear, while she was told her wet and grimy clothes were being laundered and pressed. A kind servant then led her back to the wide open hall, that not long ago under Dluckett’s watch had been a scorched, collapsed shell, but was now somehow the most extravagantly furnished room Marie had ever seen.

Immense framed paintings were mounted on the walls, the type that Marie had only seen in photographs of museums. They depicted everything from pleasant afternoon family picnics to triumphant battles. Enormous candle sconces stood against the walls at intervals, illuminating the hall. In the midst of the great room a long, polished oak table, easily seating thirty people, was fully set with a bountiful arrangement of freshly picked flowers. Encircling it, the quaint glows of a dozen perfectly polished bronze candelabras threw about a warm, cozy ambience. But it was the magnificent, crystalline chandelier that hung from the high ceiling, which fully demonstrated the elaborate decor of this

feasting hall. It refracted and radiated all the room's light, elucidating in no subtle terms that whomever owned this mansion was indeed someone of considerable power and wealth.

Marie was properly seated at the table's nearest end, next to a high-backed head chair. As the servant left, she glanced around in wonder and again marveled about everything she had seen since entering Spellhollow Wood.

Not long after, Courinn and Perion were escorted in. They were also in fine robes and even finer spirits, sitting down with hearty smiles.

"I don't get it," said Marie. "How can this be the same place that Dlucket watched over? We must have been whisked away somewhere else, like the shifting tracts did to us."

"No," said Courinn. "It is the same house. But there is a powerful spell at work here."

"Indeed," added Perion. "I can feel it everywhere. I doubt either Dlucket or Corporal Delk could have cast it, much less manage it each night."

"Maybe this big cheese general they keep talking about does?" said Marie.

A handful more servants now entered the hall, carrying large trays. As a swirl of delicious aromas immediately titillated Marie's nose, a delightful banquet was set before them. There was spiral-honeyed ham, sweet potatoes, sautéed mushrooms, steaming fresh rolls and creamy butter.

Marie's eyes could have popped out at the sight of the food. She shoved half a roll into her mouth the instant a servant had buttered it for her. Perhaps it was a bit rude, but considering how famished they each were, no one was going to complain about a brief lapse of table manners.

The butter and bread were the softest and sweetest Marie had ever tasted. She let out a long sigh of grateful satisfaction and eagerly bit into the rest.

In walked Corporal Delk with a pleasant smile. He stood at the table's head.

"I do hope you're each feeling more comfortable," he said. He again removed the large pocket watch from his waistcoat. "Nine forty-two, a bit of a late evening meal, but I'm sure, still most appreciated. May I join you?"

"You needn't ask, good host," answered Courinn, who was the best at correct etiquette. "Our most sincere thanks for this wonderful banquet and for all your gracious hospitality."

The corporal lightly bowed his head, then sat and lifted a finely crafted glass. A servant poured a sparkling beverage, as did the other servants for each of them.

“To time,” the corporal toasted. “The best and worst times of our lives are here and then gone, but let us always remember with full heart and hope, only the best.”

“And to you, Corporal Delk,” responded Perion, “that you may know little to none of the worst.” Marie didn’t know what to say, except, “Thank you, sir”. Corporal Delk humbly nodded. They all drank. Marie licked her lips with pleasure at the most flavorful apple cider ever made.

“Please, eat and enjoy,” said Corporal Delk. Marie didn’t need to be told again; she had been patiently and courteously waiting to dig into her plate until the toast and formalities ended. Everything was superbly delicious, as it often is when you’ve gone for long periods without food. In this case, however, the meal was exceptionally prepared. Marie had no way of knowing that the culinary skill involved could be matched in only a handful of places throughout the whole world. It hardly mattered though— she simply wanted a full stomach again.

“We do not often get good company,” said the corporal, then added, “or any at all, for that matter. And so it is I who am grateful for a most welcome distraction from the nightly boredom of my watch.”

“How long have you been at this watch?” asked Perion.

“I was appointed here a fortnight after General Caine’s death,” answered the corporal. He then scratched behind an ear as an afterthought. “Well, I suppose I should mean his last death. To be correct, that is.”

“His last?” asked Marie.

“Yes, Saturday, July eighth, eighteen sixty-five at three minutes after two in the morning.” He took out his pocket watch and checked the time again, while winding it up. “Which puts me here on duty exactly one hundred two years, nine months, eleven days, seventeen hours, three minutes and ... forty-six seconds.”

Marie grinned while chewing, glancing over to Courinn and Perion, also amused by the corporal’s extreme fixation with time.

“Ah, so then we couldn’t really be in the eighteen sixties now?” said Courinn.

Corporal Delk snapped shut his watch, while frowning. “Pay no mind to what the Ducket told you. If a hundredth less came out of his mouth, using a hundredth more of what brains he had, he’d still make no more sense than a gibbering lunk.”

“Quite a wealthy man, the general,” noted Courinn, admiring the great hall curiously. The corporal nodded. “May I ask how he died, the— last time? If it was eighteen sixty-five, was it during the war?”

“Oh no,” said the corporal. “He was murdered by the demon creature, Gwylligwitch.” Marie stopped eating, lowering her fork. As did her comrades.

“His gold,” she said softly, almost to herself. “She killed him for it.”

“Yes, after the general had hunted her for many years.”

“The monster attacked this house,” continued Marie, “and stole almost all the gold that was kept here?”

“Also true. You are a student of history?”

“No,” said Marie. “But I’m learning fast.”

“As we understood,” said Courinn, “the monster assailed this house at night. If so, it was you that fought and tried to resist?”

“Certainly not, I would have never allowed such a breach,” said the corporal. “That was the inept Dlucket, who was at first the night watchman. Once the gold was stolen, the general ordered him as the day watch, and from that point on I have been here.”

“So the general was slain sometime after the attack?” said Perion.

“No, no,” answered Corporal Delk, removing his watch again and closely checking it. “He was killed roughly three months, thirteen days and eleven hours before that.”

They glanced at one another. Perion shook his head as Courinn cleared her throat. They both gestured to Marie, nominating her to ask the next obvious question.

“Uh, I guess I’m a little confused,” stammered Marie. “How did—”

“—Well, as you might imagine,” the corporal interrupted, “General Caine was quite enraged that his gold had been stolen. As he could no longer be here, he ordered us by handwritten letter to switch posts immediately.”

“After he was dead,” said Marie, trying her best not to miss a beat, “he wrote you a letter.”

“I’m sure you understand,” explained Corporal Delk, “it was the best he could do, under the circumstances.”

“Okey dokey,” concurred Marie, nodding in mock appeasement as she went back to eating. Perion and Courinn grinned at her, knowing it was another reminder she wasn’t really in New York anymore.

“What else can you tell us about the monster?” asked Courinn, who had not eaten much more than a few bites of her roll, along with a small portion of potatoes.

“If you’ll pardon my answering your question with another,” said Corporal Delk, “may I inquire of your special interest in Gwylligwitch?”

“We’re looking for her,” admitted Marie flatly.

Corporal Delk blinked, unsure he heard her correctly. He checked Courinn and Perion’s reactions to confirm he did. He quickly pulled out his pocket watch, checking it yet again, appearing to make a mental note of the current time. “How intriguing,” he said, “as well as foolish. What gain is there for the three of you in such a pursuit?”

“Gwylligwitch took someone very special to me,” said Marie.

The corporal examined her closely, until he understood. “You are one of many who can make that claim,” he said. “But how do you know your mother is still alive to free?”

Marie studied the corporal in return as she shifted in her seat. “I never told you it was my mother.”

Corporal Delk now stared at her with a growing concern. “No, you did not,” he said solemnly, as he took another sip from his glass.

“Can you help us at all, sir?” asked Perion.

“Apart from rest and food, I can offer little else except a warning: this monster has no soul. It has no love or compassion for anything. It takes what it takes and nothing has been able to stop it. If you are to defeat it, you must do what no one has yet done for the many centuries it has dwelt within the wood.”

Corporal Delk rose from his seat. When a servant appeared immediately, the corporal leaned in and quickly whispered to him. As the servant left the hall, the corporal stepped past Marie and her friends, making his way around the long table to its far end.

“Your true host this evening,” he continued, “the General Tollarthur Mellickas Caine, was and remains a great man of fearless, unflinching resolve— a master battle strategist and an expert tracker and hunter, who has led and fought in more than fifty military campaigns for the past three hundred years. The general has never known defeat, never succumbed to the mind splitting, soul shattering horrors of nearly continuous warfare, and yet, even he could not overcome Gwylligwitch and her evil designs. He at last suffered bitterly at her vile mercilessness.”

The corporal rounded the table, returning to them. He took a breath, reconsidering his words. “Please forgive my self-indulgent gloom,” he said. “It is an old habit I suffer

from, but it does keep me sharp. I do not wish to encourage you to lose hope, but to stress the extreme danger of the enemy you will be facing.” Again, he produced his watch and glanced at it. “Ten thirty-three, if you care to retire for the night, please do. You must rise by five am if you intend to be out of the Dlucket’s clutches at sunup.”

“Yes, I believe we will,” said Courinn. “The meal was wonderful, sir.”

“It was really the best dinner ever,” admitted Marie, rubbing her very full belly.

“So pleased we could oblige,” he said. “Yet there is something more I could offer that might aid you in your designs.”

“Anything, Corporal,” said Perion.

“The general, in his long years pursuing the monster, did discover a weakness of hers.” As the corporal spoke, his servant re-entered the hall, carrying something wrapped in cloth. He placed it in Corporal Delk’s upheld hand.

Marie and her companions stared, but had no idea what he held— until the corporal flicked the cloth away, like a magician performing a trick. In this case, it revealed a good-sized, light brownish jar.

“Peanut butter?” exclaimed Marie, incredulously.

“As it turns out,” the corporal revealed, “the creature has quite an appetite for the stuff. What’s more, after she consumes only a fair amount, it makes her sufficiently drowsy. Yet be wary. She can smell what’s in this jar from a good distance.” The corporal snapped his fingers as more servants entered to escort them off. “I’ll have this for you in the morning. It may prove useful. Good night to you. Sleep well.”

Marie and her friends were led through spacious hallways and passages, all of superlative decor and taste. But it was not until they had entered an old-fashioned, hydraulic safety elevator, that Marie suddenly realized there were no modern conveniences or apparatus in the mansion. The great hall they dined in had no electric power, being illuminated solely by candles. As they had walked through the house, there were also no signs of any telephones or teevees either.

The elevator took them up to the next floor, where they were led down a short corridor with many doors on either side. Marie wished a good night to Perion and Courinn, who took the rooms next to hers, before entering a bedroom chamber that she instantly realized was fit for royalty.

It had a finely embroidered full canopy bed, flanked by a wall-sized tapestry depicting an elaborate coat of arms. A large fireplace was set into the chamber’s opposite wall, accented with delicately sculpted vases. In front of the bed was an immense area carpet and above it, most impressively, a ceiling of fully engraved gold and marble. Marie

stepped in and sat on the bed, staring up at the ornate ceiling. But when she again lowered her eyes, she thought she saw charred and smoking wooden studs in the chamber's far corners. Marie blinked and it was gone. She saw that her pressed clothes had already been laid out for her. She crawled into the huge bed and fell asleep soon after her head sunk into the silk pillows.

Bad dreams troubled Marie that night. She dreamt that she was running through a place she had once been to, but had forgotten. She was carrying something large and heavy and it was bright and shiny. Someone was calling her name as if they needed her help, but she somehow knew they were instead coming after her.

She then dreamt she was calmly floating on her back in a crystal clear pool. Her mother's head suddenly popped up from underwater, where she began to laugh and playfully splash. Marie then gave her mother a big hug, holding her tightly. She looked and saw something in the water, behind her mother. It was a tiny worm, wriggling. As Marie splashed it away, she saw two more worms, bigger and closer to her. She let go of her mother, while turning in the water, where she found many more even larger worms, squirming wildly.

Marie frantically splattered them away. Turning back, her mother was gone. Giant bloodworms sprung up from the water, their spineless forms madly wiggling as they closed in on Marie. More and more appeared, becoming larger and nastier. She could feel their cold sliminess against her skin. She heard the inhuman sounds they made as the pulsating, fleshy teeth along their bodies wrapped around Marie's arms and legs. To her horror, hollow jaws dripping with a fluid she knew was poison unhinged from their blood swollen heads. The jaws opened wider, over her face and head. She screamed—

--- Leaping up from the bed with such force, she almost landed on her knees. Holding her breath, it took several long seconds for Marie to reorient herself as to where she was. She rubbed her forehead hard, then sat along the bedside and forced herself to relax. Doing so, Marie noticed a small candle was lit on the far wall, offering a pale light. Glancing from the candle to a set of wide doors next to it, she again barely caught sight of the mansion's smoldering, scorched remains. It just as quickly faded away.

Marie then heard the song of crickets and the wind in the trees. She got up and walked to the double doors, which led to a balcony overlooking the rear of the house. The doors were unlocked and Marie stepped outside.

A full moon shone from above, illuminating everything as far as her eyes could see. Marie realized this made no sense. How could the moon now be full, when only days ago she stood under a thin waning crescent upon the rock ledge with Courinn and Perion? She had always listened carefully to her father explain about the heavens when they sat on the ledge. Marie knew she now should have been staring at a *waxing crescent*— not a full moon at all, which was backwards some twenty days ago. She at last decided that in these woods, who knew what moon she was looking at.



There was a good-sized garden in the yard below. Beyond that stretched a placid meadow, surrounded by the woods: a lovely view in the silver moonlight. As Marie continued to gaze, enjoying the crickets' singing, she drifted off into a sort of sleepy muse, before she gradually began to hear something else.

It sounded like horns blown, far away, echoing through the trees. There was a notable sadness to their musical phrases. Marie listened, realizing the horns were approaching steadily. Something then appeared out of the trees into the meadow. Four white figures upon horses rode on in a particular formation. As she squinted, she saw they were not actually horses, but unicorns, even larger than Courinn. The figures riding them were dressed out of an ages-old fairytale: long, flowing cloaks, wrapped about richly embroidered surcoats with flat, plumaged caps and high boots. Various weapons hung from their jeweled belts. Behind these heralds followed a lengthy procession.

They entered the meadow with heads bowed and long, sad faces. Marie noticed many lumbered on with slumped shoulders, as if in despair or defeat— except those carrying what appeared to be covered slings and caskets. It was indeed a funeral procession. Each of them were clad in the same centuries-old garb as the heralds, except their clothes were torn and ravaged, clear evidence of whatever grim battle they had endured. Some played somber, melodic strains upon pipes and fiddles, while others mournfully sang of their losses. The succession continued across the meadow, winding their way back into the woods' far side.

Two things then occurred, almost at the same time. Marie noticed a blush of light under her nightshirt. She drew out the globe amulet, now glowing again. The full moonlight caught it, causing the globe to radiate brighter than ever. It grew warm in her hands as she too shone along with it. Marie remembered what the professor said: how the charm would cast its full power upon her only under a full moon. Staring at the globe, her focus shifted and she again caught sight of the distant procession. Perhaps it was due to the shimmer from her charm, perhaps not, but from all the way across the backyard and meadow, one of the processional figures suddenly halted and stepped aside.

Marie gasped when she realized— he stopped to look up at her. In spite of the distance, she could somehow see him clearly. He appeared a boy, about her age. He was very thin and Marie could tell he was sickly: pasty pale with bluish lips, yet his eyes were keen and clear. As he gazed up at Marie and smiled, she could not help but smile back. Soon after, Marie recalled what a warm, comforting sensation she had felt at that moment— followed by a sudden, profound curiosity to know more about who he was. Continuing to stare at her, the boy nodded, just enough to extend a silent hello. Marie blushed, feeling embarrassed. She instinctively looked away, for just a moment. When she peered back, he and the entire procession were gone. The music, the singing, all the people had vanished, leaving only a stirring breeze over the meadow, along with the perpetual crickets' night speech.

Chapter 11

**Spellhollow**

Marie snapped awake as a hand gently nudged her shoulder. She struggled to see through bleary eyes, until a familiar voice set her at ease.

“It’s five in the morning,” whispered Courinn. “We have just an hour before *The Dlucket* will be after us. We’ll have to be a good ways from here by then.”

Marie accepted that what she saw last night from the balcony was simply part of the strange and frightening dreams she had, especially since she did not recall going back to bed. This was confirmed for her when neither Perion nor Courinn made any mention of seeing or hearing anything.

Corporal Delk’s servants had prepared a hearty breakfast of eggs, sausage, croissants, butter and huckleberry jam. They ate quickly before casting on light packs given to them, holding more food and water plus several other light essentials. At five twenty-four and thirty-eight seconds— as so informed by the corporal— they stood outside the mansion with him. From here, inexplicably, the structure was in burnt ruins. The palest shade of light appeared along the wooded horizon far off behind them, a harbinger of the new day. Otherwise, it was still dark and the stars shone lucidly.

Corporal Delk removed his cap and bowed before his guests. “It was a pleasure having you with us here at the Giggleswick Estate. You are welcome back at any time, but please remember: between sunset and sunrise only or the Dlucket will be waiting!”

He turned to Courinn and added with an amusing smile, “Perhaps, when we meet next, I might see you as you really are.”

Marie grinned, realizing the corporal didn’t miss much. Courinn’s eyes brightened as she nodded in return, before drawing an inquisitive breath.

“Pardon me Corporal,” she said, “a last nagging question, if I may?”

“Of course.”

“Are you and Dlucket the same people? If not, did you serve in the war together?”

The corporal chuckled. “Yes we did, and we are quite different. He is my twin brother, so I had the nauseating misfortune of growing up with him. Imagine that, if you will.”

Marie grimaced at the thought. Perion stood up from organizing his pack. “Until next time, Corporal Delk,” he said, “our sincere thanks.” The corporal courteously nodded.

Marie graciously offered her hand to him. “Whatever is ahead for us,” she affirmed, “you have been a friend I will never forget.”

Corporal Delk warmly received her handclasp. “Good fortune to you, young Marie.” He pulled out his pocket watch a last time. “Now you must be off at once.”

The three of them followed two servants, who briskly guided them along a westward path, away from the rising sun. Their guides, however, only went as far as the corporal commanded. At sunup, they themselves would become Dlucket’s soldiers, instantly recapturing Marie and her friends.

After a few minutes, the two guides waved the three companions on alone. “We have brought you along the edges of the shifting tracts,” they said. “If you continue southwest from here, you will avoid being lost within this region’s witchery.” Then they turned back and quickly disappeared.

Perion looked up into the quickly fading night sky. He turned to his friends as he situated his pack. “We’ll have to make a quick march. From here, I should guess it’s a five-mile stretch to the eastern banks of Lake Gwindylo.”

A distant cry was suddenly heard, followed by an ascending rumble. Through the outlying woods ahead, a wildly driven, horse-drawn covered wagon sprung into view, chased by two swift riders. Even from their distance, Marie could tell the pursuing horsemen were war-clad Native Americans. It was like a scene from an old western movie. They vanished into the trees just as quickly.

The three companions stood watching in silence, until Marie cleared her throat. “Uh— what year did Dlucket say it was?”

“We must stay sharp,” admitted Perion. “We’ll soon be entering the Spellhollow Pass, where lie the roots of the woods’ most beguiling enchantments.”

“You mean, we’re going into the real haunted forest,” said Marie.

“Perhaps,” answered Perion, “but this part of the wood is bewitched with not only wicked things, but also that which is good and pure and very beautiful.”

On he led them at a good pace, which Marie found she could just manage— as if Perion sensed her fatigue threshold and kept her moving along on the edge of that limit.

The daylight rose with what Marie noted was like a fanciful, emerald overcast. At moments, it appeared almost luminous. Within this strange light, Marie could easily

discern the new region they had entered. Everything was soon covered in thick moss, some of it brown, some grayish, but mostly lush and emerald green. Lengthy trails of dewy lichen hung from the branches everywhere. The woods felt older, old beyond guessing, fuller and larger. The trees became great scarlet and chestnut oaks with thick, rippling roots and enormous wide trunks. Mixed among these were many white and mountain ash trees as well as dotted hawthorns. Ever reaching fingers of ivory savaged the rock formations strewn about. Marie gazed up into an endless sweep of tangled and intertwined branches. At times, the tree roots were so thick and gnarled they had to climb over or around them, which was difficult and time consuming. Marie eerily wondered what might be lingering under the wildly spread, leafy ferns and underbrush as her feet disappeared with each step.

She noticed black squirrels within the trees peering down at them. They had distended yellow eyes, which seemed to darken with anger as if her trespass here were forbidden. A host of behemoth butterflies and dragonflies, larger than both of Marie's hands flew by, each with a myriad of colors pulsating in its wings. The two startling things about them: they flew together in perfect formation as birds often do in migration, and they whisked past, with the song of a soothing lullaby. There were periodic drizzles of very light rain, but to Marie's excitement, the drops were of shimmering *gold*. She could not help stopping to stand with both her hands outstretched, letting the rain beads glisten into her palms, before they faded into water droplets.

At length, they heard a banging noise in the distance. They soon saw a short, squat figure swinging a hefty stone hammer into a chisel. He stood upon a set of stairs carved into a mammoth, ivy-strewn boulder, which he seemed to be either sculpting or repairing. As they passed, he turned to face them. He was clad in filthy rags with worn boots. He had a long, unkempt beard and leathery skin. Perion raised a hand to offer a greeting, but the dwarf-mason dourly stared back, making no gesture.

"How rude," said Marie.

"Dwarves are sometimes a mumpish lot," said Perion.

"Leave him be," said Courinn. "His name is Linsrook. He lost his only brother, as the professor explained, to the trollogre."

"The same dwarf who melted down the gold of Gwylligwitch's?" asked Marie.

Courinn nodded. Marie looked back to Linsrook. He stared at them suspiciously as they went by, until he gruffly turned away and went back to work.

By mid-morning, the emerald green all about them suddenly ceased and quickly changed color. The tree trunks resembled oak, but were either of ivory white or charred black. Their buds and leaves were all deep ruby red, with no comparison to the color mortals see at the peak of each autumn. This foliage glistened with a saturation that, as Marie often explained afterwards concerning what she came to experience, could not be described.

Adding to this spectacle were the fallen leaves, which had lost none of their luster. Both above and below were covered in a scarlet wonderland. Some leaves wafted down as others fluttered upon a mild breeze that smelled like honey. It was the essence of a fairytale woodland setting. Perion deeply inhaled and exhaled with pleasure.

“What is this place?” asked Marie, almost in a whisper.

“The Scarlet Arches,” said Perion, “of which we are merely at the narrowest, southernmost tip. This is one of the closest reminders of home within the wood. How I relish each time I stand here.”

“If this is what home is,” declared Marie, “I wanna’ visit! What kind of trees are they?”

“This grove has been sown from the Cyprias Forest,” said Courinn dreamily, as if she too suffered homesickness.

Marie watched as Perion approached a tree, gently touching its smooth, pure white bark, before sadly leaning his head against it. In that moment, Marie thought she understood some of the loneliness Perion and perhaps Courinn too suffered each day.



Marie soon saw Perion was right; they were at a very narrow end of the red wood. Within fifteen minutes they were back among the emerald green and Marie was sorry to

have so soon left the Scarlet Arches. Perion pushed them onward still further and after three hours' hike, they briefly halted and had a quick drink from their packs.

When they continued on, Perion slowed their pace somewhat, feeling they were far enough now from any threat of Dlucket. Just as Marie started feeling hunger pangs, Perion abruptly halted and spun around. He listened closely to the wood.

"What is it?" asked Courinn.

"Many feet, running fast."

"Dlucket?" gasped Marie in alarm.

"No," answered Perion, still listening. "They're not two legged. But they flee in fear."

A minute later, Courinn and Marie could hear it: the crashing and trampling over brush and fallen branches. It was a company of woodland deer, coming at them. The bucks were of pure white, and the does, shiny silver. They burst through the trees a stone toss from where Marie stood.

"They've been frightened about something!" shouted Courinn above the clamor.

"Let's find out!" yelled Perion. Courinn nodded in understanding.

The delicate beauty of the deer transfixed Marie as they ran past into the woods ahead. These harts were larger than normal with stronger limbs. The bucks' feral horns were of elaborate design. The desire surged within Marie to touch these dignified creatures. About to take a step forward, she stopped short.

The unicorn shape of Courinn reared high up in the midst of the charging deer as they split and raced by. Yet several, Marie saw excitedly, halted in their flight, trotting and circling around the unicorn, looking like she called out to them. Perion held out his hands toward a silver doe. It turned away from the rushing pack and approached.

As the last of the harts disappeared, two remained, nuzzling with Courinn; the deer felt at ease near the commanding unicorn. Marie knew she was somehow speaking with them along with Perion, who gently massaged the doe's shoulders. Watching her friends, Marie quickly noticed their faces became concerned, even grave.

Courinn gave a last nuzzle to the deer, thanking them, before they turned and ran off. Then she saw Perion look up at Marie, smile and gently wave her over.

Marie tried her best to remain calm. Perion slowly took her hand and brought it up to the doe's neck, where she was able to rub and pet the lovely animal. The silver fur was straight, soft, and cool, in spite of the doe's vigorous dash. Marie continued, bringing her hands up to the deer's cheek, where it nuzzled her in affection. Marie was thrilled.

“How beautiful they are,” she said, caressing the doe several moments longer.

“Yes,” said Perion, “but we’ll have to let our friend catch up to her own.”

Marie kissed the doe on its nose, which it let her do, such was its trust in Perion. With a sweep of his arm, the doe scampered off.

“Thank you, Perion, but what did you find out?” asked Marie. “From the look in your eyes, it’s not good.”

“No, it’s not,” said Courinn, walking up, again in human form. “I assume you’re thinking the same as I. We follow the deer right away.”

“Yes,” he answered, without hesitation.

“What is it?” asked Marie.

“The deer were running from something they would not name,” said Courinn. “Something horrifying.”

“With a foul odor,” added Perion. “Something that ferociously lusts for gold. I don’t know how far back it is, but she’s coming this way.”

*Chapter 12*

**The Hillock of Faeriaye**

They kept close on the trail. Even without clear prints in the ground, the deer left enough broken brush to point the way they had gone.

Marie guessed it was near midday. She knew the sun was out full above the tree-enclosed ceiling, but only a faint yellow haze penetrated, slightly diminishing the ever-present green luminance.

They found a spot where a fallen, moss-covered tree trunk spanned a shallow ravine of rock. From under the trunk, water dribbled. Here they stopped and had lunch. In their packs were wrapped sandwiches, courtesy of Corporal Delk, filled with either chicken or lamb. Marie made sure she avoided the lamb, which Perion enjoyed. Courinn instead munched on some dried vegetables.

Marie sat with her legs swinging over the trunk. She tossed small stones onto a rocky outcrop below her, which fell into the ravine. She then noticed Perion, who seemed preoccupied. He was chewing his sandwich, but he was also studying the area around them curiously— or was it confusion?

“Something wrong?” she asked, continuing to watch him.

Perion didn’t react, then realized Marie spoke to him. He turned to her, forcing an unconcerned smile.

“Hmm?”

“What do you hear?” asked Courinn, taking notice of him. She straightened up and peered around them.

Perion narrowed his eyes, as if trying to penetrate something unseen. “I hear nothing, but I feel... something. I can’t explain, something familiar, yet strange.”

He got up and walked around them in a half circle. “It’s not here, but close by.”

“Something that can hurt us?” asked Marie.

“It’s not evil. But I need to get nearer to it.”

Marie was relieved Perion sensed nothing harmful as she threw the last of her stones



against the rocky outcrop below. She kept the largest for last, and when she cast it, she had no idea what she was really doing.

The moment the large stone bounced under Marie's swinging legs, something moved: something dark and large. The stone hit it square in the face. With a furious growl, a huge black bear quickly climbed out from what Marie saw was a protected rocky enclave.

The three of them leapt off the fallen trunk and quickly retreated. As the bear confronted them, they saw their rotten luck was worse than they could have imagined. It was badly wounded in several places: the chest, leg and neck. Deep slashes and jagged cuts revealed how much agony the great animal was in. Marie reasoned the bear had crawled into the ravine to drink from the water and save whatever strength it had left, until eventually succumbing to its wounds.

"The packs!" cried Marie, as she and Courinn dared to crouch forward, just enough to grab their food and water.

"This way!" shouted Perion as Courinn and Marie raced past him. Shouldering her pack, Marie scolded herself for being so careless tossing anything, anywhere in these woods.

The bear roared again, pursuing them in its anger. But with their bad luck came some good: if not for the animal's severely injured leg, it would have surely overtaken them quickly. As it were, they got a good enough start away from it.

Perion also chastised himself as they ran, furious he did not recognize the danger so close. He leapt out in front of the girls, leading the way, following his keen senses. The bear let out an ear-piercing wail and they guessed that in spite of its injuries, it was still able to give chase.

Something was ahead through the trees. Perion saw it first: something wide and high. He glanced down as he ran over some strange spongy growth. He knew whatever lay ahead was what he had actually sensed. In his wild curiosity, his adrenalin surged. He sprang away from Marie and Courinn.

When the girls at last caught up, Perion was swiftly surveying a wide and tall hillock, covered entirely in thick moss and ivy. A low, ancient wall of carved stone marked the hill's base. At the outer perimeter of trees, giant-sized mushrooms grew in a perfect circle. Above the hill, the visible sun shone directly overhead.

"Yes, that's it!" exclaimed Perion, understanding. He glanced up, confirming the high noon sunlight. The bear's tormented roar grew ever closer.

Courinn also understood. She took Marie by the hand and led her close to the great mound, her eyes trying to identify the correct spot. Perion found it: a separate shaft of sunlight, marking a jeweled stone in the hill. He quickly waved his friends over. Courinn dragged Marie.

“Correct me if I’m wrong, seven passes deosil?” recalled Perion.

“Seven *what?*” asked a befuddled Marie.

“Sunward,” stated Courinn. “Yes, seven circles, but there’ll be hardly enough time!”

“There’s no other choice!” shouted Perion.

Following behind him, Courinn and Marie quickly scampered around the base of the hill, moving clockwise. Marie immediately felt something was not right. Her leg muscles were straining to stabilize her balance, as if she were walking on an uneven surface. But she wasn’t— it was only smooth grass under her feet.

After completing the first pass, Courinn blurted out, “Six to go.”

“Six more times around?” asked Marie. “We’ll be lunch and dessert by then!”

“If we can manage this, we will be safe!” shouted Perion.

“But what about Marie?” said Courinn. “Do we need to think about this?”

“She’s crossing over with us, let’s hope that will do!”

As they finished the second pass, Marie saw the bear briefly halt and sniff the ground. Then it spotted them. Its broken body heaved itself forward.

“It’s coming!” shouted Marie. She struggled after her friends when she was suddenly struck by an odd sensation: a rush of heat swept through her head. She clutched at her temples, but as quick as it came, it was gone.

There was no time for any escape. In the midst of the next pass, the bear leapt out at them with its mouth and jaws open. Perion stepped in front of the girls. With a vicious swipe, the bear tore its claw across Perion’s chest, swatting him down hard. As Courinn ran to his side, Marie saw blood streaks of dark blue through his shirt.

Marie valiantly turned to face the crazed animal on its hind legs, towering above her. Courinn glanced back at Marie in horror.

“Run, Marie!” she shouted. “Continue around the hill!”

But Marie did not cower in fear. She instead quickly drew out her globe charm. Just as the bear was about to deal its next blow, Marie held the amulet high, making sure the animal could clearly see it.

This halted the attack. The bear peered into the globe; it did not glow, but it did not need

to. Something else, something no one could see gripped the bear, holding it in check. Whatever pain it had already suffered was now matched by an assault into its mind, just as deadly and unforgiving. The bear's eyes stretched wide, as if struck hard from deep within its skull sockets. It reeled back, violently jerking its head with a horrible shrieking never before heard from such an animal. The tortured thing erupted into a ferocious seizure until it collapsed, not able to endure a second more of existence.

Marie closed her eyes and breathed again. It was a bitter pill to swallow. She dearly loved all animals, but she knew this one had suffered enough and its quick death was the only humane choice. Marie silently hoped the bear forgave her, in spite of the damage it would have surely wreaked. She spun away, replacing the amulet around her neck.

Courinn was leaning over Perion. She had already stopped his bleeding, leaving several scars. As they helped him up, he shook his head in amazement.

"How did you do that? Are you all right, Marie?"

"Are *you* all right?" she countered, staring wondrously at Courinn. "She did the same for you, just like she did for me." Marie rubbed her own healed neck wound.

Perion grinned, "It's a marvel having a companion unicorn. Let us continue!"

Marie found it increasingly difficult following them around the hill. The further they went, the more lopsided the ground became, though it continued to appear perfectly even. Her coordination was also quickly failing. She had never been drunk, but she soon knew what it felt like to perceive everything spinning around her. On the fourth pass, Marie noticed two more incredibly strange things. One, it was much warmer now, actually more humid, like an August day. Secondly, it appeared that the path they followed around the hillock's base began to somehow rise *above itself*. It was like a ghostly mirage, like two realities separating from one another. Marie could see both the grassy earth they had trod along minutes ago and the ground now, some ten feet higher. It only added to the disorientation she fiercely struggled against.

"What's happening to us?" she asked Perion, who turned and quickly helped Marie along.

"We are traveling from one plane of enchantment into another. It will be difficult for you. Take my hand and do not let go."

As they began the fifth pass, Marie's stomach jumped into her mouth as if she were falling fast, yet her eyes told her she still walked upon solid soil. When she peered outward from the hill, she saw they were high up and the dead bear was far below. The humid heat grew more severe. She became quite nauseous and had to stop several times, while Perion and Courinn patiently waited for her. On the sixth pass, it was so hot and humid that steam issued from their mouths. Before they got half way round, it began to

rain golden drops again. When Marie peered out into the woods it was like a dreamy watercolor painting, soft and hazy.

On the final pass, they encountered a barrage of contrasts. It was now snowing, but Marie was sweating profusely from the unbearable, wet heat. Her face and arms were soaked with salty sweat as snowflakes, some of them light blue, fell about her. She struggled to trudge over what felt akin to some combination of sand dunes and walking up a building sideways— like the teevee show she sometimes watched with the comic book guy in a cape. She squeezed shut her eyes as the knots tightened in her stomach. With shuddering fear, she suddenly felt she was upside down and backwards. The complete disorientation was maddening, and just when Marie found she could not go another step, Perion spoke three glorious words: “Here we are.”

Marie’s physical confusion and discomfort abruptly ceased. She opened her eyes, slowly taking in a slow breath. Before her was the inside of an enormous, cathedral-like palace, very brightly lit. Its radiance was breathtaking. The palace floor, walls, ceiling and many columns were exquisitely carved out of diamond. Not the raw, unrefined crystals normally seen in diamond deposit caverns, but finely polished, magnificently cut into endless facets, resulting in maximum brilliancy.

There were no torches or other normal light source—instead it radiated from within the lattice of crystal, dispersing both inwards and outwards. Marie saw mixed within the pure white diamond hints of red and violet crystal that refracted in a shimmering luminance of color. At the center of the palace was a low altar of pure silver, wherein was set a pool of the deepest blue Marie could have ever conceived. Endless hues were keenly reflected upon its surface. A tall wooden pole, curiously out of place within this glimmering structure, rose out from the waters’ midst.

Yet, the great palace itself was barely more astonishing than the many figures that stood and sat within it. They had proud and beautiful faces and Marie had to blink several times to confirm there was a glow not merely reflecting off them, but from *within them*. They were of many heights and sizes. Some even shorter than Linsrook, the dwarf, yet some taller than the tallest man, almost, Marie thought, like giants. They were dressed in the same splendidly ornate fashion as the horn blowing riders Marie had dreamt of the previous night. Most sat at immense tables of gorgeous marble, with an enormous feast spread before them. In the hands of some were simple musical instruments— held now as if they had just ceased playing them.

Those same lovely faces peered at Marie and her friends in genuine concern. Courinn stepped forward with Perion as several of the beautiful people approached. Marie stood still, not sure what to do. Her friends softly spoke with them, but it was in another language of which Marie could not even begin to guess. She thought she heard a part of the word, ‘*mortal*.’ Whatever her comrades said quickly put the shimmering people at ease. Now with wonderfully engaging smiles, Marie saw that they greeted her friends warmly.

The music began, a grandiose mix of mirthful rhythms and stirring melodies. The feasting continued along with singing, dancing, and merriment and Marie was immediately smitten, desiring to stay here forever. This of course, was part of the very bewitchment these supernatural beings possessed and wove.

Courinn motioned Marie to come forward. “We won’t be here long,” she said. “But if that bear was attacked by the trollogre, we’ll need to know her whereabouts, as we are now in the region she most travels.”

“Who are these ... people,” asked Marie, still in awe, “and what is this place?”

“These are enchanted folk, the Gentry of Faeriaye,” continued Courinn, “and this is their realm, while they remain in your world. As magical as Spellhollow Wood is, it is still part of the fabric of your reality, your universe. Meaning that these folk must dwell in the confines of an unreality woven a bit closer to what they are.”

A great shout went up from the revelers and the music took an even livelier turn, beginning a spritful reel. Marie watched in amazement as many of the folk began dancing around the tall pole that arose from the mirrored pool. Dancing, that is, upon the surface of the water.

“Do they celebrate like this all the time?”

“This is a festive day for them,” said Perion. “Tonight begins Mayday, May the first, Beltaine as it was once known in your world.”

“Which makes no sense,” interjected Courinn. “Today should be the twenty-ninth of April, not the thirtieth, unless I’ve somehow missed my count.”

Marie half listened, as she could not take her eyes off the beautiful people. Their resplendent revelry was intoxicating; it struck something primordial deep down in her soul. She desired to dance and sing with them.

“Why did they seem upset when they saw me?” she asked, having to raise her voice above the merriment. Perion led the three of them aside for a bit of privacy, behind one of the palaces’ many elaborate columns.

“Hardly upset,” answered Perion, “just somewhat surprised to see that we brought someone as you.”

“Meaning someone human,” said Marie, clarifying. “Don’t they like us?”

“Some do, some do not. Most have no conviction either way. But these are good folk and they are concerned that a mortal is not harmed on their account.”

“Why?”

“Because they realize,” said Courinn, “that this is still your world, and they are but visitors. They do not wish aggression toward mortals. They have enough of that with other kin and clans here in the wood. At any rate, they prefer to keep humans apart from their realm, because of the dangers involved.”

“Which we must explain to you now,” added Perion.

“What dangers?” said Marie. “I thought you said this place would be safe.”

“It is,” said Perion. “But while here, you must understand what you can and cannot do.” He then nodded toward Courinn to continue.

“These great folk you see, singing and feasting,” she explained. “Some of them may offer you food and drink. Do not take any of it, whatsoever. If you do, the moment you return to the woods, you shall become dust. Some may invite you to dance with them. If you become a part of their circle, you could be caught in their span of time, which might release you again in a hundred years. There would be nothing we could do to help.”

“But why would they, when you said they don’t want to harm me?”

“Their nature is not yours,” Perion explained. “Some innocently do not realize the danger until it’s too late. Many here will take great interest in you, Marie, for they may have never been in human company. At any rate, all of them noted with surprise and interest what you did to the bear outside their home.”

“Lastly,” Courinn added, “one or two here may ask to return with you back to the woods. If you leave this place alone or with anyone but either of us, you will become somewhere lost in time or simply cease to be, the moment you step back onto mortal ground. We brought you in, and only through a certain mastery and command— mostly, Perion’s— can you be returned safely. Understood?”

Marie nodded, as she peered back at the fervid revelers. Their singing really did capture the heart and sweep away all worry and fear. The sight and smell of their food hypnotized and forged a ravenous hunger.

“Perion and I will learn what we can from our hosts,” said Courinn. “Please be careful.”

As Marie set her pack down next to a pillar, she watched Courinn and Perion step out among the jovial folk. They made their way toward an older group, not meaning gray or white haired, but sage-like. These few smiled and sang, but did not take direct part in the festive fun. Perion and Courinn were soon in deep discussion with them.

Wearing a white summer dress, Tilda excitedly peddled her bike. Her hair was neatly

brushed back and held in a hair ribbon, instead of hanging in front of her eyes. As hard as Tilda's legs pumped, she barely felt the strain.

It had finally happened yesterday afternoon, after gym, right there in the school hallway. She was talking with Jack Salento, as she often did. Then, out of the blue, with no warning, he asked her. She couldn't believe he asked her!

He had always been nice to Tilda, even when she was at first rude to him. She couldn't help it, he was the most popular boy in their grade, and she didn't understand why he kept coming around— asking her how she was, and what she liked to do. He quickly made her feel at ease, which no one else did. And when she began talking to him, he listened, really listened to her, and it was so easy. She soon found that she liked herself, liked whatever part of her came out— even she thought, shined at times— when she was around Jack. She hoped he would like her dress, something Tilda would have never worn around Bettyann and Trish.

Jack had told her more than once how he thought she could do better than the friends she had chosen. He knew the trouble Tilda kept getting into with Bettyann, Trish and Marie, and assured her she was much smarter than that. Sometimes, Tilda even believed him. But all she knew now was Jack had asked if she'd like to come over his house today to listen to the latest record by the Fab 4.

The familiar flutter she got in her stomach, whenever Tilda knew she was going to see Jack, grew as she rounded the final corner to his block. That same flutter quickly sank like a dead weight as she gaped at the scene in front of her.

Two police cars were parked in front of the Salento house, with several officers going in and out. Tilda came to a stop. She took no notice that her breathing had quickened and was now almost in gasps. Her hands trembled on her handlebars. Tilda could not, did not want to believe what she feared most likely had happened.

Sheriff Dan came out of the house. He quickly saw Tilda, stopped and then waved her over. Tilda slowly walked her bike, still straddling it, toward the sheriff.

“What are you doing here?” he growled suspiciously. He cut himself short, seeing the look on Tilda's face.

“Where's Jack?” she asked immediately.

The sheriff could see the sincere panic and fear in her eyes. “He's gone, along with his mother. We're starting to look for them.”

“No!” Tilda grit her teeth, forcing back tears. The sheriff had never seen this reaction, knowing only Tilda's exploitive and selfish temperament. He earnestly reached out, laying a hand on her arm.

“Jack meant something to you? What can you tell me? Please, the truth this time.”

Broken sobs escaped as Tilda fought the burning rage inside her. “She did it,” growled Tilda to herself, tears streaming down her cheeks. “She did it anyway!”

“If you know something, Tilda,” said the sheriff. “You’ve got to tell me.”

Tilda was so furious she grunted like an animal as she swung her bike and wildly rode off. The sheriff sighed, watching her before turning back to the house.

“Well, I guess I shouldn’t be a snob,” Marie said to herself. All eyes were on her as she began to stroll among the beautiful folk. Many offered kind, courteous exchanges. Some halted their revelry to stare in their own fashion of curiosity. One or two, Marie thought, frowned or sneered at her.

Ambling further along, she found herself heading toward the pool and the dancers who literally floated upon the water. Marie knew it was some magical form of the May Dance, which she had seen several times at the Gulliver county fair. She was feeling a little uneasy in light of Courinn’s warnings, but so far, no one had approached her or attempted to make any contact, outside of a greeting. Then she halted and her breath was sucked away and her eyes and mouth went taut in a great jolt of surprise.

Sitting before her, among the Faeriaye People was the same young boy who had stopped to look up at her during the procession in her dream. But at this moment, Marie realized it was no dream. She was awake through everything last night. She pinched her thumb to make certain she was not dreaming now.

He appeared the same: very thin with blue lips. Looking closer, Marie could see that the tips of his fingers and nails were also blue. It was hard to tell from his condition if he was her age or younger. He was a sickly boy, but his eyes and smile were bright and cheerful, and Marie strangely found herself wondering how grubby she looked. Was her hair a mess? Several days in the woods could not have left her appearing too glamorous.

However, the boy did not seem to care in the least. He rose from his seat, a bit awkwardly Marie observed, as if there was some strain. He was not dressed like the others, wearing a simple old pair of pants and plaid shirt, with rolled up sleeves. He also stood out, since there was no glow about him. When he spoke, his voice was warm and pleasant. It seemed to somehow comfort Marie, just as she recalled feeling when he first smiled at her during the procession.

“Hello. Would you like to sit?”

This was indeed a kind gesture, since he appeared to be the one who needed to sit.



“No thank you,” she replied, glancing down at the finely polished stone where he had been seated. She saw a piece of old paper lying on the table behind him. Looking closer, it was a material slightly thicker than paper. On it was a sketch.

The boy followed her sightline to the drawing and picked it up. As he handed it to her, Marie was embarrassed to discover it was a sketch of her— standing, she assumed, as she did minutes ago at the rear of the palace.

The drawing was a dead-on likeness of her and incredibly detailed, certainly for having been sketched so quickly. Studying it, Marie realized that the talented boy had placed her not in the diamond palace, but standing upon an elevated structure at night: the balcony of Giggleswick Mansion.

“It wasn’t a dream,” she excitedly exclaimed, looking up at the boy, “I really did see you!” There was such a pleasant sparkle in his eyes, nothing sweet or superficial, but all at once, sincere and heartfelt. Marie felt herself beaming uncontrollably.

The boy nodded. “I remember that evening well.”

“You remember? It was only last night.”

“Well ... for you perhaps.” Marie grinned. By now, she knew to shake off any brain-stretching confusion. She handed the drawing back to him. “Who are you?”

“My name is Steavyn.” Marie thought she heard ‘Steven’, but the boy pronounced it strangely. He also spoke with a strange accent, not too different from Perion.

“Are you ... ” she began, but leaned in close to be more discreet, cutting through the mirthful sounds around them, “... like them?” She motioned to the dancing folk.

Steavyn raised a curious brow. “The festivities here are wonderful to watch, but not to talk over.” He shivered as if cold, then coughed several times with a rawness that underscored his condition. “Let’s find somewhere less clamorous.”

Stepping away, Marie reached out and took his hand to halt him. She felt silly making so forward a gesture, but she had not forgotten Perion and Courinn’s warning. “Umm, I really shouldn’t leave my friends,” she said as Steavyn faced her. He understood.

“I’m no threat to you, Marie,” he assured her earnestly. “I am human.” He pointed ahead. “Look to your friends now.”

Marie saw Perion in discussion while Courinn’s eyes searched the palace, until she found her with Steavyn. As the boy waved to Courinn, Marie threw her an inquiring glance, whether it was safe to be with this gentle stranger. Courinn smiled as if slightly amused, then nodded her agreement.

“I’ve met Perion once before,” said Steavyn, “but Courinn and I have been good friends. This way.”

Taking the paper sketch with him— old parchment, actually— while tucking a drawing utensil behind his ear, Steavyn led her along a far wall of the palace. He turned at an open passageway and entered. As Marie followed, she could see the difficulty Steavyn had from simply walking. He breathed hard through his mouth so he could gulp the air easier. Marie made sure she stayed close behind him, within arms reach in case he staggered or fell, which she thought he might at any time.

The passage they were in had many others leading away from it, all carved out of the same diamond structure. Steavyn began taking these, one after another. Marie tried counting the rights, then lefts, but they were too numerous to keep track of. She realized they were traveling within an extensive labyrinth.

Steavyn needed to stop and rest several times while Marie patiently waited. She could see the blue tint in his lips and fingernails become even darker. At one point, he began coughing with labored wheezing as he tried to breathe. Marie began to be concerned.

“I didn’t know you were taking me this far,” she said, wondering if there was any danger following this sickly boy. Still, her instincts told her everything was okay and Courinn would not have let her leave if there were any real threat. “This is like some kind of maze that leads on forever. Where are we going?”

“It’s only around the next turn,” said Steavyn, catching his breath. “I wanted to surprise you. Forgive me, I thought I could make it without another rest, but I suppose not.”

Marie turned to him, sadly. “What happened to you, Steavyn? Have you always been so sick? Maybe you shouldn’t be walking this much.”

Steavyn breathed hard to steady his condition. “Thank you, but I’m fine now. Follow me, it’s right up ahead.”

He took a sharp left as the wide tunnel ended, leading them outside. They now stood in yet another place of otherworldly beauty. If Marie had only known of the grandeur that existed within Spellhollow Wood, she would have taken her father’s Polaroid camera. But she soon came to learn that nothing enchanted would photograph anyway.

Before them was a grove of woods that was split by a peacefully flowing stream. The water was the same bright blue as the May Dance pool. It sparkled brilliantly as it cascaded over rocks that rose up from its surface. Then there were the trees, which Marie gazed at in awe, glistening with rich moisture and of the purest, deep green. Not just the leaves, but also the boles, boughs and branches were all drenched in luscious emerald and majestic beyond description. The sound of the bubbling stream along with a soothing cedar-wood breeze that swept past them overwhelmed Marie with a euphoric tranquility.

Steavyn enjoyed watching Marie's reaction as her mortal eyes swilled the immortal landscape. Staring at her, he removed the pen from his ear and began sketching.

"I keep thinking I've seen it all," she said dreamily, "and then I realize I haven't."

"Much within the wood has scarcely been seen by human eyes," said Steavyn. "None more so than this place, which is why I had to show it to you."

Suddenly, Marie gasped. "Oh no! The hill— I left it without Courinn and Perion!" She peered down at her feet upon the ground— ground that was not mortal, but was the only soil she would ever be able to walk upon for the rest of her life. "What have I done?"

"At ease, Marie!" exclaimed Steavyn. "We have not left the Faeriaye Realm. This grove and stream and all you see still lies within the hillock."

"It does?" replied Marie with great relief. She peered up into the treetops, straining her eyes to see some sort of ceiling that would indicate they were still underground. But it made no visual sense to her. The light within the grove was a pleasant shade of natural, ambient daylight. How could that be possible if they were inside a great mound?

"Are you sure, Steavyn?" she asked. "I won't be turned to dust when I leave?"

"I would have never put you in such peril," he answered with calm reassurance. "This is a place to ease one's thoughts and feelings, not to fear."

Marie took a few steps. The earth below her appeared rich and fertile. It had a wholesome scent, which seemed to invigorate her senses. She approached the dazzling stream and knelt next to it, then turned back to Steavyn for his approval.

"Go ahead," he answered, "it's safe to touch, but you must *not* drink from it." Watching her, he continued to draw on his parchment.

The water was cool to Marie's touch with a heady scent of red willow bark.

"I was born with a serious medical condition," said Steavyn as he sketched. "Two large holes in my heart."

Marie stood and faced him. When he stopped drawing to look at her, the expression in his eyes clearly suggested he did not want pity, only clarification. "The mixture of oxygen and blood that is pumped through my body is insufficiently thin, which results in my skin's blue color, along with weakness and shortness of breath.

"How did you get here? Where is your family?"

"Still in Highland Pointe, I suppose," Steavyn answered, returning to sketch. "I had many problems as an infant, in and out of the hospital, operations, endless procedures. It

took a terrible toll on my parents, especially my poor mother.” He took another long breath. “I was given last rites several times, but somehow I always pulled through. Still, it was an extremely difficult childhood. Until they came.”

“They?”

“The magical folk you’ve seen here today. They came one morning and whisked me away, out from my bed.”

“They took you? Kidnapped you?”

“Only at first.” He glanced up at Marie, examining some part of her and then sketching it. “They offered me a life with them where I could find some relief from my suffering. But they made it clear it was my choice. If I decided no, they would return me home and I would have no memory of them. But if I chose to stay, they would go back and leave a changeling in my place.”

Marie stared at Steavyn incredulously. “You stayed.”

“I did. I knew I could only beat the odds so many times. The doctors’ plan was to place a pig’s valve within me every ten years, but after two or three, the risks would become much higher. Here among the Faeriaye, I enjoy a life without any of that.”

“But you’re still suffering,” said Marie, shaking her head, confused. “How are you any better now?”

Steavyn stopped drawing and looked up. His gaze narrowed as he continued to take long, steady breaths. “Things are not all as you see them.”

“Do you miss the life you had? Don’t you miss your parents, Steavyn?”

He remained silent for a long moment. “My mother, yes, very much. My father? Well, there were some problems. It’s best this way.”

A cold distance came into Steavyn’s eyes; his reply seemed to both annoy and upset him. Marie knew her queries had dredged up confused feelings and unanswered questions. Steavyn lowered his parchment and took a short step toward the stream. “So, what do you think of this place?” he asked, moving their conversation along. “I come here often, to sit and simply think.” He no longer seemed interested in talking about where he came from or how he got here.

Marie understood, wishing she were not so inquisitive. “How could anyone not think it’s the most peaceful place ever,” she cheerfully answered, trying to whisk away the uneasiness that had moved between them. It wasn’t that difficult to appear cheerful since Marie knew two things at this moment: she loved being here in this place, but she also knew what really made it so special was that she was here with him.

“I’d like to ask you something,” broached Steavyn, still looking away. “If you don’t mind.”

“No, please ask.”

“How did you stop the attack of that crazed bear who would have surely taken your life? What is that charm you carry?”

“How did you know?” asked Marie. “Did everyone see that?”

“Yes, we usually can tell who’s knocking on our front door.”

Now Marie turned away, ashamed. She slowly withdrew the globe amulet, without looking directly at it. “I didn’t want to do that,” she began. “But he was in so much pain.” She peered at the charm. “I knew this would stop him. A burning hot voice in my head *whispered* to me, that if the poor bear perceived the monster again within the charm— it would be swiftly driven mad— ending its misery.”

She spoke these last words like someone else had said them aloud for her. She felt the same strange ache of searing heat in her head, the same she experienced right before she faced the bear. It quickly passed again.

Steavyn faced Marie with a newfound respect. “You are an enchantress then?”

Marie shook her head. “No, not even close.” She removed her charm and stuck it in her pocket, then glanced up at Steavyn. “You look like you’re feeling better,” she said. It was her turn to change the subject.

He stepped toward her again. “I do feel stronger when I’m here.” He raised his parchment to show her. It was an even more detailed drawing of her exactly where they now stood. Marie examined it in awe.

“That’s incredible, Steavyn,” she said. “What talent you have.”

He nodded in appreciation, handing it to her.

“For you.”

She accepted it graciously, forcing herself to subdue what she was really feeling. She wondered if he had any idea what this gift meant to her. A silly ‘thank you’ hardly seemed enough.

“This is so kind, Steavyn,” she said sincerely. “You really are very special.”

“You inspire me, just as this place always has,” he answered. “But come, it gets better.”

He led her along the stream until the ground began to steadily rise. It was only a short ascent, yet Marie grinned gleefully as she saw the water of the stream flowing *uphill* along with them. She also took note that Steavyn did not need to rest.

At one point, something on the ground caught her attention. When she looked closer, it was gone. “What was that?” she thought. It was some kind of peculiar shape, strange, but somehow familiar. She experienced a potent sensation of *déjà vu*.

When they had reached the top of the hill Marie saw that the stream opened into a wide basin. An elaborately fashioned archway made of smooth, white granite traversed the water. At its highest point, the arch led through a short passage cut into a great wall of jagged stone, with many craggy edges protruding in all directions.

Standing before the archway, Steavyn held out a hand to Marie. She warmly took it, after only a moment’s hesitation. He led her up the arched slope toward the wall, where Marie again glimpsed something vaguely familiar. But it quickly disappeared once more, followed by the same sense of *déjà vu*. Marie hesitated and shook her head.

“Is everything all right?” asked Steavyn.

“I think so. I’m not sure. I just had *déjà vu*. Just now and a few minutes ago.”

“Really?” said Steavyn. “If you’ve been here before and still remember it, you are an enchantress.”

“It’s gone again, I don’t know.”

Marie noticed that the basin swirled off and disappeared into a seam-like foundation of the stone wall. Staring down into the water, Marie saw many shiny and glittering things. Looking closer, she saw they were weapons stuck into the basin floor: spears, swords, lances, and long axes, all highly wrought—beautiful but deadly.

“What place is this now?” she asked with some curiosity. Steavyn halted. “We have come to ancient, sacred ground. He pointed into the water. “What you see below are the reminders of ugly hostilities, long ago set to rest.” Just ahead of them were two massive spears that rose out of the water on either side of the archway. In spite of their vast age, the gleaming spearheads looked as if they had been forged anew. Their long shafts plunged into the water, firmly sunken into the basin floor.

“The great weapons set here mark a pact,” continued Steavyn, “a long truce between enemies of old. To remove these spears is to break that truce, which none left alive has the strength to do, since—”

Marie waited for him to finish, but he did not.

“Since what?” she asked, unclasping his hand, not about to let him stop there.

Steavyn’s lip curled as he shook his head. “Since it can only be done if both spears are drawn together at the same time. It’s been told there might indeed be another way, but that is just myth.”

“Myth?” repeated Marie. “After all I’ve seen nothing is just a myth.”

Steavyn chuckled to himself. “I don’t doubt it.” He politely escorted Marie forward, through the opening in the wall. “This way, if you please.”

On the other side, she saw that the archway descended back down to a perfect, white bricked walkway that stretched ahead and overlooked endless fields— immense fields, fields of meticulously arranged flower gardens. There were innumerable lilies and lilacs, strewn with heather and poppies, primrose and thyme. But once again, it was the satiated colors and textures that were so magnificent to the mortal eye. A low waterfall from the basin swept down into the fields, keeping the flora continuously nourished, as if it were some magical elixir of perfection.

It would remain the single most beautiful thing Marie had ever seen in her life. Her eyes welled up, wholly overcome by all that lay before them, along with the gardens’ bountiful fragrances. Steavyn came up behind her, beaming. He was delighted to be able to share the beauty of this place with another human. Then Marie turned to face him and as she did, her young heart leapt. The sickly color of Steavyn’s skin had faded. His eyes shone with an unexpected happiness Marie guessed he had rarely known in his life, or did not ever expect. She marveled at seeing the flowers’ dazzling colors reflected in his eyes. Within his gaze was somehow clearly revealed true kindness, warmth and unbreakable friendship, but most of all, eternal trust.

It was to Marie’s wonder that she found herself greatly wishing to share these same things with Steavyn. She did not understand the rushing sweep of emotion that now overtook her. What were these feelings she was having, for someone she only just met? From the moment she saw him last night when he smiled at her, something new and exciting had been stirred up, taking hold of her. Even at this moment with the fluttery ache in her stomach, Marie did not want to let it go. She found herself leaning in close to Steavyn with no awkwardness, as naturally as breathing, even as she held her breath. She watched him cautiously move toward her as their lips met. Every sensation she knew suddenly tingled and trembled, compelling her eyes to squeeze shut. It was simple and pure joy. The moment froze itself in time and yet it ended all too quickly. But for as long as she lived, Marie never forgot her first kiss.

Steavyn gazed at Marie as their lips gently parted. Her eyes remained closed like she had drifted off into dreamy sleep. He patiently waited, smiling at Marie at last exhaled and opened her eyes, which were still moist with emotion. It hardly surprised her when she saw that Steavyn’s were just as misty.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

She couldn't help but chuckle. “Take a guess!”

“I'm not sure where that came from,” he admitted.

Marie held out a hand to touch his face but then stopped, retracting her fingers in a jumble of uncertainty and confusion. “Who are you?” she asked, fully realizing how vulnerable she now was. “What is this feeling, Steavyn?”

“I hope the same thing I feel.”

He leaned toward her again for a second kiss, but it never came to be. Just before their lips touched, Marie saw Steavyn's cheek twitch. His eyes went wide as another tremor, looking more like a spasm, suddenly assaulted his face and neck.

Steavyn sprang backwards, clenching his fists as if desperately trying to calm and control himself. But Marie quickly saw it was no good as his hands and arms began trembling out of control. Steavyn glanced at Marie, just long enough for his eyes to shoot her a message of warning. This was quickly followed by a wail of pain.

“Get away!” he shouted. “Go!”

His neck convulsed, with his face contorting in great pain. He tried to speak again, but only strangled sounds came from his throat.

“Steavyn!” Marie shrieked. “What's happening?”

She stepped closer to help him, but the seizure became worse as another powerful wave of convulsions took Steavyn, thrusting him backwards where he lost all balance. He flipped over the edge of the archway railing, falling into the water below.

Marie ran to the edge, watching helplessly as the waterfalls' current quickly pinned Steavyn. Lost in a whirl of disorientation while still suffering the seizure, Marie clearly saw he was drowning.



### Vecubus Attack

“Steavyn!”

Marie knew he could not hear her. She panicked, clumsily trying to climb over the archway rail, but it was too far a drop. What was happening to him? The question sliced through the raging thoughts in her mind. She speedily searched around her for something to lower down to Steavyn.

She spotted his pen lying on the arch floor— the pen he used for her drawing. Now half-crushed in her hand, Marie held up the sketch and studied it, just as she was struck by another strange bout of *déjà vu*.

There it was, right in the drawing. The odd shape Marie had noticed several times already. Steavyn had drawn it into the sketch’s wooded background. Where did she last see that strange shape? Again, she glanced about the archway, until her eyes locked on the wall of stone, with its many crags and fractures forming all kinds of patterns.

She raced back through the wall passage. In desperation, Marie firmly grasped for the tall spears sticking out from the water. She heaved, but nothing budged. She then remembered what Steavyn told her: how one must grab both at the same time. Marie saw this was impossible, with the span between them some fifteen feet.

For a moment, Marie thought she heard distant voices, calling out. They seemed far away. She ignored this and instead faced the stone wall. There were indeed endless shapes within it. Her eyes fought to unravel their geometry. She took a few steps back, then crouched a bit. A pattern appeared and fluidly shifted before her eyes. She took another two steps and then crouched a tiny bit more— There it was! Straight between the spears with the archway framed under them and from only this height and perspective. The exact shape from her sketch was framed and clearly outlined.

Marie struggled to quell a resurgence of panic. She was taking too long to solve this puzzle. Though less than a minute had passed, it was a minute too long for someone drowning. Marie climbed the arch rail again, then grabbed the spear tightly and shimmied up. Reaching the strange shape upon the wall, Marie freed one hand, pushing against the stone: nothing happened. She pushed again much harder, with no result.

Marie maneuvered herself to get better leverage. She desperately held herself aloft with just her legs, then purposely fell into the stone with both hands held out.

“No, Marie!” cried out a strong voice.

With a crack, the stone gave way. It cleanly separated and slid from the wall. Marie fell with it. She lunged out to the spear shaft and just caught it, but quickly saw in despair that both spears suddenly shattered apart. Down she plunged.

She had enough self-awareness to hold her breath, yet Marie prayed she would not crash into the basins’ rocky edge. In startling confusion, she suddenly felt herself being seized and held close by strong arms. Looking about her she saw a face familiar, yet different. It was Steavyn. Marie looked down and gasped. They were rising up, away from the water—somehow sailing through the air. Steavyn carried Marie over the archway as he landed, easily touching both feet down.

He allowed Marie to stand on her own before he released her. As he did, she stared at him, unable to believe what she saw.

“Are you hurt at all?” he asked quickly and earnestly.

He was completely transformed, physically. He must have been some fifty pounds heavier, most of it defined with muscle. His skin was flush with wholesome color. He stood straight and tall as opposed to slightly hunched, now with two great, shimmering wings sprung from his shoulder blades. His eyes were bright as ever, now matching the vigor that embodied him.

“A little shook up,” she said, “but I think I’m okay.”

“Thank the Fates,” said Steavyn. “Yet this is a dark hour.” He looked past Marie, where the two massive spears had been destroyed. As he did, Marie saw the alarm and foreboding cast over his face, which he could not hide.

“Steavyn, what happened, what did I do?”

“It’s my fault,” he said. “I did not realize the danger of bringing you here. Once you unsealed the hidden marker, the ancient spell over this place ceased. It was no myth, as you suggested. There was another way to remove the ceremonial spears. The pact has been broken.”

“I’m so sorry, I was trying to save you any way I could—”

“—Please hold no blame on yourself.”

Marie heard the distant voices again, as did Steavyn. They both clearly heard Marie’s name called out.

“Your friends are looking for you,” he said. “We must go now, quickly. Please, take hold of me.”

He extended his hands. Marie held him around his neck and shoulders. His huge wings spread apart and they were off again, soaring through the air. Marie gasped in unbridled elation. Steavyn, however, did not share her excitement.

They re-entered the diamond labyrinth in flight. Marie could feel Steavyn’s considerable strength as he easily swerved through the air.

“What happened, Steavyn?” she asked as they flew onward. “Is this the real you?”

“I share this form along with my other.”

“So, you can’t be human then?”

“I am. But here within the Faeriaye Realm, I also may live as this. It was a gift they bestowed upon me. An essence, fashioned from what I would have been, was I not born sick. With an extra spell or two.”

“But then why don’t you stay like this all the time?”

“That’s not how the gift was given. They could not completely undo what I was, but I was granted some reprieve from my suffering. Until today, I thought I could only take this form when my pain became too much. But I now understand my magical friends have a sense of humor. They never mentioned it could be either pain *or pleasure*.”

“I wish you told me this before!”

“So do I.”

“What’s going to happen now that the pact is broken?”

“I don’t know,” said Steavyn. He threw her a curious glance. “How did you know where the hidden marker was? I’ve stared at that wall endless times and never saw a thing.”

Still clutching her drawing, she shoved it in front of him. “Right there. You drew it in my sketch. Didn’t you want me to find it?”

He stared at it a quick moment, then shook his head. “How could I sketch in what I never knew? Whatever you saw, Marie, you found on your own.” Steavyn was however, incorrect, as they would eventually learn. This mysterious skill existed between them and would be a valuable aid in time.

The voices became louder and clearer.

“Why are they calling me?” asked Marie.

Steavyn’s gaze narrowed as they landed. “Something else is amiss.”

Marie released Steavyn’s shoulders, just as Perion and Courinn emerged round a corner.

“There you are!” exclaimed Perion, relieved.

“I’m okay, what’s going on?” said Marie.

“The palace is under attack!” said Courinn. “We have to go right away!”

“Under attack, how?” asked Steavyn.

“The trollogre is entering the hillock,” said Courinn.

It was like a sharp stab of fear striking Marie. In the last four days, she had thought of little else but two things: her mother and the trollogre. One was now very close.

“She’s coming after me,” stated Marie, drawing out and gazing at her charm.

“Steavyn,” said Courinn, “has the monster ever attacked before?”

“Never that I’ve known.”

“We must flee immediately,” said Perion. He turned to Steavyn. “You and all the Faeriaye are in the gravest of danger, as long as we remain.”

“The folk here do wield the power that will stay the creature from entering these halls,” assured Steavyn.

“They’ve slowed her passage, yet she still comes forth,” said Courinn.

”Come!” said Steavyn, already leading them off. “This way!”

When they reached the main palace, Marie saw the beautiful people gathered and readied in defense of their home. They moved with speed and grace; many could hardly be seen by Marie, except as blurs and streaks. Others flew about, much as Steavyn could, prepared for the worst. A terrible, growing noise echoed through the palace, a sound that Marie immediately recalled: choking and strained breathing.

Steavyn led them to the far end of the palace, where they each found their packs and slung them on. As Steavyn helped Marie with hers, he quickly spoke with Courinn and Perion, making sure they understood his plan. The monstrous roar became closer and fuller.

“She’s close,” said Steavyn.

“What you’re proposing makes sense,” said Courinn. “If we withdraw at the right moment, we should be able to slip between her entrance and our exit. The timing will be crucial and we risk disastrous consequences. We’ve already lost a whole day coming in.”

“Lost a day?” asked Marie.

“So we just learned,” said Courinn. “The enchanted fabric of this realm is delicate and was ruptured by the bear’s attack. The trollogre’s presence could do the same or worse.”

Perion grinned at Courinn. “You sound more and more like the professor. Still, I thought we would be safe here. I’m sorry, Marie.”

Marie slyly glanced at Steavyn. “I’m not too sorry.” Perion caught the innuendo, raising a curious brow.

“It is time,” said Courinn. “Our humblest thanks, Steavyn. Just give the word.”

The three comrades joined hands, facing the direction they had come. But Marie strained her neck to look back at Steavyn, whose wings tightly folded together. As their eyes met, Marie saw in his face the same lonely ache she felt. She could not just leave him like this. She broke free of her friends and ran back to Steavyn, who also stepped forward as they inter-clasped one another’s fingers.

“Will I ever see you again?”

“If you wish to,” he said, “as much as I wish to see you.”

She hugged him, resting her head on his chest. “I don’t want to leave now.”

He returned her embrace. “You must.”

She looked up at him as if her next words were a promise she had to seal with her eyes. “I’ll come back, Steavyn. Once I do what I have to do.”

“I’ll bear the hardest of days until then. But if you cannot come, I will find you.” Then he kissed her. Courinn and Perion watched, wide-eyed.

“Goodbye, Steavyn.”

“Never say goodbye, Marie,” he said. “Instead, think of what we’ve shared, until our next moment.”

She returned his kiss. “My real name is Emily.”

His smile, which he no longer for her sake allowed to be tinged with sadness, confirmed his approval of her name. His bright eyes sparkled, as if a final parting gift.

“Until our next moment, Emily.” A choking roar boomed all around them.

Courinn motioned to her. “Quickly, Marie, please!”

Marie took a deep breath and turned away. She took hold of her friends’ hands again. Perion stared at her. Marie ‘felt’ him, but she only looked forward.

“On my mark,” began Steavyn. He listened carefully to the trollogre’s oncoming progress. “Let her come a bit closer ... hold. Closer. Now!”

Marie shut her eyes as she jumped forward with Perion and Courinn. She was once more thrust into shadowy, spatial disorientation. Her stomach again leapt into her mouth. “I can’t do this a second time,” she pleaded, her voice already sounding queasy.

“You won’t have to,” reassured Perion. Seconds later, Marie felt herself upright again, followed by a great surge forward. She opened her eyes and saw that she and Perion were bestride Courinn in unicorn shape again.

She galloped furiously round the high-edged perimeter of the Faeriaye Hillock. The thick, humid air blasted against their skin as snow, then golden rain fell about them. Marie was so grateful the journey back to mortal ground would be smooth and quick. Her stomach already had calmed as the damp air quickly cooled. They descended back through the ghostly mirage of two merging spheres, leading downward along the great mounds’ spiral, interplanal passageway.

Nevertheless, the ghastly sounds of Gwylligwitch grew much louder. “She’s too close!” shouted Marie, “We’re going to run straight into her!”

“No!” said Perion. “It will be tight, but we should just miss the wretched beast.”

And yet, as Courinn rounded through the fifth pass, an immense, hulking shape came into view above them. It was luckily, as they hoped, not in the same spherical plane. Marie could see the trollogre appear to them now as a shadowy and dispersed form only, with an ethereal barrier separating them. Even so, she glared at her adversary.

“We’re past, but she’s coming back out!” shouted Perion. “Quickly, Courinn!”

Even as Courinn sprang forth with ever-greater speed, Gwylligwitch turned to them. She knew they were there and had no intention of letting them escape so easily. Ever since the trollogre came upon the bear corpse, she had caught their scent— yet this smell was familiar. The monster reckoned it must have been a mortal she had once caught and let live. There was something about this fresh, young one: something that drove the creature

to pursue it right into the loathsome Faeriaye Realm. The troll beast also sensed a potency to this young mortal—a power that had not long ago inflicted deep wounds upon her, which she still suffered from. If that power still existed, she would find it and the one who now possessed it, and both would savagely die.

Halfway through the final pass, Marie suddenly cried out. A monstrous arm and many-clawed hand was now reaching towards them. It pierced through the segregated planes of enchantment, lucidly demonstrating that the strength and will of Gwylligwitch could not be denied. With every bit of force Courinn could muster, she sped the remaining distance. Marie and Perion leaned as far away as possible from the filthy, groping limb coming at them.

It was not enough. One of Courinn's hind legs was abruptly seized, until she tore free a moment later. But it was sufficient to force a bone-crunching halt. Perion, again defying human physics vaulted off, landing in a well-managed shoulder roll. Marie screamed as her momentum viciously flung the young girl forward—alone, into yet a new plight.

Tilda's legs stung with pain, but she pedaled on. She had been out of breath more than an hour now, so she continued on her bike in short bursts only. This was necessary anyway, since Tilda had to constantly keep watch around her. She had been evading all car headlights along Oak Tree Road since dusk. Ducked into the trees until they passed, she saw that each car was the sheriff's men on patrol.

Once she had turned off the road and joined the interstate, it became much easier. She had hoped and was soon proven right that the sheriff's officers would not be checking up and down here on a Tuesday night. Yet Tilda still had to take rests. She had never before biked this far alone and good stretches of the road and highway were hilly and twisty, as much of the Gulliver County region was. Pedaling alongside the southbound traffic in the dark may have been difficult, but Tilda Jentiss knew where she was going and was one hundred percent determined to get there.

She at last found the turn-off she was looking for. It was much farther away than she had thought, having come some twelve or thirteen miles from home. Tilda stopped twice, thinking she missed it, yet here it was: an old, unmarked service road that lead from the interstate's jug-handle into the woods on her left. Tilda had been here only once before with her mother, several years ago. Nioma Jentiss had one morning drove to this area in a fury, proceeding to verbally—and very close to physically—attack a recluse young man who lived here in the woods. She raucously claimed he had been investigating and interfering in things he had no business concerning himself with.

Raynor Mifflin respectfully warned Nioma off his property or he would be notifying the sheriff. With much ranting, theatrical ravings, and a good measure of foul language, she at last left with a warning of her own: he didn't want her to have to come back.

Tilda had heard the usual things about Mifflin through the years: the stories of a mad

scientist that performed crazy experiments in his haunted home— experiments with the dead, said some. The townsfolk may have had serious disagreements with one another, but the one thing most agreed upon: Mifflin was out of his mind. Yet Tilda had also heard some very kind things about him, from those she had known were honest people. She knew he was a friend of the sheriff, so how bad could he really be? If Mifflin were up to no good, he would have been locked up long ago— but then, Sheriff Dan had not locked up her own mother yet ... .

She followed the service road through the woods. There were no lights. If not for the battery-powered flashlight she had wedged in her handlebars, it would have been pitch dark. Yes, she was in Spellhollow Wood at night, but Tilda kept reminding herself it was in the eastern, least haunted part. She silently hoped those stories were right.

“Enough already!” she protested aloud, coming upon more hills. She briefly halted at the top of one of these rises, catching her breath. Gliding down the next descent where the road bended to the left, she then saw a dim light ahead.

The light grew quickly as she emerged from the woods. Before her was the comfortable sight of a large house. But before she could advance closer, a blinding searchlight snapped on from the top window of the house’s widow’s walk structure. A moment later, a figure emerged from the woods, mere steps in front of Tilda, giving her quite a startle.

“Who are you?” the figure asked immediately, obscured by the dark.

“It looks like she’s alone,” said another voice behind her.

Tilda spun to see a second person standing there. “I’m not looking for any trouble,” she said. “I just need to see Mifflin.”

“Professor Mifflin,” said the boy in front of her, who stepped into the light. “Who are you?” persisted Zendara.

“I’m Tilda Jentiss,” she said, covering her eyes. “I have to speak to Professor Mifflin.”

“Tilda Jentiss,” repeated Dyllion into his radio, standing behind her. “She wants to see you, sir.”

“*Tilda* Jentiss?” came the sound of Mifflin’s voice over the radio, emphasizing the first name in curiosity. “How interesting. Show her in, please.”

“You gotta’ be kidding me,” said Tybain, watching Tilda enter the main library with the professor. “It’s the never-afraid-of-nothing chick,” he added, sarcastically referring to Tilda’s empty boast before she first fled the woods. Zendara and Dyllion followed them.



Tilda glared at Tybain in mock disapproval. He had a good-sized dressing and bandage on his left shoulder. “Who are you kidding?” she snapped back. “Band aid boy.”

Seated next to Tybain, Brage and Theel burst out laughing. Tybain nodded, approving her quick and witty comeback. “She’s got some attitude, though,” he said to Brage. “I like that.” Attitude or not, no one in the room could deny how attractive she looked, in spite of her vigorous bike journey, with her white dress and softly-styled hair.

“Everyone, this is Miss Tilda Jentiss,” said Professor Mifflin, taking a seat behind his desk. “Who has bravely ridden here alone, mostly in the dark, while cleverly evading the sheriff’s patrols. All so she could help us.”

“Help us?” said Brage.

“Bravely?” said Tybain. “Like I said, you gotta be kidding.”

“It would seem,” said the professor to Tilda, “Brage and Tybain have a definite opinion of you already.”

“I’ve never seen either of them in my life,” said Tilda.

“No, but we’ve seen you,” said Brage.

“Where?” asked Tilda, “When?”

Brage turned to Tybain, who nodded. Cupping their fingers over their mouths in a strange manner, they began making an odd noise. It sounded like eerie laughing.

Tilda recognized the bizarre sounds she, Bettyann and Trish had fret over, just before they ran out of Spellhollow Wood.

“That was you?” she scowled. “Did you fake the ghosts we saw too?”

“Your ghosts,” said Tybain, “were only the sun on some rocks.”

Tilda looked away, embarrassed. “You saw us tear outta’ the woods?”

“So brave,” added Tybain.

“That’s enough,” said Mifflin. “I think you’ve made your points. Are we going to cast stones at some mistakes Miss Jentiss has made?”

“No, they’re right, professor,” said Tilda. “It was wrong and I was a jerk. You won’t believe it, but I’m just beginning to see who I really am and what my life has been about. I don’t like what I’ve found.”

“Accepting that is sometimes the first step,” said the professor.

“If she will aid us in finding Perion,” said Brage, “along with Marie and Courinn, then we should welcome her help.”

“Yeah, will you help us find Perion?” said Dyllion.

“Explain to them,” said Mifflin to Tilda, “what you told me.”

Tilda cleared her throat. “I don’t know your friend, Perion, but if you let me, I’d like a chance to make up for the things I’ve done. I want to help find Marie, wherever she is.”

“What are you looking to get out of it?” asked Tybain.

“Ty, must you always be so cynical?” interrupted Mifflin.

“No, he’s right again. I came here because I hoped the professor could help me too. That’s the truth. I can’t explain everything now, but I kind of have something to do with what happened to Marie’s mother.”

The five boys quickly exchanged concerned glances. Tybain shook his head.

“She said she had *something* to do with the incident,” reiterated the professor. “Not that she was actually responsible for it.”

“No, I wasn’t,” she said firmly. “But this afternoon ...” She hesitated, with a sudden swell of emotion in her voice, “... the same thing happened to someone else pretty special to me. I want to do whatever I can to make sure people here stop going missing. Please believe me.”

No one said a word, yet each of their faces clearly expressed what they were thinking.

“I’ve always considered myself a fair judge of character,” said the professor. “In this case, I think it might be wise to give our guest the benefit of doubt.”

Zendara, Brage and Theel appeared to be open to this suggestion. Dyllion and Tybain were most obviously not.

“If she’s really come to help Marie, then let’s have her prove it,” said Zendara.

“Let her actions speak for her,” said Theel.

“Prove it or not, I still don’t trust her,” said Tybain.

Tilda quickly cast Tybain an icy stare.

“Don’t give me that look,” he said. “Tell me this, what would you do if the story were reversed? Would you trust me?”

“No, not you I wouldn’t,” she said.

“We agree on something,” said Tybain.

“Very well,” concluded Professor Mifflin. “Aside from a bit of typical distrust, we’ll agree on accepting the help of Miss Jentiss.”

“Professor, you can call me Tilda.”

Mifflin nodded. “Tilda it is.”

He turned to address them all. “Without a radio, we’re deaf to whatever troubles our friends might have met. Otherwise, Perion by now would have led them very close to the woods’ western edge. We must quickly get there, but to do that, we’ll need to maneuver past the sheriff’s blockade and patrols.”

He faced Tilda. “That’s where you’re going to assist us.”

She nodded. “Won’t be the first time I’ve run up against the sheriff.”

“When do we move out, sir?” said Zendara.

The professor stood. “I hope you’ve recently slept well, Tilda. We go tonight.”

*Chapter 14*

**Cat and Mouse**

Professor Mifflin drove cautiously through the deep night, past the vague reflection of Mohican Lake to his left. His headlights were turned off. Oak Tree Road had never offered any streetlights and in those days there were no reflective pavement markers. This had forced the innovative professor into equipping his Ford truck with an infrared night-vision system.

From the vehicle's dashboard, a pop-out screen clearly showed the road ahead under IR spectral range. The professor never took his eyes off the screen as he drove. Next to him sat Tilda and Zendara. The rest of the young exiles rode behind in the truck bed, no longer joking and prankish, but silent.

Mifflin suddenly brought the truck to a stop. "Here we go," he said, pointing to an image that appeared on the screen. He pressed a button and the grainy image zoomed in, becoming much clearer. It was a police car ahead, with its own lights off.

"Just over three thousand feet," said Zendara.

"Yes, and they look asleep," added the professor, "as I hoped they would be at this hour. Are you ready, Tilda?"

She peered ahead into the dark. "I've snuck around the fuzz a lot without being caught," she said. "But not like this. Yeah, I'm ready."

Zendara banged the cab's rear window, signaling his friends. "Let's go, we're up!" Brage and Tybain leapt out from the truck bed.

Dyllion and Theel lowered Tilda's bicycle down to Brage and Tybain. Dyllion was grinning in amusement, which Tybain quickly noticed. "What are you looking at?" he asked. "Was this your idea?"

"Not me," answered Dyllion, suppressing a laugh. "The professor's."

"Yeah," said Tybain, curling his lip in annoyance. "I believe that."

"Look, if she rubs you, Ty, please," said Brage. "No punching her in the head, okay?"

"I can't make any promises."

“You do that,” stated Dyllion, “and you better worry where she’s going to slug you back.” They quietly laughed to themselves, all but Tybain.

One of the two officers sitting in the patrol car just ahead was out cold asleep. The partner next to him in the driver’s seat struggled to stay awake— his heavy head clumsily nodded, then jerked upwards with a sharp snore. With each lurch, he would blink once or twice and repeat the motion.

When his loudest snore scraped itself out from his nose and mouth, he woke himself. The officer licked his dry lips as he vigorously rubbed his eyes. When he stretched them open with his fingers, he jumped in alarm, seeing something out of the patrol car’s windshield. A young girl was riding her bike straight towards them.

“Hey, hey, wake up, what’s this?” he stammered, nudging the officer next to him. His partner snapped to attention with a sharp breath. At the girls’ approach, he switched on his headlights, along with the cars’ two overhead police beacons. The girl seemed agitated and upset as she neared them.

When they both stepped out from the car, Tilda jumped from her bike and ran toward them. She wrapped her arms around the driver’s side officer in great relief.

“Thank goodness, I found someone!” she cried out amidst realistic looking tears.

“What’s happened, miss?” asked the officer. “What are you doing out here at this hour?”

“I’ve been lost!” blurted out Tilda, in a wave of well acted panic. “For hours! Then someone was following me, until they must have seen your car and ran away. It was scary! I didn’t know what to do!”

“Tilda Jentiss,” said the second officer, recognizing her. “I know all about your antics. What are you up to?”

The lead officer frowned at his partner. “C’mon, Wayne, she’s pretty upset.” He gently released Tilda, reassuring her with a smile. “Who do you think was following you?”

“I don’t know,” she answered, trying to calm herself. “But whoever it was, they dropped something there along the road,” she said, pointing. “When I went back to look at it, I found a gun!”

“A gun?” asked Wayne, the second officer, his suspicion mounting. “Where?”

She let go of the officer and got back on her bike. “Follow me!” she said, waving them on. She pedaled off to the roadside, about thirty feet away.

With a glance and sigh between them, the officers followed.

From the roads' opposite shoulder, a shadow quickly moved up to the rear of the police car. Tybain carefully made his way to the passenger door. With hardly a sound, he opened it.

"I don't see anything," said Wayne.

"It was here, it was right here!" insisted Tilda.

"Do you know if the gun was loaded?" asked the first officer, still willing to give Tilda the benefit of the doubt. His partner shot him a dubious sneer.

Tilda got off her bike and began searching the area, which she followed with a perfect impression of exasperation. "I don't understand," she said, "it couldn't have just vanished!" The first officer bent to the ground, searching closer as Tilda took a step back. Neither of them noticed her glance toward the police car.

In spite of his shoulder injury, Tybain worked efficiently. He then clicked the sidebar of the HT radio in his pocket. "Done," he said. "Moving out." He had securely fastened a small round device just under the dashboard. Retreating from under the front seat on his stomach, his timing would have been perfect. Instead, he dropped the small tool he had been using onto the floorboard. In the dark, he could not find it.

"Good, because you're out of time," Zendara's voice informed him. "They're coming back."

Tybain remained calm, continuing to search, his hands and fingers rummaging everywhere. "Ty, move!" Zendara warned. "Move out now!"

The first officer opened the rear driver's side door and stuffed Tilda's bike in. His very annoyed partner escorted Tilda to the passenger door. He seemed curious when he found it not closed all the way, as he motioned Tilda to get in. "I'm sorry," she said, "I don't know what happened." She slid onto the middle of the seat, followed by the officers on either side. "Just take me home now."

"That's where you're going," said Wayne, reaching for the vehicle's radio mic. He never spoke into it. Immediately, a high-pitched squeal burst forth from the device under the dashboard. Both officers cupped their hands over their ears. The sound quickly faded from earshot, but judging from the victim's reactions, it did not cease. They dug at their temples, trying to shield themselves from the ultra-high frequency. Tilda watched them in a mixture of awe and alarm. In fifteen seconds, both their heads drooped, appearing asleep as they were minutes ago, yet now unconscious.

Tilda removed the two small pieces of webbed material from her ears, which protected her, while the head of Tybain popped up from the passenger window. He inspected the officers, then clicked his radio. "We got 'em," he said. "Out cold."

Zendara's voice crackled in return. "Check, we're coming to you."

"How long will they be out?" asked Tilda, tentatively studying the officers as if they would suddenly awaken.

"An hour or so," replied Tybain. He extended Tilda a reluctant hand.

"What took you so long?" she grumbled, nudging his hand aside, scoffing at his courteous gesture. "I thought you and your ditzy gang were supposed to be sharp. I heard you get away just in time when we got back to the car. You almost blew it!"

She was not exaggerating. Tybain had found his tool and slipped out from the police vehicle with only seconds to spare. If he was caught, there was still the sound device, but it had a range of several feet only. For it to work, the police had to be in the car.

"It's done now, so take it easy," said Tybain. He offered his hand again. "You gonna sit there and ride shotgun all night?"

"Flake off," she said, looking away as Professor Mifflin's truck pulled up.

Tybain dropped his hand. "You belong in the back seat," he jeered, walking away.

Mifflin speculated as he drove onwards along Oak Tree Road. He was gambling on what he knew of Dan Radich and how he operated. After four days, he felt the sheriff would no longer keep multiple blockades along the county roads overnight. He was optimistic the patrol car they had just left was all they should be concerned with.

"What was it that knocked the cops out?" asked Tilda, again sitting between him and Zendara.

"Just a basic ultrasonic beam emitter I threw together," said the professor. "They're both good officers, but I don't envy the headache or the sheriff's wrath they're going to suffer when they wake."

"Couldn't we have used it the first time we tried to get past?" said Zendara.

"Not with the multiple roadblocks they had then," said the professor. "Nor without someone on the outside like Tilda to aid us. At any rate, let us keep our fingers crossed. Woldred is only two miles ahead, and from there we should be worry free."

Marie's head throbbed as she rubbed it. She was lying on her back. Sitting up and peering around at the woods left her quite confused.

It was late afternoon, serene and still. She was in some kind of clearing. The trees

reflected the light with a soft green glow. At the clearing's edge, she saw what looked like giant mushrooms that grew in a circle. This image jogged a memory, but it was vague. Looking to her left, she noticed a large mass lying upon the ground.

When she stood, she could see it was the carcass of a large animal. Taking a few steps closer, Marie then remembered it was the wounded bear. Memory flooded back. She spun around, facing the slope of the Faeriaye hillock. Her pack was strewn upon the ground several feet away. What happened to Perion and Courinn? Moments later, an icy chill crept over her. What about— Gwylligwitch?

After a few minutes surveying the terrain, Marie grabbed her pack and slung it over her shoulders. She badly wanted to call out her friends' names, but was fearful of the unwanted attention it might bring.

She then realized she was very hungry and thirsty. Reaching into her pack, she was struck with a sudden spell of dizziness. She stumbled and then dropped to a sitting position. A forcible desire to sleep overcame Marie as she yawned. It took a full minute of concentration to cast the strains of slumber aside.

Before she rose again, Marie took another sandwich from her pack. Sealed in wax paper by Corporal Delk's people, it still appeared quite fresh. As she ate, she took her water flask and drank deeply. She knew it was not smart to guzzle so much at a time, but she rationalized the long draught being in lieu of her restriction to eat or drink anything of the Faeriaye, though it all looked and smelled so unbelievably tempting.

What was she to do now? Were her friends still within the Faeriaye realm? Marie stared at the hillock, knowing she would never be able to get back inside herself to find out. The thought of returning was so tempting and she thought of Steavyn and the wonderful, but far too brief time with him.

*"No, not now,"* she reasoned, forcing herself to focus on the riddle before her. What happened? She remembered seeing the trollogre's massive hand coming at them. She knew it must have grabbed Courinn, recalling the severe lurch, then fleeting resistance, before being hurled forward. She would have been thrust from the enchanted realm alone, without her friends. Marie began pacing back and forth, as she tried to think logically, like her hero always did on her favorite teevee show.

If her companions were caught, Marie reasoned, Gwylligwitch would have killed them. But the monster would not have remained in the hill. She would have come out and found Marie lying on the ground. But if her friends escaped, why didn't they find her? It didn't make sense.

As she continued pacing, Marie glanced at the bear's remains, noticing something odd. She took a few steps closer. It was fly-ridden and foul, but Marie realized the carcass looked like it had been there for some time.



That didn't make sense either. How long could she have been? — and then the answer came to her, mixed with a sudden uneasiness. She did not depart the magical realm with Perion and Courinn; she exited alone. Time, as she knew it, had changed. How much time had gone by since Marie had saved them from the bear? From the corpse remains, Marie guessed it was not more than two or three days. Since then, her friends must have gone looking for her.

As this occurred to her, Marie continued staring blankly at the carnivore cadaver. When her focus returned, she spotted something lying on the ground, stuck within a clump of fallen leaves only inches from the bear's open paw. Marie stepped closer and yanked away a length of hair— braided together in two different colors.

Marie laughed out loud. Half the braid was the nearly flaxen hair of Perion, intertwined with Courinn's tresses of black. Marie immediately understood: Her friends could not guess how far in the future Marie would emerge from the enchanted realm, but the condition of the animal's corpse, if it were still there, might reveal to her a clue. And if Marie *were* studying the bear's state, trying to puzzle out the riddle, that would be the place to leave some kind of marker. Plus, a lock of hair would decompose much slower than the rest of the animal's remains, prolonging the chance to be seen if Marie came upon it weeks or months later.

She held up the braid. "Okay, you were both here," she said aloud. "Hopefully no more than a couple of days ago. But how do I guess which way you went?"

Her answer came floating upon a gentle breeze, though Marie did not at first understand it. The light wind became stronger and more noticeable as it swept the fallen leaves up in a circular pattern around her. The rush of air swung the braid upwards, then down, up then down. Marie glanced about; she knew there was *something* magical occurring. All at once her eyes froze on the braid in her hand, swaying in the gusty air, always in the *same* direction. It was pointing a way for her— a way to follow.

She grinned and shook her head. "What will they come up with next?"

The braid indicated Marie should continue from the hillock's far side. Off she went.

It became an oddly unsettling sensation. The farther she made her way alone, the more Marie felt she was being watched. She had already tried several times to face away from the breeze, yet the braid continued to point the same course. That, Marie felt, was like someone you could not see, helping you along. "Very ghostly," she kept thinking. She had only traveled an hour or so, yet twice more she had fallen under the same cloud of sleepiness. Each time it came upon her suddenly and she was forced to sit and struggle against nodding off.

The terrain she passed through now was full of rocks, hilly and uneven. She made her way up several ascents, only to lead down, zigzagging between large girders of stone.

Two of these descents had sharp fall-offs in places where Marie had to carefully pick her way along.

Climbing over another tangle of massive tree roots barring her way, Marie peered up, noting the emerald haze of the wood beginning to turn pale gray. Night was coming fast and with it the ever-mounting notion that something was nearby, patiently watching and following her. Marie also marked that the oak and ash trees with their ceaseless, serpentine branches began to grow ever larger in size and sprawl, transmuting into frightening shapes. She remembered the old stories about sinister looking trees coming alive after dark. Her confrontation with the hate-filled mydrus combatants brought those disturbing memories to life. Yet what Marie would face this night, her first night out in the wood, all alone, far outstripped anything her imagination could have ever conjured.

The lower part of the wood was already in darkness. What remained visible were the treetops only, sharply silhouetted against the pale day's end. Marie kept on for another few minutes, before she was forced to halt. She could no longer see where the enchanted braid of hair pointed. Marie grudgingly admitted she could go no further until sunrise. She needed to find a place to set herself down and sleep.

Marie cast a reluctant eye upwards. As if the twilight desired to maliciously besiege her jittery senses, the contours of the shadowy wood sprang to life as immense, wicked demons and monsters that she could have sworn were encroaching all about her. She held her breath to control her fright, as a shivery chill crept up her spine. The vexing fear that she was being watched and followed returned. With an audible shudder, Marie shrank to the ground where she stood and curled up in a ball, hiding her face in her arms. All light soon disappeared and a pitch-blackness Marie had never known invaded everything.

Her hand felt for the globe amulet in her pocket. It began to glow faintly as she drew it out in front of her. She could see nothing but ominous tree boles, roots and underbrush. Replacing the charm around her neck, Marie thought she spotted several pairs of eyes that a second later went dark.

"Who the heck woulda' thought a week ago," she said out loud, "that I'd be lying in the middle of Spellhollow Wood ... at night." She slipped the pack off her shoulders. Reaching into it, Marie pulled out a thin blanket, courtesy of Corporal Delk. She nestled back and draped it over her, curling up as comfortable as she could get.

She scratched her cheek thoughtfully, once again holding up her charm. It grew brighter with the image of her mother appearing, looking concerned, as if she knew that Marie were all alone in the wood.

"But a week ago," Marie reiterated, studying her mother's image, "I never knew I had a mother."

As if in answer, her mother spoke. "Take heart, Emily. You are not far away now. I am with you, every step." She placed her fingers to her lips and blew a kiss, which she always did whenever her little Emily was frightened or troubled. Marie returned the gesture as the globe faded. She tucked it back under her shirt.

She lay quiet for several more minutes, letting her ears adjust to the woods' vacuum of sound. She could hear nothing, except that of her own breathing. There was no breeze wafting over branches or leaves; no sound of owls or other nightly creatures; no song of crickets or any insects. In short measure, it became very disturbing. Marie tried to close her eyes and forget where she was, but how could she sleep when the noise of her own respiration seemed to echo within like a steam engine?

In addition, any other noise she made was somehow instantly absorbed. It reminded her of a snowy day's muffled, dead air, but this was a hundred times worse. When Marie coughed, which she did twice, it felt like something reached out to hungrily swallow it up. She was soon convinced the woods were making sure nothing of her existence would survive this night.

"I hope I find Perion and Courinn tomorrow," she said fearfully. "I can't do this all alone. I can't."

The aggregate effect of this sensory nightmare swiftly set her nerves in tatters and Marie found herself trembling with fright under her blanket. As brave as she had been so far, as emboldening as her mother's words were, she could not shake the sense of dread that was clutching at every part of her. When she found herself crying, she had no clue when she had started.

"Mommy, please, help me!" she wept. Her sobbing was strangled into the horrendous oblivion trapping her. Then mercilessly, when she at last teetered on the precarious fringes of sleep, all her nightmares were abruptly thrust before her and the meaning of horror was redefined.

With no warning, an immense crash thundered through the wood. After the ghostly silent world Marie had inhabited, the noise scorched her mind. She leapt to her feet and screamed, feeling like her heart and lungs had exploded inside of her.

The crashing was very close. How could anything have moved that near to her in the stillness without warning? Perhaps some kind of magic or spell that prevented her from hearing what she should have? The question assailed Marie in confusion as she withdrew her shimmering charm, madly searching around her.

It came too fast. There was no choice but to grab her pack and run. In the brief second before she fled, she saw something in her amulet's glow: huge and powerful it was, something black, gray and red. As this smeared image registered in her brain, it also triggered a memory. She had seen it once before: that day, that terrible day. She had

come into these woods to find it and now it had found her. In response, all she could do was run for her life.

She sprinted as fast as she could, through the complete black of the forest, unable to see anything, anywhere. It was, come to life, all the childhood nightmares we share of the dark and the horror that lay within it. The electrifying fear of something reaching out and brutally seizing Marie from any direction, froze her gasping breath. She knew she had to suppress the prying door in her psyche that held shut all these thoughts, knowing that if that door broke open, she would suffer unimaginable panic and terror.

Instead, she navigated herself with her arms and fingers outstretched before her, scraping and smashing them through the trees. It was a far cry from the dark sections of the county fair's haunted house. She tripped and fell hard over the thick, entrenched roots at least three times, probably more, cutting her legs and wrists. At each fall, she heaved herself up and ran on, until the spell of sleep accosted her once again. She slapped herself hard across the face, twice, forcing it away and raced ahead.

The monster's pursuit did not let up. Marie heard the disgusting noises it made, as if endlessly choking on its own phlegm. She remembered its wretched odor from three years ago and how it gagged her. Here it was again, coming ever closer as she gulped in the air rushing past her, fleeing blindly through the night. Marie tucked her gleaming charm away under her shirt for fear of being spotted. But soon, the adrenaline rush that set her racing like mad began to ebb. A new panic set in, knowing she would not be able to outpace her enemy.

As her burning legs began to give out, Marie was abruptly struck yet again by *déjà vu*—of having somehow once been in this same situation: chased through the night by something terrible. Looking down, she saw she was now carrying something *large and shiny gold*, which threw off a faint glimmer and showed her clothes appearing different. Instead of her simple shirt and dungarees, she now wore a dirty, frock-like gown with a sash at the waist, long stockings and leather shoes that strapped over the instep. She heard a thick, craggy voice call out to her several times, but not by the name Marie or Emily. It was calling her *'Charlotte.'*

She had mere seconds to question all this. With the inhuman sounds of the monster creeping up behind her, Marie cried out as the ground below suddenly ended. Her feet met only air, her legs buckled under her and she fell forward, painfully tumbling down a sharp fall-off. Unable to stop her momentum, she crashed over rocks and through prickly underbrush, severely banging her arm and shoulder along the way. When Marie at last came to a halt, she hardly knew what had happened and as she was already beset by total darkness, there was no noticeable difference as she entered unconsciousness.

Marie woke to another nightmare. Her legs and arms were twisted in a tangle of barbed shrubs. As she tried to move, sharp thorns tore her skin. She couldn't budge her right forearm. Touching it, she felt a sharp pain race through her shoulder. Using her other hand, Marie slowly unstuck herself from the shrubs. With a bitter groan, she pulled

herself onto her side. When she propped herself up with her good arm, she confronted her terror.

Giant bloodsucking worms surrounded her, this time oozing out from the damp earth. They wrapped themselves around her extremities and mercilessly pulled at her. She suffered excruciating pain in her right forearm and realized it was broken. As more larger and deadlier worms slivered over her torso, she knew they were intent on squeezing every last drop of blood from her. She then looked up, through an open clearing in the woods, revealing a perfectly blue sky. Someone was hurtling downward through the air. It was Steavyn, come to rescue her ... .

“Steavyn!” shouted Marie as she woke. It was still night and she could still see nothing. She quickly realized much of her dream had come true. Her legs and arms were twisted in a tangle of prickly shrubs. As she tried to move, sharp thorns tore at her skin. She groaned and discovered she could not move her right forearm. Excruciating pain raced up through her shoulder when she touched it. Her dream suggested what she already knew: her arm was broken. Using her other hand, Marie patiently freed herself from the thorns. Moaning bitterly, she hauled herself onto her back.

Marie laid motionless for a long while, listening. There was no sound of the trollogre. Of course, that meant nothing. In the blackness, the beast could have been sitting right next to her at this moment, toying with her. How long was she passed out? What time was it? She wished she could return to her dream, just as Steavyn rescued her.

“Well if you’re there sitting next to me,” she said out loud, “please don’t waste my time. Do what you want and get it over with. At least it would get me out of this confusticated darkness.” She grinned widely at her impulse to quote Professor Mifflin. She hadn’t thought of him or the boys for some time. She badly wanted to see them again, along with Courinn and Perion, alive and well.

Then she heard something far away. She listened further. Yes, she could hear the creature out there, somewhere, looking for her. If she was going to survive this night, Marie had to come up with a plan of action. With a tremendous amount of effort, she moved her right arm a few inches.

After several more minutes, Marie realized her left leg was lying over something. She kicked at it, pulling it toward her. Her pack! With good fortune, it had tumbled down and landed with her. Searching through it with her good hand, Marie found something she had forgotten about. She could not see it, but she knew what it was— a good-sized jar of fresh peanut butter. If Corporal Delk was right, it was her only defense.

Marie spent the next half hour trying to get up while getting her pack on. This took an appreciable force of will as she was badly battered from her fall. She could feel wetness on her fingers and arm. Tasting it, she confirmed it was her blood. Most importantly, she had to work through the pain of her broken limb while gradually and patiently setting it in some type of sling. She could not have her arm simply hanging at her side without

considerable distress. Her father had broken his wrist once, but refused to stop working. He showed Marie how to make his own cast and sling so he could still repair tractor engines, while selectively using both his good and injured arms. Marie was amazed and never forgot it. She now relied on the same technique her father imparted. She tore a strip of her blanket apart and, using her teeth, tied it around her shoulder. Then it was simply a matter of putting the bad arm through small, limited motions while gradually tolerating that level of pain. The theory was, as you continued, the hurt would lessen a bit. Either that or your tolerance level increased. Marie wasn't sure; she only knew it worked. Eventually, she secured her arm firmly enough so she could move about without too much stress on it.

In the time Marie spent doing this, she could hear the trollogre much closer now. Was it tracking her scent again? If so, it was time to put her plan into action. Holding the jar of peanut butter, she realized her new dilemma. How could she open it with a broken arm? With further strained effort, she lowered herself and searched blindly for a hand-sized rock. Finding one, Marie wedged the rock between the jar and the flat tin lid sealing it—a detail Marie should have expected from the historically accurate corporal, who would not have used a modern screw-on lid.

She pried up the tin cover with as much force as her left hand could muster, but it would not dislodge. The sounds of rustling leaves, along with breaking sticks grew close now, distinctly marking the approach of the trollogre, undoubtedly descending the slope Marie had fallen down.

Marie pushed the rock harder with her good hand as tightly as she could. It wasn't enough. She needed more leverage.

“Of all the things to go wrong, come on!” she barked loudly in frustration. Moments later, her blood froze. The choking sounds and disgusting smell reached her ears and nose. The beast was only a short distance away. She could hear small rocks mixed with earth sliding down past her. In desperation, Marie unclasped her injured arm from its sling and gripped the jar along with her left hand. She held her breath and exerted force on her broken arm, crying out in misery and nearly fainting. There was the sound of a pop, followed by crumbling glass. The jar broke open, releasing its sealed vacuum.

Marie felt the jar's sticky sealing wax around its sharp, glass edges, knowing she cut herself again. She could not believe her ill luck. How was she ever going to stick her fingers into the shattered jar in pitch dark, without cutting herself further?

“Gwylligwitch!” Marie shouted out in anger. The stabbing pain in her arm had momentarily swept away any fear. Right now, she didn't care. “If you want me, come and get me!” The approaching sounds ceased, followed by silence. During that brief stillness, Marie sincerely regretted her outburst. Then, in answer a ferocious cry erupted forth, demanding to know who had the temerity to shout the beast's real name.

Marie grabbed a squishy blob of peanut butter, gathered herself up and re-slung her arm.

For a second time, she blindly ran from her attacker. Her left hand holding the jar had to also feel her way ahead. As she hoped, the ground leveled again after the steep drop-off. Her chief worry now was to come across another sharp descent in the dark. Marie knew in her condition, she would not survive a second steep fall.

Using her best judgment, Marie made off in a direction she hoped was away from the monster, but still close enough that the creature could pursue the bait. Ideally, Marie wanted a parallel course, alongside the monster's, so she could then escape the opposite way, wherever that was. Forcing the stinging muscles in her legs to continue their stuttered jog, she suffered another spell of drowsiness. She growled and clenched her teeth, commanding it away.

As she went on, she tried sticking her fingers carefully into the jagged jar's edge, but quickly learned how unsafe it was. She had to stop, place the jar on the ground and find a stick. When she began running again, Marie shook her head in exasperation: she had to scoop out the peanut butter with the stick in her mouth. Clenching it within her teeth, she spread thick globs of peanut butter along the tree boles every one hundred paces or so. After she had left her bait on some six trees, she halted and rested, while listening.

The sounds of pursuit had not stopped, but were slowed. Marie hoped that meant Gwylligwitch was enjoying her newly found sticky snack. Catching her breath, Marie considered Corporal Delk's explanation of the trollogre's love of the stuff. If he were wrong—there would be a grave turn of events.

Marie's arm throbbed but seemed manageable, only due to her fright and adrenaline surge. She then eked out a long stretch, leaving her bait on another ten trees and the leaves of their low hanging branches.

If she had made a straight run, Marie guessed she would have left almost a half-mile of peanut butter globs for the monster. At this point Marie decided to turn aside, according to her plan and make off in a new direction, no longer leaving a trail. She gambled that after following the strong whiffs of peanut butter, Gwylligwitch might have far more difficulty tracking a human scent. Her only problem was that she could no longer seal the cracked jar. Was the monster's nose so acute that it could detect an open jar a good distance off? Marie hoped not.

She knelt and stuffed the jar into her pack. She was now ready to put distance between her and the trollogre, long enough to see daybreak and escape the cursed pitch black. With the daylight, she kept telling herself, a new course of action would present itself.

There appeared more activity in the woods, with the peanut butter attracting others. Marie saw there were many more eyes watching her within the dark, which no longer made her skin crawl. Escaping a powerful trollogre set straight her priorities of what to be scared of. Marie also glimpsed other things. One particularly frightening moment occurred when Marie heard growling noises approach, realizing a pack of large wolves surrounded her. When Marie flashed her globe charm, she saw they were reddish in

color. As quick as they appeared, they also withdrew. She was certain she heard one of them speak, growling, "Not this one, let her pass."

The most startling thing she saw, just beyond her stretched out hand was a glowing male face, materializing out of nothing. He peered at her, blinking many times. From his head sprouted wildly long, white hair. A great gray beard nearly covered his glowing face, save for his eyes and nose. It was so lengthy and thick that it shrouded the figure's body, once he stepped out from the trees to reveal himself.

Marie knew she was now facing a real ghost. She could see through parts of him as he pulsed in shape. He abruptly pointed to her and then waved her on to follow him. He did this repeatedly and in urgency. Did he know what danger she was in? Marie inwardly felt she could trust whoever this spectre was. It was that same reason, she suspected, she wasn't frightened out of her mind.

"Who are you?" she asked.

The ghostly form returned a friendly smile, continuing the request to follow him.

Marie wasn't about to jump so easily, whether this spectral fellow was friendly or not. "I'm sorry," she said, "but I'm in trouble and I'm not gonna make it worse by following a stranger."

The ghost pointed away, motioning into the dark, while his eyes went wide in fear. Marie understood.

"You know what's chasing me?"

The ghost nodded. As if in answer, the trollgre's wail sounded in the distance, trailing off, mixed with a hint of frustration.

Marie shook her head, stepping back. "I can't trust anything or anyone but me right now. Leave me alone. Go away." She turned from the ghost, moved off and did not look back. She did her best to continue judging her direction, away from the monster's cry.

She continued for perhaps another ten minutes, when she became aware of something new: a creeping uneasiness that quickly grew. Doubt and empty fear began wresting away the disciplined control Marie had diligently kept. She felt a sudden urge for her globe charm, which her left hand reached for and firmly held.

The growing doubt slowed Marie's pace. She shivered then stumbled twice before falling to her knees. When she knew what was happening, it was too late and she had lost control. With a wide yawn, the spell of drowsiness struck her like a soothing wave of instant comfort, relieving all her pain and distress. Marie doggedly crawled a short distance, until coming to the wide bole of a tree. She clumsily snuggled next to it and slipped off into sleep.



Marie was with her father and mother, in the present time, at her present age. She knew she was dreaming vividly and keenly accepted it. It was wonderful. Everything seemed to be like it once was, each of them laughing and happy. They were lying down on a blanket, having a picnic on the rock ledge, enjoying a wondrous, sunny day. Her mother was setting out lunch, while Marie and her father were staring into the clouds. Over them wafted a gentle, stirring breeze.

The breeze became chilly. And it grew darker as clouds covered them. Marie suddenly noticed the trees. They were everywhere and seemed to be moving in closer and closer. Then she knew they were not on the rock ledge, but were trapped in Spellhollow Wood. In the next instant the fog rolled in, the choking sounds began and the odor consumed them. The trollgre was coming, but this time, not for Marie's mother or her father. It was coming for her.

Sheriff Dan Radich sat at his desk. He had promised himself hours ago that he was packing it up and going home. Yet here he was, sitting and thinking over the events of the past week, leading up to yesterday morning. He was now at wits end after receiving word that two of his men were bushwhacked on patrol last night— by Tilda Jentiss.

Above him, close to one hundred bells of many sizes hung from his ceiling, far more than were in his squad car. It was an instant reminder to anyone entering the office how superstitious he was. Yet most soberly understood why, after what he had dealt with these past twenty years.

His father, Danny, was county sheriff for twenty-eight years, as was his grandfather, Daniel, for another thirty years. From the end of last century, Gulliver County, New York was fairly and justly under the primary protection of one family who knew what living here really meant. Like his father and grandfather, he shared their same beliefs in the unnatural and otherworldly forces that existed in the woods and bedeviled so many. Unlike them, he had not married. He knew since the day he took oath that he would be unable to adequately serve and uphold the county's unique requirements with a wife and children. Others in town felt he could not bear to risk harm to a family of his own, as he saw happen to so many others.

He grieved with many residents through the years, good friends of his, folks he felt a responsibility to protect. He blamed himself when he was unable to help them. He had made mistakes, exercised bad judgment, but still, many looked to him for security.

Again he replayed the recent sequence of events in his mind: Marie Meehanan running off on her own, her father, James, publicly made a scapegoat, then arrested. The Salento family's disappearance— and now, Tilda Jentiss, all alone, somehow outsmarting his men and vanishing? What was happening? Shaking his head in frustration, he slid his chair back with a screech, rose and forced himself to go home.

Marie woke to a dull gray glow. Judging the light, she guessed it wasn't yet time to wake. She snuggled within her warm and cozy blankets. Good sleep was crucial today. She had to be sharp when she met with Tilda, Bettyann and Trish after school. It was all up to her, Marie reminded herself, whether they would be caught breaking into the school tonight. But that was to worry about later. She had another good hour to comfortably sleep, safely in her own bed— in her own bedroom.

Marie reached for her blankets as she tried to roll over. But she couldn't. Everything around her seemed misty. There was something bumpy and hard against her. She was lying on her back with her arm propped up over her chest. From sleepy, peace of mind, Marie suddenly felt the stabbing pain down her right arm, quickly followed by a bruised and throbbing stiffness she had never before known. The reality of where she was abruptly clutched at her heart. Damp cold shivered her bones. There were no warm blankets, no safe bedroom. Though she was now only some ten miles from her cozy bed, Marie might as well have been on the other side of the world. In several ways, she was.

Lying still, Marie let her thoughts catch up, assessing her situation. She had made it to daybreak, but barely so from the look of it. Night had passed only minutes ago, Marie guessed, at least here under the cavernous treetops of the wood. She was in that eerie, pale-grayish twilight, where everything looks ghostly and devoid of life.

With her good arm, Marie tried reaching up to whatever was next to her. She was lying in a narrow space beneath a thick fallen tree. Her thoughts raced, recalling the night before. She had stumbled trying to ward off sleep. Could she still move her bad arm? Marie clenching her jaw and tried, barely nudging it, still within its homemade sling. "All right, good," she thought. With the strained effort of her stomach muscles, she lifted her head. The mist she first saw was instead a thick fog, emerging all around her. Then she heard the pleasant sound of running water, like a stream.

Marie could not see above the tree without propping herself up on the elbow of her good shoulder. This took a bit more of her waning strength, with stiffened, bruised muscles screaming out as she forced herself upwards. When her eyes poked above the fallen trunk, she stared at first with some visual confusion, then as the fog cleared, in heart-stopping horror.

Her pack was lying just beyond the hedge. It was opened now and her peanut butter jar had been taken out. Before the fog again obscured her vision, Marie saw the glass jar was now in the hands of an immense creature feasting on it.

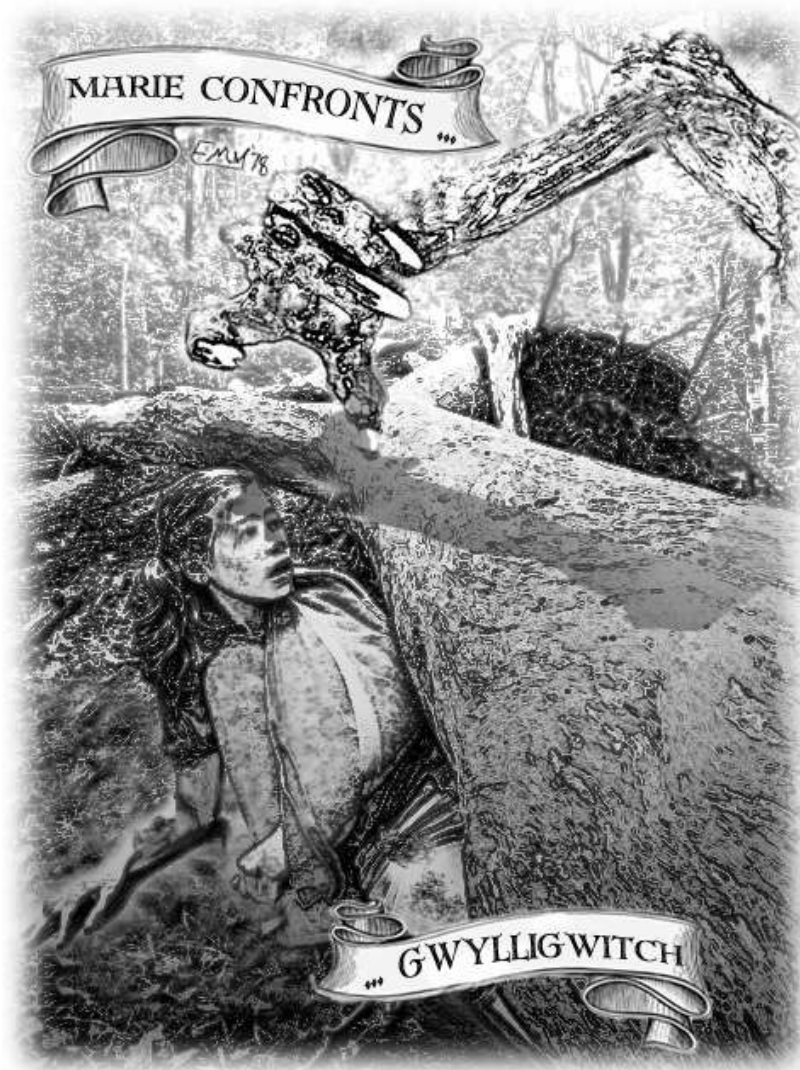
Gwylligwitch had at last trapped her.

Chapter 15

**Madman**

“Breathe long and low,” Marie kept telling herself, in spite of the vile stench that now singed her nostrils. She strained to listen as best she could to the trollogre, only ten feet away. Marie wondered how powerful this creature really was, realizing it had somehow bargaged her with continuous spells of drowsiness last night.

Her next concern was whether the monster now smelled her or was the peanut butter distracting it? If not, how was she going to escape? Until she came to the Rainbow’s End, Marie knew she was not ready to confront Gwylligwitch.



She plucked up courage and lifted herself again, gritting her teeth in searing pain. The running water was all she could hear, obscuring any sound the trollogre made. Marie peeked above the tree a second time.

Her heart exploded in alarm—the trollogre was even closer. Through the thinning fog, Marie saw a deformed limb thrust upwards\* as it sluggishly rummaging through her pack, which she guessed meant that the peanut butter indeed made the monster drowsy. She at last got a real look at the creature in the growing, gray light. Sick to her

stomach it made Marie; so hideous was Gwylligwitch.

\*Note per Marie: "When I drew the picture of myself seeing Gwylligwitch for the first time, I extended her limb much closer to me, because at that horrific moment that's how it felt. In reality, the monster was some 15 or 20 feet away."

The female monster was huge, some ten feet in height. The hide of her torso was protected with leathery spikes. A mammoth hump swelled from a deformed shoulder. Her extremities bore no outer flesh; only black veins wrapped around gray and red sinew. One of her rippled arms was freakishly long, dragging along the ground when it wasn't used. The other was shorter, thin and spindly. From her haunches sprang an immense forked tail, each length like a deadly, coiled snake. Yet most striking of all was the monster had *no head*. Piercing red eyes were deeply set below a wide mouth in what appeared to be her chest.

Marie collapsed back under the tree in utter dread, unable to stop her frenetic gasps. None of her mental and emotional readiness had prepared her for this. It was only a matter of seconds before the trollogre discovered her. She could hear the guttural, choking sounds in the monster's throat. The tension was unbearable. Marie considered crying out and simply giving herself up. Why couldn't Gwylligwitch just grab her and get it over with? Without knowing what else to do, she withdrew the globe charm from under her shirt. Peering into it, she saw that the green liquid surrounding the small piece of black rock was madly bubbling, as if in anger. This was quickly followed by a dull ache in her heart, which suddenly went cold in a terrible shiver. Marie closed her eyes and held her breath. When she opened them again— she was *face to face* with her enemy.

Gwylligwitch stared straight down at Marie, who in turn now saw the cause of the trollogre's deformed shoulder: a dribbling, festering wound. Marie knew it was the result of Thurle's attack, as the professor explained. The injury only intensified the rank stench of the beast. From her blistered mouth, steamy saliva dripped onto Marie's cheek, followed by a long, single curved fang.

The strange thing Marie remembered was the trollogre's hesitation at that moment. Did the peanut butter slow its reaction or did the monster glimpse something, perhaps a hint of helplessness, innocence— or was it recognition? Whatever the reason, it didn't last. The hand of Gwylligwitch came forward, reaching for the side of her head. Marie shrewdly guessed its intention: the monster coveted her gold earrings; the same she had worn since she left home, her mother's earrings.

Marie acted, shoving her amulet straight up. The globe burst into blazing white moonlight, smashing into whatever face Gwylligwitch possessed, dead center between her malefic eyes, angrily singing her sparse flesh. The monster wailed in pain, seizing the necklace from Marie.

In an abrupt and clumsy lurch, Marie dragged herself out from the fallen tree trunk. Rolling to her feet, she stumbled, her pounded and battered muscles instinctively locking up and ignoring the demand of all available strength. She somehow managed to remain

upright and repeated what she had done all the previous night: run blindly in any direction, as swiftly as the knife-like pain in her feet could carry her. Seconds later she was splashing through the water of whatever stream or brook was so near.

Reaching the other side, Marie briefly looked back. Thirty yards away, Gwylligwitch advanced. With a wave of her forked tail, the fog around her vanished. She was on the chase now; she no longer needed to weave a misty snare. Strewn and badly tangled within her wicked hands was Marie's charm and necklace, whose radiant glow stung at the beast. She tore at it ferociously, trying with all her brute strength to shred it apart, which she could not.

Watching from the stream's far side, it occurred to Marie that Gwylligwitch was trying to destroy the amulet no longer out of mere fury, but because the monster could not rid herself of it— as if the charm would not release the monster from its own grasp. Marie clearly saw the suffering that the charm's encapsulated moonlight inflicted on the trollogre, yet she also marked that its power was not enough to destroy, much less overwhelm the creature. In a final rabid attack upon the object, Gwylligwitch cried out in feverish rage. Yet the globe amulet and its fine silver necklace, cast within a forgotten spell by a murdered gnome, could not be marred in the least. At last, the monster broke free of the charm and its imposed pain. With another revolting shriek, the trollogre flung it from her hands out into the water.

"No!" Marie gasped, straining her eyes to follow the charm's flight. Thankfully, dawn had fully risen, making it easier to see. Her amulet splashed into the water, about midway between her and the beast. She ran after it, but the charm was whisked away, disappearing downstream. Her only chance of rescuing her mother had just vanished.

Now it was Marie's turn to be angry. She defiantly faced her enemy across the running water. She also noted how easily the trollogre shook off whatever torment the amulet had dealt. Its headless bulk curiously stared at her, stepping up to the stream bank. Headless or not, Marie could have sworn the creature was now grinning at her.

"Whatever you do to me now won't matter," shouted Marie. "My friends will hunt you down!"

Marie was not sure if her enemy knew English, but she assumed the monster gathered what she meant as it stood at the very edge of the water. This appeared strange, Marie thought— her words surely provoked Gwylligwitch, yet the monster paced along the stream, but never dared to enter. Marie was astounded at her sudden good fortune. Moments ago, she was sure it was all over.

Twenty feet behind Gwylligwitch was a good-sized oak tree. The trollogre approached, tightly wrapping both her arms around it. Her great forked tail took hold as well, clutching the tree base, near its roots.

Marie watched in awe. With a low roar, Gwylligwitch heaved with all her might. Marie

heard the sounds of vigorous pulling and ripping through dense earth, as the thick and gnarled roots were rent from their underground refuge. The entire tree was retched out from the only home it ever knew. Unbelievably, the trollgre lifted the tree and carried the entire mass to the edge of the water. Until she let it fall.

The monster's aim for Marie was impressive as she watched the height and girth of an oak tree suddenly thrust down upon her. Marie took off, racing downstream as the lumbering giant crashed through the treetops, across the stream and deep into the far bank with a thundering boom.

When she returned to the fallen oak, Marie watched in sly amusement as the monster climbed onto it. Trying several times, Gwylligwitch could still not pass the rushing water's boundary. Something was preventing the trollgre from crossing its threshold. When the monster caught Marie's eye, she returned a cold, empty gaze.

"When we meet again," Marie said to herself, lightly rubbing her injured arm, "I'll be ready." With that thought, she turned away, heading onward into whatever lay ahead.

The morning was beautiful. For the first time since Marie had entered Spellhollow Wood, the sunlight broke in and burst through to the wooded ground. It was now a much thinner tract of forest, mostly pine and maple trees. Similar, Marie remembered, to the eastern part of the wood, near the professor's house. But the terrain here was ever more open and accessible. The ground was softer and darker in color, mostly peat mixed with some scattered clay.

Marie shook her head in frustration. She would have enjoyed a lovely stroll through this part of the woods, except for the terrible shooting pain in her broken arm, which she supported upright with her other hand— not to mention her stinging leg and foot muscles.

She had survived, all alone, the black night of the wood. She came face to face with her terrible enemy, yet had escaped. But she now had no pack, meaning no food or water. The enchanted lock of hair given to her as a guide was gone. Most of all, she had lost her globe charm, the only hope to save her mother. Marie spent some two hours searching downstream for it, with no luck. If there were any sign directing her what to do next, Marie entirely missed it.

Sometime near mid-morning, Marie could again hear the sound of running water ahead. When the ground dipped into a tapered ravine, she soon came to a second stream, where she halted and glared in amusement. The largest green bullfrogs Marie had ever seen, all with fiery red limbs, were leaping out from the water in high arcs, croaking with pleasure then landing again in springy plops. The streaking sunlight dramatically backlit the green acrobats, like stage illumination. They leapt up in patterns and at intervals, looking like a well-choreographed water dance.

Marie decided to sit near the bank and admire the bullfrogs' performance. At the very

least, it would lighten her mood. Carefully lowering herself, keeping her bad arm propped upon her knee, she curiously noticed something in her boot: the flare given to her by Campbell. She had forgotten all about it, realizing how she might have needed it last night against Gwylligwitch. Then, she reflected, perhaps not, as the flare had no doubt gotten soaked in the storm, days ago. When she relaxed her leg, kicking it out, she heard a hiss and a sharp snap from behind. Both her legs were seized and dragged. She rapidly slid away on her back, colliding with a pine tree in a heap of tangled rope. Before blacking out yet again, Marie knew she had been caught in some type of trap.

Marie gasped as her eyes snapped open. She was sitting up against the same tree. Her broken arm was in a newly fashioned sling, being tended to by the filthiest looking person she had ever seen.

He appeared about her father's age. He wore the remnants of a flannel shirt and work pants, which were now little more than swarthy rags. His dark, red hair grew wildly past his shoulders, exceedingly matted and greasy. He had a months-long unshaven look, with scattered clumps of beard. There was a half-inch of grime under his fingernails and his breath marked a new definition of foul.

"Thank you," said Marie, motioning to her arm, and she meant it. No doubt the most painful work to reset her fracture had taken place while she remained unconscious. The tormenting sting had lessened and it felt more secure again.

"I didn't do you any favors," answered the dirty man. "I fixed your arm, so I could move ya', that's all." His voice did not fit his narrow, freckled face— whatever freckles were not covered by muck. To Marie's relief, he began to untie her from the trap.

"Who are you?" she asked. "What happened?"

"You fell into one of my traps," he said. "I got lucky today. Today, I'm going home."

It was a strange voice indeed, sounding like that of a feeble old man who probably spoke to himself often, who was perhaps a tad peculiar, but harmless. Unfortunately, this first impression did not warn Marie in time.

"Do you set your traps for food?" she asked.

He peered at her with a half smile. Marie now observed in alarm that he kept one rope securely attached to her waist in a slipknot, tying its other end to his waist.

"For people."

Marie struggled to get away, but once she felt the muscle of her abductor, she wasted no more of her strength.

He dragged her across the stream, away from the leaping frogs. If she fought back, he drew tightly on the slipknot, crushing her waist. He cleverly walked at an angle to always keep his attention on her. Marie's nimble mind began searching for a course of action.

"At least tell me your name," she said, deciding to keep him talking.

"Macmanus," he muttered, briefly looking away, as if ashamed to reveal himself.

"Macmanus?" she repeated, followed by a quick afterthought. "Can I call you Mac?"

He halted, studying Marie closely, like she had discovered something very personal about him. "Only my dead sister, Trickett, started calling me that five years after her funeral, when she became a fish captain. How did you know?"

"I didn't," admitted Marie, "it just seemed easier to remember."

He continued to stare at her, though Marie marked how he began looking through her, hinting an errant, wandering mind. She also noticed something straight, stuck in his long grimy hair. She couldn't tell what it was.

"Do you know the date?" he asked abruptly, yet in earnest.

Marie blinked, uncertain. "I'd like to know myself. A few days ago, it was May 1."

"Not the day, you didwiddle brat. The year."

Macmanus's answer lurched Marie's thoughts again back to Campbell and his fate of being misplaced in time.

"You're lost, aren't you?" she answered. "I can't tell you what's happened since, Mac, but when I entered these woods, it was nineteen sixty-eight."

She saw then, not unlike Campbell, the same shock of bitter truth flash across Macmanus's face.

"How long have you been here?" she asked.

Macmanus wrenched Marie forward again, harshly leading her on. The swelling anger within him was ably transferred through the rope to her waist, where she stumbled more than once, always in fear of falling on her arm.

"Hey, take it easy!" she yelled out. "Just tell me, what do you want with me?"

"You'll find out soon, son-sonny."



Marie carefully studied her surroundings while being dragged. She could not help but notice how this thin-wooded land between the streams appeared a friendlier, peaceful place. However, this serenity did not keep her from again spotting the bearded, ghostly face she had seen the day before—or was it two? It stared at her from within a clump of pines, looking alarmed at seeing Marie captive. She was certain she saw mercy in his pale eyes. The ghostly form quickly vanished no sooner than it appeared.

Then Marie saw someone else just ahead: a longhaired woman with her back turned. Whatever she wore appeared like a gray and fuzzy glow, yet even from the back she was only too familiar.

“Mom?” she cried out. “Mommy, is that you?”

Her mother turned, filled with delight to see her daughter again, until she saw Marie tied and dragged. Her expression turned downcast, heartsick and angry, all at once.

Macmanus drew on his rope even harder. “Never mind that,” he said, “just keep moving!”

“No!” Marie shouted. “Let me go! Let me go to her!”

Macmanus threw both his shoulders into his rope. But she would not yield, falling to the ground, luckily on her good arm. Macmanus hauled her off through the brush. The last Marie saw of her mother were tear-filled eyes.

After almost one hundred yards, Macmanus halted. He picked Marie up again, making sure her arm remained in its sling. She was too sore and disgusted to fight him, certainly after experiencing his brawn in having lugged her so far along the ground.

“It’s only just ahead now,” he said with an alarming calm, as if Marie was being invited to a harmless tea party.

He led her to a shallow clearing of what appeared to be a shabby, makeshift living area. There was a low overhang of rock, which led to a cave. Near the entrance was a years-old fire ring, along with the many bones of—she hoped—animals stuck in the ground. Leaving her bad arm free, Macmanus securely tied Marie, standing up, to a thick spike nailed into a maple tree. He then untied himself from her and sat down, drawing out the object from his hair: a large knife with an ivory handle. It was rusty, but still sharp. He used it to dig out the bowl of a hand-carved pipe, which he then re-filled with ordinary crumbled leaves. He lit the pipe by squatting down next to the bright embers of his fire.

Macmanus sat up and stared at an old tree stump next to him. Set upon the stump was a single ‘itchy ball’, one of the brown, spiky balls that drop from a sweet-gum tree, of which several stood near. Macmanus gazed at it, nodding to himself.

Then he *spoke* to it.

“Helter-pork dimples?” he said, whatever that meant. “Yeah she has, hasn’t she? After all this time, we finally caught a break.” He turned to Marie again, appearing like he was waiting for her reaction to a question he never asked.

“I knew you were a rude brat,” he said to Marie. “Answer him.”

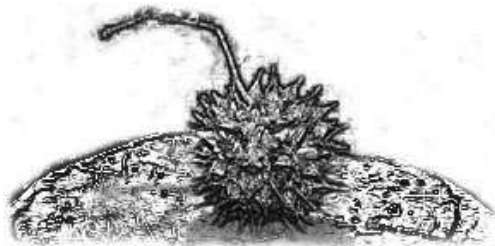
Marie adjusted her tightly tied arm into a more comfortable position. “Answer who?”

Macmanus lifted the itchy ball. “Don’t you pretend he’s not here,” he said gruffly, as serious as a Sunday sermon. “His name’s Ritchie Delmo, my only friend and he’s been stuck here with me for years. He thinks you came to us just in time, but he wants to know how you heard about us.”

Marie swallowed hard. If this was a joke, it was bad. And if it wasn’t, it was worse. Who was this lunatic hermit she had run into?

“Hello,” she said, looking at the spiky thing. “I didn’t know ... you were awake.”

Macmanus placed the itchy ball down on the stump. He raised his knife again and eerily scraped its blade across his dried, cracked lips. “I don’t think me or Ritchie would have made it much longer if something didn’t change.”



Marie wanted to spew out all the rage she now felt toward this man, but knew that would only give him the advantage. She had no idea what he might do. Marie instead remained calm and for the meantime played his game.

“Let’s start again, Mac,” she said. “What do you want?”

Macmanus exhaled pipe-smoke from his nose and mouth. “I need you to show me the way out of here. Out of these grooberlob woods.”

“I can’t show you out until I finish something I have to do. I’m sorry.”

Macmanus stuck his knife back into his matted hair, like its own sheath. He then dug into a pocket, which Marie could not believe he still had in his decrepit pants. He pulled out the last thing she ever expected: her globe amulet on its chain.

“Tell me what this is and what it does,” he said, glaring at it with a devilish scowl.

“How did you find that?” demanded Marie angrily. “It belongs to me. Give it back to me now.”

Macmanus cackled like a mad old man, just as Marie imagined him. “No, it’s mine, you rotten brat.”

“How did you find it?”

“Was at the right place at the right time,” he said. “I saw the demon monster throw it into the water while I was hankie wrestling a six-bucks tadpole. It washed on downstream, ‘till it just about floated up to me. Like it was a butter and granite sandwich. Like it was lookin’ for me.”

“You saw the monster chase me?” asked Marie, trying to filter through the nonsense-talk.

“Yeah, Ritchie told me this morning he heard it coming ‘round again. Round and ‘round and out of boiler plots.”

“Do you know why she couldn’t step in the stream?”

“No demon can cross running water,” answered Macmanus, “no matter what it’s after. That’s why I stay put on this side of the river. It’s good to always know that creature can’t get to me and Ritchie.”

Marie nodded, suspecting such a thing. She examined the hermit’s sparse living area. It seemed this filthy madman kept busy. Among his meager possessions were several self-constructed things: a board with stick-like darts, a flimsy, wire-framed basketball hoop tied to a tree trunk, with the ball under it made of packed-together acorns and yet more itchy balls. Most curious was a chessboard, with the board and all the pieces hand carved from wood. Marie quickly saw the various formations of a game currently being played.

“You like chess?” she asked.

At the mention of the game, Macmanus’s eyes flashed, kindled with excitement. He leaned over to the chessboard and moved a rook, then nodded with satisfaction.

“Yeah-oh,” he said. “I’ve never lost a game.”

“Never?” asked Marie.

“Nope, slippery fat-lip, never once.”

“Yeah, but it must be really boring always playing against yourself. How about a real challenge?”

“Hey, Ritchie’s pretty good.” Again, his eyes flashed. “You play?”

“Never lost yet,” Marie fibbed, if only to titillate his curiosity.

Macmanus sucked in his cheeks; his breathing quickened. He reached for the chessboard and set it down between them. He was at first uncertain which set of pieces he wanted, but at last chose a side. “You’re about to get your first butt-kicking,” he said.

“Are you that sure of yourself?”

“Just watch and learn.”

“Well then,” Marie suggested, “why don’t we make it more fun? Let’s bet on the game.”

Macmanus looked up from arranging his pieces. “Bet?”

“Yeah,” continued Marie. “If you win, I show you the way out of here. And I’ll tell you the magic secrets of the charm. Believe me, there’s magic in it. But if I win— you let me go free and give my charm back.”

Macmanus reached for his knife again. He began idly sticking it back and forth through his hair. “You’re showing me the way out anyhow,” he said. “No gain there.”

“Nope,” said Marie boldly. “The only way I’m gonna do what you want is if you checkmate my king. Then you have my promise that I’ll help you. Do I have your promise if I win?”

“You don’t have a chance, nishtikote brat.”

“Prove it, Mac. Let’s see if you’re good enough.”

From his oily rags, Macmanus took the globe charm and tossed it on the ground next to him. Marie tensed as he drew his knife and stabbed it between the necklace into the dirt, while he glared at her with pleasure.

“Over spider thumbs and liver tails? Done.”

“Done,” said Marie. “But you’re going to have to untie me some. I don’t think I can play standing up.”

Leaving his knife in the ground, Macmanus stood and untangled the two sections of rope so she could sit in front of the tree. However, he kept the main cord tied between them, where he reattached it to himself, again at the waist.

Marie quickly set up her pieces, which were a fair likeness for being roughly carved. “Who begins?” she asked. “Which is white and black?”

“I start,” he said, moving his pawn out one space.

Marie moved one of her pawns two spaces.

Macmanus immediately moved his bishop out. Marie glanced up at him, grinning. She knew that he was attempting to set her up for a quick kill in only a few moves.

She maneuvered a crucial pawn. He brought his queen out diagonally. Marie brought her knight out. That did it; Macmanus’s plan was thwarted. After studying what she had done, he scratched his cheek.

“All right,” he admitted, “you’ve played a game or two.”

“My dad used to play that same quick attack against me,” said Marie. “I had to learn to defend against it.”

Macmanus now had to implement a new strategy; by trying to quickly checkmate Marie and failing, he was already off to a bad start. He wondered if Marie realized this. If so, she didn’t let on. With his next moves, he shifted into a more conservative opening game. Marie did the same.

“What happened to you, Mac?” she asked, looking right at him. “How long have you lived here in the woods?”

He took a long drag from his pipe, but kept his eyes fixed on the board. “How old are you?” he asked.

“Thirteen.”

“Mmm,” he responded. “That so? Well that’s easy. I’ve been lollyblistered stuck here in these woods since you were born.”

They exchanged several more careful moves. “Stuck here?” asked Marie. “Why? What happened?”

Macmanus’s gruff expression softened as he looked up from the board to her, searching for a hint of something Marie felt might be trust or honesty.

“I guess you would believe me,” he said. “You know what’s here in these woods if you’ve already seen the troll monster.”

“After what I’ve seen, yes Mac, I’ll believe you.”

Macmanus’s eyes dimmed. “I got lost one day, trying to save someone: a young girl, not much younger than you. On the eve of Halloween it was. When I tried to get her out of the woods, something attacked me— another dibly creature, a lot smaller than the troll monster, but just as dangerous. It was a goblin, an evil, gruckruckling goblin.”

With lingering fear in his voice, Macmanus immediately returned his scrutiny to the game, making his next move. It appeared the chessboard had somehow summoned back his concentration.

Marie’s thoughts raced. She had heard this story before, more than once. It was one of the fairly common tales told throughout the village. Now she tried to remember the story’s details. Marie carefully inspected his move, before countering with her own.

“What did the goblin do to you?” she asked.

Macmanus inhaled deeply on his pipe. He didn’t look up this time. “Had its way with me. Tortured my mind and cast wicked spells on me. Then it left me, dirgy asleep, where all I had was nightmares. I’d wake every Halloween Eve after that just at midnight, to be attacked again. To relieve the dibly’s torture.” He recounted his tale like it was a distant memory, yet Macmanus never lost his focus on the board before him. He took Marie’s rook with his knight.

She quickly took his bishop with a pawn. “Why? Why did the goblin do all this to you? Did you try to hurt it?”

“Castling,” said Macmanus as he exchanged his king with his rook in a queenside castle. Marie did not miss the fact that he first moved his rook, then his king.

“It’s supposed to be done king first and with only one hand,” she said. “But that’s nit picky, I guess.”

“I know the rules, that’s what I did,” he angrily lied. “I didn’t do *anything* to that gruck goblin,” he added, answering her prior question. “It attacked me out of hate. Hate only.”

“Castling,” said Marie, as she executed the same maneuver, but to the king’s side, generally considered safer. Macmanus cleared his throat, seeing it correctly done.

He then took Marie’s knight. She took his other rook. He moved his queen out. She took his pawn with one of her own.

“Then, all of a sudden it stopped,” he continued. “I woke up and had no more bad dreams and nothing happened on Halloween. But—”

Another pawn was captured. And another. And another bishop. The board was quickly clearing.

“—You couldn’t find a way out of the woods?” said Marie.

“I tried every day. Always found myself going in circles. I madhat knew it was a trick of that evil gruckrucker. It would never let me leave again. Not on my own.”

Marie moved her queen out, taking another pawn. Macmanus brought his queen across the board, then squatted to re-light his pipe from the embers of his fire ring.

“Until I found a way. Until today. Me and Ritchie are going home.” Marie moved her other knight into attack. Macmanus sat up and moved his only bishop, taking her bishop. “Sheriff Dan will be thrilled to see me again. I was his best.”

“The sheriff’s best?” said Marie, allowing his boast to register. She moved her other bishop to block his attack.

“That’s right,” he said, moving another piece into attack as his excitement mounted. “I was First Deputy Earl Macmanus before I got lost. Check.”

He had cornered her king with his queen and bishop. Marie had to move her castling rook in defense. In spite of recounting his tale, which Marie hoped would sidetrack his thinking, Macmanus was playing a deftly sharp endgame.

However, Marie’s hope was twofold. Macmanus’s focus and particular attention on their game thankfully allowed her to pursue another gamble. In between chess moves, using her leg and good hand, Marie had gathered a bit of the rope her disturbed adversary untied after he secured her to the tree. She had slyly knotted one end of it to the loop now taut around her waist. Her plan also included the thick spike nailed into the maple tree now just behind her head. Whether she could succeed or not depended on her getting hold of the knife stuck in the center of her charm’s necklace.

Macmanus repositioned his queen, taking another of Marie's pawns. "Check," he said again, sweetly savoring the taste of assumed victory.

Marie saw she was now in a tight fix. In trying to both encourage Mac's tale and prep her plan with the rope, she had not given the attention she needed to the game. He was assailing her with the power of all his remaining pieces. She had no choice now but to defend and run. She was also forced to sacrifice her remaining rook to elude checkmate. Macmanus captured it, and croaked a loathsome, condescending giggle.

"Check again," he pronounced.

Marie glanced over to the knife between them. It was simply one good lurch away. But when would the *right moment* come? With a quiver of panic, Marie also realized something else: her plan would never work without some kind of distraction.

Otherwise, Macmanus would quickly overpower her. She glanced back to the game. She had to flee, bringing back her bishop to shield her king. Macmanus then decided to put the game away. In his rapturous zeal, he brought forth his castling rook that protected his own king. He let go of the piece without hesitation, so sure was he in the furor of attack. It would all be over after her next move. "Check."

Marie gaped at the board in astonishment.





“Checkmate,” she said, as she quickly issued her knight forward into crushing victory.

With the rook no longer protecting Mac’s king, Marie’s queen and remaining bishop were converged on it. Her knight sealed his final capture and won the day. In the struggle to keep calm amidst her current stress level, Marie luckily spotted the error. Macmanus’ reckless arrogance got the better of him.

“Checkmate?” he repeated in denial. He incredulously took in the game’s final battle scenario, again and yet again. Macmanus refused to believe what had just occurred. He was one move away from decisive victory. The pint sized charlatan before him must have pulled a fast one.

“This pozer can’t!” he boomed in anger, throwing his lit pipe to the ground. “You rimped and cheated somehow!”

In the seconds after she won, Marie considered there might be a chance this maniac would honor his wager with her. Peering into his burning eyes, that notion quickly disappeared along with another question: when to put her plan into effect. A sliver of opportunity just presented itself. It was now or it was over.

Marie dove forward, grabbing Mac’s pipe with her good hand and his knife handle with her teeth. In the same motion, she rolled away on her uninjured side, pulling the short flare from her boot. The madman’s obsessive scrutiny of the chessboard allowed Marie the precious seconds she needed to ignite the old fuse. She knew the gamble she was taking: whether the lit pipe would set the flare off in time, or even if the flare still functioned. With a snarl, Macmanus hurled himself at her, only to be met by several uneven blasts of searing light, carving into his face and eyes. The flare sputtered from the effects of the rainstorm, but worked well enough.

Macmanus fell back with a cry as Marie grasped the rope connecting them at the waist. She tore at it with all the strength of her good arm and perhaps a bit of her broken one. Mac drunkenly stumbled, shielding his face from the flare Marie dropped in front of him. She quickly wound the rope twice, tightly around the thick stake. She then retreated behind the tree, pulling it taut.

The rope tightly held both Macmanus and Marie at bay, with no leverage to move beyond their distance from the stake. With the knife, Marie swiftly cut herself from the loop around her waist. As the flare quickly died, Macmanus, now dizzy with rage, should have simply untied himself, but as Marie hoped, he bent all his desire on getting at her.

He clumsily staggered forward with an exasperated roar. Marie however, still grasped the longer rope length she had covertly knotted on. All she needed was for Mac to chase her around the tree, like a childish game between friends.

He did exactly this while Marie sped about, pulling the rope tighter than ever. Poor, dull-

witted Macmanus found himself tied against the tree as Marie circled twice more. Even with the force of only one arm, Macmanus was pinned tight. He glared at her in both puzzlement and fury as she wrapped the rope's far end around a thick branch.

"I didn't want any trouble, Mac, I just wanted to be let go," she said to him, catching her breath. "I'm not here in these woods because I have nothing better to do. I have to finish something. But I won't forget about you and I'll come back if you promise not to hurt me. Can you promise that?"

"You must be some kind of witch, you wicked little brat."

"I'm no witch," she answered, "but I've been in some pretty witchy company. Do you promise?"

"I make no bullywick promises. Ritchie is watching you."

Marie backed up from him, casting a glance to the lonely itchy ball. She then bent and took her globe charm from the ground. "Then I can't help you. I'm sorry. Good luck to you, Mac. I'll let the sheriff know about you, if I get out of here in one piece myself."

"You can't leave me here anymore!" he desperately shouted. "Come back!"

Marie kept his knife, turned from him and sped off.

It was nearing midday and Marie knew she had to quickly put distance between her and Macmanus. She figured he'd be out of the ropes in less than half an hour. She could have tied him up further, but then how could she have left him like that? "*Just enough to get away,*" she thought. She also realized how hungry and thirsty she was.

After fifteen minutes, Marie again heard the sound of rushing water, now much louder and stronger. She made her way toward it without much consideration. Running water had protected her from Gwylligwitch so far. She took a chance and drank from it.

Marie had underestimated Macmanus. He was able to free himself from the rope and tree within minutes. With a growl, he took off in heated pursuit.

After she drank, Marie thought about seeing her mother earlier. Could it have really been her or some other trick of the woods? Marie knew she could not be far from the actual lair of Gwylligwitch. Maybe her mother had somehow escaped her entrapment and was now lost? Was that why she could communicate with Marie through her charm?

Marie took it out, placing it around her neck. She closely peered into it. The blackish stone swirled within the green fluid. "Mom," she said, both into the globe, then looking out into the wood around her. "Are you still here? Are you lost?"

Again, her mother's image appeared not fifty feet from her. She was clad in the same

grayish glow as before. She moved with a slow-motion-like rigidity. Her smile was sad just as Marie saw her with Macmanus. Staring back into her amulet, the globe was now dark, the fluid in it bubbling.

“Don’t move I’m coming!” Marie shouted, but she then heard a sound from behind. Turning with terror, Marie saw Macmanus racing through the trees. She grabbed her slung arm to steady it and bolted off toward her mother, who’s outstretched hands welcomed her.

“Mommy, don’t let him get me!” she cried out, like she did when she was a little girl, running for her mother’s protection whenever she had a bad dream about the woods. Reaching out, Marie gasped in anguish when she ran straight *through* her mother, who then vanished. Ahead she could see a wide, rushing stream. With her muscles screaming on fire, Marie charged toward it.

As fast as she ran, it was not enough. Only ten feet from the stream’s bank, Marie suddenly heard rabid panting come up behind her, before she was grabbed hard. She tripped and fell, landing on her bad arm and shoulder with a howl of extreme pain. In a moment, Macmanus was over her, pinning her to the ground. He seized the knife she had taken and glowered at her, wild-eyed and out of his mind.

“Did you see those bones in the ground?” screeched Macmanus, motioning back to the grimy, sub-dwelling he called home. His rank breath choked her.

Marie shrieked in agony. “Please, my arm! Stop!”

“I’m gonna’ add yours too!” he cruelly hissed, mercilessly crunching her broken arm further into the dirt. Marie’s eyes snapped back into her skull. Macmanus brandished his knife ever closer over her face, ready to finish what he started.

*Chapter 16*

**The Rainbow's End**

He was met with sudden confusion when a visceral force snatched his knife hand. This was immediately followed by a vice-like grip, surging over his back and shoulders. Try as he did to resist, Macmanus was seized and hoisted up from Marie. He saw then he was no longer alone with his victim.

Three hands held Macmanus's own weapon arm with a fourth intensely lunging at his throat. Mac's fingers were jammed backwards until he dropped the knife with a grievous shout. Whatever strength held him from behind whirled Macmanus about, before flinging the whole of him into the air, until he crashed into the coursing stream.

Dyllion picked up the ivory handled knife, quickly examining it as Tybain and Zendara advanced upon their water-spluttering adversary. Brage followed them, loosening his arms out after hurling the full weight of Macmanus.

Tilda assisted Theel in securing two lightly propelled motorboats to the near bank. Perion and Courinn, along with Professor Mifflin, leapt out from one of them, splashing through the water, making their way to Marie.

Tybain and Zendara grabbed Macmanus none too lightly, and with Dyllion's help pulled him up from the water. Mac threw a wild punch, which Tybain barely dodged. Struggling to get free, all three boys tackled him. Macmanus put up a good fight, like a football running back refusing to go down. He pumped his legs against the boys' inertia, until Brage threw himself into the fray, where they all collapsed in the foamy stream.

The four boys quickly gained advantage, getting a good hold on Macmanus and dragging him out onto the bank. While Mac flopped about, coughing up water, Theel assisted his comrades in securely tying him with some boat cord.

"Is it bad or worse?" asked Perion as the professor carefully examined Marie and her severely crippled arm. She was shaking and muttering incoherently.

"Worse," answered the professor. "The pain must be unbearable. Courinn, she urgently needs your help."

"She has it," answered Courinn, glaring at how badly battered Marie appeared since they last saw her. In addition to her scabbed neck wound, the welted, black and blue bruises all over her looked horribly frightening.

In the moment the professor and Perion stepped aside, Courinn rose up in her glimmering black unicorn shape, her bright green eyes now misted with compassion for Marie. Tilda stared in childlike wonder at Courinn in her other form.

“We need a bit of water!” shouted Perion. Tilda shook herself back to reality and raced off to the boats.

“Can you hold her still?” asked Courinn in the unicorn’s deeper vocal register. Perion and Mifflin firmly grasped Marie and steadied her.

The unicorn gently grazed the tip of her golden alicorn across Marie’s sticky, perspiring forehead. Then she just barely dabbed the alicorn into the tiniest of tear droplets at the corner of Marie’s eye duct. Finally, she traced her gallant horn through a blotch of Marie’s blood, which had dripped and dried along her arm.

“All three healing elements?” said the professor with a hopeful smile. “Not taking any chances, are we?”

“Either of them separately might work,” said Perion, “but all three make for a potent recovery.”

Professor Mifflin turned to Perion, with a look of curiosity. “She’s been teaching me, sir,” answered the boy. Mifflin nodded in approval, looking back to the others.

“Where’s that water?” he called out.

Tilda found a metal cup and was clumsily filling it from the stream. Standing behind, Tybain stopped her, shaking his head. “Thanks, but we don’t have all day, sis.”

He took her cup and tossed the water in it to Theel, running up to him. Seizing the water and swirling it in his palms like a ball, Theel then amazingly flung it through the air—remaining spherical and entirely intact. Some twenty feet away, Perion stood and caught the water. Not a drop had spilt. Tilda stared at Tybain in a mixture of awe and annoyance, stepping out from the boat.

Courinn stood tall over Marie, her alicorn raised high into the sunlight beaming down upon them. From the tip of the horn, it began shimmering. She then dipped the alicorn into the water held in Perion’s palm. The unicorn slowly stirred it. Instantly, a sweet fragrance was set free. The water bubbled into a sparkling, light emerald color.

Marie was groaning as Courinn lightly touched her injured arm and traced a soft line down along her skin leading to her hand. Courinn then dipped her horn again into the remedy; from its very tip, she let three drops fall into Marie’s mouth.

Seconds later, Marie's trembling abated; she opened her eyes. When she glanced around and saw who was near her, she let out a much-relieved sigh, then shut her eyes again and strove to speak.

"You don't know how badly," she weakly uttered, "I dreamed you were all looking for me. Here you are. I'm so tired." She fell back to sleep.

"Will she be all right?" asked Perion. Courinn nodded. "Pour the rest of the ointment on her other limbs. It will renew her strength."

After Perion did this, they covered Marie to keep her snugly warm. Then the professor stepped up to Macmanus, glaring down at the tied madman.

"Whatever part you've played in harming this young girl," he said with uncharacteristic anger, "I can promise you'll not have a chance to repeat."

"Who are you supposed to be?" barked Macmanus. "I don't believe this, I'm lost in the woods for years, haven't seen a soul, then today it's a dripdoodle circus. That girl stole my property and tried cheating—"

His mouth hung open in fear. More than fear: terror. Courinn stepped up in human form.

"No!" Macmanus cried, seeing her. He began kicking his tied legs. "Get away, get away from me!"

"So we meet again," said Courinn. "I never expected to see you in this lifetime. I heard you were released, but it seems you've not learned from your mistakes."

"You know one another?" asked Mifflin.

"She's a demon dirgy!" screeched Mac, trying to slide himself away from Courinn. "Don't believe her, she'll have the gruckruckling thing at your throats!"

Everyone gazed at Courinn, who shook her head sadly, almost in sympathy. "This troubled fellow once abducted me, holding me for a ransom. From the beginning it was his undoing, as it was the night before Halloween. And he chose to hold me in a deserted house *within* the woods."

"All these years," croaked Macmanus in gasps of breath, "you've never aged ... at all! You're of the devil!"

Courinn cleared her throat. "What you never understood, Deputy Macmanus—"

"— Macmanus!" said the professor. "This is Earl Macmanus?"

“— was that it was no human you kidnapped years ago,” continued Courinn, nodding in response to the professor’s question. “Haven’t you surmised that by now?”

Macmanus shook, trying to steady his breathing.

“What happened?” asked Perion.

“He threatened to kill me by sunrise, if the ransom was not met,” she explained. “I desperately pleaded with him for his own sake that if he did not let me go by midnight, he would be attacked by a powerful goblin who dwelt in the woods close by.”

“The Croakmire Goblin?” asked Brage.

“Unfortunately, yes,” said Courinn. “Who has always borne a particular interest in protecting children and a vengeful temper for those that would harm them.”

“It came at midnight, I assume?” asked the professor.

“It came!” shrieked Macmanus. “Because she told it to! Do you know what that thing did to me?”

“What I do know is, the goblin at last let you go,” stated Courinn.

“But it wouldn’t let me leave! I couldn’t get out of the woods!”

“Perhaps the goblin deemed it part of your punishment. But when you finally met someone, as you did today, did you kindly ask Marie to help you, or did you cruelly take what you wanted from her?”

“She’s a brat, a pork-helter brat! She tried to cheat—”

“—Shut up!” yelled Tybain, stuffing several leaves in Mac’s mouth. The lunatic spit them out, but when Tybain stuck a pointed finger at him with sober authority, he kept quiet.

“Well, what do we do next?” asked the professor.

“Throw this fellow into the stream again,” said Zendara. “Let him clean off a bit.”

“What about Marie?” asked Perion.

“She should rest,” said Courinn.

“Then why not make camp here?” said Brage.

“Yes,” agreed the professor. “We’re in a safe area. There’ll be no other threat to us.”

“To us, maybe,” said Courinn softly. The professor and those nearby turned to her, waiting for her to clarify. She stepped close among Mifflin, Brage and Perion.

“Macmanus was released by the goblin,” she quietly explained, “perhaps to see if he had learned some civility. After today’s events, I fear my goblin friend will return for him.”

The professor raised a brow. “Tonight?”

“At dusk, I’m afraid.”

“Will there be any danger to us?” asked Brage.

Courinn shook her head. “No. But I doubt we’d want to be near.”

“How about some hot soup?” said Theel, holding a metal bowl before Marie. Some four hours had passed and she was relaxed against a tree now, but still covered to keep warm. “Thank you,” she said, amiably taking the bowl and a spoon.

“Brage just whipped it up for you,” Theel continued. “Would you like some toasted bread and honey with that?”

“Yes, Theel, that sounds delicious,” she answered. When he raised a slice for her, she glanced at him with both her hands full. An awkward moment passed before they both laughed. Marie opened her mouth and Theel let her take a bite. “Wow, that is good!” she said, savoring it.

“I’m glad,” said Theel. “I made the honey, from an old recipe of my folk.”

“You’re the quiet one, Theel,” she said, chewing. “I haven’t gotten to talk with you too much.”

“It’s sometimes difficult getting a word out among my free-spoken friends. But they seem to always hear me when I have something important to say.”

Marie lowered her bowl and spoon. She looked closely at Theel. Of the Exiles, only he and Perion had light hair, but Theel’s was so blonde it was almost white. He also bore the most obvious physical difference, the thin scars that ran upwards from the corners of his mouth. Marie knew these marks were actually a type of gill, allowing Theel to breathe underwater as well as above it. She also knew he and his people were from the depths of the sea—the oceans of some other place and time.



“Do you remember your home?” Marie asked. At this moment, it was she that was feeling homesick and so alone.

“I do,” answered Theel sadly. “But without faith there would be little hope for our return.” He smiled. “I have seen great hope and faith in you as well. I’m certain you will soon find what your heart seeks.” Marie’s eyes brightened, touched by his sentiments, which dampened the ache in her heart.

“So you’re awake!” the professor’s voice declared merrily. Marie looked up as everyone approached, while Theel stood back. Courinn hugged her and Marie returned it tightly.

“I can’t thank you enough,” Marie said earnestly. She knew what Courinn had done.

“How do you feel?” asked Courinn.

“Like I slept a month. Much stronger.”

“And your arm?”

Marie raised and straightened it, without a hint of discomfort. She laughed in amazement. “Only a dull ache. It almost feels like new!”

Perion knelt next to her. They embraced just as tightly. “I’m so glad to see you again,” he said.

“I didn’t think I’d make it without you, Perion,” said Marie.

“Give yourself the credit,” said the professor. “I think we can all agree there’s few we’ve ever met as courageous and just plain hard shelled as you, young lady.”

“I found the magic braid you left for me!” she said excitedly to Courinn.

“Another of Perion’s wild ideas,” answered Courinn.

“It worked! It led me in the right direction, until—”

“—Until you ran into this maniac?” said Brage, motioning to Macmanus, half propped against a boulder-like rock. For the first time Marie glanced around their camp. There was a good fire burning with cooking and other gear set around it. It seemed to be a bit past mid-afternoon by the sunlight. She saw the two boats strung up by the riverbank. Then she saw Macmanus, tied, and half asleep.

“No,” she said turning away in sudden alarm. A shadow seemed to gather over her. “Not him. The trollogre.”

No one said a word. Even the professor was caught off guard. That is, until he broke the foreboding silence.

“Do not think about that now,” he said. “You are back among your friends and you still carry that which will see your quest fulfilled. Rest easy, Marie.”

Marie’s hand reached for the amulet around her neck, checking that it was still safe. Then she took her bowl of soup and spoon and began eating.

“By the way, Marie,” said the professor, “there’s someone with us you might not have noticed yet.”

From behind Zendara and Dyllion, where she could have been awkwardly hiding, Tilda Jentiss stepped out in her disarming, yet now somewhat ruffled summer dress.

Marie coughed, trying to swallow her soup. “Tilda!” she exclaimed. She then searched her friends’ faces for some answer.

“She helped us past the sheriff’s roadblocks, to reach this side of the wood,” explained Professor Mifflin. “Without her, we had little chance.”

“C’mon, we had a *good chance*,” whispered Dyllion to Tybain.

“Shut up!” replied Tybain brusquely, anticipating Tilda’s reaction. “This I gotta’ hear.”

“I’m sorry, Marie,” said Tilda. “Really sorry for the things I said to you and how bad I treated you and your family.” She looked down somewhat shamefully, until she strode past everyone, toward Marie.

“If you don’t really dig yourself much,” continued Tilda, after a long moment quietly between them, “then I guess it’s pretty hard to like anyone else. Around Bettyann and Trish, that’s all I felt like.”

“I understand,” said Marie. “I was no angel either.”

Tilda fought back tears. “I also lost someone, taken by that monster out there. Someone almost as special as your mother is to you. I’ll do whatever I can now to help you finish what you started.”

“Thank you, Tilda,” said Marie. “You’re brave for saying all this.”

“A lesson for us all,” said the professor. “Now Marie, how do you feel about continuing on after you’ve eaten?”

“I think so, sir.”

“Fine, then let’s share a bite and break camp. It would do us well if we could be back on the water by dusk.”

Nearly two hours later, the party had eaten, cleaned up and finished getting the last of their things packed into the two boats. The sun had dropped low and evening quickly approached. Marie was up and about, looking and feeling a good deal better. She was now extinguishing their fire, the most physically demanding chore they allowed of her.

Marie thought about seeing her mother. She turned and stared out into the trees, wondering if she was out there, somewhere. Zendara approached, noticing her interest in the woods.

“Everything all right?” he asked.

Marie turned to him. She liked Zendara. He had a gentle, easygoing way about him. He listened when she spoke. He was easy to confide in, easy to trust.

“Zen, I haven’t told this to anyone yet,” she began.

“What’s that?” he said, stepping closer.

“Twice this morning, I saw my mother in these woods.”

Zendara froze in alarm, then tried to soften his reaction.

“That means something,” said Marie. “Doesn’t it?”

“Are you *certain* it was your mother?”

“Zen, I know my own mother, even if I haven’t been with her in three years.”

Brage stepped up, noticing their anxious exchange. “No sad faces,” he said cheerily, “we’re moving out soon.” He then saw Marie’s fear and frustration. Brage motioned to Zendara. “What did you say to her?” Zendara shook his head.

“Brage, I saw my mother today twice in these woods,” said Marie. “Can both of you tell me what that means?” Brage blinked while taking a long, drawn breath.

A short whistle sounded. They looked back and saw Tybain motioning to Macmanus. “What are we doing with this creep?” he asked.

Brage turned to him, clearing his throat. “Put him in the boat. The professor wants us to hand him over to the sheriff.”

Tybain cocked his head, confused. “We’re gonna’ just hand him over? Along with ourselves?”

“In the boat, Ty, please,” said Brage gruffly, turning back to Marie. He did not know how to tell her.

Tybain turned away. He and Dyllion grabbed Macmanus, raising him to his feet.

“If what you’re saying is true...” said Brage slowly, not wanting to continue.

“I’m very sorry, Marie,” Zendara interjected. “Your mother is already dead.”

He reached out and lightly touched her shoulder, trying to absorb back from her the sudden emotional blow. Before Marie could fully react, a low roar began all around them, stretching into a wretched cry of rage. The last of the light vanished. Like an eruption of shadow, night plunged down upon them.

As Tybain and Dyllion held Macmanus at his feet, the madman suddenly shouted in terror. The boys tried to restrain him but were flung aside, as if by force.

Courinn’s eyes searched around her. She knew only too well what was happening.

“It’s too late,” she said softly. “He’s here.”

“No!” Macmanus cried, standing helpless in front of the same large boulder.

“Gruckrucker! Don’t let it take me again!” His wide eyes bulged, as if trying to leap out from his skull, that is, until they found Marie. “I’m sorry! Forgive me!” he pleaded in some last desperate belief that only she could pardon him from the nightmare he was about to face one more time.

An orange swirl of light burst out from the stone, tearing through the many cracks and seams suddenly appearing at its base, reaching upwards and seizing the petrified form of Macmanus. With another scream of anguish, he was helplessly lurched under and into the bolder. He disappeared, along with all the light.

Marie ran to the mass of rock, searching it with her hands. Everyone watched her, not sure how to react, until Perion gently tried to back her away.

“No Marie,” he said, “it may still be hexed.”

“There’s no danger,” assured Courinn. “He’s gone.”

Marie pulled away from Perion. “You just can’t take him away!” she yelled, glaring

down into the rock. “He should be judged! By humans! Not by a goblin or the devil or anything else! I hate him, but bring him back and let him face what he has to!”



To their wonder, the same orange light began to form again, but this time from within the rock. Seconds later, Macmanus appeared, entombed in the stone, lying in repose within some mystical trance. His eyes were open, but unaware and lifeless. Marie’s face was awash in an orange hue as she gazed at him. Then the light faded until the large rock stood dark and still. No one said anything for a long time.

When at last Professor Mifflin spoke, it seemed like out of a dream. His voice, with its air of assurance and authority, quickly broke down whatever boundaries of the fantastic still lingered about them.

“Prepare the boats. Make certain there is no remaining clue we were here. Let us leave this place.”

The boats traveled slowly upstream with a minimum of sound. A dim gas lantern was kept in each, just enough so they could see one another and a scant bit of their way ahead. They spoke in quiet whispers as they went along. In the first boat were Brage, Tybain, Dyllion, Tilda and Theel. In the second were the professor, Perion, Zendara, Courinn and Marie, who was wrapped in a blanket like before. She said very little and her friends respected her wish to be left alone.

“How far is it to the wood’s border?” Courinn asked the professor.

“Once we join the river, a good four miles,” he answered. “After that, the river enters an underground passage as it bends northward. We’ll come ashore at that point, where I have long kept an in-ground bunker for the boats. From there it’s another quarter mile to the wood edge and the road.”

Within the boat ahead, everyone dolefully stared at Brage. “Zendara told her,” he said softly. “He just came out clean with it.”

“Only way to really do it,” said Tybain as he scribbled into a small notebook.

“So what does that mean for Marie now?” whispered Dyllion, not wanting to be heard in the second boat. “Is it all over? Does the professor know?”

Brage shook his head. “I don’t know. Maybe that’s what they’re deciding now.”

Dyllion peered behind. “It doesn’t look like Marie’s talking much.”

“Are you really sure about this?” said Tilda, in her usual obtrusive voice. “Her mother is dead, just because Marie thinks she saw her here?”

“Shh,” said Dyllion. “Quiet, they’ll hear.”

“Grow up,” said Tybain, with a jab to Dyllion’s shoulder. “Brage just said they’re probably discussing the same thing!”

“That’s the foretelling of this place,” said Brage to Tilda, ignoring his friends’ all too familiar chatter.

“What place?” she asked.

“This area between the streams,” he continued, “leading out from the river into Lake Gwindylo is called the Witch’s Fingers. It’s considered a safe haven from any of the wood’s evil, but is also believed to be a refuge for ghosts of the dead.”

A shiver went up Tilda’s spine. She glared into the passing woods. “Are there really ghosts here—?” She suddenly gasped aloud in fright. From the dark trees a shimmering, ethereal face with a long beard stared back at her.

“Aye, Greywindle!” Brage called out. “There you are!”

“Looks like a ghost to me,” said Tybain to Tilda with a grin. She stared, her hands half covering her eyes. “I’ll never get used to this place,” she muttered.

In the second boat, Perion and the professor also turned in warm greeting. “Our thanks once again,” said the professor. The ghostly bearded form smiled and nodded, floated along with them as they continued upon the water.

“Whoa,” said Marie, now speaking up. She glanced at Perion. “Greywindle?” she asked, confirming the ghost was real.

“Yes,” said Perion. “A very good and trusted friend of ours. He helped Courinn and I to regroup with the professor.”

“He’s often aided us through the woods’ deceptions,” said Professor Mifflin.

“I saw him twice,” said Marie. “Even after being scared out of my mind, I felt there was something good about him.” Blinking several times to observe the spectre clearly, Marie instead saw that he had disappeared.

“He doesn’t linger much in one place,” said Mifflin. “Indeed, Greywindle led us to you.”

Marie fully turned to Courinn. Her reawakened curiosity now required some answers. “How long were you looking for me?”

“Three days,” said Courinn. “We knew you had emerged from the hillock out of phase, but we couldn’t know how long. You were lucky. It could have been weeks, even months into the future. And without Greywindle, who can travel through the forest in a stream of light, the chances of finding one another any time soon were quite slim.”

Marie remained silent for a long moment. “Lucky?” she solemnly said at last. “It did seem like luck was on our side. But I’m too late. My mother is gone.”

Perion and the professor exchanged glances. “We don’t know for certain,” said Mifflin.

“There is always hope, Marie,” said Zendara. “Do not yield to despair.”

Perion then caught Courinn’s eye, who looked like she desperately wanted to say something, struggling with some thought. “What is it, Courinn?” he asked. “Are the tales of this part of the wood true?”

“Yes,” she said. “The dead walk here as ghosts. But there was— is— something more to the tale, something I can’t remember.”

This did little to comfort Marie. Her head and eyes were downcast; her shoulders slumped. “We were getting so close,” she said. “So close,” she softly repeated.

Then a wisp of light fell upon her neck, catching her globe amulet. It faded and reappeared. They all gazed ahead. The stream was heading straight for a swiftly emerging glow, which began to dance upon the water. The professor and Courinn smiled. They knew what was coming.

“Just beyond the next bend, my dear,” said Professor Mifflin, “is a sight that may bring you a lifting of heart.”

It looked to Marie like they were coming to a place where night somehow abruptly ended and day began. Rounding a wide bend, the trees suddenly disappeared. The land opened up, revealing an expanse of boulders and rocky terrain, from which the stream broke off into another outlet, becoming the genesis of the Witch’s Fingers. Beyond this, the flowing artery was a good-sized river, spanning some hundred yards across.

It was the first time in many days that Marie could peer up into an open sky. After the claustrophobia of the wood, she experienced a jarring, but momentary shift of environment. Then her breath was taken away.

The clearest rainbow Marie ever saw streaked across the night sky, glowing with a majesty all its own. Marie noted right away how it was different from any normal

rainbow: not a continuous gradation of color, but far more distinct in separation. The color order also differed. It should have been red to purple, with orange, yellow, green and blue in the middle. But this rainbow had red and purple in the middle with green and blue on the outside. The dark sky only heightened the rainbow's triumphant intensity. Color bled down over all of them.

"Now that's how we do a rainbow back home," said Zendara.

"Fantastically exquisite," said Mifflin. "It defies every known rule of physics."

"Your next stop," said Perion to Marie. "The end of that rainbow."

In the front boat, Tilda sat mesmerized. "Is it like that every night?"

"Night and day," said Brage. "Everyday."

"Then how come we don't see it at home?"

"Nope," said Tybain. "It's only visible from within the wood."

Marie's comrades watched her gazing upward, sensing a bit of her gloom ease away.

"How far is it?" she asked at length.

"If all goes well, after a little rest we could be there by tomorrow afternoon," answered the professor.

Marie took another deep breath, never taking her eyes from the multi-colored light. Perion saw that light reflected in her eyes. He also now saw something else there as well: dogged resolution.

Marie turned to the boat ahead. "Theel," she said, addressing him, "I remember what you said to me today about hope and faith. You too, Zen," she added, glancing at him. "Both of you were right. I have to see this to the end, don't I? I have to find out the truth of what happened to my mother. Whatever the truth is. Good or bad."

Courinn nodded assuredly. "I can't imagine you turning aside now."

Onward they continued, passing through the rocky, open ground and again back into the woods, where the rainbow faded from view. They took turns napping and keeping watch, though they let Marie sleep, untroubled. Apart from the unearthly eyes watching them and the occasional supernatural creature's eerie night sounds, the night passed slowly as they motored upriver.

Professor Mifflin noted aloud it was just past eleven o'clock when they reached the underground entrance. When she woke, Marie saw that the river literally plunged into a



cave-mouth entryway, quickly disappearing from view. They carried their supplies and gear ashore, while the boys lowered the boats into a fairly deep underground bunker, which was sealed to look ordinarily inconspicuous. Professor Mifflin often conducted testing and research in this area of the woods— actually throughout the whole of Spellhollow’s western arm. This forced him to construct the bunker as well as other helpful conveniences for his excursions.

They briefly settled there at the river bend and had another meal, already prepared and quickly served. Marie never ceased to be amazed at how effectively the exiled boys worked together, in spite of their occasional clowning and roughhousing. The professor demanded efficiency. The boys delivered it. As they ate, Marie saw Brage and Zendara closely huddled with the professor, no doubt discussing some kind of strategy.

Professor Mifflin then announced they would continue on a bit. “Are we gonna’ travel all night?” groaned Tilda.

“Not much longer,” he answered. “We’ll sleep once we’re back in the wood again, but we must be off the road by daybreak.”

Three quarters of an hour later, they reached the very edge of the woods. Following Brage’s dim lantern, it was a sleepy trudge through the night, in spite of the increasingly thinning trees— the same present-day woods growth as when they first entered the eastern edge. About midway they came across a dozen six-inch high, Moss and Root Folk, who, surprised at seeing a mixed host of mortals passing through at this early hour, asked Zendara if his friends might stay a bit and frolic with them. After Brage and Perion restrained Tybain from stepping on them in annoyance (not the first time) Zendara and Courinn courteously thanked the little people and they continued.

The boys immediately began removing the brush with which they had covered the professor’s truck. This was an extra precaution since hardly anyone ever traveled this part of the narrow dirt road. Once everyone and everything was loaded in, Professor Mifflin drove out from the obscured enclave where they had parked.

Tilda again rode in the truck bed with the boys. Courinn and Marie sat in the front seat with the professor, who had made it clear that he needed to speak with them both. With their headlights off, the police radio and the IR night vision system were switched on.

“It didn’t hurt you?” asked the professor, gravely.

“I didn’t really give it a chance,” replied Marie.

“You’re one of the very few to have seen Gwylligwitch and lived, Marie. Please tell me, what did she look like?”

“Like nothing you could imagine, sir. Just horrible.”

“I know it’s rather unpleasant,” the professor courteously persisted, “but if you could quickly describe her.”

Marie blankly stared ahead at the empty road. “Spiked body with a bad hunchback. A forked tail ... disgusting red and black eyes. And ...” her voice faltered a bit, “no head.”

Courinn listened, wide-eyed. “Professor, that’s not a trollogre! She’s describing—”

“—Yes, as I long expected,” he said, nodding in somber confirmation. “A *vecubus*. The beastly scourge of Spellhollow is a lone, surviving *vecubus*. It would explain much.”

“How is a — *vecubus*, different from a trollogre?” asked Marie.

The professor motioned to Courinn. “It’s an absurdly powerful creature,” she explained, “bred for war, to utterly plunder and destroy.”

“That sounds like my pal,” said Marie in sarcasm, “I watched her pull a whole tree, roots and everything, straight out of the ground like a piece of grass.”

“I understand how she might have got here,” said Courinn, “But why would a *vecubus* want to linger in this wood?”

“A good question,” said the professor. “Unless someone or something wanted to keep the monster here.” Courinn raised a curious brow.

“However,” continued Mifflin, “now knowing what our enemy really is gives us another possible weapon.”

“Yes!” Courinn said, nodding in understanding. “Its *umgricuth*.”

“What’s that?” asked Marie.

“The deadly, poisonous fang of a *vecubus*,” answered the professor.

Marie recalled her face-to-face encounter with the monster. “Yeah, I saw it. A long, curved fang in the middle of her mouth.”

“If that *umgricuth* can somehow be seized, even preferably torn out,” added the professor, “it will weaken Gwylligwitch considerably.”

Marie scowled. “I didn’t really want to get that close again.”

Professor Mifflin noticed something in his rearview mirror, just as the boys began rapping the back window. Marie and Courinn turned to see flashing lights coming up fast behind them.

“It appears our time has run out,” said the professor. “The sheriff wasn’t going to be fooled three times.”

He gunned the accelerator as Brage slid the rear window open. “Standing by, sir, as we discussed,” he said calmly. “How much farther?”

“Another mile,” said the professor. “See that Tilda is ready as well.” Brage shut the window. Mifflin turned to the girls.

“Ladies, we’ll be disembarking in thirty seconds. Courinn, please make sure you grab the pack in front of you.”

She nodded as Marie saw the old truck’s speedometer hit a striking eighty miles an hour with the professor keeping solid control of the vehicle. Checking his mirror, he noted the increase of speed from the spinning lights behind.

“When this vehicle stops,” he continued, calm but firm, “exit immediately and follow Brage and Zendara into the woods. Ask no questions and do not hesitate. If we’re caught here, I can assure you, we’ll not get a second chance.”

“Professor, ahead of us!” exclaimed Courinn.

More lights suddenly appeared, now coming at them. No more than half a mile ahead. Time had really run out.

“That’s that,” said Mifflin, instantly reacting. “Hold on!” He hit the brakes as he skillfully veered from the road, quickly bringing the truck into a thick grove of trees.

Like a well-prepped military operation, the Exiles instantly moved. Theel, Dyllion and Perion quickly took hold of Courinn and Marie as they stepped out, guiding them into the trees. Tybain ushered Tilda off as Brage and Zendara checked two packs of provisions to carry away.

Marie turned. She saw Brage hastily speaking with the professor in front of the truck, where his headlights were now turned on. He then shook Brage’s hand.

Marie halted. “Wait!” she called out. “What about Professor Mifflin?”

“He’s not coming,” said Perion, next to her. “He’s our diversion. Keep moving, Marie.”

“No!” she protested. “What will happen to him?”

The professor heard Marie, looking over to her, touched by her concern. In the truck’s lights, she saw him wave goodbye and mouth the words, “Go! I’ll be fine!”

She watched Brage turn and race into the woods as Perion and Dyllion began leading them on. The last thing Marie saw when she glanced back were the bright police lights through the trees, converging on the spot they escaped from moments ago.

After a short run, Perion halted. Assisted by Brage, they quickly gathered everyone, making sure they were all accounted for in the dark. Each of them held onto one another as Brage now led them on, plunging further into the wood.

“How much further?” asked Tilda as they marched. “I can barely keep my eyes open.”

“Only a few minutes,” said Zendara. “We must be far enough away from any search the sheriff’s men may do. Then we’ll make camp for the night.”

“You mean the morning,” said Marie. “Half the night is over.”

Ten minutes later, they stopped. The boys quickly set up a circular sleeping area, placing the girls inside the perimeter while they slept on the outside. They had brought with them only the bare essentials: thinly rolled coverings, which the girls placed both below and over them, while the boys slept on the bare ground. As uncomfortable as she was on the lumpy earth and with a slight thirst nagging her dry throat, Marie fell fast asleep.

A handcuffed Professor Mifflin was nudged into the back seat of the sheriff’s patrol car. Officers were rummaging through his truck, looking for incriminating evidence.

“Here we are again, Raynor,” said Sheriff Dan, getting into the patrol car. “We keep dancing to this same tune, don’t we?”

“Aw come on, sheriff,” said the professor, “You know how fond I am of conducting my strange little research experiments at odd hours. No harm in that, is there?”

The sheriff irritably chewed at his lip. “Do your experiments require you to drive with no headlights in the dark and your infra-red detection gizmo on? Besides, I saw a bunch of someone’s run from your truck. You wanna explain that, professor?”

“No one out here this morning but me. You know the wood plays tricks on your eyes.”

Sheriff Dan rubbed his forehead in fatigue. “With all that I got going on, I shoulda’ known you were mixed up in this somehow. Why don’t you just tell me now where in the heck is Marie Meehanan and Tilda Jentiss?”

“I thought you liked mysteries, sheriff? That’s the only reason I could fathom you wanting to serve and protect this county.”

From the woods, a handful of officers appeared, shaking their heads. “Couldn’t see or hear anything, sheriff,” said one of them. “If anyone ran in there, they’re gone now.”

The sheriff slammed shut his door, disgusted. “Let’s bring it home. Have the truck hauled into town.” He lurched the car into gear. “You don’t wanna’ talk, Raynor, then you can spend the next month mulling it over in jail.”

“From what I’ve heard, it’s a popular place to be this week,” said the professor, with more than a hint of acerbity.

Perion woke Marie. It was mid morning and everyone was already up, even Tilda. “How do you feel?” he asked with an exuberant smile.

“Like I need a real bed,” she yawned, rubbing her back.

“Come have some breakfast,” he said, “and you’ll feel better, before we move out again.”

They enjoyed some fresh bread, butter and jam, along with a variety of fruit. As she ate, Marie saw they were once again in thickly wooded terrain, and the sun was mostly obscured above the high ceiling of tree cover.

“So what’s next?” she asked as she bit into a sweet nectarine.

All eyes fell on Brage. “If the professor was correct, we should have re-entered the wood almost directly west of the Rainbow’s End— the only way, he explained, one can make a practical approach to it. Due to several forgotten spells, the rainbow is unreachable from the north or east. That is why we came down the river and circled around the long way. From here, it should be a straight march of some three miles.”

Brage removed an object from one of the packs. “Another of the professor’s gadgets. Who knows how it works, but it will direct us towards any great source of light.”

Marie drew out her globe charm. Within it was the image of her mother, with her kind eyes staring back, waiting for her daughter. The image faded. Marie lightly kissed the charm as another form appeared. She shuddered, closing her hand over the globe, unwilling to stare further at the grotesque image of Gwylligwitch. Everyone watched, knowing what she was looking at. Marie defiantly raised her eyes and met everyone’s gaze, then nodded. “I’m ready.”

Brage and Zendara led on, followed in single file by Courinn, Theel, Tilda and Dyllion, then Marie and Perion, with Tybain bringing up the rear. Brage kept the professor’s device, which emitted a soothing hum, held out in front of him, checking their direction almost continuously.

The woods here were unique, chiefly marked by two different types of trees which easily grew among one another as far as the eye could see: a tall and thick straight trunk, similar to a redwood, and a gnarly, thick bole with hungrily extended branches, stretching out in every direction. The combination of such disparate foliage growing so close together underscored the unsettling, even sinister air that seemed to lurk about the farther they seemed to go.

After an hour, Perion stepped up to Marie as they walked. "How's the legs and arm?" he asked.

"Not a hundred percent," she replied, "but so much better than yesterday."

Perion nodded. "I am glad. Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

Perion hesitated. "About Steavyn ..." he said slowly and carefully, "... back within the Faeriyae Realm?"

Marie couldn't help but smile at the mention of the name. "What *about* Steavyn?"

"What happened? I mean ... you two seemed to have gotten on pretty well, pretty quick."

Marie looked down as they went on, embarrassed. "I don't really understand it all, but I know what I'm feeling."

"What are you feeling?" asked Perion.

"I think about him all the time," she answered, glancing up at him again. "And I know it sounds crazy, but I can't wait to see him again."

Perion curtly smiled. "I'm sure you will soon." He dropped back behind Marie, a bit too hastily. She turned to him, but he also now stared at the ground, so she was unable to see the expression on his face.

"Something ahead!" shouted Zendara. He and Brage ran forward. Perion came up again from behind. He took Marie by the hand. "Come on!" he said.

There indeed was something ahead. It was quite large, crookedly sticking out some forty feet from the wooded ground. It was brownish gray and covered in patches of old moss. It seemed to be chipped and splintered in many places. Dangling down from the top of it was a coupling or joint of some kind.

"Pythag giant," said Brage.

“Lower leg,” said Zendara, stepping around it.

“A giant leg bone?” asked Marie in amazement, trying to visualize the bulk of whatever else was once connected to the calcium structure. “Fidleedee, that’s big.”

“They usually are,” said Courinn. “Some three hundred feet in height.”

“Let’s continue with some caution,” said Brage.

The professor’s humming device led them to find more giant bones, staggered across the woodland floor: pieces of legs, then ribs, backbones and shoulders, arms and hands, until lastly an immense skull, larger than the professor’s truck. It was wildly misshapen, with irregular deep cavities for the eyes and mouth, indicating how foul looking the giants must have been. The bones went on for a mile before the terrain began to rise, looking as if the behemoth creatures had fallen and tumbled from higher ground, until they perished. Marie and company soon found themselves clambering among the rocks of a mountainous ascent.

“This is it,” said Brage. “We are climbing the western ridge of the Rainbow’s End. It supposedly lies on the far side in a great ravine.”

The trees gradually shrunk in size and height as the mountainous slope became more and more canted. Marie worked up a good sweat as she dug her legs into this rising terrain. She grew annoyed at herself for not being in good enough shape to keep the effortless pace of Courinn and the boys. She glanced at Tilda panting heavily, having the roughest time of all. Marie offered a helping hand. Tilda took it and they assisted each other.

The giants’ bones began appearing again, looking like eerie markers of some ancient civilization, surging out from the uneven landscape. Several times Marie used the bones to grasp onto and pull herself up. Tilda saw this and did likewise. Still, she was exhausted and soon halted to catch her breath.

“Hold on already, I need a rest,” said Tilda.

“I’m with you,” said Marie.

The boys stopped, helping Marie and Tilda to sit. Perion took a flask of water and gave it to Marie, who then passed it to Tilda. Brage turned to them.

“We’re not far from the top. Zen, Tybain and I will scout ahead and see what we can. Rest a bit more.” Tybain stood and followed Zendara and Brage— until all three stopped dead in their tracks.

Sharp growls broke out around them. As Brage and his comrades spun around, Perion’s eyes darted up, searching the trees. Dark shapes perched within the low branches

emerged. Marie studied the closest to her: it was pure black and resembled something like a perilously wild mountain lion. It had yellow eyes with dense black pupils that shone prey-like and venomous. From its mouth grew a beard of sorts, shaggy but unable to hide its dagger-like fangs. On either side of its snout sprang two short, pointed horns or tusks.

“Cgrimpyre!” shouted Dyllion, crouching and tightly contracting his legs. A fraction of a moment before one of the deadly creatures leapt upon Courinn, Dyllion sprang first, hurling himself forward into the low trees, more than thrice his own leg span. The creature lunged at him, but Dyllion lithely decoyed it with his arms, leaving the beast to snap its fangs at air.

“Get down!” Brage shouted as he, along with Zendara and Tybain raced back to their friends.

Within the branches, Dyllion caught the creature by its horns, twisting its head away. But the cgrimpyre’s thrashing legs forced the combatants out of the tree, with Dyllion landing hard under the demon-creature.

More of the cgrimpyres leapt down among them. Sensing Marie and Tilda’s mortal vulnerability, they began to stalk them.

The leader— and largest of the black animals— bounded high into the air, over Perion and Theel’s heads, straight at Tilda. She threw her arms up over her face, but never felt the cat-creature’s impact.

Marie watched as Zendara sprang after their leader. Just as he collided with it, Marie rapidly blinked her eyes several times in astonishment, for he was no longer Zen the boy, Zendara the exile, but another cgrimpyre, as large and ferocious as his opponent. More cgrimpyres jumped down from the trees. They did not attack, but awaited the victor of both struggles, as did Brage and his companions.

Dyllion viciously fought to regain advantage over his foe, while Zendara’s cgrimpyre form kept his enemy in check with a rigorous hold at its throat. Staring into its mustard eyes, Zendara snarled, almost, it appeared to Marie, like he was intoning words. The beast growled back, answering. They exchanged several more phrases of various lengths and expressions, until the cgrimpyre grew angry and defensive.

In answer to this, Zendara’s cgrimpyre shape transmuted again, this time into a mammoth constrictor snake with blue, opaque eyes. The constrictor quickly clamped itself around the chief cgrimpyre, who then reluctantly yielded. Zendara croaked some final, stern request, while nudging his head to Marie.

The cgrimpyre closest to Marie hesitantly approached her. She braced herself as Perion took a step to intercede. The creature simply sniffed at Marie, then quickly withdrew in



fear. It grumbled some bewildered answer to the leader, Zendara's beaten opponent, who considered a long moment, before agreeing and rising to its feet.

The leader growled loudly and with authority as the cgrimpyre Dyllion fought yielded. As a parting shot, Dyllion angrily punched the animal in the leg; it viciously snapped back. Dyllion stood, panting.

"I've told them we are not enemies," said Zendara, standing once again as an unassuming boy. "Their chieftain has agreed to let us pass this way."

"Do they dwell here?" asked Brage, still tense, not fully trusting the creatures.

"Yes, but they are more like guardians," explained Zendara.

"Then let us be quick and continue on before they change their minds."

Brage and Courinn quickly wrapped Dyllion's arm, which he protested, as he usually and curiously did when wounded. The cgrimpyre beasts then stood aside, letting them pass. Zendara nodded to them respectfully, prompting their chieftain to stiffly acknowledge the boy in return. They were soon back to climbing the remaining ascent, moving on past the last of the pythag giants' looming bones.

"What did you say that convinced the chief cgrimpyre?" Brage asked Zendara.

Zen grinned. "I told them Marie had fought and slew the trollogre and that they would suffer a similar fate, if they did not yield. The monster's scent on her did not lie."

The boys broke out in full laughter. Marie was incredulous. "You gambled our lives over those things sniffing Gwylligwitch— on me? Do I smell that bad?"

"You've been out in the woods a full week," said Courinn laughing with the others. "You smell like a fresh spring day!"

Nearing the summit, Marie saw that the trees grew ever shorter, until they appeared no taller than her. A few minutes later, she saw that ahead, Brage and Zendara had halted where there were no trees at all. Just as Marie reached the spot after a last deep breath, that same breath was taken away.

There it was at last— The Rainbow's End.

They stood at the top of a single mountain's gradual swell. Before them stretched a wide, green valley surrounding a circular lake. The lake itself was the final destination of the highest waterfall Marie had ever seen, cascading down the sharp cliffs of a great canyon along the far side, where another mountainous peak was thrust upward, ice capped and significantly taller than where they now stood. Billowing, perfect white clouds filled the afternoon sky above the valley.

But what stretched above the lake was truly magical. Three enormous geysers, along a semi-circle pattern, erupted out from the water in a continuous, intersecting arch. There within the crossing surges of brilliantly, multi-colored water and vapor sprung the end—or the beginning, depending on one's point of view— of a rainbow.

Brage carefully led them down into the ravine. Everywhere around them was lush, green grass and clover, now moist and slippery as if it had recently rained. Moments later, the rain found them. It fell steadily as Zendara called out to make sure their packs were secured.

Marie welcomed the warm rain on her face and arms as they descended, glad that she no longer was climbing a mountain, though her legs still felt rubbery with each step lower than the last. She stooped to pick up some clover and smiled, seeing it was four-leafed. She picked another and another, all with the same result. Gazing up at the splendid sight before her, Marie felt a renewed strength like she did when first seeing the great rainbow from the boats. She took hold of her charm in one hand with a four-leafed clover in the other, thinking, *“I hope this works.”*

When they had reached the base of the valley, only then was Marie able to take in the widest view of the luminous rainbow in profound awe, resembling something straight out of the heroic myths she loved to read in school, now magnificently brought to life. When Tilda wiped her face, Marie knew it was not from the rain, but from her own tears at seeing such beauty before them. They also saw a tall, stone structure, like a tower, erected out from the lake. It rose straight up into the rainbow where its summit was obscured by shimmering light and color.

Even Courinn was spellbound as she gazed, reverently taking everything in.

“Wow, Courinn,” said Marie, “it must really be wild if you're amazed too.”

“I've seen much in this wood,” she replied. “But I've never gotten the chance to see this. How I miss my father right now.”

Tilda sadly stared at Courinn. “You speak about him a lot ... He didn't die a long time ago like you said, did he?”

Still looking up, Courinn sighed. “This site before us easily makes me forget that a great war is looming back where my father and Perion are from. My father believed he should try to return home to do what he could. You're correct, Tilda. It was only a year ago.”

“He's here with you now,” said Marie, reassuringly.

Their approach to the rainbow was easy. Where the western slope of the valley ended, a clear path ran around the lake's edge. From its eastern shore, an arched walkway led to a

small island. Marie saw that it was actually upon the island that the stone tower was built.

They all stood at the lake shoreline, curiously staring into the water. Within it they could see what looked like golden gems everywhere, just beneath the surface. Brage spoke up.

“From here Marie should go on with only one or two of us. But be cautious, this is not as easy as it might appear.” Marie glanced at Courinn and Perion. They nodded.

As the three of them crossed the arch, Marie instantly longed for the endless gold gems in the water beneath. With a nudge from Perion they continued, reaching the small island. Marie gazed up at the tower, with its apex plunging into the rainbow, and sighed.

“I really didn’t want to do anymore climbing,” she said. She nervously realized that once at the top, they would be some two hundred feet above the lake, which was at least fifty feet higher than the geysers’ crossing currents.

“So how does it work?” she asked, summoning her courage. “We get up there and I just stick my charm into the rainbow?”

Perion and Courinn exchanged that same glance, which usually signaled concern to Marie. “Well,” said Perion, “not quite. First of all, you have to go up alone.”

“Alone?” repeated Marie in confusion, wiping the rain from her eyes and hair.

“The rest is simple,” said Courinn in a voice, light and carefree. “You take out your globe charm ... hold your breath ... and jump.”

Marie apprehensively gazed upwards again. “Okay, it’s joke time, right? Am I supposed to laugh now?”

“It’s the only way,” said Perion. “You have to pass the globe through the point from which the rainbow begins ... its wellspring.”

“Sorry, but I am *not* jumping from up there!” stated Marie stubbornly. “And *why* do I have to go up alone?”

Courinn approached the tower’s open entrance. “Come here, Marie,” she said, “with your charm held out.” Marie did so.

“This tower,” continued Courinn, “was most likely built as a magical conduit for a group of sorcerers living some time ago, who wished to try and harness the rainbow’s power. I have little doubt there are one or more incantations set upon this entrance, to shield who may or may not enter. Observe.”

Courinn stepped through the entrance threshold. Just as she raised a curious brow in

surprise, her hands abruptly groped at her arms and neck, where ugly raised blotches of red skin instantly appeared. She turned and quickly withdrew.

“Oh!” she screeched, madly scratching herself. “Stop it ... Stop!” she cried out, trying to command the sudden and maddening itching to cease.

Perion then stepped through. Nothing happened for long moments, until he reached up to his eyes, which Marie saw had turned solid white, with no longer any iris or pupil. He then collapsed, straight into Marie’s arms. She stumbled, before falling with him to the ground, outside the entrance.

“Perion!” she shouted.

His eyes returned to normal in seconds, just as he regained control of himself. Marie helped him up to his feet.

“Corporal incantations,” said Courinn, scratching the last of her irritated skin. “Some sorcerers have nothing better to do. Now, Marie, hold out your charm. And enter.”

Marie was justifiably hesitant. “You really think it will protect me?”

“It will,” said Courinn. “Your charm was wrought of a master craftsman that has already worked its protection over you. Go ahead. You will see.”

“Wait,” said Perion. He raised Marie’s hand and held both of their fingers over her temple. “Look at me,” he said. He closely studied Marie’s face before leaning over and whispering something in her ear, which she did not understand. It immediately felt like Perion had opened a window and stepped inside Marie’s mind, as if he had entered her dreams. He lowered their hands and released her.

Marie entered the tower, holding her breath. The globe amulet grew faintly brighter. But after a full minute, there was no effect on her. She shook her head and smiled back to her friends, indicating she was fine.

“How long did you know all this and why didn’t you tell me what was coming?” she asked with some annoyance.

“We didn’t know until yesterday,” admitted Courinn. “The professor explained what needed to be done. He didn’t wish to trouble you with the details at the time.”

Marie sneered. “Are there any more details you don’t want to trouble me with?”

“You’ll be fine,” assured Perion. He touched his own temple. “I’ll be right there with you.”

Marie turned and began to climb a set of circular stone stairs, hewn into the tower walls.

The steps were cracked with good-sized chunks shattered away in some places. Marie carefully stepped over these, while keeping her eyes ahead at whatever might be lurking. It was never very dark, for the light, much of it rainbow colored, shone from the top of the tower, often revealing crumbled sections of wall. The stairs led up and around, circling again and again.

Several times, she became aware of voices: proud voices, echoing off the tower walls. This sensation was reinforced when she thought she heard distant snickering, possibly one or two even laughing at her. She listened to yet more voices speaking in whispers, occasionally followed by a distorted voice yelling in anger.

It was indeed spooky. Marie briefly halted to focus and clear her head— until another voice spoke to her, but not from within the tower.

“Courage, Marie,” said Perion. “Ignore what you see and hear, they’re only shadows.” But Marie found it difficult to root out the tingle in her spine. Still, she had learned a few things from this past week in the woods: when alone and scared of something, confront it directly.

“You can laugh at me all day if you want,” she spoke out loud, “but unless you’re ready to throw me down these stairs, I’m going up to the top.”

Some final whispers tapered off, followed by silence. Marie steadfastly continued. The ethereal rainbow light from above quickly grew. It shone all about the walls.

The circular ascent reminded Marie of somewhere she had once been: the Statue of Liberty during a trip to New York City with her parents. She was so excited to climb the statue’s circular staircase, especially to arrive within the crown, overlooking the harbor. That warm, summer day was one of Marie’s precious memories with both her parents.

Marie’s relationship with her father was based on his adherence to practicality: Employing common sense while using one’s mind and hands to overcome problems and obstacles. Whether it was understanding the science of the heavens above or knowing how an engine functioned and was repaired, James’ down to earth influences were the pragmatic gears propelling Marie’s curiosity ever onward. He continually pressed her to develop the innate cleverness and ability that he recognized she had from early on.

The relationship between Marie and her mother, however, was almost opposite in comparison. Anna Meehanan was a romantic in every sense. Marie inherited from her the love of the outdoors and animals. Anna shared her passion of books along with her varied tastes in music. She spent endless hours with Marie drawing, painting, singing and dancing. They often dreamed up and wrote down stories: heroic fairy tales of bravery, love and chivalry, frequently with a female protagonist. She freely encouraged Marie in her creative spirit and indulged her to follow her muse.

Years from now, when Marie was grown up, she realized that with the loss of her mother came the loss of so much she deeply loved and shared. A void that she unconsciously and unsuccessfully tried to fill— by substituting her mother’s ever positive and spirited encouragement with the hollow and negative acceptance from her destructive friends.

Now, as Marie neared the top of the tower stairs, she ached to hold her mother once again, like she did when she was so young and nothing else mattered. Nothing except loving arms wrapped tightly around her, never to let go ... .

She halted just below a shaft of blue light as she held up her globe amulet. Marie needed to see her mother again. She waited, but nothing appeared.

“Mom, are you still there?” she asked aloud. Only the small black rock within the greenish fluid was visible. Marie fought back tears as she again thought of what Zendara and Brage told her. Was all this for nothing?

“I have to find out,” Marie reminded herself. “This is the only way. *The only way.*”

Holding her charm, she continued upwards. Rounding a final curve of the wall, Marie stepped squarely into the Light of the Rainbow. Her charm smoldered out into a multi-faceted glow. Marie also noticed it became heavier and denser. A flat stone walkway beckoned to her, leading out from the tower through an arched opening. “*Like a pirate’s plank,*” she thought, staring at the walkway in suspicion, in spite of all the color that surrounded her.

She took several steps along the ‘plank’, walking though an ethereal incandescence of mostly blue, yellow and red. The colors oscillated as she passed through them. The air felt and smelt so pure and clean, like it had been scrubbed of all impurities. She heard Perion’s voice again in her mind.

“What does it feel like?” he asked, as if he knew exactly where she was.

“Well,” she spoke aloud, gazing around in wonder. “Now I really know how Alice must have felt.”

“Alice? Who’s Alice?” Perion asked in confusion. There were several beats of silence.

“Oh, yes, Alice,” he then agreed. Marie smiled, knowing Courinn must have explained. Marie knew then that even if Perion entered her mind to help lesson her fear, he also deliberately blocked himself from her thoughts.

In the years to come, Marie would never forget the awe-struck clash of emotion and sensation she experienced nearing the end of that platform. The breathtaking view of the whole ravine between the mountains, with all three geysers and the rainbow thrust out from them was something few mortal eyes had ever beheld.

She looked down and smiled no longer. An instant attack of height vertigo rushed over her as she cast a terrified glance at the tremendous drop to the water below. She bounded back several steps in dizziness, turning her eyes away and fell into a sitting position.

“Why did you let me come up here alone?” she shrieked. “I can’t do this! I can’t even look over the edge!”

Two hundred feet below, Courinn read Perion’s face. “It’s too much,” Courinn said to him, staring upwards. “To willfully leap from that height? She’s as stout as they come, but she’s still mortal.”

“She can do it,” persisted Perion. He took a breath and began walking in a circle around Courinn. “She must put her human fear aside and trust in her charm’s power.”

Marie concentrated on steadying her breathing, when she heard Perion’s voice again. “That’s it, Marie,” he said, empathetically sensing his comrade trying to re-summon her will. “Calm your fear.”

Marie slowly stood again. She took a step forward, then another. Approaching the walkway’s edge, she hesitated to look. When she did, she fought hard against the panic that took her. This time she continued staring downwards.

Marie now saw beneath the expelling geysers, into the clear, blue lake water. It was not as it appeared from the ground. Under the water’s surface were no longer gold gems. To her horror, there were sharp masses of rock stabbing out from the lake— all exquisitely golden capped and gleaming, but craggy and knife-like. Landing upon them would leave Marie horribly pummeled to shreds.

“No!” she cried, glaring down. “I can’t! The lake is full of sharp rocks! I’ll be torn up!”

“Listen, Marie,” said Perion sternly. “What you are seeing is a trick. A mirage. It is part of this place’s bewitchment. You must ignore what your eyes tell you.”

Marie shook her head in uncertainty. “It’s so far down. So far.”

“It means nothing,” pronounced Perion. “Your charm will act as your guide. Place your faith in it. Forget what you see.” Perion spoke his thoughts aloud so Courinn could hear. Now he stared at her and spoke silently in his mind. Courinn guessed from his expression it was something uncomfortable for him to say.

*“Think of Steavyn,”* he said within himself. *“Think of him with you now, guiding you, aiding you.”* Marie shuddered with a new surge of hope.

“Yes, Steavyn,” she said to herself. “I need your help. Wherever you are. Please help me.” She took a step forward, standing on the very edge of the stone plank.

“Hold out your charm,” said Perion, almost whispering. “And step *forward*.”

Within the rainbow’s many hues, a wave of calm swept over Marie. She held out her globe amulet. “After all you’ve both shown me, Perion and Courinn, after all you’ve done for me ... if I can’t trust you now ... who can I trust?” She closed her eyes and stepped out into nothing but colored light ... .

Expecting to fall, she did not. Instead, Marie opened her eyes to see herself being gently thrust forward by some unseen force into the center of the rainbow. Once held within its enchantment, between the red and purple color bands, she then glided—the only word she could later think of to describe the feeling—downward along the rainbow’s arc. She was flying, but it felt more like floating in a pool wearing many life preservers. In contrast to this, the air was warm and unexpectedly arid, so dry that she could feel the rainy wetness in her hair and clothes begin to disappear.

She then saw the rainbow’s colors, dancing and radiating *within* the globe in her hand. The charm had definitely grown in size. For a moment, Marie also thought she saw the face of Thurle, the gnome who created it. She became drenched once again, passing through the erupting spray of the three intersecting geysers: the rainbow’s wellspring, its very origin.

There was a sound like the hiss of compressed air, followed by a crack of some kind. Marie was falling in a kind of weightless slow motion, but as she splashed through the geyser spray, normal gravity took control and she plunged straight down into the midst of the jagged rock formations. Marie cried out in terror, expecting a horrible, deadly impact. Instead, she endured the slapping percussion of an enormous splash, thrusting her deeply into the blue, lake water. Enshrouded in foamy white bubbles, she had forgotten something important in her panic: to hold her breath.



*Chapter 17*

**Captives of Ice**

Marie had always been a good swimmer, spending summers at Mohican Lake with her parents. What she loved most was to spin and whirl underwater; she often challenged her friends to see who could hold their breath the longest while darting between the raft and third swim marker. She now summoned that former skill to reach the surface— until she caught sight of what lay below her. Glimmering and refracting the multi-hued light from above were a hundred thousand shapes and sizes of every kind, in the form of gemstones, ornaments, jewelry and coins.

Yet within the grandiose splendor, something clearly stood out, outshining everything else with its intensity. Unable to control herself, Marie thrust her arms downward, propelling her toward the submerged hoard. The fact that she struggled to breathe did not daunt her, until her throat convulsed. As her outstretched hands grasped the object she sought, water poured into Marie's mouth. She became bleary with confusion and disorientation and never saw the speeding shape that approached and seized her.

Perion and Courinn raced back over the archway to the lake shoreline where everyone else waited. Looking out between the geysers, they could see Marie being carried, head above water with the speed of a boat. Seconds later, Theel lifted her lifeless body, which Perion and Brage quickly received. She was grayish pale and not breathing.

“Quickly, Theel!” shouted Courinn as the amphibious boy leapt out from the water.

“She's swallowed a lot,” he answered in panic, the gills in his cheeks pulsating. “I don't know that I can help!”

“Do it,” demanded Perion, “while you still can!” He and Brage held Marie securely by her arms and shoulders, turning her face down. Tilda and Zendara used their bodies to deflect the falling rain.

Theel crouched beside Marie, discreetly pulling up the bottom of her drenched shirt. He began lightly tracing his hands upon her back in circular swirling motions, alternating one stroke into the next. Each stroke became quicker as he pressed his fingers more firmly into her skin, giving the visual impression that he was drawing something outwards. Marie's head swayed and her throat shuddered as water came streaming from her mouth in the same swirling motion. Theel continued until Marie began choking. He lowered her shirt as Perion and Brage spun her on her back. Immediately, Dyllion and Tybain grabbed each of her legs and pumped them into her chest, forcing her to breathe again.

Color seeped back into Marie's face. When she opened her eyes, everyone let out heartfelt sighs of relief.

"You're going to be fine," said Perion with firm assurance. "Try and relax." Looking into her eyes, he saw in amazement tiny streaks of color: the colors of the rainbow.

"Wow," he added amusingly. "There have been some changes in you." He lifted the globe charm around her neck, holding it for her. First Marie saw the black stone, now cast not only in its emerald fluid, but in the rainbow light as well. Then she clearly saw the image of Thurl the gnome. He nodded in obvious approval. The globe went dark and Marie could see a reflection of her own radiant eyes. She smiled in awed approval.

For the rest of her life, whenever Marie was in rain, mist or high humidity, those same colors shone and sparkled in her 'enchanted eyes.'

"You are a stubborn one," said Courinn, motioning down at her hands. When Marie lifted them, she was holding a pure gold diamond, the like of which had not yet been seen in the mortal world. A gem only described by ancient, long forgotten words.

"I can only imagine," pondered Courinn aloud, gazing into the diamond's gloriously intricate design, "the trouble you're going to find with this."

The metal lock made a jarring *klatch* sound as it was turned. In the dark, it reverberated enough to wake the departed souls lying in peace just a block away.

Nearing two a.m. earlier that same day, Professor Mifflin was led into a jail cell. He quickly inspected it with a nod, before turning to face Sheriff Dan.

"Accommodations have improved, I see," he said sarcastically. "Good to see our taxes at work."

"One last chance, Raynor," said the sheriff. "Talk to me."

Professor Mifflin barely shook his head. "I can't do that. Not now."

The sheriff motioned to his partner in annoyance. The officer unlocked Mifflin's handcuffs, then stepped back and securely locked his cell door.

Mifflin approached the cell bars. "I assume you're buying the round, sheriff, when this is all over?"

The sheriff stared back, dull eyed and tired. "There won't be any drinking this time. Not after all this." He turned to leave, followed by his partner.

"You always say that," replied Mifflin as a parting shot.

The main lights were switched off as the building's entrance was shut and locked tight. The professor stood peering into the shadows. Here he would remain, alone with his thoughts until their plan had been carried out, either in success or failure. At least he assumed he was alone, until another male voice spoke out.

"Only one Raynor I've ever heard of. Raynor Mifflin?"

The professor knew the voice's source was a nearby cell, though he could not see it. He came up close to the bars and strained his neck. "Yes. Who's sharing the pleasure of incarceration with me?"

"It's James Meehanan."

Within the dark, the professor grinned with some surprise. "Well, well. The sheriff does have a sense of humor. How long have you been here, Mr. Meehanan?"

"All week," he answered. "What does the sheriff want with you, Mifflin? Why can't you tell him anything?"

"I'm here for the same reason as always. Suspicion. And you, sir?"

"Don't pretend you haven't heard. Even here in Woldred, I know how fast word gets around. If you're being held for suspicion, does it have to do with me or my daughter?"

The professor carefully considered his next response. It was no good deceiving Marie's father now, here with him—almost face to face.

"I'm afraid it does, Mr. Meehanan. I stood with Marie not more than an hour ago."

Now the silence brewed from James' direction. "*You* are responsible for my daughter gone missing?" he hissed angrily.

"No one is responsible for Marie having left you but Marie," stated Mifflin. "She came to me seeking my advice and help, which I have given to her as best I can."

"Tell me, is she all right?"

"Yes, as of an hour ago."

"What does that mean? Who is she with now?"

"Friends who have already laid down their lives several times for her."

"*Why?*" roared James in frustration. His voice echoed through the small building. "Tell me, Mifflin, what is she doing? What's going on?"

“Don’t pretend you don’t know, sir. Did you not read Marie’s letter and hear what she said to you over the police radio?”

“How did you —”

The professor cleared his throat. “— Mr. Meehanan, you’re of course not aware of this, but you and I share a vaguely similar history. We’ve both lost our wives in the recent past. Under normal circumstances, the story would end there. But you and I, and the rest of us here in this county, do not live under normal circumstances.”

“Enough!” shouted James. “You’re as nuts as the rest! You want me to believe what Marie said? That she can bring back her dead mother? With what? Some magic pixie-dust? You expect me to believe that, Mifflin?”

“I don’t know. What do you think Marie believes?”

James hesitated, considering the question. “Listen, my daughter has gotten her memory back. She remembers her mother again. That’s all I care about.”

“Is that all?” provoked the professor. “Don’t you want to know what really might have happened to your wife? Instead of visiting her empty grave each week, wondering, don’t you wish to know the truth?”

James now realized how much the professor knew. “Is that what Marie meant on the radio? To find out the truth of what really happened?”

“At the very least, yes. And right about now, she is close to discovering that truth, for good or ill.”

James remained quietly in thought for a good while. When he at last spoke, his voice was a blend of fear and hope. “Marie is all I have left. Please tell me she won’t be hurt.”

“I can’t say for sure,” answered the professor. “The odds were against Marie getting this far, yet she has risen to every challenge. It’s a good bet that whatever danger may still lay ahead will most likely underestimate your daughter.”

They marched south along the valley, between the two mountains hedging the rainbow. It was now late afternoon, but still two hours from nightfall. Brage led them out of the rain, keeping an easy pace back to the woods’ edge. There they halted, drying off and letting Marie pause to regain some more strength.

“We’ll have to separate here,” said Brage.

“I didn’t know we were splitting up,” said Marie. “Where are you going?”

“To the professor,” Zendara answered, “who will need some assistance with his release. A brief southeast march for us, leading through the Croakmire Pass.”

“Then who will be going with me?” asked Marie, curiously glancing among them. No one answered.

“The final stretch of your road begins now, Marie,” said Brage. “Lake Gwindylo lies some three miles northeast.”

Still Marie waited for a response to her question. “So I’m now traveling alone?”

“I thought that would be obvious,” spoke up Courinn at last.

“Did you forget our pledge?” added Perion, proudly stepping up along with Courinn.

Marie smiled. “We started together, and we’ll face the end together.”

“With one more to tag along,” said Tilda, modestly raising a hand. “If that’s okay.”

“Yes, Tilda,” said Marie. “I hoped you would still come.”

They took turns saying goodbye. There was a note of apprehension, with none of them quite knowing what the future might hold. Theel offered Marie a gentle hug and whispered the word “faith” in her ear.

“I won’t forget that you saved me from my last breath,” she said to him.

Zendara gave Marie a much bigger and secure embrace, then kissed her on the cheek. “Theel is right,” he said. “Do not yet abandon hope in spite of my grim words to you.”

Courinn stood before Dyllion, heedlessly scratching one of his cgrimpyre wounds. “Can I help you with your injury?” she asked.

“Why?” said Dyllion, staring back at her in confusion. “It’s good the way it is.”

“Dyllion,” she continued with a grin, “I admire your vigor. I’d like to soon take you up on your challenge to race a unicorn. But maybe— we could work on cleaning up some of those rougher edges too?” She offered her hand to him in parting gesture.

“What rough edges?” he asked as dollops of dark blue accidentally trickled into his palm while shaking Courinn’s hand— smearing over her fingers. “On second thought, perhaps not,” she added, wiping away the mess.

Tybain briefly peeked over at Tilda. Knowing better, he simply nodded to her.

“Aren’t you going to wish me luck?” she asked.

“So you can smirk and turn away?” he answered cynically. She shot him a sidelong glance with a surprising hint of sincerity.

“No,” she said. “So I can wish you the same.”

Not trusting her sudden, exposed armor chink, Tybain replied after a brief moment. “I hope you find what you came for.”

In the most telling embrace of all, Brage took Perion, full in his arms. “We’re proud of you, little brother and what you’ve done for Marie,” he said. “Look after them and see this through, but don’t forget about yourself.” He released Perion but held his head close, staring into his face. “Don’t ever doubt you’re coming back. We’re returning home together.”

“Thank you,” said Perion, “for believing I could do this.” Brage then saw his eyes drift to Marie. “I do have to see this to the end.”

Brage nodded, understanding. “I know how you feel about her,” he admitted softly. “May the Arsentian Winds be at your back.”

With a series of final, departing waves, the five exiled boys moved out, heading back into the forest. Perion slung the small pack they left for them over his shoulders. As he did so, Marie held up her radiant, golden diamond, larger than her fist.

“Why don’t you let me carry that a while?” Perion suggested. Marie hesitantly eyed her comrades. She half-smiled, forcing away a noticeable uneasiness.

“When we get to the end,” she said, handing over the gem, “if we need to use this in any way, don’t think twice about it.” As Perion placed it in his pack, Courinn nodded and peered ahead. “We’ve got a few hours light left. However far you can manage, Marie.”

“I’m feeling better.”

With a last glance back at the Rainbow’s End, they plunged ahead, re-entering the woods. Perion led the way, holding a simple compass Brage gave him, which, unlike Marie’s first compass, the professor had rigged to function correctly within the wood. Behind him were Marie and Tilda with Courinn bringing up the rear. They were once again quickly swallowed up in a stretching cavern of tall oak and maple, watching the existing light around them darken and losing all sight of the sky. Marie thankfully noticed the lack of any thickly gnarled roots. The ground was smooth with no rocks and low shrubbery.

As she walked, Marie held up and peered into her charm. “Mom, are you there?” she

softly asked, repeating the question several times. She only saw the swirling colors of the rainbow.

Glancing aside, Tilda watched Marie replace the amulet under her shirt and dab her wet eyes. “What’s wrong?” she asked.

Marie shook her head and sniffled. “Maybe Zendara was right. It’s too late.”

Behind them, Courinn listened. She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to remember something very important, but instead exhaled in frustration only.

“Tilda,” said Marie, brushing aside her worry and quickly changing the subject, “what made you leave Bettyann and Trish to come and find us?”

“I’d still be with them,” admitted Tilda, a bit ashamed, “if something else didn’t happen.”

“Really?” said Marie. “What?”

Tilda looked away, then sharply answered. “You’re so lucky, Marie and you don’t even know why. Yeah, all this stuff happened to you, but you had one sure thing: both of your parents *noticed* if you were still breathing. Whether you find your mother or not, you don’t know how lucky that makes you.”

These words sharply tugged at Marie’s heart as she recalled Tilda’s frightening accounts of her father— how he often beat her and her mother, until he left one night and never came back. It was the only time Marie ever heard Tilda use brutally foul language.

“I’m sorry,” replied Marie. “I remember when you told me and Bettyann about—”

“—Just shut up!” bristled Tilda, angrily. “Forget about it!”

Courinn gestured for Marie to leave it alone. They went on, mostly without speaking for another hour and a half, until they halted, sat and had their dinner meal. The sun began to dip and the day’s end drew near.

Marie contented herself with a tuna and tomato sandwich from their pack. Finishing that, she had a banana and not one but two apples, realizing she hadn’t eaten since breakfast. They shared drinking from their water flask.

Courinn looked up. “We’ve about twenty minutes of light left. Should we camp here or press on to the lake? How are you feeling, Marie?”

Having eaten, Marie felt a feverous rush of strength. “If it’s okay with both of you, I’m not ready to stop yet. I’d like to finally see this Lake Gwindylo.”

“It shouldn’t be more than a two hour hike,” said Perion. “We’re close to the Croakmire ridge. We should make northeast straight from here.” Courinn nodded in agreement.

“Tilda, are you okay with this?” asked Marie, turning to her. “I keep forgetting, I had a week head start getting used to long walking.”

Tilda nodded. “It’s cool, I’m okay.” She sighed. “Sorry about before, Marie.”

Marie and Courinn exchanged glances. Tilda somehow knew they were both thinking about the defiant and cruel girl who confronted them only last week, aggressively wielding a knife. She now appeared a wholly different person.

Night came swiftly. Courinn lit the lantern Brage had used and kept it low as he did. They resumed the same formation with Perion at the rear. Using her compass, Courinn began directing their way northward. They strode on light and easy along the low shrubs and moist ground.

But within a half hour, the delightful terrain began to transform. The trees became gloomy hemlocks and pines. The ground turned weedy and mossy, full of dark pits and quagmires. With Courinn’s dim lantern, it was difficult to pick their way ahead through the stagnant pools and around the rotting, drowned tree trunks now barring their way. After a quick discussion, it was agreed to brighten their light. Yet with each step forward, they could not suppress the growing, strangling sense of foreboding that clutched at them.

The sudden screams of muddy tree toads along with the hissing of water snakes sent a chilling restlessness up their spines. Marie thought back, thinking this marsh far more difficult to cross than the Vampire Bog. Just then, the sounds of low voices began, mixed among the noises of other marsh creatures—different from those Marie heard in the rainbow tower, which were mocking in tone. The voices here seemed to be crying out. They desperately pleaded to them in unknown words and phrases.

“What do they want from us?” shrieked Tilda, her face ghostly pale and sweat soaked.

“For you to be as frightened as possible,” said Courinn, turning back to them with her lantern. “But nothing here can physically harm us.”

“Tell them that!” said Tilda, stopping.

“What are they?” asked Marie, halting along with her.

“I’ll explain,” said Perion loudly above the whispering clamor, “but we must keep moving on!” He nudged them forward, exchanging glances with Courinn, who held her light so they could all see one another clearly.



“I know what they are,” said Perion, “as I’m sure Courinn does.”

Courinn nodded. “I didn’t realize such things endured in Spellhollow or I’d have kept watch for them.”

“What lies ahead will soon become far more terrifying,” continued Perion. “You don’t have to look. Take my hand and I will guide you.”

Perion wasn’t exaggerating. They soon began to catch glimpses of eyes, wicked, yet sad, peering through the dead knotholes of hollow hemlocks. Then came the worst: The clear outlines of deformed faces and rotted corpses, deeply sunken into hundreds of tree trunks with gaping eyes and mouths, suffering in endless torture.

Tilda squeezed her eyes shut, amidst the gagging screeches of the anguished dead. Courinn reached out and helped her along. When Marie stumbled from the heinous sensory overload, Perion lunged out, leading her onward.

The corpse marsh nightmare seemed to never end. Yet as Marie plodded on, she gradually became aware that the surrounding terror existed merely along the periphery of her thoughts, only as a fading nightmare. She then understood that Perion was doing more than just helping her along. He guided her through an ethereal otherworld, a place that Marie knew somewhere in her mind was a cloak, a gentle protection against the horrifying insanity accosting them. From within herself, Marie’s voice burst forth, singing beautiful, joyful songs, sweeping aside her most disturbing fears.

But in her mind also, Marie became aware of a shadowy corner that opened up. It widened as she tried to force it away. The dark void smothered her singing, then revealed something vague, quickly coming into focus: two dead and rotted trees. Within them were two faces, becoming only too familiar. One face she had recently come to know and the other she had long missed. The torn lips of their mouths opened in anguish and their tear-filled eyes burned with fire. They were the faces of Steavyn and her mother, ensnared, writhing in torment and on the threshold of death. Marie vomited in revulsion.

Returning from whatever incorporeal state she’d experienced, Marie was lying on her back with Perion leaning over her. “They’re gone,” he said. “It’s over, Marie, we have left the swamp.”

It was still night and quiet once again. They were within a cluster of ordinary pines. Marie glanced aside and saw Tilda lying near her, drinking from their flask, which Courinn held. Marie was freely sweating and her eyes were filled with tears. Her throat felt raw. She knew she had been screaming, not singing.

“We’re safe?” she asked, feeling the burn in her throat. She coughed and swallowed hard. “Water, please,” she said.

The flask was passed to Marie and she drank. It was only when Perion helped her up into a sitting position that she saw the four of them were no longer alone. There now stood a handful of smallish figures, curiously studying her. No more than two feet in height, dressed in gray and brown with low boots. Some were full bearded; others with only chin whiskers. But Marie knew what they were: gnomes.

“When did we get company?” she asked, gulping a last swill of water. In response, the gnomes quickly spoke amongst one another in a peculiar language, with words that seemed to glide off their tongues. Marie found herself— just as she could at Professor Mifflin’s home— able to understand some of what they said. Though they gathered in a half circle, two gnomes seemed to be leaders or in some way in charge. Courinn stood and spoke up.

“We have at last come to the shores of Lake Gwindylo, Marie. These good gnomes have held camp upon this shore for some time. Their interests are the same as yours, but they are unsure how to proceed.”

Again the gnomes reacted, speaking with some anxiety. Marie could just make out the last of their chattering as they asked, “How does the mortal share our interests?”

“At ease, my friends,” said Courinn. She acknowledged Marie, gesturing to the two leading gnomes. “Marie, this is Landrom and Rhysis, whom I’ve met on occasion. Please excuse their uneasiness, it is merely concern for our unexpected arrival here.”

“Oh, sure it is,” quibbled Tilda. “C’mon, look at them. Do they look worried about us? What’s wrong, they don’t like girls?”

“Easy, Tilda,” said Perion. “They are suspicious folk, and after what they’ve endured, they do have some—” he paused, somewhat embarrassed. “There I am, forgetting my own speech lessons of the professor’s. Justification? Yes, that’s the word.”

Marie smirked, recalling Perion explain how Professor Mifflin had taught all the boys English after they had arrived here. Perion had the most trouble at first, but in time became one of the best speakers with the least evidence of an accent.

The gnomes began grumbling again, until Rhysis sternly quieted them, while taking a few steps forward. He addressed Courinn and Perion, while condescendingly pointing to Marie and Tilda— mostly Marie.

“Excuse my comrades’ concerns,” the gnome began in his tongue, “but what business does a unicorn and one of the Knolvenor kin have with bringing two simple *humans* less than a morning’s stroll from an evil they cannot begin to understand?”

Marie understood enough of his words to defiantly step up to Rhysis. “Excuse me, sir, I know all about what’s waiting ahead,” she proclaimed in authority, sharply laced with the

effort and suffering of the past week. “I might be a *human*, but I have already stood face to face with Gwylligwitch and I’m still here so far to talk about it.”

Marie withdrew her globe charm, triggering a collective gasp from the gnomes. She held it up as it glowed with the hues of the rainbow.

“I guess you know what this is, and I guess you knew Thurle, who made it and tried to defeat the vecubus monster. It’s now passed to me, and this simple, silly mortal here will use it just as Thurle wished.”

With their best-subdued grins, Courinn and Perion allowed Marie to continue, looking upon their comrade with unexpected awe. That Marie could seize such a moment and make it hers was a testament to her integrity and wit. Next to her now, even Tilda’s blustery and outspoken presence seemed blanched in comparison.

“Instead of judging me, can you help us?” said Marie, not yet finished. “Why don’t you go on from here with us, instead of arguing and planning and doing nothing? This is the time to act!”

The gnomes were silent until Rhysis and Landrom gathered them and held council. Their debate, consisting of quick, interjecting whispers could barely be heard.

“An excellent field general’s speech,” said Perion to Marie, as Courinn and Tilda joined them in their own circle.

“I intended to say roughly the same thing,” added Courinn, “but with a good deal more diplomacy. Perhaps the hard approach might have been best.”

The corner of Marie’s mouth curled in a wry grimace. “It’s like what my father always said— you can’t go easy on gnomes.”

Both Perion and Courinn stared at her a moment, before bursting out in laughter. Tilda did not quite get the joke, but smiled anyway.

The gnomes’ deliberation ended with Rhysis and Landrom approaching them. They halted and both stood with hands politely crossed at their chests and heads bowed in suggested forgiveness. They spoke in English with a strange accent.

“Mortal Marie,” said Rhysis, “I would ask for your forgiveness of my rash words.”

Marie bowed her head slightly. “Of course. I didn’t mean any disrespect. You just hit a touchy nerve, I guess.”

The gnomes raised their heads. “We have decided to take you further,” said Landrom, “to your final destination. We will leave in the morning after you’ve rested.”

“Thank you,” said Marie. “But if it’s okay with my friends, I’d like to continue now.”

“Are you sure?” said Perion. “It’s close to midnight. Some sleep would go a long way.”

“That’s just it, Perion, we’re so close that I won’t be able to sleep. I know it’s a lot to ask, but I’d like to go on now.” Marie studied her friend’s reactions. Tilda looked none too joyful at her decision.

“I’m sorry, I’m being selfish,” admitted Marie. “You’re right, let’s get some rest.”

Courinn and Perion exchanged that same glance which seemed to communicate whole conversations in a moment. They nodded with a smile. Tilda saw it, sighing with sunken shoulders.

“Keep it to yourself, Tilda,” warned Courinn. “You wanted adventure, this is part of it. This is what Marie wishes.”

Perion turned to Landrom. “We leave at once.”

They led them out from the clearing along a fresh path. In only a few minutes, they reached the shores of Lake Gwindylo. As Marie peered ahead, her heart sank. She did not like the look of it one bit. The still water had a bitter, decaying odor and was greenish black—just like the fluid inside her charm. She held it up again, but could see nothing except the streaking and shining colors of the rainbow.

Some said Lake Gwindylo was at the heart of the deepest, most powerful enchantment within the wood. Others claimed the birth of the river feeding the lake, some eight miles north, was the most bewitched. Either way, the river and lake surged through much of the Spellhollow vale, an area most believed possessed an awareness all its own. If this mysterious sentience might have once been benevolent, it was now mostly agreed that it had taken on a wicked and vengeful compulsion: a force that also made it far more powerful and dangerous. Much of the war that centuries ago had been bitterly waged within the wood took place in or along the river and lake. Echoes of sadness and loss were long ago buried along its shores. Who knew how many were forever lost under its malevolent, dark waters?

Marie knew little of this history as she sat with her companions in an old wooden boat, being hauled across the lake by a raft ahead, maneuvered by five steadily paddling gnomes. Whereas only a short time ago she was haughtily lecturing the gnomes’ leader, a gloom had now swept over her ever since seeing the lake, which only continued to grow. Her three companions also said little—Tilda was nodding off to sleep—as they drifted through the black, still water, where a single ripple hardly seemed to issue from their passage. Had Marie made the wrong choice deciding to go on with no rest?

With their lantern lit to medium brightness, they could only see some dozen feet around

them. There was no way to perceive the lake's expanse. Above, the night sky was a cloud-filled pasture of emptiness with no stars or moon. They passed through large floating masses of what looked like charred water lilies. As their boat glided over them with a lengthy *whoosh*, Marie caught a glimpse of some perched creature. It had a melon-sized frog's head with a thick snake's tail coiled around it. Marie saw it's head turn with them, revealing sizeable yellow fangs.

"It's a Nymphus," said Perion, watching Marie. "They spawn upriver and settle here. Not something you'd care to swim into alone. I've had my share of fun with them."

Marie jeered, looking away. Apart from the usual sounds of insects and fish flitting and splashing about, there were other queer noises— deep, mournful groans, reverberating against the counterpoint of distant beating drums, all struggling it seemed to angrily emerge from the depths of the water.

Marie rested her cheek on the boat's edge and peered down, seeing her cheerless reflection below. Her stomach had felt uneasy since throwing up back in the marsh and the smell of the water did little to relieve it. Marie's glum disposition now moved her to spit down at her watery likeness— noticing the mirror image did not move as she had.

"Do not stare directly into the water," cautioned Courinn.

Marie tuned out Courinn. She gazed trancelike at her shimmering reflection, barely lit from the boat lantern. The mirage began sadly shaking her head, before it spoke with Marie's exact voice.

"I'd spit at me too if I were up there. What are you doing? You're wasting time chasing something you won't ever find."

Marie cast a quick glance to Courinn and Perion. They didn't seem to hear what the lake just spoke to her. She turned back to the watery illusion; feeling like some unseen force propelled her to keep looking.

"Come with me, Charlotte," her reflection continued. "Find some peace for yourself, away from all the pain. Look at me. I'm so much happier. It's so dark and gloomy where you are." Marie could see that her reflection was dressed in a dirty frock and long stockings and held something large and shining gold in both hands.

Then the illusion held out a hand to Marie, who could not fight a sudden impulse— the desire to join herself, forever, away from this world of sadness. She rose up in the boat, lifting a leg over the side.

"Take her!" cried Courinn, just as Perion grabbed Marie. She fiercely struggled against him. "No, let me go!" she shouted. "Let me go where I belong!"

Tilda abruptly woke to see Perion and Courinn restraining Marie to sit in the middle of

the boat as they sturdily flanked her. At last, Marie gave up the fight without another word or gesture. Her friends firmly held her as they heard the voices of the gnomes ahead, reacting to the sudden commotion.

“Continue on!” shouted Perion. “We’re okay!”

Marie remained silent and didn’t try to peek over the side again. She didn’t move at all. Feelings Marie had never experienced or comprehended before entered her heart: cruelty—mercilessness. She wondered how she might feel if anything terrible happened to her friends? She no longer cared. There was now something intriguing about the idea of harming them. She nodded to herself.

Her friends watched her closely, holding her by the hands. After another quarter of an hour passed, they heard the gnomes’ voices again, chattering loudly. This was followed by a sharp crash as the boat lurched and rocked aside. Perion swung the lantern around peering overboard. “There it is,” he said. “We’ve struck the beginnings of ice.”

The gnomes slowed their speed. Marie barely glanced out at the water, seeing thick slabs of ice sliding by. Several times, they were hustled about as the boat pitched upon contact with several frozen blocks at once.

This went on for another half hour, before the boat came to a gradual then complete halt. The gnomes approached upon the ice. They spoke to Perion, but Marie could not make out what they said.

“Quite all right,” replied Perion, “We’ll move out on foot from here.”

Two gnomes helped Tilda out from the boat. She giggled at them in regard to their size. “If I fall,” she said, “you two really gonna’ save me?”

Perion offered a hand to Marie, who remained silent. “It’s time to go,” he said.

Marie stared blankly at them. Gone was the fervor she exhibited with her impassioned speech to the gnomes. Gone seemed the strength and fortitude to continue through the night. She now appeared indifferent to having nearly reached the end of her quest.

“Yeah, I guess it’s time,” she said, standing and taking Perion’s hand.

A pair of gnome hands reached into the boat to carry out their backpack. Marie leapt forward, ripping it from the small figure’s grasp. “No!” she shouted. “Leave it alone!” She slung it over her own shoulders.

“Marie,” said Courinn sternly. “You have to snap out of it. What happened to you in the boat was not by accident. It was a spell woven by your adversary.”

“I know,” replied Marie almost in a whisper. “Gwylligwitch knows I’m coming.” She bent down and picked up a handful of snow.

Tilda also touched the snow curiously. Though it was night, it remained moderately warm, with only a cool breeze as any May evening might be— but no snow was melting.

“Let’s continue then,” said Perion.

“Wait,” said Marie, stepping forward. “I would like to talk with Rhysis. Alone.” She turned to the gnome as he respectfully approached. “Just a few minutes,” she added, “just me and you, if that’s all right.”

Perion and Courinn did little to hide their apprehension at this request. However, Rhysis assured them it would be okay with his keen eyes. “Follow me, then,” he said, leading Marie away. They soon disappeared behind several drifts of snow and ice.

It was not a few minutes, but close to an hour later before Marie and Rhysis returned. Tilda had fallen asleep again in the boat, but Perion and Courinn were understandably worried, quickly approaching Marie.

“I’m fine,” she said, unwilling to acknowledge their concern. “Are we ready to go?”

Rhysis joined his people, speaking to them before he and Landrom came up to Marie.

“Brave mortal,” said Landrom, “may good fortune find you and your gallant comrades. You are right. Where you now dare to march, we have been unable to find the courage.”

“Alas,” said Rhysis, “I was never a partisan-at-arms, unlike my brother. Thurle was brave, maybe too brave. I will miss him. But it would lift my heart, knowing that he and my nephew, Hennock, were avenged using the charm my brother crafted.”

“I’ll try to do what I can,” said Marie with an acrid glare at her friends, her eyes heavy and downcast as if already in defeat. She began walking off.

Perion and Courinn confronted Rhysis. “What happened?” they asked. “Is she all right?” Rhysis merely nodded, saying no more.

“Does she believe she can reclaim some lost loved one?” asked Landrom. “That is rank folly ... the monster’s victims are all dead. Look after her, she will need your help.”

The gnomes bowed and turned away. Courinn sighed as Perion’s jaw clenched with deep concern.

And so Marie began the last leg of her short quest, in the wee hours of the dark morning, straight toward one of the most dangerous places in this world.

Carrying their lantern, Marie chose to walk alone and ahead of them. Tilda was right behind her. Perion and Courinn came last, carefully watching. After only minutes, they began to see dark lines within the ice. These quickly became shadowy patches, larger and denser, until it was obvious they were seeing chunks and considerable sections of pure black ice mixed among the white.

Marie felt something cold on her cheek. Holding the lantern up, she saw tiny snowflakes falling: pure black flakes, like falling ash, yet frosty. They soon felt the temperature drop and the wind pick up. The pack Marie still carried had only two sweatshirt-like tops. Tilda and Marie each took one.

It quickly became much colder and the snow blew thick and hard. They were soon in a raging blizzard, striving to move forward against the ferocious wind. Perion took the lantern and pack from Marie, whose face and hands were numb. Twice Tilda fell into the black drifts of snow, and Marie once. Perion kept them huddled together, holding one another as they continued. Marie and Tilda were shivering severely. The biting wind howled with demonic voices, some singing ghastly melodies with horrible words.

“They won’t make it!” shouted Courinn above the wind, pulling Tilda and Marie closer to her. The snow had risen with blowing drifts to almost waist deep. “Perion, we must get out of this somehow!”

“We’ll have to dig in for the night!” he yelled back in answer.

“No!” cried Marie, through shivering jaws. “Just a little further! What we’re looking for is straight ahead!”

“How do you know?” retorted Courinn. “We cannot risk a mistake in judgment now!”

Marie turned sharply on Courinn. “Can’t you admit that for once I might know something instead of you?” she shouted.

Courinn gaped at her through half-blinded eyes. “I’m sorry! Yes, I trust you!”

Perion brought Tilda to her feet, after she had fallen a third time. “Marie!” he shouted. “Lead on, then!”

It was probably no more than one hundred yards further, but as Marie remembered it was a punishing, unrelenting and unforgiving stretch. By the time they spotted what looked like a high ridge of sharply jutting rock through the merciless, swirling winds, more than one of them felt they had already died, but was too cold and frostbitten to know it yet.

It had a wide cave opening, which could have allowed a small army to enter. Crossing its threshold, they each gratefully collapsed to the hard ground. The temperature inside was considerably warmer. Marie was overjoyed that she was correct about shelter being so



near. She also knew they were now sprawled out on Gwylligwitch's front doorstep.

It was several hours before dawn. Within the walls of the Woldred police department, a low, rhythmic snore could be heard. Between the rise and ebb of this slumberous apnea, there was another noise: a slight ring, like metal on metal, echoing in steady succession. From this sound soon came as if in answer, a counter-clang. It grew steadier and louder, until it halted outside the high window of Professor Mifflin's jail cell.

Rising from his bunk, the professor peered up at his barred window. There was a shadow gathering under the waning light of a half moon. It came closer and higher, until it set itself just outside the window's bay. The outline of hands, arms and pry-bars attacked the barricading window. Mifflin watched chunks of stone and cement defiantly crumble from the window to the floor. In two minutes, the bars had been bent and torn aside. A familiar face popped through the window. Brage flashed a quick smile.

"Apologies, sir," he said. "We are a bit late."

"I was beginning to worry," replied the professor. He held up the metal strips he had been banging, once part of his bunk's mattress support. "My inconspicuous homing signal helped then?"

Mifflin could see Zendara and Theel outside the window as they shoved Brage through. "Without Perion, we might have missed it," he said, "but Dyllion also has sharp ears." Brage vaulted into a flip and landed firmly on his feet. He then knelt on one knee against the wall, offering his hand to Mifflin. "If you're ready, professor."

"—Mifflin?" James Meehanan's voice boomed. "Who's that with you?" He cleared his throat after suddenly awakening.

Professor Mifflin rubbed his eyes as he grinned in obvious expectation. "Believe it or not," he answered to Brage's sudden curiosity, "that would be Marie's father." Mifflin sighed. Brage knew he was quickly weighing options.

"If you want to take him," said Brage, "it's this way only. The main door is alarm set."

Mifflin nodded. "After what he's been through, I think he deserves it." He motioned to his cell door. "Get Tybain in here to pick this lock."

James Meehanan watched with a healthy mix of distrust—wondering who these out-of-sorts looking boys were—and fascination as he was freed from his cell. Tybain easily unlatched the lock with a device resembling an odd army knife, which he constructed himself and always carried. The demonstration left James, with his chronic obsession of tools and handy-work, highly impressed.

He was then brought to Mifflin's cell just as Dyllion effortlessly leapt down ten feet from

the broken-in window frame. From outside, Zendara and Theel held Brage within the window. Professor Mifflin stood on the backs of Tybain and Dyllion, lifting him up to Brage, whose powerful hands and arms readily took hold of him. Mifflin turned his head and peered back down to James Meehanan.

“If you want to see your daughter again, then come with us now.”

Tilda felt a hand on her forehead, then cheek. She opened her eyes to see Courinn examining her. “Can you feel your legs and feet, Tilda?”

“Yeah,” she answered. “Are we out of the storm?”

“So far,” replied Courinn. “Do you think you can stand?”

Tilda rubbed her face irritably. “I’m just cold, not crippled.”

Courinn and Marie glanced at each other, nodding. “She’s fine,” they said together.

They helped her up where she saw Perion carefully exploring, carrying the lantern on its brightest setting. Their light revealed it was a good-sized cave, yet oddly shaped. Wide at the open end, but steadily becoming narrower as it led back some fifty yards. Perion was curiously studying several passages that led away from the rear of the cave.

Marie glanced out through the cave opening into the night’s raging blizzard. “You tried your best to stop us,” she said softly to herself, “but we’re here now.”

“At least it’s nice and warm,” exclaimed Tilda. The cave walls and ceiling were a swirling mixture of black and white ice, unevenly interspersed in chaotic patterns, never showing evidence of thawing.

“Even warmer back here,” yelled out Perion as he waved them on.

When they all joined him, there were several long beats of silence as each of them imagined what lay ahead. The cave was too disturbingly quiet.

“How did you know,” Courinn asked Marie, “this cave was so near?”

Marie rubbed her temples. Perion studied her, noting that she now appeared in a somewhat easier disposition since the boats. “She’s in my head. She’s waiting for me.”

“But which one?” said Tilda, staring into the tunnels facing them. “There’s five different ways to pick from.”

“Five ways to become lost forever,” said Courinn bleakly.

Marie glanced at each passage. "It's the tunnel all the way on the left."

The glass of their lantern abruptly shattered and the light went out. From beneath them, a low rumble began. It quickly grew in intensity, shaking the ground so rapidly that it became difficult to keep balance. Light began to flash within each passage, erupting into a torrent of chaotic, abstract images. This was followed by voices, vague at first, then emerging clearer.

Courinn suddenly heard a shout from the middle passage. Her eyes went wide in astonishment. "Did you hear that?" she cried. "It's this way! Follow me!"

"Wait, Courinn!" shouted Perion, staring at the bombardment of sight and sound before them. He also felt the lure, sadly gaping at imprecise images of his own lost parents. "It's from our minds! Something is reading all our thoughts!"

Courinn would not listen. "This way!" she shouted, wildly leaping forward and racing into the middle tunnel. She was gone in an instant.

Marie knew Gwylligwitch was not waiting; the vecubus was making the first move.

She took immediate charge, first grabbing Perion about to bolt after Courinn. "No," she declared, "I need you with me now!" She swiftly turned to Tilda. "Go with Courinn, make sure you both stay together!"

Tilda hesitated with uncertainty and plain fear. "Forget whatever happened in the past!" shouted Marie, as if reading Tilda's mind, "Courinn needs *your help now*. Go after her!" Tilda nodded, exhaled with resolve and charged ahead into the middle passage.

Marie turned back to Perion. She knew there was no better companion to have at this moment and from the blaze in his eyes, he looked it. He threw down what was left of the shattered lantern and motioned toward the left-most passage. They both sped off.

The rumbling and distorted images of light had ceased. Tilda ran as fast as she could, which wasn't very fast. From the tunnel's start, the floor had become almost solid ice. Tilda fell twice, realizing it was much quicker if she actually "slid" along the passage floor. Thankfully, there was a pale glow that came from just under the ice, throwing off enough illumine to see the passage walls.

She could not find Courinn, but continued. Her shredded nerves became electrified when she somehow heard her mother's furious shriek: a voice responsible for much of the painful, emotional deprivation Tilda had endured all her life. In this dark, lonely place, it made her feel even lonelier.

Further ahead, Courinn bolted through the passageway, where it sharply twisted and turned. Running with inhuman grace, the icy floor barely hindered her. When the voice

clearly spoke out again, “Come to me, Courinn!” she became lost in a bittersweet whirl of hope. In the next moments, without missing a step she was transformed into her fabulous unicorn shape, galloping on like an angry wind.

The passageway abruptly ended, leading to what looked in the sudden dark to be a wide-open space. There was no longer any pale light under the ice. Everything was cold and black. Courinn cautiously walked forward. Then she halted.

“Are you still here?” she called out into the shadow.

“Yes, Courinn!” erupted a loud voice all around her.

“Is it really you? Where are you? I cannot see anything.”

“Here,” answered the voice. A spot some thirty feet away lit up beneath the ice. Courinn approached, with a rush of many emotions, mostly apprehension. The area continued to remain alight as she stepped up and looked down. Her breath froze and her heart felt as though it were ripped away.

Just beneath the ice surface was the shape of a human form— neatly encased and still. Even through the vague, frost translucency, Courinn surely recognized who it was: her father, whom she had thought was dead.

Staring in horror, her rage was unleashed. Flexing her neck muscles, she stabbed her golden alicorn down into the ice. Again and again, she vehemently struck the frozen ground, gouging away large chunks. Once she had broken up and rooted out most of the ice, she reverted to her human form. Her young hands dug out the remaining pieces, discovering her father’s body sealed within a cocoon-like bubble. Made of a clear, water lillyish material, she easily tore the bubble open. With a great heave, she grasped her fathers’ arms and hoisted his limp body out from the ice, resting him next to her.

He had soft, noble features. There was patience and wisdom etched upon his brow. Even on the edge of consciousness, a plain, simple joy pervaded his pale face.

Courinn softly caressed his cheek. “Father,” she whispered, “I’m here now. Can you hear me?” She continued stroking his face to wake him, but it was unnecessary. At the first sound of her voice, a measured smile formed before his eyes opened a moment later.

“Courinn. Yes, I hear you,” he said, weakly but clearly. “Of all things I dared to want, was to see you again.”

“I’m getting you out of here,” she stammered. “We’re going to be together again.”

Her father’s gaze sharpened, staring at her with joy. “Stubborn and proud,” he said softly. “Just like your mother. How I wish you had known her.”

“What happened?” cried Courinn. “We agreed you would try returning home to seek peace. But when you left— you never said goodbye.”

Now pain swelled in his eyes. “Courinniath, forgive me. After that last night together, I went for a walk, reflecting on our discussion and the wonderful encouragement you gave me. But alas, I was then caught unawares by the abhorrent monster that dwells here. I tried to overcome it, but—”

He dragged his hand down along his side, revealing several open slash wounds. Courinn gasped in dread, clearly seeing how serious they were.

“Let me help you!” she cried. From Courinn’s forehead scar, her alicorn took shape, already glowing. She softly touched it into the blood at her father’s side, while her hand scooped up some ice water.

“No, Courinn,” said her father. “The damage has already taken too much from me.”

Courinn did not listen, mixing her horn into the ice water, causing it to bubble. She desperately swept it against her father’s torn side, then sprinkled many drops into his mouth. He smiled sadly, shaking his head.

“You are brave, my daughter, but even with the healing skills I taught you, it is too late.”

“No, no, no!” sobbed Courinn, as she took both his hands in hers, bringing them to her face, kissing them. “What cruel turn of fortune is this? Why daddy, why?”

Her father seemed to find a new, hidden strength. He instead clasped his hands over hers. “Courinn, it is a grace that you should now know the truth. That there be no more doubt about what happened to me.”

He smiled again, peacefully. “But most of all— that we at last get a chance to say goodbye. That time has now come.”

Courinn lowered her head onto her father’s chest, tears freely flowing.

“Remember and honor peace,” he solemnly continued. “Always seek out and understand the other’s heart. Remember love. Remember all that I have taught you, as I will not forget what you have taught me here now.”

He raised her head and profoundly looked into her watery eyes for the final time. “Remember me, Braziath, husband of Mara. You must escape this place at once, my daughter. Live and do not forget what we shared. My beloved Courinniath, I love you with all of my being. *Estracelra i loreani duor*. Goodbye.”

Courinn bore the insufferable grief that burned within her.

“I will never forget. I will always love you too. *Estra oramon lyssis*. Goodbye, daddy.”

She watched as those same eyes that a moment ago peered into her soul, slowly went blank. She felt his grip go limp. Her father was gone. Courinn gently lowered his hands, again laying her head on his chest, crying openly. Moments later, she found herself resting upon a full-grown black unicorn, with a shining golden horn.

Courinn ran her fingers through his great mane and kissed him for the last time, unable to check her tears. He was everything to her.

“Such a touching moment,” spoke a voice, perfectly emulating her father’s. It was followed by a menacing, merciless snicker rising in volume, reverberating about the icy caves, becoming a full-throated laughter— heartlessly mocking Courinn’s grievous loss.

Courinn clenched her fists as the red-hot boil of raw fury erupted. “You murderer!” she shouted. Then she quickly took control of her rage, focusing it.

“I’m coming for you,” she said, grinding her teeth.

From yet another tunnel leading away, Courinn saw a rush of swirling fog and knew this was an invitation to make good on her revenge. She looked down at the body of her father. With his last words ringing in her mind, she forced them aside, for just this one time. As the cruel laughter continued, she leapt forward, again in unicorn shape, to face her destiny.

Embossed deeply within the pale glow of the icy ground, Perion found more sets of tracks: the third so far. They were large, with an impressively long stride.

“It looks like a boot print,” said Marie, stepping up to it.

“Almost,” said Perion in confusion, trying to decipher the riddle. “But something sturdier than that. And they are fresh, within the last hour.” The prints continued ahead until they sharply turned off into one of the many tunnels leading away from the main passage they were in. “If it’s not the monster,” he added, “whatever it is, it’s big.”

“It’s not her,” said Marie. When she noticed Perion glaring at her, she knew what he was thinking. “Yes,” she assured him, “we’re heading along the right passage way.”

He smiled at her correct guess. “We’ve been spending too much time together. But the tracks keep veering back this way, so you must be correct.”

“I hope Tilda and Courinn found each other,” said Marie.

Tilda slowly poked her head in. It was another chamber, smaller, about the size of a school classroom. In it were many raised platforms of icy stone, some empty, some with leather coverings over them. It all struck a chord of curiosity as Tilda stepped in.

Upon closer inspection, the icy platforms resembled stone beds. Tilda's inquisitiveness mounted. She reached out and lifted one of the leather coverings. Under it was an ashen face and a dead body. Tilda jumped back in fright, but at the same moment, she heard something approach: a rough, scraping sound against the icy floor. She raced out of the chamber.

When Tilda carefully peeked in again, she saw something had entered from an adjacent chamber. Her impulse was to scream but the instant terror she felt stuck hard in her throat. All that came out of her mouth was a strained raw wheeze, trailing off into shuddering gasps.

It was a revolting creature of short stature, no taller than four feet. It had a forked tail and a hide of thick spikes. Just as Marie had been sickened at the initial sight of Gwylligwitch, so too was Tilda seeing this thing— which also had no head, only thin eyes set below its mouth. Two short limbs carried what looked like a bowl.

The creature placed it upon a table-like structure next to the icy beds, then lifted one of the leather coverings. From the bowl, it began swathing one of the bodies with a soft cloth, and with what Tilda immediately noticed was gentle compassion.

She watched the grotesque thing go from body to body cleaning and caring for each, its misshaped hands working with true sympathetic care. When the creature uncovered the last body, Tilda gasped in ghoulish recognition. Scream she now did, letting it all out in disgusted revulsion. Tilda glared at the corpse-like features of Jack Salento.

At the young teen's deafening shriek, the monster appeared quite startled, retreating several steps. They both stood studying one another. To Tilda's surprise, the creature did not attack or make any aggressive move.

A thumping noise broke their silence. With the sound quickly approaching, Tilda cocked her head back into the passage. She barely jumped aside as the unicorn shape of Courinn galloped and leapt into the chamber, facing the creature shrinking back in defense.

"Are you hurt, Tilda?" wailed Courinn, aggressively springing up upon her hind legs, towering over the monster.

"No!" she exclaimed. "It didn't try to attack me. Is this it? The monster Marie is looking for?"

Nostrils flaring, Courinn's front hooves landed inches from the short monstrosity. She carefully scrutinized it. As hideous as the creature was, it obviously knew fear. Its chest convulsed with rapid breathing.

“No—” Courinn guessed. “This must be ... its offspring. A wretched vecubus youngling.”

The unicorn was struck with a sickening aversion, along with a smoldering hate she had never known. She ferociously ground her teeth, making a shrill screech.

“*Zru-bluk canir!*” she cursed. “You plague ridden filth! Desecrating innocent victims for your loathsome mother’s pleasure! How many have you done this to?”

She again leapt up, seeming to grow in stature. The young monster cowered back.

“You’ll not touch another after today!” assured Courinn. She viciously slashed her horn across the creature’s chest, opening an ugly wound, dribbling with greenish puss.

“What are you doing?” yelled Tilda.

“Claiming vengeance! I’ll drown Gwylligwitch in the blood of this young one!”

“No, Courinn! It never tried to hurt me! Look! It’s afraid, it doesn’t understand!”

Courinn eyed the terrified creature, clutching at its wound, but still not attempting the slightest resistance. The unicorn then studied the victims upon the platforms.

“Look at these bodies, Tilda! Spellbound, ready to be frozen in ice!” She spotted a vaguely familiar face. “I see your Jack Salento, your prince charming— lying there as if already dead. Is that not plain enough for you?”

Tilda avoided the sight of Jack. “But if this is a child,” she instead persisted, “maybe it doesn’t know any better! Maybe it’s just doing what its mother told it!” Jumbled, disquieting images of her own mother flashed through her mind. “That doesn’t mean it’s all bad! It doesn’t!”

Courinn looked back to the creature, who saw the lustful hatred in her eyes. “That’s enough, Tilda. Leave this chamber and wait outside for me.”

But Tilda instead came after the imposing unicorn. “No! Who do you think you are? You have no right!”

Courinn turned on Tilda in a wave of rabid indignation. “No right!” she roared. “I just watched my own father die! He was murdered by the mother of this scourge here! He was all I had, and for a second time he was taken from me. This freak abomination deserves death, as does the monster who gave it life! Go, Tilda! I will treat with this devil.”



With the young vecubus shrinking to its knees, Courinn raised her long horn for a deathblow. But Tilda was a master at utilizing provoking words, usually to find trouble. Now she had to prevent it, and to do so, she went for the throat.

“What *about* your father?” she shouted in desperation. “What would he say now, watching you do this? Is this what he wanted from you in his last breaths?”

The words struck at Courinn like a splintered knife blade. She forcibly struggled against them, bringing her head and its sharp alicorn down to bear upon the wounded creature.

“Did your father really want a gutless *coward* as his only daughter?” said Tilda, unrelenting in her verbal assault. “A coward *and* a murderer? That’s what it takes to kill something that won’t raise a finger against you. What shame are you bringing him now?”

Courinn touched the point of her horn to the creature’s chest, just below its eyes. One surge forward and the young thing would be cleanly skewered. The creature shut its frightened eyes, ready for the inevitable.

Tilda’s words rang in Courinn’s head, followed by her own father’s last words: “*Honor peace, look into the other’s heart.*” She halted, unable to proceed. In the next moment’s crucial struggle, she tore away and cast aside her heart’s dark desire.

“I’m sorry,” she at last whispered to the creature.



Courinn's four legs collapsed, but before she fully made contact with the floor, her mortal form landed first, head buried in arms.

"Forgive me!" Courinn pitifully repeated before the creature. Even after sustaining its wound, it still raised a limb and gently patted Courinn in forgiveness.

Tilda ran forward to Jack. She raised the covering next to his, revealing his mother in the same trancelike state. Tilda placed her head down over Jack's heart, threw her arms around him and hugged him just as his mother would have.

Marie and Perion entered the dark, gaping chamber. Like Courinn before, they could hardly see a thing. But Marie easily detected that same foul odor: like something rotting away for weeks. With a sound like a charge of forced air, the floor beneath began to glow, revealing an uneven circle of ice, surrounded by a chamber of black glacial rock. Marie's eyes drifted up and down. It appeared like an enormous ice-skating ring in a primitive arena, carved from the heart of a black iceberg. At its far end, there were glints of something reflective or shiny, but mostly hidden within silhouette.

"You were correct about being expected," said Perion.

Marie did not answer, instead focusing her sights upon the ice. She saw something dark lying there. Perion saw it too.

"What is that?" he asked.

Marie took a full breath and stepped forward, fearing what she was about to see. Moments later it was confirmed: shapes below the ice, vague, but distinguishable as people. Venturing across the frozen prison, they saw dozens and dozens more.

"They're so many," whispered Marie to herself, shaking her head in disbelief. She then ran to the dark shape lying ahead. Her heart twisted in panic as she dropped beside the black unicorn with a golden horn.

"Courinn!" Marie shouted. "No!"

"It's not Courinn," assured Perion as he knelt down, quickly surveying.

"Are you sure?"

"It's a male. The mane is shorter, the forelock longer." Perion ran his hands along the unicorn's neck and sides. His face hardened.

"He's dead," he said, examining the frozen shards around the body of Courinn's father. "Someone or something recently dug this unicorn out." He took one of their sleep

coverings from the pack he still carried and dabbed it along the unicorn's wounds. "He could have still been alive at the time."

"No, Perion," replied Marie. "They're all dead." Her voice sounded empty and hopeless. "I've failed. The ghost I saw of my mother in the Witch's Fingers was real, just like the legend says."

As with Courinn earlier, laughter suddenly burst out around them. This time however, it didn't begin quietly and build. Nor was it mocking in tone. It erupted deeply and fully, in an amused reaction to Marie's last statement. Its bombarding echo among the giant blocks of ice blasted their ears.

"The Witch's Fingers!" thundered a voice amidst the laughter. "You've not put stock into that old ghostly piffle!"

The voice was female, but any normal similarity ended there. It was a terribly ravaged, scorched and craggy voice, which sounded like frozen, grinding metal. It was difficult to listen to.

"I don't often welcome trespassers, certainly not any who do so of their own arrogance. Yet you, my defiant young mortal, have recently provided me with such amusement, of which I've not enjoyed in ages."

Marie's eyes searched throughout the wide chamber.

"For that alone," the voice continued, "I shall grant you brief audience, instead of torment and death. You are courageous to have come to me, even after I had rid you of that inane, useless charm. But let us talk first, before I decide your fate."

"I didn't know you could speak," said Marie. "How do you know English?"

The grating voice took on a note of earnest. "One must become adaptable living in these times. Alas, it is not as it once was, centuries ago. *O negh e ke wishe noo*. Or to put it plainly, *U zult spoedig mijn slaaf zijn*."

Marie turned to Perion for some kind of translation. He shook his head. Taking a few steps forward on the ice, Marie was now certain of one thing: she had no use for talking. She was fed up and angry and got right to the point.

"You've been poking around in my head for days now. You know why I'm here, so let's not waste any more time. Where is my mother?"

"Ahhhhh," rasped the vecubus monster, indicating yet further approval of Marie's bold and challenging tone. "But I'm certain you'll care to listen to what I propose first. Mark this, human."

The silhouetted backdrop at the chamber's far end sprang into full view. Marie's gasp stuck in her throat. In the past week, she had seen and witnessed many unnaturally beautiful and otherworldly, enchanting things. Yet, none of them instantly pierced her heart with such fierce desire and longing as the sight now before her.

Mounds and mounds and still more mounds of the most splendid gold any mortal had ever beheld: a magnificence cascading into a golden, red and white brilliance. All of it masterfully fashioned into gems, coins, and jewels along with heroic weapons of supernatural embellishment and shimmering opulence.

It was this sudden, overwhelming desire for what lay before her that quickly stoked a burning malice within Marie. For there seated upon some kind of makeshift throne, some self-important place of honor, erected within the heaps of the treasure was Gwylligwitch.

"Now I ask," the monster teased, taking grand pleasure in Marie's reaction. "Do you like what you see?"

Marie mumbled something, but could not clearly articulate a response; so steadfast was the grasp in which she was held. She had once already seen Gwylligwitch, she had heard again and again of the monster's tale and how it had stolen an immense hoard of gold. Yet now, seeing this vast treasure in the keep of this hideous monster struck something buried deep within her. Something she had so far only perceived as a distant reflection now began to form into a more conclusive impression.

"You have no rightful claim to that gold!" exclaimed Marie at last in anger. She caught herself in surprise at the slightly different voice she had spoken with. It was dissimilar and yet it felt wholly natural. "You're nothing more than a worthless thief!"

"Am I?" said the headless monster, with a twisted grin of her wide mouth. "A brazen accusation from one with such pining desire in their eyes. Come, how readily would you see yourself sitting where I am now?"

As surely as Marie knew it was wrong, Gwylligwitch was right. She couldn't help herself. All her life the sight of gold had transfixed her. She never understood why, it just did. She was aware that at times it made her selfish and greedy and she had acted like a spoiled monster herself, wanting as much of it as she could find. She felt that now, only a hundred fold more. Like a dark rain swiftly washing over her, a hunger smoldered in her heart and mind. If she were aware that the vecubus might have been weaving a spell to heighten her desire, she did not care. She wanted the monster's gold, all of it, all to herself. She hated the disgusting creature. She needed to be sitting right where it now sat. Any thought of her mother was cast aside and forgotten.

From a side passage, Courinn appeared in human form. She glared at Gwylligwitch as she moved toward the fallen body of her father, kneeling beside him. Though Marie and the monster saw Courinn, either made no motion to recognize her.

“You do want it,” pressed Gwylligwitch. “You want it all, or I’m a mudtroll. Your entire short life, you have been poisoned by this same gold lust. But you never knew why. Don’t you care to know, mortal?”

Perion saw that the question stung Marie hard, adding to her confusion. He noted the troubling range of emotion etched across her face.

“Marie!” he shouted, quickly approaching. “Don’t listen to this wretched demon. It spouts only lies and treachery!” He took her hand in his. “Look at me,” he said, intently peering at her, as he did at the Rainbow Falls tower. Marie again felt Perion breach her mind. “Your mother,” he silently spoke. “Think only about her. Show her to me.”

Marie slapped his hands away. “Don’t touch me!” she shouted in a fuming rage, before turning to face him and Courinn. “I don’t need either of you anymore!” Yet she knew Perion had glimpsed images of her mother, before she drove them out from her thoughts.

“Behold your forgotten past,” said Gwylligwitch, raising the shorter of her deformed limbs. An area of ice lit up in front of Marie, looking like a misty teevee picture within its frozen crust. She instantly saw herself or a young girl who resembled her. She was running through the woods. The icy picture also showed Gwylligwitch hurrying along, carrying something in both hands: something large and pure gold. The scene changed and Gwylligwitch was asleep under the trees, clutching her gold prize. Along crept the girl and carefully wrested the large treasure from the creature, replacing it with a thick branch. The scene shifted again, revealing the monster waking with a furious roar and then hotly pursuing the girl.

Just as Marie first re-learned of her mother’s fate a week ago, another gateway of her memory opened, buried ever deeper within her psyche. She now lucidly remembered these images before her, but not within the life she currently lived. She understood she was once someone else, a long time ago. Her name was Charlotte.

“I remember,” recalled Marie, now as Charlotte, with a sudden British inflection and speech pattern. “You pursued me for days and nights. You would not forsake the hunt.”

“You and I, my dauntless adversary,” explained the vecubus, “first crossed paths on that day some one hundred and sixty years ago. We both discovered our desire for gold that morning and it has burned in our blood ever since. You and I cannot change what we are. Let us embrace it together.”

The images faded back into the ice until they were gone. Marie rubbed her swimming head— with part of her psyche, though perhaps not all, returning to the present. Behind her, she did not see Perion, staring down, slowly making his way along the many shapes and faces imprisoned under the ice.

“What do you want of me?” Marie asked the creature.

“You see the hoard I have pillaged,” said Gwylligwitch. “But there is more to be had. I fancy there is still some hidden in the late general’s estate, though the night watchman there is cunning. However— *you know* where the most exemplary spoils are to be found: the waters beneath the Rainbow’s End, half a day’s march from here.”

Marie shook her head, feigning ignorance. “I’ve never heard of such a place.”

Gwylligwitch erupted in fury, rising from her self-fashioned throne. “Do not lie to me!” she roared, her rotted, poisoned voice trembling the hall. “I know you have already been there and I know what plunder lies hidden beneath its spells!”

“You wish for me to aid you in stealing yet more gold?” Charlotte’s voice snapped back, undaunted by the vecubus’ anger. “What then will be my reward?”

“Have I not been clear, human?” exclaimed the monster. “You shall share this fortune with me for all time.”

Marie balked. “You said it yourself— I desire all of it, not for it to be shared. How would such an arrangement work? It surely would not be long before one of us commenced designs on the life of the other.”

Gwylligwitch laughed softly. “There is no fool about you. You speak plainly. But let us make good on that plight when the time comes.” Gwylligwitch then stood to her full height of ten feet. She stepped aside from her throne and motioned to Marie.

“Come,” offered the creature. “Sit and take my place amidst this countless wealth that would soon be yours.”

The vile, cunning vecubus had made it too easy— too tempting. She fully exploited Marie’s greatest weakness. Her sapping resolve was no match for her centuries’ old desire, in addition to the bewitching powers now commanded upon her. She was on fire with avarice as she took her first step toward both the monster and its precious gold.

“No, Marie!” cried Courinn, perched next to her father. When Marie ignored her, Courinn stood up, eyes blazing at the monster.

“Stop it!” she shouted. “She’s just a girl! You can’t enslave her!”

Gwylligwitch leered with vindictive satisfaction as Marie continued.

“Your mother!” cried Courinn to Marie. “What about your mother?”

“She’s dead!” screamed Marie, viciously spinning at her friend. She saw Courinn’s hands upon her deceased father. “And who’s that next to you? Someone you loved?”

Like my mother, they're dead too. Everything we cared about is gone!" Courinn could see from the malefic gleam in Marie's eyes that she was not of her own mind.

"But a new day awaits me, Courinn," continued Marie. "A new life! Soon I'll be as rich as a queen! A queen of pure gold!"

"Pardon me, Your Excellency," said Perion. "Are you forgetting something?"

Perion stood some twenty feet away. From his pack, he withdrew the two-handed golden diamond, instantly refracting into thousands upon thousands of twinkling, gold facets. Of all Gwylligwitch's treasure, this single stone's beauty surpassed the whole of it.

The vecubus monster had to partially avert her eyes from its glow, yet she could not deny desperately coveting such a precious gem. From her foul mouth came a long, drawn hiss of sinister greed.

Marie's face tightened in an angry snarl. It was clear she thought Perion meant to steal the stone from her, there and then. "Give that to me now," she demanded.

"Come and get it, Your Eminence," replied Perion.

Marie rushed at him, her hands ravenously held out. When she reached Perion, he deliberately dropped the gem onto the ice. Marie gnashed her teeth, launching a solid kick at him, which Perion sidestepped.

"Pick it up!" she screeched, not daring to look subservient in front of Gwylligwitch.

"No," replied Perion, calmly.

Searing anger and hate filled Marie's heart. All the horrific thoughts she had considered back on the lake now returned with terrible potency. She no longer needed her friends, no longer cared about them. They were now in her way.

"Why do you seek the favor of these two useless plebes?" Gwylligwitch slyly asked.

"Deal with them," answered Marie with a sickened sneer, "in whatever way you like."

Courinn stood over her father. "Vecubus," she defiantly addressed Gwylligwitch, "have you seen your little one?"

"What of him, unicorn?" answered the monster. "I drained your father of his own depraved blood, yet you could not slay my youngling. You are weak."

"And you are now all alone," answered Courinn. "The young one longed to be liberated of your wicked dominion. I healed the very wound I gave him and set him free. He is gone with no desire to see you again."

Gwylligwitch remained silent. Courinn knew the monster was searching its own mind.

“Curious, that you did not ‘feel’ this,” added Courinn. “Perhaps, the little one blocked you out ... perhaps his mind is greater.”

Courinn was suddenly thrown hard on her side. She grasped at her father’s body, but was torn away and lurched forward along the ice by an unseen force. Moments later, Perion grabbed at his head, before buckling to his knees. Gwylligwitch entered his mind, swiftly overpowering all his telepathic skill. The both of them slid across the frozen lake.

Marie kneeled to pick up the golden diamond, yet it too glided away on its own.

Perion and Courinn were dragged to a spot at the edge of the icy lake. Vapor began to form beneath them. As they struggled to break free from the creature’s bewitchment, the ice began to melt. Gwylligwitch was going to deal with them in the same fashion as her other victims: submerged, frozen and trapped beneath the black ice.

Marie watched her friends, pinned tight, as if an unseen claw were stretched over them. She glared, completely unmoved, with a hint of terrifying pleasure. Perion and Courinn began to sink into the rapidly melting ice. In his effort to resist the power over him, Perion locked eyes with Marie. He had one hope left.

“Marie!” he shouted, spitting out icy water. “Look down! Look down in front of you!”

Perion had not chosen an indiscriminate place to stand when he threw down the gold diamond. Watching Marie manipulated and spellbound by the vecubus was too much for him. He had searched the ice for the images received from Marie’s mind— the likeness he and Courinn had once seen in the globe charm. He gambled on the love in Marie’s heart to trump all. Yet, staring into Marie’s face, he knew it was too late.

Marie lowered her eyes, now seeing what she ignored seconds ago, trying to take the diamond. There her mother lay, trapped six inches below the icy surface.

It was like a torturous dream and a rapturous burst of newfound hope violently colliding. Marie’s most significant challenge was before her: the eternal battle, waged in mortals from their earliest days— between the human heart’s merciless, stone hardness— and simple love. Within her, both sides desperately vied for supremacy: all the gold she wanted or bringing her mother home. She stared up at the mountains of treasure with the hideous monster next to it, then back down to her mother’s sweet face, now frozen solid, expressionless. Marie trembled with her internal struggle. But in the end, hopelessness won out. Staring into the ice, Marie’s mind had been twisted enough to firmly believe her mother was indeed dead. She never had a chance. How did any of it matter now?

A great cry burst out from behind them. Marie turned to see a hulking, shining figure charge ahead. She had to blink several times before she could believe it. It was the



knight—the lost knight, whom they had last seen days ago upon the river. He had vowed an unwavering oath to Marie, and he had sought her out to complete his service. His massive broadsword and shield were raised and ready.

The crushing force holding Perion and Courinn to drown within the icy water ceased. The resplendent, golden diamond also halted upon the ice, some ten feet from Gwylligwitch as she rushed forward toward her new adversary. The gallant knight met the vecubus near the center of the ice.

Imposing as he was, the monster dwarfed him. Gwylligwitch brought both her contorted limbs crashing down upon the knight's shield. He was badly thrown off balance, nearly falling. His iron shield was battered as if it were pewter. The beast's forked tail uncoiled and struck at the knight. He nimbly eluded the blow in spite of his size.

Perion tried lifting Courinn up, spluttering and choking within the slushy ice. "Breathe!" he said, trying to do the same himself.

Regaining his balance, the knight swung his giant sword upwards, cleanly severing the monsters' dragging left limb. She roared, more in rage than pain. The stalwart knight quickly pivoted and drove his broadsword straight into the vecubus' spiked torso. The blade sunk deeply and the creature shuddered with foul breath. But Gwylligwitch somehow recovered.

Just as the knight hurled his dagger, catching the beast straight between its eyes, her forked tail flung outwards, wrapping around him. She lifted and held him up in mid-air as she drew his own sword from herself. With a quick thrust, the monster buried the blade straight through the knight's armor. She held him aloft, gloating, watching the life pass from him, until she hurled the fallen soldier aside, crashing into a heap upon the ice.

Gwylligwitch rose up, seeming to grow even larger. She tore the knife out from between her eyes, as if it were a mere splinter.

"Is that all?" she roared, casting the short blade aside. "Is that the best you have against me?" She let out a thundering, victorious laugh.

The assaulting spell reappeared, flinging Perion and Courinn down again into the watery ice. Courinn was instantly submerged, with Perion only barely above water. A soft, cocoon-like bubble began wrapping itself around each of them.

"Finish them," said Marie to the monster. "And take the golden diamond for the nuisance of this attack."

The vecubus bent, reaching out with its short remaining limb as the golden gem slid into her gnarled hand.

“Your charm!” choked Perion as the last of the water engulfed him. “Marie, use your char—” They were both drowning beneath the ice.

Marie reached up to her neck. Her globe charm was missing. She did not understand.

Gwylligwitch lifted the golden diamond in awe, marveling at its incomparable beauty. The diamond’s splendor radiated all about the creature’s hide of rot and pitted disease, which she endured with lustful rapture, in spite of the discomfort its light inflicted. It was a fitting tribute; soon this human slave of hers would recover the myriad gold riches beneath the Rainbow’s End. Gwylligwitch would then slowly put Marie to death.

Yet now, the vecubus stared in confusion as tiny lines began to appear all about the stone, like spidery legs threading themselves. The lines began to split, quickly becoming seams. The sounds of many cracking fissures erupted as chunks of the diamond began shattering and falling away. Gwylligwitch gazed in utter bewilderment as the entire gem blasted apart in her deformed hand . . . .

Marie had played her final chess move: a built-in failsafe, the groundwork of which she laid down some five hours ago. In the last two days, she had learned how powerful the mind sorcery of Gwylligwitch truly was. The closer Marie came to the monster’s lair, the easier the vecubus could breach her thoughts. Hour by hour, she could sense her resolve weakening. Add a hoard of gold to the mix, and Marie knew she would not have a prayer of a chance. She needed a weapon, which she already had around her neck. But— she would need to launch it, even if she were completely under the monster’s control.

At the banks of Lake Gwindylo, Marie shared a well-spent hour with a certain gnome. A gnome who was an able enough craftsman to secretly embed something into the golden diamond she had found. After all, Rhysis was the brother of Thurle; if anyone could do it, he could.

With an abominable roar of pain, Gwylligwitch staggered. Set within the last of the crumbling diamond, the globe amulet detonated an explosion of rainbow light. It brilliantly glowed in swirling hues throughout the icy chamber.

The monster collapsed to the ice, cowering in astonishment and perhaps for the first time in her life, sudden fear. Marie’s instructions to Rhysis were executed perfectly. The diamond was to begin its destruction at the vecubus’ first touch. The gnome even wove an extra detail into his spell: the charm’s entangled necklace tightly caught around the monster’s fingers, just as when Gwylligwitch first seized it, days ago.

Marie stared, wide-eyed in absolute wonder. She was so thankful she had been able to shield her trap from her enemy’s thoughts by concentrating on insatiable greed. The sudden reveal of Marie’s true objective scorched the befuddled mind of Gwylligwitch, just as Marie felt the strangling spell over her— a desolate, cold barrier in her heart and mind— diminish, then break.

She again glanced up at the immense hoard as the reality of her ordeal came crashing down. The primal desire of gold that so nearly possessed her to forsake her beloved mother was shattered.

From the frozen grave closing up over her friends, Perion's arm smashed upwards, shattering the ice. Amidst the splintering shards, he broke free, emerging with Courinn in his arms. Marie ran to them, helping her friends back onto the ice. She was again reminded with amazement how her comrades were far from human— quickly recovering, with just a minimum of coughing and spitting.

Courinn clutched Marie eagerly. "I remember!" she said, still coughing. "All this time I had forgotten, but now I remember!"

"Remember what?" said Marie.

"In the Witch's Fingers ... did your mother speak to you when you saw her?"

"I don't know," said Marie.

"Try to recall!" urged Courinn. "Did she say anything to you at all? Anything!"

Perion bounded off across the ice where his pack had fallen as Marie tried her best to remember. She saw her mother twice. Once before Macmanus, then right after. Her mother was crying. She had gestured to hug Marie.

"She was crying, I remember that."

"But did she speak in any way to you?"

Marie recalled both instances. "No," she replied again. "She never did."

"Then she's alive! Alive, right now! It's what my father once explained to me. A speaking ghost in the Witch's Fingers is already dead. But if they do not speak ... they are still among the living!"

Marie fought to hold back the welling of emotion in her throat. As Perion raced back, she bowed her head shamefully. "Courinn, Perion, please, please forgive me."

"We made a pledge to you near a certain rock ledge, where this all started," said Perion, taking a small satchel and two iron nails from his pack. "Let's end this now." Courinn sternly nodded, shoving her drenched hair aside in final resolve.

Soaked in the rainbow light, grappling with the spell-woven, entwined charm about her fingers and enraged beyond any hope of mercy, Gwylligwitch looked helpless upon the ice. Then Marie learned her enemy was also capable of unveiling tactical surprises.

In a shower of black ice, the frozen floor before them angrily broke apart. Many shapes burst upwards from underneath: long, spindly, and slimy gray. They were giant bloodsucking worms and they were very real.

“It could have been anything else,” mumbled Marie as she cringed back. “Why worms?”

The immense brutes formed a deadly wall in front of Gwylligwitch. Their spineless bodies wriggled madly as they croaked with inhuman speech. Two worms lunged out; one was met with a golden horn pierced through it. The sharp point of an iron nail slashed the other. Both fell dead.

Marie turned to see her unicorn comrade valiantly impale two more in quick succession. Perion swung his arms out, grabbing another by its head. The satchel fell from his grasp as he wrestled the worm down, before driving a nail between its eyes.

For Marie, there was no time to consider how she would quickly overcome her lifelong aversion as a particularly ugly and ferocious worm seized her. She could feel its cold sliminess against her skin as several pulsating, fleshy pincers opened small holes in her arms and legs. Glancing to the ground, Marie saw her chance. She threw herself backwards, landing hard upon the ice, feeling the worm wrap tightly around one arm and both her legs. Marie gasped with terror as the worm’s hollow jaws unhinged from its blood-swollen head, its mouth dripping with poisonous fluid.

Marie desperately stretched her free arm outwards, grabbing the dropped satchel. She pulled it open with her teeth and shoved the bag into the worms’ maw, pouring out its contents of pure salt. The slimy worm suffered immediate strangulation as the salt instantly sucked away its moisture. Recalling Courinn’s defense against the vultures, Marie held the satchel under her worm punctures catching a single drop of blood. She cast the magical salt over the worm’s thrashing body, where it erupted into flame, releasing her from its squirming death throes.

Perion and Courinn courageously fought through Gwylligwitch’s protective guard, while Marie scooped up handfuls of salt and hurled it into the attacking heads and bodies coming at her. She was suddenly met with a tremendous force from behind. It sent her to the ice, knocking the wind from her. Painfully rolling over, Marie caught a glimpse of Perion dragging his nails in a crisscross pattern, slaying a dreadfully fat worm.

When she could breathe again, Marie was lying among nothing but invertebrate corpses. Her comrades had made good work of them. She shoved away the oily carnage as she was grabbed yet again— this time by the hand of Perion. He quickly pulled her towards the vanquished knight’s shiny form. Perion’s hands gripped the hilt of the sword protruding from his breastplate.

“Help me with this, quickly!” he said to Marie. “I doubt I can remove it alone.”

She took the sword hilt just as one of the knight's gloved hands darted out, seizing her. Marie jumped in fright. With great effort, the knight raised his helmeted head.

"Tell me, my friend," he spoke with a low, accented voice. "What is opposite of *many days lost*?"

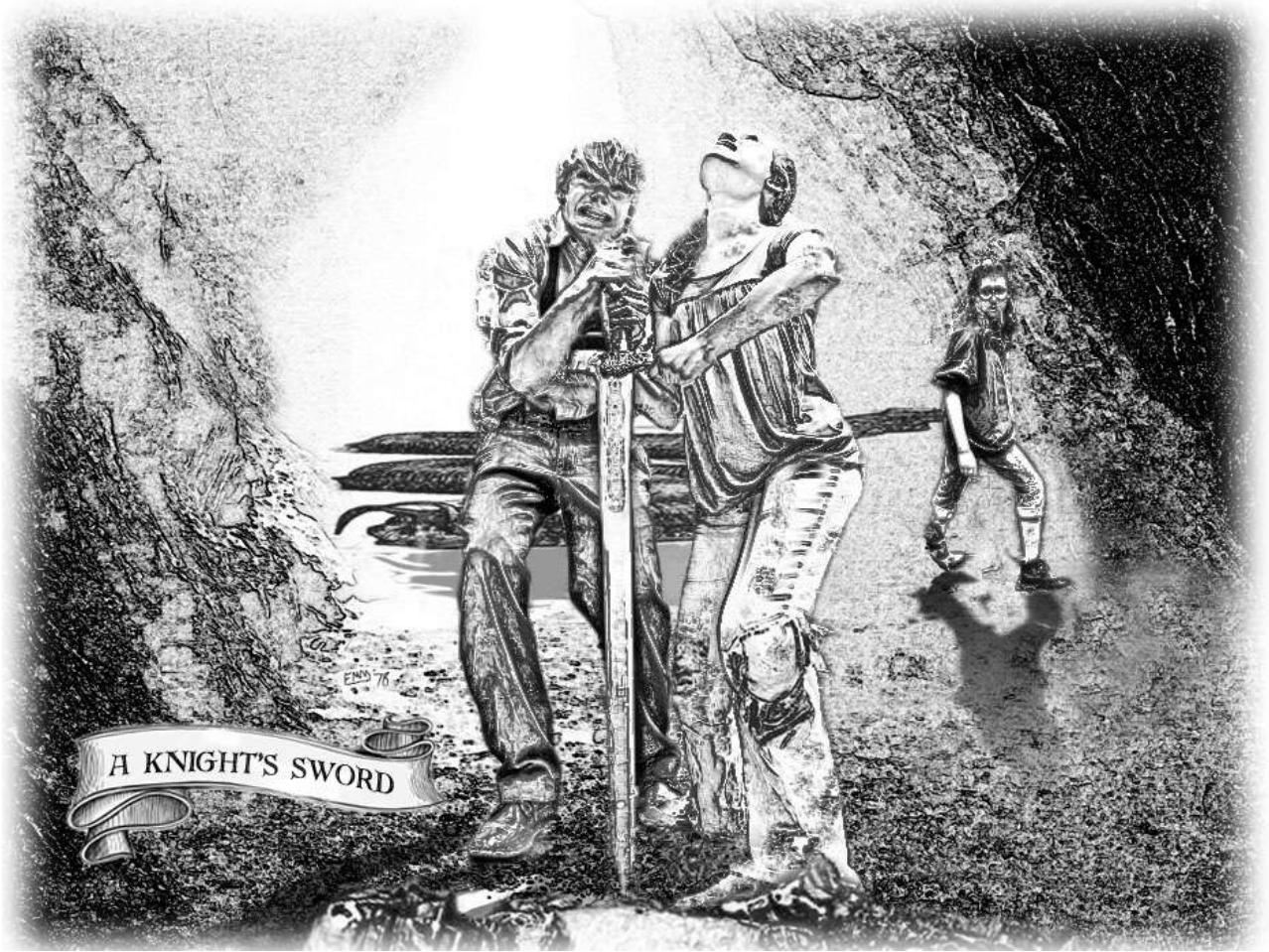
Marie didn't understand. Then her throat tightened, remembering the jokes she had playfully shared with the knight.

"I— don't know," she sheepishly answered.

He nodded, peacefully and contented. "*A knight's soul saved*," he said weakly. She couldn't see under his visor or helmet, yet she knew he was smiling. His head slowly dropped and rolled to one side. His hand went limp.

Marie stared at him in bitter sadness. She did not know who he was, but he had given his life for her cause. Yet the honorable knight did not die in vain, having cut off Gwylligwitch's vital limb. Without her other hand, the vecubus could not now wish to pry apart the amulet's chain. Behind Marie, the monster let out a hideous cry of hatred and suffering that shook the chamber and the ice below them.

With a renewed fire in her heart, Marie's hands sprung back up to the knight's sword. With a great effort, her and Perion drew it out. With Courinn's help, the three of them hurled the broadsword upwards in a wide arc as best they could, hoping the momentum and mass of the blade would exert a fierce blow to the monster's hump and shoulders—right where its head should have been.



But the sly vecubus acted quickly. She purposely brought up her remaining entangled limb, letting the mighty blade sever it and the charm away from her. Gwylligwitch then experienced a quick surge of strength. Armless now, her formidable forked tail swung about, ready for whatever battle her opponents could wage.

Courinn rushed in, galloping wildly with no fear, only venomous anger. She plunged her golden horn squarely into the vecubus' bubbling, oozing wound, once given to her by the gnome, Thurle.

Gwylligwitch screamed as if struck in her own black heart, flatly pinning Courinn under her tail while Perion leapt up, onto her spiked back. The monster violently recoiled from Courinn's blow, yet Perion with his otherworldly skill, stayed atop, plunging an iron nail into her misshapen hunchback.

Marie leapt forward, toward the monster's severed limb with her charm entangled within its fingers. Cut away from the beast, the spell became undone. Marie easily removed it.

She then stood again before the monster, her centuries old enemy and held up the globe charm for the last time, its kaleidoscope of light forcing Gwylligwitch to avert her eyes.

“Yes, I’ve been to the Rainbow’s End!” shouted Marie. “You should see all the gold that’s there!”

In her mind-numbing wrath, Gwylligwitch released Courinn and blindly lunged out with her tail, seizing Marie. The monster wrenched her upwards toward her mouth, even as her single fang— her curved, deadly umgricuth— appeared.

Courinn rose, lifting the knight’s sword with her teeth and jaws. With her four legs, she spun in a circle and released the weapon, casting it upwards. It easily passed within the vecubus’ reach— but she had no limb to seize it. Perion instead sprung from the creature’s back, flipped over and snatched the sword hilt in mid-air. He landed directly on her shoulders just as he guided the blade’s momentum downward, cleanly severing the vecubus fang. Gwylligwitch staggered, struck mortally. Perion hurtled away.

Marie’s stomach twisted in knots from the vecubus’ hideous stench at this close distance. While the monster wavered unsteadily, striving to keep grasp of her mortal adversary, Marie glared coldly at the diseased monster.

“Fidleedee,” she bitingly scoffed, “you should have left me alone a hundred and sixty years ago.” Hate burned in the creature’s eyes.

“You think this charm is useless?” she added. “Well *this* is for what you did to my mother.” She cast the globe charm straight into the dripping, bleeding mouth of Gwylligwitch.

The rainbow’s multi-colored aura engulfed the monster. She dropped Marie, unable to bear the force now laid upon her.

Perion and Courinn helped Marie away as the hide of Gwylligwitch caught aflame. Electrical spikes danced upon her torso and tail. In a burning heap, putrid smoke whirled about the vecubus monster. With an agonizing wail of loathing and defeat, the last of Gwylligwitch collapsed through the ice and disappeared into the dark, watery depths.

The three comrades watched as the ice around them began to rapidly melt off. The captives’ spell was broken. Streaming currents formed while dozens and dozens of cocoon’s surfaced, each harboring a living form within.

Marie stood waiting, her tears an appropriate analogy for the surrounding rushing water. She watched as another cocoon surfaced. With trembling hands, Marie reached down and carefully cleared an opening in the soft, leafy shelter. Her heart bounded in joy as her dearest mother’s face emerged with closed eyes: beautiful, peaceful, but unawake and devoid of any color.

Marie held her breath. In her mind, she relived the last moments she had spent with her mother— vividly recalling her mother’s fear and courage and how rudely and selfishly Marie had behaved; how learning only a week ago she had a mother again, and enduring the grim moments of doubt that she would never again see her. All these thoughts collided together, leading to this very moment. Nothing happened. The flicker of hope from the depths of Marie’s heart began to bitterly fade.

“Mom, no!” she cried. “You can’t leave me! There’s so much I have to tell you ... and show you! I can ride and take care of my own horse now! I got my ears pierced! And I can beat dad in chess! Please, please, can you hear me? Mommy, you can’t leave me!”

And then— Emily Marie Meehanan bore witness to the most magical of moments. There was a sudden flush of warm, glowing pigment to her mother’s cheeks, followed by rapidly twitching eyelashes. She opened her own eyes and saw her daughter. Her only daughter, who had indeed saved and rescued her— as she had never, ever doubted Marie would.



Chapter 18

**The End of the Beginning**

Perion and Courinn quickly moved throughout the watery chamber, helping the captives as their cocoons emerged. What started as dozens, soon doubled and tripled, until there were close to one hundred recovered victims. All were gently and carefully assisted to their feet, only to limp away. Many had been prisoners for quite some time, leaving their muscle functions badly impaired.

Tilda presently arrived with Jack Salento and his mother; only recently captured, they were in much better shape. The young and strong Jack soon regained his full strength and was able to assist in the rescue. As Tilda later explained to Marie and the others, moments after she heard the final cry of Gwylligwitch echoing throughout the lair, Jack and his mother, along with the other newly captured victims, promptly awakened from their eerie repose. The youngling of Gwylligwitch, as Courinn revealed, had indeed vanished after being set free. Even after a thorough search, it was never found.

With some difficulty, Anna Meehanan held out frail, unused arms as Marie joyously threw herself within them. It was like she had instantly stepped out from a raw, chilly night into a warm, sunshine filled spring morning. She felt that hidden, empty place inside her—ever painful, scarred and scared and hopelessly alone—fully heal as quickly as if Courinn had used her power. It felt like home again.

“It’s gone, mommy!” Marie sobbed into her mother’s shoulder. “It can’t hurt us anymore!”

“I know, Emily, I know,” her mother said, also crying. “You found me. After all you’ve suffered, you found me! No mother could give more than you have.”

“Please forgive me,” said Marie, “for the way I acted that day, for throwing your charm into the woods. I didn’t know ... I didn’t know!”

Her mother took hold of her wet face and held it. “No, no, Emily, there’s nothing to be sorry for. I know all the guilt you’ve carried about that, but *you* were trying to *warn* us something was wrong. We should have listened to you!”

Marie stared back, nodding in great relief. She had desperately needed to hear those words spoken to her. “So many times, I was sure I lost you.”

“But you didn’t and you never gave up,” said her mother, full of pride. “Vampire bats,

vicious caretakers, insane hermits or a horrible monster. You didn't give up, no matter how scared you were."

Marie looked upon her mother in bewilderment. Had she read her mind? Before she could ask, her mother again hugged her tightly.

"Yes," she whispered, "almost everything you did, I saw and heard. From the moment you took the charm, I've watched and waited for you. You're the strongest, bravest young woman I've ever known. I love you, Emily Marie." She wiped away Marie's streaming tears.

A young gnome was recovered among the captives. It was Thurle's son, Hennock, who was sincerely grateful for his rescue. He already knew of his father's fate, having seen it during his captivity, just as Marie and her mother shared semi-mental contact. As a token of friendship and faith, Marie gave to him the shards of the golden diamond, which Hennock and Rhysis in time re-wrought. Hennock and Marie, along with Perion and Courinn, became good friends in the years to come.

Before they were set to depart, both the fallen knight and Courinn's father were given a temporary burial under a shelf of rock exposed by the melted ice. It was agreed that a small party would return for a service with befitting dignity and honor. When their shrine was erected months later, it resembled nothing less than a lordly monument of two great mausoleums, where the inscriptions read under their names, '*Honor Peace*' and '*A Knight's Soul Saved*'. Courinn often visited the shrine, especially when she was in need of strength and council. She always came away feeling her father had spoken to her.

It was daybreak by the time Perion and Courinn, in her enchanted form, began accompanying the captives away. With the rising sun, they saw a plain of fertile, green grass bordering Lake Gwindylo, amidst an outcrop of angular rock formations, all in place of the ice and snow from the prior night.

Perion led them sharply southward, parallel to the steadily growing, bolder-like formations that led along a wide pass between a mountainous ridge. It was a difficult march for many of the victims; most were thirsty, hungry and very weak. Courinn used her healing skill for the worst off, as she could. Many had a lifting of heart at simply seeing a wondrous unicorn pass up and down the survivors' ranks. Tilda and Jack also worked tirelessly attending to the others' needs. Marie patiently helped her struggling mother along. When Anna stumbled and fell, Courinn took her up on her back.

After traveling another hour, they heard a shout in the woods and were soon met by Brage and Tybain, heading their way. Thereafter they found Professor Mifflin along with the rest of the boys, whose quick and compassionate aid made the slow journey somewhat better. Yet having to fend for one hundred captives was a difficult task.

From the scores of victims, Marie suddenly came bolting out. She ran with all the strength she had left, which was considerable, having not slept the entire night whilst

waging a superhuman battle against a supernatural foe. She raced past Perion and Courinn, past the exiled boys, past Professor Mifflin with no word of greeting. She ran into the waiting, aching arms of her father, who was the last to appear.

“Emily!” he exclaimed, fully embracing his daughter. Marie could not recall him ever speaking her first name before. “Thank God, you’re all right!” he gushed. Marie saw a swollen cut under his eye before she hugged him back as tight as possible. James kissed her cheeks many times in euphoria, fighting the urge to cry.

“What were you doing?” he asked, not in anger, but in genuine confusion. “You could have been killed in these woods and nobody would have ever known. What was it you had to find out that made you run away, sweetheart?”

Marie listened, wide-eyed. After all she had been through, he still thought of her as the same troublesome girl who came home too late one night.

“Don’t you know by now, dad?” she said. “Don’t you understand? I made our dreams come true.”

“Seeing you again does make my dreams come true,” he answered.

“No, no,” she countered in frustration. “I brought mom back to you! To us!”

James sighed heavily. He bit his lip and shook his head. “Marie,” he said, “I’m so happy that you remember your mother again. I know this is hard for you, but regaining your memory—it might seem very real, like mom is coming back. But you have to understand that she’s not. Not today or any other—”

“—James,” a voice clearly called out. He raised his eyes, past his daughter. Upon the back of a shimmering, black unicorn sat his wife and his love— alive and unharmed and as beautiful as the day he met her.

There are, of course, no words to describe what the practical, sharply skeptical James Meehanan felt at that moment. A chaotic storm of conflicting emotions assaulted him. All he could do at length was gradually step forward. As Marie helped her mother down from Courinn, James raised a trembling hand to Anna’s hair and lightly stroked it.

“Anna,” he spoke, barely audible, delicately touching her face, confirming she was real.

“Yes, James, it’s me. I’m here. I’m with you again.”

The tears came, unchecked. It was the first time Anna had seen him openly cry; such was the joy of this moment. He took her in his arms and kissed her as she joyfully returned it. When Marie joined them, James lifted her high into the air, leading to a colossal embrace between all three. It was long said afterward of those who beheld this spectacle, that they had witnessed a true miracle.

Some two hours later a hundred people emerged from the woods, pouring into the small town of Woldred. The village folk emptied from their homes, lining the streets as the exhilarated reunions began— relatives and friends greeting those long thought dead or missing. Ambulances and medical personnel swiftly appeared, aiding and assisting the weak, sick and starving. Even the dratted mayflies turned up, as usual.

Tybain stood with Brage, Perion and the professor. Peering ahead, he saw Tilda with Jack. She looked genuinely happy with the strapping, young gentleman, but Tybain could not let the moment pass. He stepped up behind Tilda, leaning in close.

“Are you *sure* this guy realizes what he’s getting into?” he whispered.

Tilda smirked, warmly glancing at Jack. When she turned to face Tybain with a playful sneer, he was nowhere to be seen. All the boys had quickly disappeared.

The genuine shock of it all had to claim one more person of interest: the sheriff himself. As expected, news spread to Highland Pointe and Upper Lanask ‘like ghost-flight’. By the time Dan Radich arrived with his men, he stared in silence. With a tear in his eye, he guessed who was largely behind this wonderful turn of events. However there was no sign of him— Raynor Mifflin was also long gone.

After a full confession from Tilda that morning, the sheriff and police surrounded Nioma Jentiss’s house. Entering with a search warrant, she was not to be found. It appeared she had fled quickly, with little time to hide anything incriminating. Detailed files were discovered on all the missing victims, along with their personal items.

Nioma was not heard from for many years. It was generally assumed she fled into the woods, living a solitary, meager existence, not unlike how Earl Macmanus survived. It was also said she had befriended one of the many evil things still lurking in the wood, no doubt forcing that unfortunate creature to wish it had never taken up with a human.

If the sheriff was unable to connect all the dots, Professor Mifflin did, concluding that Nioma was probably appointed by the Helots to personally select their victims, tracking and choosing their whereabouts until Gwylligwitch came for them. Mifflin doubted Nioma was in direct contact with the monster, but had probably operated within a remote system of communication, also devised by the Helots. Yet the one question remained, which the professor pondered long after: what did these missing Helots plan on doing with all the victims the vecubus had captured? And what retribution would they seek for the ruin of their designs, if they ever returned?

Tilda Jentiss on the other hand, cleanly broke off her dealings with Bettyann and Trish. The Salento family took her in, where Tilda worked hard in school, graduating with top honors. Her and Jack’s relationship blossomed and they fell very much in love. In her second year of college, studying psychology, she and Jack married and their bond remained happy and strong. Tilda became a certified children’s counselor for those with

troubled families (and troubled histories within the woods) generously helping young people with the very same problems she experienced growing up. She did not miss her mother and hardly ever thought about her again. Sadly, Bettyann and Trish soon found others to join them in their mischief.

Marie returned home with her mother and father to a village extending its sympathy. James received many apologies from friends like Walters and Kosko, who were so downright suspicious of him. He stopped his drinking for good, waking up everyday, thankful for how blessed he was. The county fair later that month was a real celebration, and for a time it seemed everyone forgot about their differences and genuinely enjoyed one another's company. Many now supposed— apart from James, herein a firm believer— that most of the 'spell' in Spellhollow had been driven out from the woods. They would soon learn differently.

Marie's relationship with her parents took on a new level of understanding and maturity. The family spent a generous amount of time together, getting to know one another again. They were each different people now— a bit older and with some rather unique experiences behind them. In school, Marie also became an outstanding student, although somewhat of an outsider. She found that she hated anything resembling gold and could easily bait a fishing hook with a worm. Her prior life as Charlotte remained fixed in her memory. Even after several more psychiatric visits, she suffered bouts of confusing and sometimes frightening jumbles of the past and present.

After some lengthy soul searching, Courinn decided to roam the woodlands, helping those in need, trying her best to carry on in the spirit of her father's final words. She learned a good deal more about the wood and its secrets. Her healing powers considerably increased, as did her wisdom. In time, she came to be known as something of a benevolent, wandering wizard.

Marie remained very close with Perion and Courinn, often visiting the professor's home with her mother's full consent— so fond was Anna of Raynor Mifflin. Marie became a well-trusted companion of the exiled boys. When traveling within the wood, they were careful to not stray anywhere too far north, for word had reached the professor that the few surviving slaug were seeking both the fierce mortal and unicorn that had slain their chieftain and destroyed their home.

Some weeks later, Marie asked her mother for a favor. Anna drove her, Courinn and Perion north, some twenty miles along the interstate. They came to a simple, unassuming house. When Marie knocked at the door, a silver-haired woman with a kindly face greeted them. She had no words when Marie handed her a wedding ring that had once belonged to a brief friend. Neither Marie nor her friends spoke. Perhaps the poignant, yet proudly endearing look in their eyes, followed by the old woman's tears, said everything that needed to be said.

One night that summer in a dark corner of Highland Pointe's least popular watering holes, a figure approached a remote table, where a tall, sudsy glass awaited. As he sat down in front of it, Sheriff Dan stared at him from across the undersized table with an ever-curious gleam in his eye. Raynor Mifflin nodded his appreciation and then lifted his glass to toast. The sheriff did the same.

"All right Raynor," said the sheriff. "For the last time, let's start from the beginning." But of course, it was not the last time ... .

Marie returned to the woods on Midsummer's Eve with Courinn and the Exiles. Amidst much shouting and cheering, Courinn and Dyllion squared off and had their race, a lightning-paced, five-mile stretch along a section of Luck's End Loop. Courinn scarcely beat Dyllion by a horn, in spite of his boastful claims that he would easily best her next time.

The next day, Midsummer, Marie again entered the Faeriaye Realm as she promised, where Steavyn greeted her with open arms. Walking through the dewy, misty morning woods, he marveled at the streaks of rainbow light in Marie's eyes. They spent a good deal of time together the rest of the summer, and their feelings for one another swiftly grew. However, they did not realize the full repercussions of their very first meeting. And there were indeed.

Within the enchanted domain surrounding the exquisitely flowered fields of the Faeriaye Kingdom, many unnamed creatures and magical beings who had once only known hate and barbaric war began to awaken and arise, where they had been buried in peaceful slumber for centuries.

A pact had been broken and there would be blood spilt for such a fierce betrayal.

## Appendix

There is a very old and oft repeated saw, originating from a particular region of New York State, “*Confess ye’ sin in the church, drown ye’ sorrow in the alehouse, but shall ye’ ever wish to meet or cheat the pale horse ... the wood awaits.*” \*

Though it bears a different name today, the Gulliver County area of New York State is mainly comprised of three villages or hamlets, just as it has been for the last several centuries. The largest and most populated of these, set within a wedge of mountainous outcrop at an elevation of some two thousand feet is Highland Pointe, the county seat. Some seven miles to the west lay Woldred, with the hamlet of Lanask twenty miles north. Yet all three places sit on the borders of what this story is chiefly about: the two hundred and twenty square miles of dense woodland known as Spellhollow Wood, more colloquially termed by the local folk, Spookyhollow or Hellhollow.

It was actually named the Dolriad Forest in much older days as well as *Tekene MlallikLiwacan*\*\* in the Native American tongue, meaning “Forest of Witchcraft”. It remains one of the very last old-growth or ‘ancient-growth’ woodlands left on the east coast of North America— meaning that these particular woods for whatever strange reason have never been cut down and savaged for any logging or timber needs. It was also believed it had never been the victim of natural fire of any sort, from which almost all large woodlands suffer, some many times over. Yet by most learned accounts, this was not true— at least one huge fire did claim the wood, somewhere around five hundred years ago. Since then, the Dolriad trees and vegetation have grown back and stood untouched.

\*No doubt an inaccurate quote, simply because “ye” was rarely, if ever used in Early Modern English of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, during which only the European/American colonization of New York State could have recorded it. I suspect “ye” was some time *later* substituted for “your” to falsely denote age, as if the sentiment were passed down from a far earlier time period, as well as perhaps lending a “spookier” tone.

\*\*Assuming this *is* a correct translation, I still have not yet been able to ascertain whether it is the Unami or Munsee dialect of the Lenape tongue. Anyone with more information, please contact myself or Marie via our website.

The woods’ present namesake specifically refers to the western arm of the forest, long believed to be the most bewitched, set between two highland ridges, which the townsfolk describe as a ‘hollow rife with spells’. Most of the region’s residents have long been convinced they were hopelessly ‘cursed’ for living as close as they do — additionally believing they cannot escape this fate, which explains why few, if any, ever move away as the county sheriff often urged of them. Yet others remain, hoping upon a stroke of spellbinding prosperity, for the wood does not only bring suffering and tragedy but sometimes grants miraculous good fortune too. Still, they unanimously all wish to keep to themselves the secrets they have long taken great care to hide from the outside world. And so with this book, Marie and I will have ruffled more than a few feathers.

Marie Meehanan and her loyal, trusted friends, Courinn, Perion and Tilda, (incidentally, their real names, unchanged to protect the innocent) were just a group of

kids I would see from time to time, during the summer. They were at least five years older than I, and as a highly naïve and immature lad, I had no idea what brave and true heroes they really were, as accurately described in these pages.

During the late 1960's and up through the mid 70's, I spent a period of either July or August with family at my aunt and uncle's summer home in Highland Pointe, New York. These years became forever more the idyllic childhood summers of my youth, playing, swimming and fishing with my siblings and cousins. As you might imagine, the reminiscence of those days burns bright in heart and mind.

We were constantly forbid to enter the woods and nearly everyone listened, content to play elsewhere (at the lake) and mostly too scared by all the stories we heard. I, however, did not listen. From an early age, I have always felt a compelling kinship with the woods— any woods— as a place where I could as a pre-teen, readily find the rush of the adventurous unknown, then later as an adult, enjoy nature's splendid serenity and the woods' almost magical ability to re-ground myself when the mind and soul become entangled with what life hurls our way ... along with perhaps still, a wee bit of adventure.

Though I hardly ever ventured far enough into the woods to encounter any of its real splendors or perils (apart from an angry run-in with a bobcat, which I luckily and thankfully sent fleeing after smashing my walking stick down upon its crown) I did one day come across Marie and Courinn walking about. Through them, I met Perion and the rest of the exiled boys soon after. I remained merely a general acquaintance with them all for a good many years, until our family trips upstate ceased sometime in the early 1980's. I did not return until years after college, with a desire to see the woods once more, when, by chance I met Marie again. She did not live there anymore, having moved away with her family and was also back visiting. We went to a local eatery and after a few games of ping pong in which she thoroughly shellacked me, we sat and talked for the first time. By then, Perion and his comrades had long since returned home, and whether it was the sadness of missing him, or some other weighing melancholy, she began telling me some of their past adventures, of which I had never known or heard a word of.

Returning to my aunt and uncle's home that night, my head was spinning with the details of the incredible stories Marie had recounted. I awoke late the next rainy morning, convinced my host had fabricated a rather large, however entertaining practical joke on me, until she arrived at my aunt's door with my camera I had left behind. I vividly remember staring in sheer awe when I looked at Marie, seeing the unearthly, swirling colors of the rainbow in her eyes: a phenomenon occurring only during rainy or foggy days. It was exactly as she explained to me the prior night, after her adventure at The Rainbow's End within the wood, years earlier. From that moment, I was a believer.

We stayed in touch from that point on, evolving from letter to e-mail correspondence, meeting every few years in Highland Pointe, where she would continue telling me more and more of the incredible tales she shared with Perion, Courinn, and



eventually of course, Steavyn. I once asked her why she chose to reveal her fantastic stories to me, someone completely out of their circle.

“Amidst two worlds of imbalance, it makes very good sense,” she answered. I still have no clue what she meant.

Today, Marie lives with a family of her own in Northern California. Though my meetings with her had become fewer and farther between throughout the 1990’s, that changed in 2002. That year, Marie came to me with an extraordinary gift. A mammoth volume titled, “*The Cycles of Exile*” given to her by Professor Mifflin, yet composed not by him nor her, but Tybain, one of the Exiles, who had returned to Marie, along with Perion and Brage in 1996, then again by himself in 2001. He had set all of their tales down, meticulously chronicling their adventures here as well as back in their home world, a place that exists upon the twilight of all we can see and know, yet which is also directly linked to the mysteries and magic of Spellhollow Wood. It is from this vast work, per Marie’s request, that I have diligently transcribed these accounts into a unified narrative, the first of which at long last is this book.

Marie has also drawn the map and wonderful illustrations throughout the story, which she has created from her own mind’s-eye as only she remembers the events. I would like to sincerely thank her and Tybain for his monumental effort in making their stories possible to share. For those wishing more detail, it should be noted that large portions of this tale were transcribed sitting and walking within the very woods of Spellhollow as they exist today— changed a bit since the days of these stories, yet the very enchantment and bewitchment remain. I sincerely hope you enjoy spending time with Marie, Courinn, Tilda and Perion and that you might wish to return in the future and read their further adventures. I also hope you find their exploits at least half as exciting as I did that heady evening when a young woman named Emily Marie opened my eyes to the impossible.

Joseph Scotti

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