

The Hero's Chamber

**BY
IAN NEWTON**

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Smashwords Edition

Dedications

To Connor, Brandon, and George -
Because you were there when I dreamt it and because I told you I
would.

To my amazing wife Elizabeth -
If you weren't by my side, I never could have finished this
project.

To Gwynn -
For your limitless support and love and for being a zombie.

To Lynn B. -
You're one of a kind and I'm a huge fan.

To Neil, Geddy, and Alex -
If you read between the lines, you'll hear your songs.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the authors' imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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Note from the Author

In the early morning hours of July 5th 2006, I woke up from a dream. Since then, I've tried to write down what I experienced; to express what I saw, to tell the story of my dream.

The reason for my effort and the purpose of this book is to get the images, the story, the characters, and the emotions out of my head.

With my dream finally down in print, at least the first half of it, I know that I will be able to put aside the unreasonably detailed visions that have danced through my head for years. After you read it, I hope you understand why I had to write it down.

Ian Newton

July 5th, 2013

Table of Contents

[Preface - FRAYED EDGES](#)

[Chapter 1 - FRIENDS](#)

[Chapter 2 - MR. MILLER](#)

[Chapter 3 - THE KINGDOM AS IT WAS](#)

[Chapter 4 - FIRST STEPS](#)

[Chapter 5 - AN EARLY DEPARTURE](#)

[Chapter 6 - THE WASTELANDS](#)

[Chapter 7 - HEAVY BURDENS](#)

[Chapter 8 - DAYS TURN TO WEEKS](#)

[Chapter 9 - KNOWLEDGE AND PERSPECTIVE](#)

[Chapter 10 - CONSEQUENCES](#)

[Chapter 11- FIRST IMPRESSIONS](#)

[Chapter 12 - EASY TRAVELING](#)

[Chapter 13 - BASE CAMP](#)

[Chapter 14 - A SLIPPERY SLOPE](#)

[Chapter 15 - THE HERO'S CHAMBER](#)

[Chapter 16 - STRANGE ATTRACTORS](#)

[Chapter 17 - THE WANDERER'S WAY](#)

[Chapter 18 - PROMISES FULFILLED](#)

[Chapter 19 - UNEXPECTED GIFTS](#)

[Chapter 20 - SUNRISE](#)

[Chapter 21 - THE CALL](#)

[Chapter 22 - WISDOM](#)

[Beyond The Hero's Chamber- Preface](#)

[My Team of Hero's](#)

[About the Author](#)

[About the Illustrator](#)

[Dedications](#)

[Note from the Author](#)

Preface



Frayed Edges

There is a man who's been struck by lightning seven times. He's still alive and in perfect health. The probability of this happening to anyone is one in ten octillion. That's a one with twenty-nine zeroes after it (100,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000). His wife's been struck by lightning too, so that probably adds another zero.

A golfer recently hit ten 'holes in one' in less than four months. The probability of this happening is one in a quintillion. That's a one with eighteen zeroes after it (1,000,000,000,000,000,000).

Two identical snowflakes were found in Wisconsin in 1988. That's one in a nonillion or thirty zeroes (1,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000) and did you know that for every person on the planet there is, was, or will be someone else that looks just

like them? I think we all know that just shouldn't be possible no matter how many zeroes come after it.

When these things happen, knowing how virtually impossible they should be, the randomness fades into repetition, and where there is repetition, there is a pattern.

Would it be surprising to learn that your world is like a factory-made dress? It was made from a well-worn pattern that's been used to create the same world over and over.

Like the copies of a dress, the colors vary from the original and sometimes there is a stitch or two out of place. Eventually, the edges of the fabric fray and the rough edges with all their little imperfections are exposed.

If there is any certainty in this reality, it's that there are stitches out of place, the fabric of our world is frayed, and the flaws are becoming more visible as the dress ages.

Of course, it's not possible to look past the frayed edges of this reality to understand why the flaws exist. To do that, there will need to be a close inspection of the original, hand cut, hand stitched item.

Unfortunately, when comparing the original to a copy, the forgotten details, the lower quality materials and all the little alterations only confirm what you already know.

In order to understand the real difference, the one that blurs reality, the original needs to be seen and experienced first-hand as it was intended to be.

It's waiting out there; in the arm of a small spiral galaxy, orbiting an ordinary yellow star on almost the exact opposite side of the universe.

Even from a distance, the blue of the air surrounding it and the even deeper blue of the salty oceans can be seen. There are colorful greens and browns blended onto the surface of the slowly drifting continents and the warmth from its molten core can practically be felt from the cold of space.

From just below cloud level, you can see the busy little people running around. They're just like you and all the other people living on the copies. So much so, they don't even realize where they are or why they might be so important..

Chapter 1



Friends

"I wish it didn't have to be this way," George Weaver said to his son Andrew, reining in the one horse wagon in front of the shabby looking building. Andrew's little face was tear-stained and his eyes were tired and red from a sleepless night of anticipation.

Their friends, Jacob Duncan and his son Connor, sat behind them on the backbench of the old wagon. Connor was in the same condition as Andrew. He had dark circles under his small bloodshot eyes, and there were streaks of dirt across his cheeks from wiping away the tears.

Jacob had his arm around Connor's shoulders, and he hugged his son into his side. Looking down into his eyes, he said, "If there was any other way..." He kissed the boy's small forehead and did his best to keep his emotions under control.

Connor nodded bravely. He knew he couldn't say anything without making the tears start again, and didn't want to walk into that place looking like he'd been crying.

George dropped the reins over the buckboard and hopped out of the wagon. He walked around Duke, the massive black stallion who had pulled them to their destination and came around to Andrew.

"Come on," he said, holding out his arms. "Let's get this over with."

Helping Andrew from the cart, George said, "Come on Connor. Let's get you out of this old wagon. The sooner we get going the sooner we'll be back."

Connor knew better than to object. He and Andrew had already asked all the same questions a hundred times over, and there were no good answers, just "grown up" reasons for things that don't matter and things that don't make sense.

"Thank you, Mr. Weaver, but I can do it myself," Connor said, trying to sound all grown up.

"I'm sorry Connor, I forgot; you're seven now and quite capable."

Mr. Weaver backed away as Connor put his hand on the sideboard. He hopped down to the dirt street, and a little cloud of dust rose up around him.

Walking up the front steps, Andrew stopped and so did everyone else. He asked his father the same question he'd been asking for weeks, hoping for a different answer, "How long until you're back Dad?"

"A couple of months Andrew. It's a long way to the Spire Mountains and the Kingdom, but don't worry. We'll be back before your birthday, I promise."

Connor was standing a couple steps above his father when he flung himself at him and wrapped his arms around his neck.

As the tears broke through his tiny resolve, he begged, "Please don't go, Dad. Please don't leave us here! Please don't go away like Mom did, please don't go!"

Jacob held his son tightly, unsure of what to say.

George had his arms wrapped around Andrew, and he whispered into his ear, "I'll be back before you're seven years old. You'll be safe here, you'll be fine."

The men peeled off their sons and had them stand on the top step of the porch, inspecting them like little soldiers.

"All right," George said to the boys. "Let's wipe away those tears."

Both boys did their best, but it wasn't easy.

"Tuck in those shirts please, boys," Jacob said in a sharp military way.

"That's better," George said to the little men. "Now we've all got a job to do today, tomorrow, and for the next few weeks ahead."

The boys weakly nodded, but at least they were listening.

"Your job," George continued, "is to stay strong, keep to the rules, and no fighting with the other boys. Is that clear?"

They gave a mumbled response.

"Is that clear?" George asked with a more serious tone.

"Yes sir," came the timid response.

"Not good enough Georgey," Jacob critiqued.

George looked at his son and Connor with a critical eye and straightened his back like a soldier coming to attention.

With short, crisp words, he demanded, "Is that clear?!"

This time, both boys lifted their chins, stuck out their little chests, and bravely offered, "Yes sir!"

"That's much better," George said, without moving from his stiff stance, "Now then, while you're off doing your jobs we will be doing ours. As you both know our job is difficult and dangerous, but nobody ever said saving the world would be easy!"

Andrew and Connor smiled at their fathers, embracing their new resolve.

"That's more like it," Jacob said to the boys. "Now let's get in there and make the best of this."

With that, they all marched into the orphanage.

Over the days and weeks that followed, Andrew and Connor obsessed over what it would be like when their fathers had saved the world. Their visions and dreams were the stuff of childhood fantasy, and their fathers were the heroes of legend.

Inevitably, they confided to the other children at the orphanage that they were not really orphans at all. Instead, they told their new friends they were just biding their time until the world was saved, then everyone would see the truth of it.

On the evening of Andrew's seventh birthday, he and Connor were eating supper with all the other boys at the long common table in the orphanage. Matthew, an older boy, was sitting next to Andrew, and whispered, "He's never coming back to get you."

"What did you say?!" Andrew asked.

Connor looked around Andrew, and asked, "Yeah, what did you just say?!"

"You heard me," Matthew said with a sneer. "You two are stuck here just like the rest of us. Nobody's coming back for you."

Andrew turned to look at Connor, but he was already off the bench and moving behind Matthew. Matthew tried to stand, but Connor grabbed the back of his shirt collar, pulled him to the floor, and started to deliver a merciless beating.

Just as the dining hall exploded with commotion, the cook and headmaster walked in holding a small cake with seven lit candles.

For Andrew, Connor, and Matthew supper was over. There was no cake for Andrew. There was no happy birthday song. There was no special moment. What Andrew got for his seventh birthday was a month worth of extra chores and a lifetime of disappointment.

After eight long years at the orphanage, when Connor was fifteen and Andrew was fourteen, they left and never looked back. They did their best to survive on their own; sleeping wherever they could find shelter and eating whatever they could beg, borrow or steal.

By the summer of their third year outside of the orphanage, the boys had wandered far enough that none of the villages or towns they visited were familiar to them. Under the oppressive heat of the summer sun, they walked a dusty road until it gave way to cobblestones.

"We're coming up on a town," Andrew said, stopping in the middle of the road.

"If they've got cobblestone starting all the way out here, it must be a pretty good sized one too," Connor said, stopping next to Andrew.

"If they've got a gate, and they probably will, I don't think we should try to make it past the watchman looking like this."

"I look great! What are you talking about? Besides I'm starving, let's just give it a shot and see what happens," Connor coaxed.

"You're filthy and so am I. We've been walking these dirt roads for a week now, and they're never going to believe we've come to visit anyone in their big old fancy town looking like this."

Connor went to run his fingers through his dirty blond hair, but he couldn't push them in all the way. He tugged a little getting them back out and wiped the back of his hand across his forehead. The grit and grime covering him from head to toe rubbed against his sweaty skin leaving a smudge.

Andrew motioned toward Connor's head, and said, "You made a clean spot."

Connor self-consciously rubbed at his forehead.

"If I look half as dirty as you do, I can't even imagine how bad we must smell. Unless you've got some better excuse to get past the town gates, I think we should go get cleaned up a bit."

"What about the lake we passed a mile or so back? That might do the trick," Connor suggested.

"Just what I was thinking," Andrew agreed, so they turned away from the cobblestones and headed back the way they came.

The second season of berries had ripened, and as the boys got closer to the lake, the thorny vines grew all along the road. Andrew liked the raspberries the best and Connor didn't seem to care what kind of berry it was. He was always hungry and usually ate anything they could find.

When they started to catch glimpses of the lake through the trees, Connor called back, "Hey, this looks like an old trail."

Andrew followed him off the road and into the underbrush. The patchwork canopy of small trees lining the edge of the road offered some welcome shade, but the rabbit path Connor had followed disappeared halfway down the hill. They did their

best to navigate the rest of the way on their own, and they struggled to keep their footing on the overgrown and uneven hillside.

"Nice trail," Andrew said sarcastically.

"Don't forget whose idea this was," Connor snapped back as the trees gradually gave way to an open field covered by brown, waist high grass and weeds.

Connor only hesitated long enough to get his bearings, then lifted his arms and boldly waded into the sea of brown. His trailblazing led them across the field, around a multitude of thorny obstacles and several out of place boulders.

With their destination finally in view, Connor quickly made it out of the grass, and told Andrew, "It's bigger than I thought it would be. Look," he said, stopping abruptly and pointing off to the north, "It stretches clear over into those trees."

Stepping next to Connor, Andrew said, "Come on, let's get in and cool off."

They quickly stripped down to just their shorts and were about to wade into the water, when Connor said, "Andrew, I'm starving. Let's check out the far side over there for some berries before we get in."

"Right now?!"

"Come on. It'll only take a few minutes. I'm starving!"

"Fine!" Andrew complained. "But you lead the way."

With bare feet, the boys cautiously stepped through the weeds along the shoreline until they found a tangled patch of raspberries, blackberries, and thimbleberries growing under a stand of massive oak trees. Before long they each had two handfuls of juicy ripe berries, and as Connor shoved a handful in his mouth, they heard the high-pitched buzzing.

Glancing up, Andrew and Connor watched as a dark cloud of mosquitoes descended upon them.

"We're under attack, RUN!" Andrew yelled.

He took off running toward the lake and tripped, falling to his hands and knees. Berry juice oozed out from between his fingers.

Connor laughed out loud, shoved his last handful of berries into his mouth and passed Andrew on the trail. His arms moved in rhythm with his strong legs, and he quickly sped up into a full sprint. Running into the lake up to his knees, Connor dove into the cool refreshing water.

Andrew knew he was ahead of the swarm, but before he could get back up, he had a leg full of bites and a few on his back.

"Aaaah, those things are fast!" Andrew yelled, jumping to his feet and stuffing his only remaining handful of berries into his mouth. After a short sprint, he followed Connor into the lake and as soon as his head broke the surface of the water, the teasing started.

"How'd that berry juice taste?" Connor laughed with his head bobbing up and down in the water.

Andrew still had a mouthful of berries, but he managed to yell back through the juice, "The Black Guard, they got me! I'm a goner."

He let some of the blood-red juice dribble out of his mouth and down his chin while Connor looked on with a smile. Andrew took a deep breath through his nose and slid under the water. With his hand just above the waterline, he waved a final farewell and slipped away.

As soon as he was deep enough, Andrew flipped himself around and dove to the bottom of the lake. After twenty feet, the warm water on the surface turned down right cold and everything faded into a murky green.

When he finally arrived at the bottom, he reached into the cold shadows and grabbed a handful of slippery, oozing mud. Flipping back around, he swam to the surface holding the mud tightly in-between both hands; making sure it wouldn't wash away.

Scanning the top of the water, he saw Connor treading water ten feet from where he was going to come up.

Andrew gave a few good kicks and broke the surface with enough speed to get most of his chest out of the water. He pulled his arm back and let the mud fly. Connor saw it coming and yelled at Andrew to stop, but he was too late...Direct Hit!

A splatter of mud went from Connor's hair all the way down to his chin and neck. A nice big glob went right into his mouth, and he even got a little in his nose! Andrew didn't mean for that to happen, but it was a sweet reward after being laughed at. Connor wiped his face as he gagged and spat out the putrid smelling muck. Finally, he dove underwater.

When he came up, Connor's face was bright red, and he locked onto Andrew with a dangerous, piercing glare. Not that it was hard to get Connor angry. Actually, it was something Andrew excelled at, but from the look in his eyes, Connor was out for revenge. Luckily for Andrew, he had always been a much better swimmer.

Andrew got out of the water and danced a little jig, while singing, "Connor is a mud eater, mud eater, mud eater. Connor is a mud eater, that's why he's so dumb." Then he ran down the shoreline and jumped back into the water.

Connor chased Andrew for at least fifteen minutes before he realized he wasn't going to catch him.

"I'm gonna get you when we're done swimming. You just wait and see!" Connor yelled.

With a huge smile on his face, Andrew teased, "I didn't mean for it to go in your mouth, or your nose, or your hair. It was just a lucky shot!" Then he started laughing.

"You're gonna be sorry when I catch you!"

"You know I wouldn't throw that stuff at you if you weren't so afraid to go down there."

"I am not afraid!"

"Oh, come on, Connor. You never go down to the bottom because you're just a big Mud Chicken." Andrew 'clucked' like a chicken while swimming around the edge of the lake, just beyond Connor's reach.

Connor didn't like to admit he was afraid of anything and today was no exception. Andrew knew this of course and followed up his 'clucking' with, "Hey mud eater. I dare you to go stick your foot in the mud at the bottom."

"Shut up, Andrew! You're already gonna get it."

Andrew gave out a "Cluck, cluck, cluck, cluck," while swimming around and flapping his arms like a chicken. "Hey, look," he laughed, "I invented the Chicken Stroke."

Connor actually laughed a little, but then he yelled, "I'm not a chicken! I'm gonna grab a handful of that stuff and make you eat it!"

Andrew knew how much Connor hated the bottom of lakes, and he smiled because he could see Connor had already convinced himself to brave the murky depths.

Andrew mercilessly gave out a few more 'clucks' and a big rooster call.

"Wait right there, smart guy. I'll be back with your little mud-treat in just a second."

Connor took three deep breaths and held his fourth one. He glared at Andrew one last time and ducked his head underwater, popping his feet up.

Andrew smiled and began counting aloud, "One King's crown, two King's crowns, three King's crowns."

"He'll be up in less than ten seconds," he thought while he kept counting.

When Andrew got to ten King's crowns, he was still smiling. He started shouting the numbers loud enough for Connor to hear, "Eleven King's crowns, twelve King's crowns, thirteen King's crowns!"

It wasn't until he reached twenty King's crowns that he started to think Connor was really going to do it.

"Well, I'm not gonna be here when he shows up," Andrew thought, taking a deep breath. He counted, "Twenty-two King's crowns, twenty-three King's crowns," and thought, "He's probably right under my feet trying to scare me. He never even went down to the bottom." He took a second deep breath, then a third and letting it out, he yelled, "Twenty-six King's crowns! Connor Duncan is a mud chicken!"

He took his fourth deep breath and held it, dipped his head under the water, popped his legs up over his head, and went to spoil Connor's little joke.

Andrew was down ten feet in just a couple of seconds. He didn't see Connor so he kept going into the colder darker water.

"Thirty King's crowns, thirty-one King's crowns, thirty-two King's crowns."

As the light green faded into shadows, a pair of ghostly white hands appeared. They were opening and closing, over and over.

When Connor's arms and face emerged, he looked up, and a cloud of bubbles poured out of his mouth. Andrew heard the eerie scream and every hair on his body prickled.

With an out-of-focused look in his eyes, Connor desperately grabbed at Andrew like a prisoner reaching through the bars of a jail cell.

"Forty King's crowns, forty-one King's crowns."

Andrew looked down at Connor's feet, but his legs just faded away. Avoiding Connor's desperate grabs, he took hold of his wrists. Connor didn't offer any resistance as Andrew tried to pull him up, but after two or three feet, he just stopped.

"Fifty King's crown," echoed in Andrew's head as his chest began to burn.

Andrew looked closer into the silty, black mud dripping off Connor's feet. It was dark, but not dark enough to hide the reflection of two small black eyes. Once Andrew saw the eyes, the rest of the camouflage fell away, revealing the horrifying creature.

Its head was as wide as both of Connor's feet put together and just behind the head was the top of a huge shell. Andrew watched in horror as the giant snapping turtle re-secured its grip on Connor's foot.

Andrew had lost count of the seconds, but he knew they were both out of time. He got behind Connor and wrapped his arms around his chest. Andrew kicked his legs trying to pull him away from the creature, but it was no good.

His chest was on fire, and Connor wasn't moving anymore! In desperation, Andrew moved in front of Connor, took hold of his wrists, and sank to the bottom.

Andrew's toes rested on the soft, thick slime covering the monster's shell. Bending his knees, he pushed off as hard as he could. The sharp ridges of the shell slipped past his toes, shoving the enormous snapping turtle deep into the mud.

Shooting up, he yanked Connor's wrists with all his strength. A little popping noise echoed through the water and finally, Connor started moving toward the surface.

Andrew was just about to breathe in water when his head burst through the surface, and he took his first desperate breath of air! He pulled Connor up, but then he disappeared back under the water.

Winded and bobbing at the surface, Andrew could only take short, sharp breaths. When he could finally hold his breath again, he dipped back under the water and saw Connor floating in a cloud of pink. With the pink slowly turning red, Andrew realized it had to be blood.

Connor slowly moved his arms up and down, making it look like he was trying to fly. His mouth was open, he never looked at Andrew and the only color in his face was the blood- red water. Andrew grabbed Connor's arm again and pulled him up to the surface, but Connor had stopped breathing.

Andrew knew he had to get him to shore, but he was exhausted, and Connor was just dead weight; the thirty-foot journey felt like it took forever.

Finally, Andrew's toes brushed against the bottom of the lake. Digging them into the sandy mud and rocks, he dragged Connor up the shore by his arms. He pulled everything except Connor's feet out of the water and collapsed. Connor rolled toward Andrew and threw up. Berries and water went everywhere.

"At least you're alive," Andrew wheezed between gasps.

To his astonishment, Connor sat up, grabbed his right foot with both hands and started screaming.

Andrew sat up to see what the problem was, but Connor was in the way.

"Let me look at it," Andrew wheezed.

When he pulled Connor's hands away, the big toe was completely gone, and a thick stream of blood pulsed out of Connor's foot.

Connor passed out, and Andrew tasted berries.

Scrambling up the rocky slope, Andrew grabbed his shirt. Racing back, he wrapped it around the end of Connor's foot. With one hand on the shirt, Andrew slipped off his belt and wrapped it tightly around Connor's ankle. Then Andrew wound it around the middle of the foot a couple times and cinched it tight.

He dragged Connor to the top of the slope by the edge of the water and pulled him into a seated position. Standing below him, Andrew yanking Connor off the ledge, and took Connor's full weight across the back of his shoulders. Andrew's legs trembled, and the rocks cut into his feet.

Stumbling up the path, Andrew realized he wasn't wearing shoes, but he couldn't stop. He would never be able to pick Connor up again.

He carried Connor back through the tall grass, across the field, and up the overgrown hillside. When they got to the dirt road, Andrew fell to his knees, dropping Connor behind him.

"I'm cold. Take me home, Andrew."

Andrew cinched the belt tighter around Connor's foot, but the flow of blood only slowed a little. Gasping for air and covered in blood, dirt, sweat, and berry juice, Andrew managed to say, "I can't stop the bleeding! You have to put pressure on your toe, or you're going to bleed to death. I have to go for help. If anybody comes by, ask for help. Don't wait for me; just get yourself help."

He grabbed Connor's shoulders, and their eyes met.

"You have to put pressure on your toe! You have to try! I'll be right back. Don't give up!"

Andrew stood up and his vision blurred; his legs were heavy and stiff. He tried rubbing his eyes, but the sticky mess on his hands only pulled against the skin. He looked for any road dust kicked up by a passing horse or wagon, but everything was perfectly still.

Chapter 2



Mr. Miller

Andrew ran for as long as he could, but fear and desperation could only take him so far. By the time he got back to the cobblestones, he was limping and wheezing. Light-

headed from dehydration and unable to do anything but walk fast, Andrew staggered hopelessly down the road.

Just when he felt like he might be getting closer to the town, the road turned sharply and split in two. On his left the cobblestone road continued into the distance and on his right, a deeply rutted farm road climbed up and over a short, steep hill.

With waves of nausea washing over him, he stopped at the junction, put his hands on his knees and tried to catch his breath.

When he lifted his head, he thought a haze of dust was hovering just above the surface of the dirt road, but he wasn't sure. He knew the dirt road would lead him away from the town, and if he guessed wrong, Connor was as good as dead.

Precious moments slipped away while he struggled to decide.

"I have to make it to town," he told himself.

Starting back down the cobblestone road, he took one last look to his right. His eyes followed the contour of the hill up to the top where, just off the surface of the road, little flecks of dirt and dust danced in the sunlight.

He veered right, reached the top of the hill and glimpsed a rider on horseback just over the next rise. Hope rushed back into him as he tried to yell, but he wasn't loud enough. Exhausted and panicked, he kept running and walking as fast as he could.

When he was fifty yards from the rider, the man reigned in his skinny gray mare, and the two made eye contact. With Andrew wheezing and limping up next to his stirrup, the man looked down and in a dry, slow voice, he asked, "What did you do boy, kill somebody?"

Between gasps, Andrew panted, "It's my friend...Connor Duncan...back by the lake...he's bleeding to death on the road...Can you help me?"

The man's eyes widened, and his expression tightened as he dug his heels into the horse. The horse reared, the man yanked hard on the reins and turned back toward the main road, yelling, "Hyah, hyah!"

The sound of the horse quickly faded into the distance and Andrew took a few minutes to catch his breath. As soon as the last wave of nausea and dizziness passed, he started limping back toward the main road.

He held out his dirty, blood-covered hands and chuckled like a crazy person. His palms were scraped-up, and there didn't seem to be an inch of his body that wasn't covered in dirt or blood.

"He's right, I do look like a killer," Andrew thought, making his smile fade as he pictured Connor's lifeless body back on the road.

Andrew had almost made it down the hill and back to the split in the road when he heard the horse racing toward him on the cobblestones. The gallop slowed to a canter as it came clip-clopping around the corner. When the man spurred it back to a full gallop, he went speeding by with Connor's body draped over the front of the saddle.

It was a long, lonely walk to the town, and Andrew had plenty of time to think. After more than a mile, when he finally reached the gate, he passed two guards wearing faded uniforms. The tall, thin man and the short, fat one just looked on in astonishment.

Andrew didn't make eye contact, and not a single word was uttered between them. The only thought going through his head was, "I killed Connor. My best friend is dead."

Wandering aimlessly among the first houses he came to, he noticed the skinny gray mare tied to a broken down fence in front of an old house. The horse was blood stained around its chest and front legs.

Standing in the street, next to the foaming horse, he looked at the old split-rail fence. Most of it had fallen down into the yard where it had practically disappeared among the tangle of weeds and dead grass. The only green thing in sight was a single dandelion growing next to a dead oak tree in the middle of the yard.

The path leading to the front door was barely visible. It looked like there use to be stepping-stones, but Andrew could only make out a few broken pieces.

Fifty feet up the path was a house that looked like it hadn't been painted in a hundred years. The whitewash used to cover its plain, sun-beaten exterior was worn away. Only little flakes remained under the bottom edges of the wood siding. Most of the windows were crooked and boarded up from the outside. Even the roof over the little porch leaned to one side and bowed in the middle. The only thing on the entire structure in good repair was the oversized front door. It had a large letter 'D' carved in it that was visible from the street.

Following the overgrown path to the porch, he walked along the edge of the steps making his way around several missing boards until he reached the front door. He hesitantly reached for the faded metal knocker hanging in the center of the big letter 'D' when he heard the muffled voice of a man coming from inside the house. The voice faded in and out, and he heard something scuffling against the floor.

Andrew gave the iron ball three good raps, and called out, "Hello? I'm looking for my friend with the hurt foot. Is anyone home?"

"Help! Andrew, help me! This guy is crazy!" Connor yelled, from inside the house.

Andrew panicked and reached for the handle. Twisting it, he felt the latch pull back, and he pushed the door open. It banged against the inside wall, bouncing halfway back.

"Help me, Andrew! Save me!!"

Andrew stepped through the doorway, and it was much darker inside the house than he anticipated. Expecting a fight, he instinctively crouched and held up his fists, waiting for his eyes to adjust.

In a few seconds, the darkness lightened into shadows, and he saw a run of stairs going up to the second story. Straight ahead, the hallway continued into darkness and

on his left, through an open set of double doors, Connor was screaming, a man was yelling, and the floorboards were shaking.

Andrew swallowed hard, stepped up to the edge of the doorway and peered around the corner. Connor was flat on his back with his head toward the hallway, his legs kicking wildly. A man wearing a bloodstained shirt stood over Connor with his foot in the center of his chest, pinning him to the floor. In one hand, the man held an iron poker fresh from the coals in the fireplace behind him. Its orange glow was menacing in the dim light. With his other hand, he fumbled with his belt buckle, trying to get it undone. Connor's legs thrashed and squirmed, his hands pushing at the man's boot in vain.

Andrew braced himself against the wall as his knees started to give out.

The man looked at Andrew slumping against the doorway, and demanded, "Get over here, boy, and hold him down or I'm likely to do more harm than good!"

Connor was white as a corpse, and his screaming had turned into begging. He kept saying, "No, no, no, don't do it. Please don't, no, no." All the time flailing his legs across the floor and trying to sit up.

Andrew sunk to one knee.

"I said hold him down!"

"Wha...wha...what are you gonna do to him?" Andrew stammered.

Connor's head twisted back in an unnatural way, and he looked at Andrew with bulging eyes, pleading, "No. Don't let the crazy old man touch me! Let me go. Help me!!"

"I'm gonna save his life! Now get over here and hold him down!"

Andrew never made it to his feet; he just crawled into the small room until he was behind Connor's head. Looking up at the glowing poker, he asked, "What do you want me to do?"

The man took his foot off Connor's chest, bent down and grabbed his face. His shirt sleeve pulled up to his elbow as his gigantic hand covered Connor's chin and mouth.

In the dim light, Andrew stared in horror at the man's forearm. Every inch of skin was pockmarked with reddish-purple bumps and pits. There were twisted pieces of scar tissue with hairs growing out of them at odd, disgusting angles. His arm wasn't even straight. It didn't even look like an arm!

The man squeezed Connor's face and pulled him off his back until they were face to face. Looking Connor straight in the eyes, the man calmly demanded, "Stop moving around. Stop screaming. Stop fighting me or you're going to die, and there won't be anything anybody can do to help you."

He let go, and Connor hit the floor with a heavy thud. The man stood up, took off his thick, leather belt, folded it over and stuffed the strap in Connor's mouth.

Looking at the glowing poker, he said, "Bite down boy, and it won't hurt so much."

Turning his attention to Andrew, he said, "Pin his shoulders to the floor."

Andrew put his hands on Connor's shoulders and pushed him flat. Without looking up, he nodded to the man.

The man stepped back toward Connor's feet, knelt down and grabbed his right foot. He quickly unwound the belt, dropped it to the floor and slowly peeled off the bloody shirt.

Connor screamed between clenched teeth, and Andrew put all his weight on Connor's shoulders.

The blood soaked shirt made a wet slapping noise as it hit the floor.

Connor's neck was straining to keep his head up, and he watched the man choke-up on the poker. The glowing orange point was just below his hand.

"Bite down!"

Connor dropped his head, sunk his teeth into the leather belt and screamed in anticipation.

The poker began to hiss and smoke.

Connor's whole body spasmed in pain. He screamed one last time, then his head rolled off to the side, and the leather belt fell to the floor.

Without hesitation, the man moved the poker over the bleeding stump. It kept popping and hissing as the wound cauterized, filling the room with the smell of burning flesh.

The man inspected the blackened stump with a look of satisfaction and tossed the poker back into the coals behind him. With sparks snapping and bounding up the chimney, he bent down and gently set Connor's four-toed foot onto the floor.

In a disturbingly casual tone, he said, "The name is Miller. Jacob Miller. I don't suppose you remember me?" He offered Andrew his hand, Andrew took it, and with a sharp pull, he was standing.

Andrew thought back over the years, and finally said, "I'm sorry Mr. Miller, but no, I don't remember meeting you at all."

"That's all right; you were pretty young when we met. I don't suppose you were much older than five or six at the time.

I went to pick the two of you up from the orphanage six months ago, but the headmaster said you'd been gone for more than a year. I've been looking for you ever since."

Mr. Miller took the belt from next to Connor's head and put it back on.

"Where have you two been?"

"What do you mean, where have we been? We left that lousy orphanage years ago. We've been wandering from town to town looking for some old book Connor can't get out of his head. Actually, we've both seen it in our dreams. But why do you care?"

Nudging Connor's left foot with his dirty boot, and pointing to the bottom of it, he asked, "Did anybody ever notice you both wear the crescent moon?"

"What are you talking about? You're not even listening to me, are you?"

"The crescent moon, boy! Does anyone else know about them?!"

"No! Nobody else knows about the matching crescent moons on the bottom of our left feet. Are you satisfied now? Can you tell me who you are? Can you tell me where we are? Can you tell me why you were looking for us after all these years?"

"Clean yourself up out back. You can find the well easy enough, it's back behind the barn. And clean up my horse. I'll bring you some clean clothes, then I'm gonna need you to go into town and get some bandages, an ointment, and a couple of other things."

Andrew stared at the strange man giving orders.

"Don't just stand there with your mouth open. There'll be time enough for your questions when you're done. Now get movin'!"

It was early evening by the time Andrew had cleaned and fed the old gray horse and gone into town to get the medicine and bandages for Connor's foot. He had been downstairs in Mr. Miller's house, sitting in the back room by the empty fireplace for about an hour, when he heard steps creaking.

"I brought somebody to keep you company," Mr. Miller said, turning the corner with Connor in his arms. Walking into the room, he sat Connor down on an old, leather chair across from Andrew.

He took Connor's feet and put them on the oversized footrest, gently placing his right foot on a wool pillow.

Connor waved his hand at Andrew in a slow, tired sort of way, and slurred, "Heeeeyyyy." He had a crazy, almost drunken sort of smile on his face.

With his eyes half closed, his feet propped up, and a white shirt on, Connor looked rather comfortable. His foot was heavily bandaged, and Andrew couldn't tell if the bandages were yellow from the oozing stump or if the candlelight made them look odd. There wasn't any blood on the bandages, but the outline of Connor's foot told the story of the afternoon at the lake.

Mr. Miller turned and walked out of the room as quickly as he had entered.

In a slow and awkward way, like his tongue was too big for his mouth, Connor slurred, "He's a really cheery guy, I like him a lot." There was a long pause while Connor enjoyed his sarcasm. "Especially when he changes the bandage on my foot...Such a gentle, caring man..." he trailed off with a smile and blinked unevenly.

"How's your foot?"

Struggling to make an 'm' sound, Connor said, "Mmmmy left foot is perrrrfect!" He lifted it off the footrest admiring it and the silly grin never left his face.

"Are you drunk?"

"Drrrunnk?"

Connor blew out between his lips, making a rude noise that ended with him trying to whistle a tune the boys had heard outside a pub last summer.

"NnnoPe, deffinnnitely nnot drrunnkk."

"Well if my toe ever gets bitten off, I hope I feel as good about it as you do!"

"Don't pay too much attention to him," Mr. Miller said, walking back into the room with a wooden serving tray in his hands. The room filled with the aroma of vegetable beef stew and fresh bread. He gave Andrew a mug of stew with a spoon sticking out of it and half a loaf of hot bread. Andrew thanked him, then watched him reluctantly hand Connor a piece of buttered bread.

"Don't drop it!" he ordered, taking a seat between the boys in an old ladder back rocker. Turning to Andrew, Mr. Miller said, "He's not in any pain, but he's not thinking straight either. He's taking The Root, the medicine you got in town. It makes you dumber than a chicken, but at least he can't feel any pain."

"I'mmm dummb as a chickennnn. Cluck, cluck, cluck," Connor slurred, tucking his thumbs into his armpits and flapping his arms; the stupid grin still never left his face.

Mr. Miller grabbed himself a mug off the tray and cleared his throat. In a stern voice, he said, "What I'm about to tell you is not to be repeated. Not outside of this house, not ever, not to anybody. Am I clear?"

Andrew looked at Connor, his eyes were still open a little, but he was obviously asleep. The bread was butter side down on his chest.

"Yes sir, but what about Connor, can I tell him?"

Mr. Miller looked over at Connor, then leaned over and took the bread off his white shirt.

"I knew I shouldn't have given that to him," he mumbled to himself.

Turning his chair toward Andrew, he said, "In a couple of days, when he's off The Root you can tell him everything."

With his head down, looking into his mug of stew, he shook his head and let out a long sigh. Without looking up and in a voice full of regret, he said, "You were supposed to be at the orphanage. I was going to come and get you when you were both old enough, but when I got there, you were gone."

Andrew opened his mouth, then shut it. Opened it again, thought better of it, and closed it. Mr. Miller took a spoonful of stew and chewed. Swallowing loudly, he raised his head and began again.

"Your father was a fine man and a good friend. From the looks of it, you may be an even tougher sort than he was. You both had the crescent moon on your feet when you were born. They signify the bloodline of the Kingdom. You two are all that's left, at least as far as we could tell. You're the only remaining heirs of the Fifteen."

Andrew's eyes got wide, and he almost dropped his mug of stew.

“Andrew, there is a book. Your dad found it in the Kingdom when we went there almost ten years ago. Connor’s father was with us too.

It’s the book you’ve been looking for, I know it is. Hell, it’s probably been looking for you. After you see it, you’ll understand.” He paused, looking Andrew right in the eyes. “Your father died because of the book. It wasn’t his fault, but I hate the thing because of what happened to Georgey.”

Andrew started to speak, but Mr. Miller held up his hand to quiet him. “Just listen right now. I’ve got to get this out, for me. When I’m done, I’ll answer every question I can.”

Andrew nodded.

“Like I said, we were in the Kingdom, the three of us and we had just crossed the river Cups the first time. That’s where the river is the widest, and the water moves so fast, it’s nearly impossible to cross.

It had taken us the better part of a day to get there. We were tired, and it was late in the day when we made our crossing. I wish we had waited until the next day, but we were so anxious, we didn’t think to wait or wait to think. Just after your dad crossed, I made it over.”

He paused, taking a bite of stew. “Your father,” he said, with his mouth still full, “turned to make sure I got across all right, but when he turned back around he slipped. I saw him take a side step to catch his balance, but he stumbled a couple more times until he fell on his backside. Then he really started sliding.

I was just out of the freezing water, and all I could do was watch. I got myself over to the side of the path, just when he tried to catch hold of a little bush growing out of the rocks. He grabbed the base of it, but the thorns grabbed him back.” Mr. Miller winced, scrunching up his face. “When he pulled away, the sleeve of his shirt got caught on the thorns and his arm got twisted up behind him. After that, he just sort of disappeared over the edge. The only thing left was his shirtsleeve, ripped off at the shoulder, snagged around that horrible little bush. I heard him land, but it seemed like it took forever.”

“Could you see him? Was he all right?”

Mr. Miller shook his head. “No, I couldn’t see him, but I could hear him. He said he was all right. Come to find out he just didn’t want to tell us how bad off he was.” Mr. Miller’s voice quieted as his words trailed off.

He took another bite of stew and swallowed, trying to choke down more than just the stew. He took a couple of deep breaths and began again, “After Connor’s dad made it across the Cups, we started trying to figure out how to rescue Georgey. Your dad was down in a pit, literally just a crack in the mountain. The side farthest from us was a sheer cliff face, and the only way down was the way your dad had gone. It was getting dark, and the temperature was dropping fast. All three of us were still wet from the

river, but all we could think of was your poor dad down there with his arm hurtin' him and it bein' freezing cold all night.

We tried tying off some rope onto a big boulder up the path and lowering it down to him, but it wouldn't reach. The only thing we could do was get to the edge, so I wrapped it around my waist a couple of times and lowered myself down.

It was already two shades to pitch black, but it looked like it was thirty or forty feet to the bottom. I couldn't see him so I yelled down to see if he was really all right. He said his arm was twisted up pretty badly.

I dropped his blankets down to him, along with some food and water. It was too dark to try anything creative.

That night the wind picked up, and it was freezing. We looked around in the dark for something to start a fire with, but we couldn't find a single stick or twig; not even a handful of dried grass. That night nobody got any sleep.

As soon as we had first light, J.D. and I were trying to figure something out."

"Who's J.D.?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. That's Connor's dad. His name was Jacob too. Your dad never liked calling both of us Jacob. When he started calling Connor's dad J.D. it just sort of stuck. After a while, everybody called him that."

"Oh, all right. So what happened the next morning?"

"Well, like I was saying, as soon as the sun was up we were yelling down to your dad. He said he couldn't feel his hand and his shoulder felt like it was on fire. He said he messed up his leg, too.

I yelled back and told him we were gonna lower a rope. J.D. put a slipknot at the end of it, and I sat down on the top of the slope. I took the line and pitched it over the edge, but the damn thing wasn't long enough, not by ten feet.

J.D. and I tied both our blankets to the end of the lead, and we were ready to try again. But just when we threw the thing down your dad started yelling. He said he found something.

That's when he found the book and the shield."

"A shield?" Andrew asked excitedly. "What kind of shield?"

With a look of mysticism in his twinkling eyes, Mr. Miller smiled and whispered, "It's magical, Andrew. I'll show it to you later."

"Wow!"

"It's hidden. It's safe, and it's not coming out of hiding until the three of us leave for the Kingdom. The shield is incredible. I don't know how it survived the destruction, but you'll get to see it in the book. You'll get to see everything I've seen, Andrew, but I think I'm getting ahead of myself. Should I keep going?"

Andrew nodded, and Mr. Miller started again. "I could feel the rope moving around as your dad put it around his chest. When he was ready, he sent up a couple of

short tugs, and we started hauling him up. The rope was moving fine until the blanket hit the top of the cliff.

Your dad called up and said he was going to kick off the face of the cliff to try and give us slack. That way we could pop the knot up and over the edge. He gave us a three count, and we felt the rope go tight. When it went slack, we pulled, and the knot popped over the edge.

We could see the blanket rubbing against the lip of the rock. The rope had been tuff enough, but as your dad got closer to the top, the blankets started to rip. He yelled for us to stop pulling. He was close enough to reach the ledge, but he said he couldn't do it. I asked J.D. if he could hold Georgey's weight while I crawled down to take a look. J.D. was a big man, he said he could, and I let go of the rope.

The cliff looked solid enough, but the rock just crumbled under my hands and busted apart when my knee hit it. All these little pebbles kept getting under me as I crawled down the cliff and I thought I was gonna slide into the pit at any second. I was also sending a shower of pebbles and rocks down on your dad, and I could hear him complaining.

When the little pricker bush was next to me, I could see the thorns sticking out. They were wicked things, curving downward like razor-sharp sickles and your dad's sleeve was still hanging there.

The only way I could anchor myself was by hooking my foot onto it. By the time I had my head and shoulders over the edge, the thorns started poking through the top of my shoe.

I smiled at your dad, and said, "Hi."

He told me to grab the shield he had tucked between the blanket and his back. The sunlight was bouncing off it in ways that didn't seem possible. Every color came off the sides, and it looked like little rainbows were dancing around the edges.

I asked him if it was heavy and he smiled and said it was light as a feather. I reached down with one hand and tugged at it until it came loose. Your dad started swinging back and forth when I pulled it out, and the blanket started ripping again.

I threw the shield over my shoulder, up the cliff face just hoping it wouldn't slide back down. Then I reached out to take your dad's hand, but he didn't reach for me. I looked at his twisted arm for the first time and saw his swollen, purple hand.

Your dad shoved the book in my face and told me to take it. I told him to drop the damn thing and give me his hand, but he wouldn't do it. Finally, I took the book with both hands just before the blanket under my chest ripped for the last time.

Your dad and I looked at each other as he started falling away."

Mr. Miller's voice broke, and tears ran down his face. "All he said was, "Tell Andrew...", then he was gone."

Tears were running down Andrew's face too.

"That's enough for now. I think you already know neither of your fathers made it back. I'm still not sure how I survived, but you can see the price I paid."

Mr. Miller pulled up the loose sleeves of his shirt past his elbows and Andrew saw the terrible scars. It looked like hundreds of barbed fish hooks had been pushed into his skin and ruthlessly pulled out against the barb. Andrew twisted up his face, and Mr. Miller lowered his sleeves.

Andrew wiped away the tears and Mr. Miller stood up, set his mug on the table next to Andrew and went into the other room. When he came back, he was holding the largest book Andrew had ever seen.

He sat down again in the chair next to Andrew, and asked, "What do you know about the Kingdom, Andrew? How much do you really understand?"

"I only know a few stories. Mostly I've heard that the people who go there usually don't come back, and those who do," he said, looking at Mr. Miller's arms, "Well, they never seem the same as when they left."

"Is it worth the risk?" Mr. Miller asked.

Andrew thought back to the countless debates he and Connor had about the Kingdom. Neither of them knew much about the test that made the Kingdom famous; all they knew was that most people who went there didn't come back. The stories they made up about what the test was and what a man had to do to survive it were pure fantasy. Regardless of their ignorance, they both agreed on one thing: trying to become the ruler of a broken down mountainside by challenging a power that killed everyone who'd stepped before it for the past two thousand years, was probably the dumbest idea ever.

"No, I don't think it's worth it. It can't be."

"Then why do men go?"

"I guess I don't really know. It doesn't seem like a very smart thing to do."

"Kind of hot this summer, isn't it?" Mr. Miller asked.

"Yeah, the field of grass by the lake looked like it was dried up and brown by early summer."

"Yep, remember last summer?" He asked again.

"Yeah, it was pretty hot too."

"Is it a heat wave?"

"I guess so."

Mr. Miller gave Andrew a skeptical look and a wry grin, then he let out a long sigh.

Andrew started to feel like they weren't just talking about the weather.

"Do you know where the Kingdom is?"

"Yes sir, it's in the middle of a giant desert in a valley somewhere really far to the north."

“Good. The Valley of the Crescent Moon, up along the Spire Mountains, which is now the center of the biggest desert we know of, and here’s a little secret. The desert is getting bigger every year.”

“What you mean?”

“What lives in the desert?”

“Nothing really, I guess. Just the cactus and the lizards.”

“That’s right, not much lives in the desert. What do you suppose will happen if everything becomes a desert?”

“That can’t really happen. It’s just been a few hot summers.”

“Andrew, what do you suppose will happen when everything becomes a desert?”

“I guess everything will die, but that’s not even possible. What are you talking about?”

“It’s already happening. The fleets are bringing back fewer and fewer fish in their nets. Entire flocks and herds are wasting away in the heat. The crops burn up before they ever produce a harvest; winter is short, summers are longer than they’re supposed to be. Don’t you see, it’s already happening?”

“What does that have to do with The Kingdom?”

Mr. Miller glanced down shaking his head. He mumbled, “There is so much you don’t know,” then he looked back up at Andrew, and said, “Forget about the weather, it doesn’t matter right now. What’s important is this book, if you want to call it that. It’s the only one of its kind. If anyone finds out we have it, things will change for us, and it won’t be good.”

“Why? I don’t underst...,” Andrew trailed off again because of the look in Mr. Miller’s eyes. Andrew was so excited by what was in front of him and so confused by the conversation they were having, he could hardly control himself.

“This is the book from my dream!”

“It’s also a trap.”

“A what?”

“A trap,” said Mr. Miller with excitement in his voice.

“It’s just a book, right?”

“Does it look like ‘just a book’?”

“Well, sort of, but not like any book I’ve ever seen. Those letters are, are, well, look at them. I don’t know what they are.”

Mr. Miller ran his hand over the cover of the book, and said, “It’s more than two thousand years old.”

Andrew’s mouth fell open, and all he could do was stare, first at the book, then at Mr. Miller, and finally back to the book.

“How did you...I mean, where did you...I mean, Wow!”

“Andrew. Andrew!”

“What? Oh, sorry it’s just that I never...,” he trailed off again because Mr. Miller had that ‘stop talking and listen’ look in his eyes.

He told Andrew to sit back in the chair. “This is the book your dad pushed in my face,” he said, gently setting the book on Andrew’s lap. “The one he wouldn’t drop to save his own life. Don’t open it, but you can touch the outside if you like.”

The book was at least six inches thick and twenty-four inches square, but it didn’t weigh anything. Andrew’s finger traced the outline of the boldly, stroked letters written on the cover. Each one outlined by thin ribbons of gold which delicately came together. Each strand ended by curling out and around the others. When Andrew looked more closely, he could see the letters were filled with something that shimmered; it almost looked like deep water or the dark blue of the sky just before a storm.

He moved his hand over the seamless letters and around the cover. It was perfectly smooth, but the letters were strangely soft and slightly cooler than the rest of the book. The corners and spine looked like pure gold, and his fingers just slid over them as if they weren’t there.

“Funny thing about that book,” said Mr. Miller. “The longer you’re around it, the more you want to hold it. The longer you hold it, the more you want to open it, and as soon as you open it, you’re trapped. You won’t be able to move or speak; not a twitch, not a word. Not until somebody closes it for you. You can still breathe and hear, but that’s about it. It’s a dangerous thing too because more than one person can be trapped at the same time. If I went to close the book for you when you were trapped, and I looked into the page, then I’m stuck too.

It’s only dangerous if you’re alone, without someone to guide you or to take you out of it. That’s the trap, see? If you just opened this here book and tried to read it and nobody came by for a few days, you might die of thirst or hunger. If you’re fool enough to open it outside, then the elements or some wild animal might take you, and there would be nothing you could do about it. That’s why you’ve got to be with somebody who knows what to do.”

“Guide me where? Honestly, Mr. Miller, I don’t know what you’re talking about. First, we’re talking about the weather now you’re telling me I’m gonna get trapped inside this book.”

“It’s not just a book. That’s what I’m trying to tell you. It’s part of the original magic of the Kingdom.” Mr. Miller reached out and slid his hand over the cover. “These metal pieces, this fabric on the cover, it’s all more than two thousand years old.”

“My father died to get this?”

“Yes, he did. He could have dropped it and given me his good hand. I don’t know if I could have pulled him up, but your dad didn’t know that either. Instead, he shoved it in my face, and I didn’t have a choice. I would throw the thing away if it would bring him back.”

“Me too,” Andrew agreed.

Chapter 3



The Kingdom As It Was

"I can feel the book asking me to open it. It's just like I saw it in my dreams and I feel like I..."

Suddenly, a brilliant Light shot from the book and everything in the room faded away. Andrew felt a hand on top of his, gentle yet firm and he heard a voice saying "Nooooooo!" Then the Light was gone.

Mr. Miller had his eyes closed and the book in his hands as Andrew got to his feet.

"What gives you the right to...?!" Andrew's mouth was open, and his arm was sticking straight out with his finger pointed right in Mr. Miller's face.

"Sit down Andrew, and tell me what just happened."

"I don't know. I guess I just needed to stand up."

"You fell into the trap."

Andrew sat back into the big leather chair trying to remember why he was standing.

Mr. Miller removed a long strip of black cloth from his pocket and blindfolded himself. With his head tilted up and a blank expression on his face, he said, "Now I'm ready, Andrew. Here we go."

Handing Andrew the book, he said, "You're about to visit the Kingdom as it was more than two thousand years ago. Try to remember everything you see. Understand that you can move to wherever you want, just by focusing on where you want to go. I'm going to be talking to you during your trip. Remember, I've been there before, and I'm your guide. Nothing in the Kingdom can hurt you and no harm will come to you."

Mr. Miller opened the cover, revealing a brilliant white Light that took on shades of blue as it filled the room. In its expanding arc across the ceiling, every object in the room threw off a long shadow until the candlelight, Connor, Mr. Miller, and the room faded away.

Instead of turning away or shielding his eyes, Andrew was compelled to look, to stare into the Light as it danced and flickered in waves. He tried to see its source as it shimmered and ebbed, growing and fading in intensity as it flowed around him.

Gradually the Light faded, leaving him weightless, thousands of feet off the ground. He wasn't free-falling and yet nothing was controlling his descent; nothing except the Light, but the Light was gone.

Looking over the landscape below, he was overwhelmed by the vast range of towering, jagged, snow-capped peaks. Each one reached an impossible height, and they had a chiseled, almost unnatural appearance. The majestic stone spires filled the horizon for as far as he could see.

Looking down he saw an enormous city. Andrew strained to see the design and architecture of the buildings until he realized how incredibly far away they were.

He turned in the opposite direction and saw a dry, lifeless desert beyond the great city. Each wave of its flawlessly patterned sand cast a shadow, and the pattern of the dunes ebbed on for miles until they transitioned into the ebbing blue waves of the ocean.

Pivoting effortlessly back toward the city and mountains, he continued downward toward the barren sands. Several of the mountain peaks were already above him. Leaning his head back, he marveled at their size. Following the sharp lines and angles of the peaks to their bases, he noticed the mountain range didn't end where the city began. Instead, the city and the mountains flowed into one another; just as the sea became the sand, the mountains became the city.

As Andrew drifted lower, the perfection and simplicity of the city's design overwhelmed him. It looked nothing like the towns and villages he had visited, and somehow he knew it wasn't made of bricks or block. Such crude materials could never radiate the harmony and beauty achieved by sculpting the mountainsides and bedrock.

Streets radiated from the city center like the spokes of a delicately made wheel, but with infinitely more detailed and complex patterns. Each primary outward spoke connected to the next by a latticework of corridors, walkways, bridges, and roads. And all this subtlety worked to emphasize a single towering spire emanating from the city center. This impossibly slender, gleaming white spire ended with a tapering point. Just below this point there was a large arched window.

Andrew heard a distant voice,
“Go to the window.”

Andrew didn't think it would be possible to travel all the way to the window and besides, he was heading toward the desert to see the city from the outside.

In the empty open desert, more than a mile away from the city, he stood facing the only defensive barrier between the greatest civilization ever and the outside world.

The massive outer wall of the kingdom grew directly out of the desert sands. It was almost the same color as the sand, but dull as if it was pulling light into it. Through the heat waves rising off the sands, Andrew could only see one of the three enormous archways which allowed entrance to the Kingdom.

Feeling a bit anxious to inspect the city, he focused on the archway and imagined himself standing in front of it. A blurring moment later and that's exactly where he was.

The distant voice spoke again,
“Make sure you look at each archway and don't forget the Defender's Portal.”

Looking up at the words seventy feet overhead, he knew he had seen letters like this before. They were intricate but bold. Like the lettering you might see on an official document, but certainly not the type of lettering that's etched in stone. The deep blue letters shimmered and sparkled as if water flowed through them. The artistry was beyond perfection.

While he could guess at some of the letters, the words were beyond recognition. Then, to his surprise, he spoke the verse aloud,

“Only the Virtuous May Enter.”

He put his hand to his mouth in astonishment. “What does it mean?” he whispered, “Only the Virtuous May Enter.” As the words left his mouth, images began to flicker through his mind.

A thin man with a shaking hand was stealing a plump loaf of bread as a shopkeeper turned his back. A small boy threw a rock at a window, and Andrew heard the glass break; a woman was bartering with a man in a crowded market and a little girl walked by, innocently dipping her hand into the woman's bag, stealing her scarf and a bundle of carrots. The images became more intense as Andrew witnessed a horse being whipped and forced into a corral; a man was beaten and robbed in an alleyway, then left for dead; finally and horrifically, Andrew watched as a faceless marauder cut a man's throat.

The Light within the book spoke to him in a soft feminine voice, "These things are not allowed in the Kingdom. Those with such thoughts or desires may not enter, and those who commit such acts may not remain. The virtuous person is above these things; they are selfless, caring, humble, and honest."

Andrew nodded in agreement and started to walk under the archway when he thought about how Connor lost his toe.

"What happens if you're not virtuous, and you still try to enter?" he asked aloud.

Again, images formed in his mind. He watched as a gentle looking, desert-weary, elderly man in poorly cut robes reached the center archway in the outer wall. The one Andrew was standing directly under. The old man raised his head and spoke the words in a dry, tired voice, "Only the virtuous may enter." The dark blue letters flickered and crackled with electricity. The man balled his hands into fists, lowered his head, and started walking under the archway.

Just before he made it to the other side, Lightning ripped through the air in a blinding flash. Wild ribbons of Light connected the top of the archway with the sands below. Before he could take another step, a clap of thunder split the air. The sound wave knocked Andrew onto his bottom, and he only heard the first part of it, then his ears just seemed to stop working.

The man stumbled in the loose sand, but kept walking through the archway. He walked across the expanse separating the outer wall from the inner wall, and when he approached the final archway of the inner wall, he raised his head.

"Know thyself, for you shall be revealed," he read, from high above.

He fell to his knees and pounded the sand with his fists. With tears running down his face, he yelled to the sky, "I am a virtuous man. I know in my heart I am worthy to enter your Kingdom!" He got to his feet, and in a final burst of energy, he ran into the archway and disappeared.

Andrew got back to his feet, asking, "Where did he go?"

"He is back in the desert."

"But where?"

"Where all who do not yet know the error of their ways must go; back where he started. He is alive and unharmed, but he may not enter the Kingdom until he is ready."

Andrew stood looking into the Kingdom from beyond the outer wall. After a while, he asked, "How can he become virtuous?"

"It is a different path for every person. Many of those who are tainted by hatred or fear can never find their way, but over time, it can be done."

Andrew took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Finally, he asked, "Can you see what I did to my friend, Connor?"

The kind voice of the Light spoke again, "You have done nothing to forbid your entrance to the Kingdom. Your friend acted of his own free will."

Andrew was relieved, but completely overwhelmed by what was going on. The voice in his head, the Light, this invisible guide could see what he had done and knew what he knew!

Andrew heard the distant voice again,

“The Defender’s Portal, don’t forget the Portal.”

“I should go look at the Portal,” he thought, and the scene in front of him blurred. Without moving a muscle, he flew off to the east. The Defender’s Portal was exactly half-way between the southern and eastern archways of the outer wall. Within seconds, Andrew had traveled more than three miles.

When he stopped, the outer wall was only six feet away, and the small, unassuming niche of the Defender’s Portal was right in front of him.

Looking into the Portal, Andrew felt angry and sad.

“So this is where fathers come to die,” he murmured.

Knowing his life might depend on what he saw, Andrew looked closely at the Portal trying to take in every detail. The opening looked exactly like the archways in the outer wall except it was much smaller. The peak of the arch was only fifteen feet high, and the sides were no more than eight feet across. It looked to be about eight feet deep, and since it was carved into the outer wall, the floor was just a foot off the sand.

Stepping across the threshold, he passed through something cold. It felt like he was back at the bottom of the lake. With both feet inside the Portal, the feeling disappeared.

Instead of being square, the walls formed a perfect half circle and in the center of this small recess there was a white spike. It was about four feet tall and ended in a dangerously sharp point. Around the thick base of the tall cone, inlaid into the floor, patterns of lines and squares radiated out in a spoke-like formation.

Along the curved wall, etched into the stone, there were dark letters outlined in pure white Light. When he looked into each of them, they weren’t just black, they were empty. The bright white of the edges bled into the center and disappeared. Andrew had never seen anything like it.

He backed up to the entrance of the Portal until he felt the chill of the barrier through his shirt. The phrase on the wall intensified its glow, and he read it aloud,

“No one shall go unchallenged before the call abates.

To lay your hand upon the spire declares both choice and fate.

Connected by your sacrifice two shall be as one.

Send hope when it has faded and strength when you have none.”

The spike suddenly lit up, and Andrew shielded his eyes. With his hands blocking the Light, he saw the letters on the wall fading. As the last word faded away, the spike began to pulse, growing dimmer then brighter in a rhythmic pattern. When his eyes finally adjusted, he lowered his hands a little and looked around the room.

With each blinding flash, Light pulsed into the spike and shot out of the top. A second later it would fade, pulling the Light down through the spike and pushing it out of the base; into the pattern of lines and squares on the floor.

The Light traced through each tiny line and shape until it reached the outer wall of the chamber, then the spike re-energized.

Andrew stepped forward and knelt down, looking at the intricate pattern on the floor. When he reached forward to place his hand on the floor, he noticed a small black shape just below the tip of the blazing white spike. It wasn't glowing at all. The little black thing never changed color, even when the spike pulsed with Light. He realized that the black shape looked just like the window at the top of the spire in the center of the Kingdom and he began connecting the clues.

The Light faded again, and the small streets and buildings represented by the inlaid cityscape echoed the pulse as they quickly filled with Light and passed it outward to the Portal wall. In came the Light and down went the glow, in and down, in and down. Andrew took a deep breath and sat down on the floor with his legs crossed.

With each passing second, the pulsing of the Light slowed. Eventually, it settled into a steady, calming rhythm.

He was staring at the small black window when something in it moved. The hairs on the back of his neck and arms stood up, and the pulse of the Light quickened.

Unfolding his legs, he quickly pushed himself back to his knees until his head was directly in line with the window. He scooted forward, holding up his hands and making a little opening to look through.

Andrew thought he could see a little smudge or maybe the shadow of a smudge in the darkness. Leaning forward to look more closely, he steadied himself by putting one hand on the tip of the spire and the other just below the small window.

From the moment his fingers touched the spire, he knew he had made a terrible mistake. The spire and floor stopped pulsing. A brilliant beam of Light shot out of the top of the spire, and every ounce of strength was pulled from his body. Pulling his hands off or pushing away from it was impossible.

After all his strength had drained away, his hands dropped to his side. He fell forward, slamming his cheek and ear into the stone spire, then his shoulder rammed against it. The floor was coming up fast, and he closed his eyes, bracing for impact.

When the impact never came, he slowly opened his eyes. He was lying on a floor, but his face was resting on a soft carpet. A tall woman was walking away from him toward a giant window, and with the little breath he had left, Andrew screamed for help.

Mr. Miller closed the book with a snap, but without time to adjust to the nearly pitch-black room, Andrew was blind to his surroundings.

"Mr. Miller," he shouted, moving to stand up. "Is that you?!" he cried out, smashing his forehead into Mr. Miller's chin.

"Ouch! It's me all right," Mr. Miller said, taking the book. "I think you just knocked out one of my teeth!" he said gruffly, setting the book on the floor next to Connor.

"Ooooh my head," Andrew moaned, holding his forehead and slumping back into the chair with his eyes closed. "I thought I was done for."

When he finally opened his eyes, Mr. Miller was lighting the last candle above the fireplace.

With blood running down his chin, Mr. Miller gently touched his lip and winced.

"Nope, my tooth is still there. I just got a nice split lip."

They looked at each other and laughed.

"What did you think?"

"I had no idea, I mean whatever that was, no wait, that's not right. What I mean is, the Kingdom, it's incredible. I wouldn't believe anything I saw was real except I was there. I saw it, I felt, I have to go back!"

"Tell me what happened? How did you make that sound?" he asked, setting his candle back into the holder on the table.

Andrew's green eye's flashed with excitement and fear as he recalled his journey. "I was standing in the Defender's Portal when I noticed the spike on the ground; you know how it pulses and glows. Well, I knelt down to look at it more closely, and I sort of grabbed it on accident."

Mr. Miller's eyes got wide, and his hand fell away from his lip, "You touched it?"

"Well, I didn't mean to, but yeah, I did."

This time, it was Mr. Miller's turn to say, "Wow!"

"So what happened?"

"As soon as I touched it, the entire city map and the spire stopped pulsing, and they both lit up. I don't know how long I held on, but honestly, I couldn't find the strength to let go.

It sucked every bit of strength right out of me. The next thing I knew I was face down on some carpet and a woman was walking around crying. I thought I was going to die. I didn't even have enough strength left to breathe. The last thing I did was cry out for help. That's when I came back here..., but I guess I never really left, did I?"

Mr. Miller leaned toward Andrew, and asked, "Was there a big window in the room and was the lady who was crying real pretty?"

"There was definitely a big window, but I couldn't see her face. Have you been there too?"

"I didn't think you could get in there," he whispered, sitting back and sounding far away. "I've seen it from the outside, but never from where you were. You may not have been there very long, but you were in the room at the top of the spire, the private retreat of the Kingdom's creator. You were in the Hero's Chamber!"

"But nobody ever comes back from the Chamber!" Andrew exclaimed, turning white and pleading, "Am I gonna die?! What am I supposed to do?!"

Mr. Miller smiled, saying, "It's all right Andrew, you weren't actually there, it just feels like it. You're gonna be fine," he trailed off with a chuckle.

"But I was there."

"Pretty good magic trick, huh?"

"That was incredible! How long was I there?"

"How long do you think you were there?"

"I guess about an hour, maybe a little more."

"See that candle?" Mr. Miller asked, pointing to the candle on the center table. "It's down by more than half since you opened the book. You were trapped for more than two hours."

"Two hours? It sure didn't feel like two hours!"

Mr. Miller took out his tobacco pouch and grabbed his pipe off the table. While he filled his pipe, he convinced Andrew to go upstairs and get some sleep; they were leaving at first light.

Chapter 4



First Steps

It was four in the morning, and Mr. Miller shook Andrew by the foot.

“Hitch up Duke, the big black one, to the small covered wagon. Don’t worry about my old gray, she’ll never let you bridle her. I’ll throw it on her when you’re ready, and we’ll tie her to the wagon. We’re going to my house. Come on, I want to be on the road before sunup.”

Andrew rubbed his eyes, stretched his arms wide and yawned. He got up slowly, walked down the stairs, out the back door and quietly closed it. He walked the short distance to the barn behind the house, but was surprised at how warm it was. The sun wasn’t even up and it was probably eighty degrees. He went inside the barn, the temperature jumped ten degrees, and it smelled just like a horse stable in the summer.

The old gray was sleeping in the stable, but Duke heard the latch and his massive black head was already facing Andrew when he opened the door. With tired eyes and slow steps, Andrew made his way over to the tack area and gathered the horse's well-worn attire.

"I know, I know. You think I want to be up this early either?" he said to Duke. "At least you got some sleep last night."

Duke shook his big black head as if he understood.

"Wake up ya old gray horse!"

She opened her eyes as if she'd been listening the whole time.

"You're not gonna give me any trouble are you?"

The old mare just closed her eyes again.

In thirty minutes, Andrew had Duke hitched to the wagon with the oiled-canvas cover. Mr. Miller was right, Andrew couldn't set the bridle in the old gray's mouth, and he just left the stubborn goat in her stable with the door closed.

Just before Andrew reached for the latch on the back door of the house, Mr. Miller poked his head out.

"You ready to go yet?"

"Yes sir, but you'll have to set the bridle in her mouth."

"Yep, I thought as much. That stubborn old thing is gonna be the end of me. Here, hold the door open while I bring Connor out. He's still on The Root, and we're gonna lay him in the back of the wagon. You're gonna sit back there and keep him from rolling around."

Andrew held the door as first light started to show itself, and a moment later Mr. Miller stepped out sideways with Connor cradled in his arms. His foot was sticking out at an awkward angle, and the bandages were a sickly shade of yellow.

"Let's get a move on," Mr. Miller grumbled, "It's gonna be a long hot day, and we've got a few miles to travel before you can rest a wink. Get inside and grab a couple of blankets from upstairs."

"Yes sir," Andrew mumbled.

"And grab the old wool pillow for his foot and something to rest his head on. And don't worry about anything else, just hurry up."

The back door banged shut behind Andrew and after a quick trip upstairs, he had two blankets under one arm and a bed pillow under the other. From the back room, he carefully plucked the wool pillow up with his fingertips. It was covered with the stiff, crusty ooze from Connor's toe, making it stick to the leather footrest, and it had a rancid smell. Making his way out of the house, he pushed the old wooden door closed with his elbow.

Mr. Miller had Connor propped up in a sitting position on the end of the wagon. Andrew walked over, and Mr. Miller said, "Good, now put those blankets in the back of the wagon. We'll lay him down, and you can help me drag him in."

Andrew climbed in and quickly spread them out. The wagon was too small to stand in without hitting the canopy, so he crawled back to Connor and put his hands behind his shoulders.

"Watch his head," Mr. Miller instructed, letting Connor's weight fall onto Andrew. Andrew tried to ease him down onto his back, but Connor's head rolled backward and caught Andrew on the chin.

"Ouch!"

"Just because he's as dumb as a chicken doesn't mean you have to be!"

Connor went down the final few inches while Andrew tried to keep his head from hitting the bed of the wagon. He rubbed his chin and was pretty sure Connor would have a knot on the back of his head when he woke up.

Mr. Miller grabbed Connor's ankles as Andrew hunched over in the wagon. Andrew lifted and pulled, Mr. Miller pushed, and after a few pushes and pulls, they had Connor in position. Mr. Miller grabbed the old wool pillow from the end of the wagon and squeezed it before putting it under Connor's foot. Andrew heard it crackle and watched Mr. Miller drop the pillow at the end of the wagon and cautiously sniff his moist hands.

"Oh dear God!" he coughed.

"I was gonna tell you, but I forgot."

He set the moist, yellowish-gray pillow under Connor's bandaged foot.

"I don't have time for this right now," he said. "And burn that thing tonight when we're at my house. The sun is coming up, and we're gonna have to make good time to avoid attention."

Andrew nodded and sat down next to Connor. Yawning, he said, "I'm gonna fall asleep if we don't get moving."

"Watch his head and try to keep his leg as steady as you can."

"I will."

Mr. Miller turned away from the wagon, then turned back, and asked, "Andrew?"

"Yes, sir."

"Everything is about to change. You know that don't you?"

With another big yawn, Andrew said, "I think it already did."

"I'm sorry your dad couldn't be here."

"Me, too."

"Did you like the first page?"

"I can't believe I'm gonna say this, but I can't wait to go to the Kingdom." Andrew took a deep breath and let it out, saying, "I think it's probably worth it."

"Tell me that when we're half-way across the Wastelands and I just might believe you."

Andrew leaned over a little so he didn't have to raise his voice. "If the rest of the book is anything like what I saw last night, you'll get the same answer every time."

"Just remember," Mr. Miller said, walking around the side of the small wagon, "the Kingdom either takes you, or it takes everything away from you. There doesn't seem to be any middle ground."

He walked back to the house and in just a couple of minutes Andrew heard the door open and close for the last time. The cart tilted sharply to one side as Mr. Miller climbed onto the front. He had a large bundle under his arm wrapped in a stout wool blanket. He popped the reins, and the little wagon lurched forward. The sun was just up over the horizon, the old wooden cart kicked up dust, and they were off.

From inside the wagon, Andrew could see the first shafts of light playing through the trees. It looked serene until the cart hit a rut and Andrew's head bounced off a support rod.

"Watch it back there and keep his head still. It's gonna be a bumpy ride."

Mr. Miller had his arms stretched out in front of him with the reins in his hands. Andrew could see the bumpy, pitted scars and the hairs growing at odd angles.

"What happened to your arms?" he asked hesitantly.

After a long pause, Mr. Miller said, "Like most men, I've paid a high price for my trip to the Kingdom."

Glancing back, he said, "It happened when J.D., I mean Connor's dad, and I were coming back from the river after we lost your dad. I got the idea in my head that we needed to test the shield."

"What do you mean, test it?"

"We could tell it was magical. It's actually unbelievable just how beautiful it is. Anyway, I thought it would be a good test of its strength if J.D. held it the proper way and I took a swing at it with the little mace I had on my belt. We had already finished crossing the river, and we were about half a day from our base camp when I finally convinced him we should test it.

He held the shield, and I took out my mace. I held on with both hands and J.D. nodded for me to give it a whack." Mr. Miller draped the reins over his forearms and started rubbing both of his hands together like he was washing up for supper. "I gave it one good swing and the next thing I knew, I woke up on the ground in agony.

Later, J.D. told me about the tiny rainbows and how they danced around the edges of the shield and all over my mace. They covered my hands and arms, then they exploded, and I got shot back about ten feet.

I had my eyes open by the time J.D. was standing over me, and all I could do was scream from the pain."

He stopped rubbing his hands and held up his arms, letting Andrew see the scars. "As far as I can tell, each pockmark is where the little bastards went in, and every bump is where they came out. We never did find my mace.

J.D. carried me back to the Cups, and I stuck my arms in the icy water. It helped; at least they went numb for a little while. We spent the night by the river because every

time I took my arms out of the water, it felt like they were on fire. The next morning he carried my pack for me, and I stumbled along behind him. I don't remember how we got back to our base camp. All I really remember is the pain."

The damage was cruel looking, and Andrew couldn't imagine the pain Mr. Miller must have suffered.

"Did you have any of The Root?"

"We had some of it at the camp, but the Heroes never take it because they never need it." He said the last part at a slow pace almost as if it had to come out, but he didn't want it to.

"I took it," he told Andrew. "And know this. Some pain can't be touched by The Root. I don't know if it's the type of pain or the amount of pain that makes the difference. All it did to me was make me stupid. Even after I took it, the pain was beyond description. I would pass out every three or four hours because I couldn't fight it anymore. Either that or because The Root made me so stupid I would use my hands to grab something. As soon as I touched anything, the pain would wash over me. I felt like I was drowning in it, then I would pass out again."

"That must be some shield."

Mr. Miller turned his head and met Andrew's eyes. "It's not just a shield. It's a defensive weapon that will defeat anything that strikes it."

"How do you know? Maybe it just attacked you because you had a weapon."

"You're a smart boy, Andrew. It's a good question. A few years ago, I had it out so I could move it again. Hide it you know, where nobody could find it. I threw a few rocks into the air when I had it on my arm. I don't know how to describe what happened, but because of the shield, the world is missing a few rocks."

"Didn't you say I would see the shield when I got trapped in the book?"

"You will, but it's not for a few more pages."

"I still don't understand what you're saying about pages. I wasn't on a page, I was in the book."

Mr. Miller grinned, and said, "You ain't seen nothin yet boy. Every page is a different view of what the author wanted you to see, feel, and investigate. When you turn a page, you change the scene."

"But how can you turn the page if you're trapped?"

"You can't, but I can turn them for you."

"I don't want to be rude, but who would make a book that takes two people to turn the pages?"

"The way I figure it, the author was probably the only one who could read it without getting trapped. Whoever wrote it wanted to keep it secret, and that's why it traps anybody who's not supposed to be reading it."

"That's a good trick," Andrew said, "but who wrote it?" and as the words came out, he realized he already knew.

"I think I've known all along. It was written by the Lady I saw, wasn't it?"

"You mean the Lady of the Tower? The Maker of the Spire? The Daughter of Hope? The Bringer of Unity? Yep, she's the one!

She's the woman you saw in the tower, the one who was crying. This book is, or I guess was, hers and the next twenty pages are yours to explore. I'm confident she would not approve, but then again, we must all learn what we can when we can," Mr. Miller trailed off in a mystical way.

"I think I know what it says on the cover."

"You do, do you?"

"It says, My Diary."

Mr. Miller turned again and looked at Andrew. He raised an eyebrow, and asked, "Andrew, how could you possibly know that?"

"Right now, from the look on your face I would love to say I don't know, but it was the Light. You know, the Light in the book, or I guess I mean it was the magic, the magic of the Lady. I feel so stupid for not realizing it until now. I mean that it wasn't a light. The Lady's magic was guiding me. It was inside of me, it was part of me. It could see me, and it could see the things I've done.

She translated the words for me over the archways. She showed me things. Some things were wonderful, but others were horrible, and I guess the letters just make sense now. Didn't that happen for you too?"

There was a long silence, and Connor started to get restless. Andrew did his best to keep him steady as the old wooden cart jostled and bumped its way out of town.

Mr. Miller turned Duke up another dusty road, then he called out, "All right, we're here. I've got Connor; you take care of the horses."

Duke was foaming. It wasn't more than three miles door to door, but the heat of the morning took its toll.

Andrew scooted out of the back of the wagon while Mr. Miller quickly moved around to the back, pulling Connor out by his legs.

"Go on boy, I've got this. I want the horses fed and watered. There's a cellar under this old shack, and you can get a break from the heat down there. Finish tending to the horses, get a drink from the well out back, then get some shut-eye in the cellar. I'll wake you for supper."

"Yes, sir."

"Andrew?"

Andrew lifted his weary head again, "Yes sir?"

"Don't come in the house when you're done, just go straight to the cellar. There's a bed down there. Just climb in and get some shut-eye."

He yawned again and holding his hand to his mouth, he asked, "Why can't I come inside?"

"We'll have the book open."

“What if I wake up before you come and get me for supper?”

“If you wake up, and it’s dark outside, you’re the last man standing. Put on a blindfold and figure out how to close the damn book.”

Andrew didn’t know if Mr. Miller was serious, but he took it that way and nodded.

“Good,” Mr. Miller said, cradling Connor in his arms and starting toward the front door of the house.

Mr. Miller’s house was easily twice the size of the house they had just come from and except for the roof, it was made entirely of fieldstone. It reminded Andrew of a miniature castle. He watched as Mr. Miller stepped through the front door with Connor, then he went to tend to the horses.

Twenty minutes later, Andrew was walking out of the barn. Once again, he was covered in dirt and sweat, and his mouth was as dry as a leather strap. He went behind the barn to the well.

The large wooden bucket spun and swayed as he cranked the rusty chain through the pulley. Reeling the leaky bucket back up, he pulled it over to the side of the old stone well and set it on the edge. It held at least three gallons, and he plunged his head in up to his ears and drank until he couldn’t hold his breath anymore. When he stood up, his hair was soaking, and he was gasping for breath, but the sweet taste of the cold well water sent him down for another couple of mouths full.

With a soaking wet shirt and hair to match, Andrew made his way to the east side of the house where he found the double doors to the cellar. The thick, pine boards sat resting at a slight angle just above the ground. The old ironwork holding them together was as faded as the wood.

He grabbed one of the smooth handles, and it was already warm to the touch. Rocking his weight back, he pulled at it with both hands until it opened halfway. The hinges creaked, the wood complained, and the door thumped against the ground.

The hazy light of the early day pierced the dark shadows of the cellar, illuminating tiny flecks of dust and dirt. Stepping down into the shadows, he knew he was on the verge of collapsing, but he paused on the final step while his eyes adjusted.

An old plow sat off to his right with some dusty crates next to it. To his left was a dresser with a couple of missing drawers. Behind the dresser was the fieldstone wall holding up the back of the house. With no candle or lantern in sight, he decided to leave the door open.

With his feet on the floor, he could barely make out a long, dark blur about knee high at the far end of the cellar. With one hand gently feeling for obstacles and the other hand sticking straight out, Andrew made his way into the darkness.

His leg brushed against what he hoped was a cot, and he reached down with both hands to investigate. To his relief, he felt the soft cotton bed linens and a plump pillow. Within minutes, he was flat on his back, sound asleep.

Andrew dreamed he was standing in a great hall where shining shafts of light shone down in bright unbroken beams. Beautiful tapestries covered the walls, and ornate furniture gave it a formal but comfortable feel.

A tall, powerful, and very angry looking man dressed in white armor stepped through a doorway and began walking toward him from across the room. The wooden heel of his high leather boots sent a hollow sound echoing around the room.

The man was twenty paces away when he unsheathed a crystal sword and quickened his pace. With his gleaming crystal rapier pointed at Andrew, the man in white shouted, "How dare you enter where others cannot! You will pay for your reckless indiscretion!" Andrew raised a magnificent shield to protect himself, but the man dropped his sword and grabbed the shield.

Andrew sat up, yelling, "No, No, No! I'll never let it go, never!"

Andrew tried to pull his arm away from his attacker, but the man in white held fast to the shield.

"No! I'll never let it go," Andrew yelled, "She gave it to me! Help me! Somebody, help me!"

"Andrew, Andrew! Andrew, wake up!"

Water splashed onto Andrew's face, and he opened his eyes. There was a hand on his wrist, and he tried to pull away, but Mr. Miller held tight.

"Let go, what are you doing? Where's my shield? What are you doing?"

Mr. Miller had a lantern in his right hand and an empty tin cup around his finger. His left hand was wrapped around Andrew's wrist, and the look in his eyes was frightening.

"Andrew, it's just a dream. You're having a dream."

Andrew knew he had been dreaming, but he couldn't figure out when it had started or stopped.

"When did you get here?"

"We heard you yelling from upstairs. I came to wake you, but when I got to the bottom of the steps, I thought you were awake."

Mr. Miller let go of Andrew's wrist.

"I thought I was, too," Andrew said, sounding confused.

"I brought you some water," Mr. Miller said, looking concerned, "Sorry about having to throw it on you. I didn't know how else to wake you up."

"Did I try to hit you?" Andrew asked, wiping off his face.

"No, but you were flapping your arm around like somebody had a hold of it. Your eyes were closed, too."

"Somebody did have a hold of it. Not my arm though, he was trying to take my...," Andrew stumbled for the right words, "I mean the shield away from me." He reached over and rubbed his left shoulder. "It still hurts."

There was a long uncomfortable pause. "What kind of a dream...?!"

"Strange things are happening Andrew, things I can't explain. Come on, somebody upstairs wants to say hello."

"Upstairs?"

Mr. Miller laughed, "You're down in my cellar. What, did you forget? You've been sleeping for twelve hours."

He led Andrew up the worn wooden stairs until the stars came into view. Andrew could smell the wood fire burning and something delicious cooking.

After ten paces, they rounded the front corner of the stone house, and Andrew saw Connor standing on the front porch. He had a bowl in his hand and an entire slice of bread in his mouth. Holding up his hand, he mumbled, "Hey Andrew, you gotta try this stuff. It's fantastic!"

Mr. Miller looked at Andrew, and said, "You're the only one that's slept in two days. I'm going to go to the cot you just got out of, don't wake me up. By the way, Connor made it through the first two pages and his foot is almost completely healed. The book has the power to heal you if you stay in it long enough. Now get something to eat and please, don't talk about anything outside of the house. We can't afford anybody overhearing what the two of you might be talking about."

Andrew nodded as Mr. Miller turned, and said, "Goodnight."

His footsteps fell away, and Andrew climbed the front steps where Connor stood smiling on the front porch. Connor just looked down at him with a big grin. He had some stew stuck in his teeth and he stretched out his arms, saying, "What do you think? Can you believe it?"

Andrew felt a smile creep onto his face as he faked a punch to Connor's ribs. Connor pulled his arms in to protect himself and the stew in his bowl launched in a high arc over Andrew's head.

Connor's reflexes were perfect, but he lost his balance and fell back against the front of the house. He dropped his bowl and Andrew reached his hand out just in time to keep Connor on his feet.

"Whoa, I was just joking," Andrew said, pulling Connor upright. "What was that all about?"

Looking confused and irritated, Connor said, "You have no idea how important your big toe is."

Andrew grabbed the bowl off the porch, tossed it back to Connor, and asked, "Where's mine?"

"It's in the house. Come on, I could use another bowl myself."

Connor started toward the door with a bit of a limp, but after a few steps, he found his rhythm.

"Does it hurt?"

"No, but we shouldn't talk about it out here. Come inside, it's a little warm in the house, but at least we can talk without anyone overhearing us."

Chapter 5



An Early Departure

Stepping through the wide front door into Mr. Miller's house, Andrew said, "I know where the shield is."

"Close the door! What are you talking about?"

"You know, the shield my dad found," he said, pushing the door shut.

Connor stopped and turned around in the dimly lit hallway, saying, "I got to see the first two pages of the book and I don't remember a shield, but can you believe it?! It's like a dream."

"You only read the diary. We didn't actually go there."

"The what? The diary? Why did you call it that?"

"Because that's what the letters on the front of the book say."

Connor turned back around and walked toward a candle lit room. "You know," he said, in a quiet voice, "that makes sense. It felt like I was having someone else's dream, but I knew I wasn't dreaming. That's when I realized I could do whatever I wanted."

The large kitchen at the back of the house was lit along the wall by a half dozen candles. On the far end, in an oversized hearth, the cooking fire burned low. An iron pot on a large hook bubbled and steamed, wafting its glorious smells throughout the house.

"Help yourself. The bowls are right here," Connor said, pointing at the table.

Andrew picked up a bowl and followed his nose to the small cauldron of stew. Connor sat down and waited for Andrew in the large room connected to the kitchen.

"I can't believe I was there! Do you remember the thing behind the other thing in the middle of that place?" Connor said to himself. "Wow! That was impossible," he said, shaking his head as he answered his own questions. He waved his arms around, saying, "How do you think they made that? I'm ready to go back. I wish I lived there. I'm going to live there. We're going to go there, and it will be amazing, you'll see. You've got to see the next page."

Andrew came over with his bowl and spoon. He was calm and cool, trying not to seem impressed or impatient. With a mouthful of stew, he said, "Why? What's there besides a broken down old nothing?"

"You're kidding, right?!"

Andrew chewed slowly, making Connor wait as long as possible for his answer. Finally, he said, "Yeah, I'm kidding. I can't wait to see everything in that book. Where did Mr. Miller put it?"

"He said it's safe. We can look at it tomorrow, but I can tell you what I saw if you want to know?"

"I don't think I'll be able to shut you up. But before you start telling me all about it, let me see your foot."

Connor proudly held up his foot with the missing toe and tried to wiggle the stump. Andrew set down his bowl and took a candle off the table. He stepped over to Connor's waggling foot and grabbed it.

"Would you just look at that?! It's completely healed. It's like you were born without a big toe!" He tossed Connor's foot to one side and set the candle back down. "How is that even possible?" he mumbled to himself.

"What did you say?" Connor asked, still holding up his foot, trying to make the stump move.

Andrew picked up his bowl and sat down in a chair across from Connor. "I said how's that possible? How is any of this possible?"

"I don't know, but why don't you tell me about the shield and I'll tell you about the next page of the book," Connor said, feeling brash.

“The shield?! Didn’t Mr. Miller already tell you about it?! Don’t you know what happened to my father?! You were in the room when he told us all about it!”

Connor lost his brashness, set his foot back down on the uneven wooden floor, and lowered his eyes.

“I don’t remember anything except going to the lake. I can’t even remember what happened to my toe. I know what Mr. Miller told me when I came out of the book a couple hours ago, but honestly, I don’t know where we are or how we got here.”

Tears filled Connor’s eyes, and he pleaded, “What in the world is going on, and where in the heck are we?!”

Andrew sighed, let out a little laugh and started all over from the beginning.

It was late when he finally stopped talking. The candles had burned down, and a quiet calmness settled into them that hadn’t been there for a long time.

Connor, who had been very attentive the entire time, gave a big yawn, and said, “Thank you for saving me. Thank you for not letting me drown. I’m sorry if I got mad at you, I didn’t mean it. Thank you.”

“It’s not like I was gonna leave you there. I’m sorry for what happened too, and I’m sorry for calling you a chicken. I never thought anything like this would ever happen.” And that was that.

Just before Andrew fell asleep, he whispered to the quiet room, “I’m bringing him back when we go there. I’m gonna climb down into that pit and bring him back. Then I’m gonna give him a proper burial. I’m putting my word on that.”

Connor mumbled something, turned to his side in the big chair and soon they were both asleep.

Early the next morning, with the sun lighting up the room, Connor playfully kicked Andrew’s chair.

“Rise and shine, Hero.”

Andrew stretched and pawed at the air.

“What’s for breakfast?”

With the words still hanging in the air, Mr. Miller came striding into the room.

“Breakfast,” he announced, “is whatever you can find in the barn and whatever remains in that pot.”

Connor was face to face with Mr. Miller. Their six foot, one inch tall frames almost mirrored each other, and Connor politely asked, “When will we be starting our adventure?”

“You already have, my boy. Now go and gather something for us to end our fast, then I’ll tell you a story about today, tomorrow, and yesterday.”

Andrew kicked up his legs, grabbed Connor by the elbow and the two walked briskly out the front door in search of a meal. It was five thirty in the morning, the sun had just come up, and it was already ninety degrees.

“Are you sure there’s a shield?” Connor asked.

“Are you crazy?! Didn’t you listen to anything I said last night? Don’t you remember what I told you and what I saw in my dream?” He pushed Connor toward the stairs saying, “You said you were listening!”

When they came back to the house, they entered through the front door only to have Mr. Miller push them back outside.

“I thought you wanted some breakfast,” Connor said.

Mr. Miller shut the front door, saying, “As soon as you’ve both learned your lesson for the day.”

Andrew smiled at Connor, and said, “And so it begins.”

Mr. Miller had two things in his hands, the magic shield and the book. He walked past the boys and told them to “sit” on the front steps.

He backed away and began the lesson by saying, “Lesson number one. This shield will defeat anyone or anything that attacks it. When the time is right, we will use it to win the Kingdom.”

“Andrew!” prompted Mr. Miller.

“Yes, sir.”

“Take a rock and throw it at this shield.”

Andrew took a fist-sized fieldstone from next to the house and tossed it to Connor. He felt the heft of the stone, then he stood up, cocked his arm back and threw it as hard as he could.

In a blazing glory of sparkles and tiny brilliant rainbows, the rock disappeared. Mr. Miller’s head poked out from behind the huge shield, and he said, “Lesson learned.”

Next, Mr. Miller set the book on the ground. He told both the boys find a rock at least as big as their head. When they returned, he demanded that they smash the book with their rocks until they could no longer wield them.

At first, Connor refused, and Mr. Miller struck him in the face with an open hand. There was a small display of righteous indignation, then he started smashing the book with his rock. To the boys’ amazement, nothing happened to the book and the rock eventually cracked into useless little pieces. By the time he was done, Connor was sweating and winded.

Andrew didn’t want to get smacked upside the head, so he took his rock and did the same thing, achieving the same results. After they were both exhausted, they realized what Mr. Miller had known all along.

He told the boys to rest on the steps while he concluded the lesson.

He held up the shield and announced, “Anyone challenging this will pay dearly for it. This is the ultimate defense. It is magic.” He set the shield down in the dirt, stepped toward the boys and pulled back his sleeves. He presented the scarred flesh without saying a word. After an uncomfortable pause, he pulled down his sleeves, stepped backward and stood behind the book.

Holding it up, he said, "This is magic. It cannot be destroyed. It will never cease to exist. It can only be hidden from plain sight, and it offers no sanctuary to those who seek it. It is also a trap. Never use it alone and never open it without letting us know what you are about to do.

Both of these objects can be "felt" by people who are sensitive to them. Magical objects have the ability to "call" to people in their dreams and even when they are awake. You've both experienced this, and I can guarantee you one thing. Others are looking for the book, just as you were. They seek the shield in the same way. The sword remains lost. They will challenge us for them and kill us if they have to. The longer we stay here, the closer they get, and the more dangerous each day becomes."

He picked up the book, dusted the dirt from the cover and leveled his gaze at the boys. "We leave for the Kingdom in four weeks. By the time we leave, you will know some of what I know, and neither of you will be ready.

We cannot afford to stay here while the world closes in around us. Every morning we will meet, and I will conduct a lesson. Lessons will not be repeated, and questions will not be answered until that evening. Is this clear enough?"

Both boys nodded, and answered, "Yes sir."

"Tonight we will explore the book again. Until then, stay out of trouble, don't wander off, and if you see anyone holler for me right away."

That night the three of them gathered in the back room. It was just after supper and each had taken a seat in one of the high-backed chairs. Mr. Miller lit his pipe and blew smoke rings into the rafters above. With the pipe between his teeth, he casually asked the room, "Any questions about this morning?"

Andrew spoke up almost before the question was finished, "You said there's a sword, but it's lost. How do you know?"

"Because I dream about the fool thing all the time and it's in the book. I've been looking for it for the past ten years and after all my searching, I'm convinced it's in the pit your dad fell into. You boys can take a look when you get there because this time we're bringing enough rope."

"What does it look like?" Connor asked.

Andrew answered without even thinking, "It's beautiful! Its blade must be three feet long, and it's made of a blue, transparent crystal. It's edged on both sides and comes to a dangerous point. It's also got a guard and an elegant basket made of gold, and the pommel looks like a rose, just about to open. I think it's a rapier."

"Sure it is," Connor said sarcastically. "What does it really look like Mr. Miller?"

"How did you know that?" Mr. Miller asked, looking very surprised.

"It was in my dream. The one I had in the basement when you came to wake me up. I thought it was just a dream, but now I know it was more than that...wasn't it?"

"It's still just a dream, but that's the same sword I see every time. Did you get a sense of where it was? Did it call to you?"

"I thought it was right in the room with me. I mean in the room where I had the dream...no, I mean I could see it in the room where the man was, but when I woke up, I couldn't tell anymore."

Mr. Miller sat there thinking and puffing on his pipe.

"Does the sword do anything special, like the book or the shield?" Connor asked.

"According to the book, the sword was one of two gifts from the Lady of the Spire to her father. He didn't have any magic of his own, and from time to time, he had to leave the Kingdom to meet with people around the world. His daughter worried about him so much, she actually removed part of her magic, weakening herself, to create the shield and the sword. The book doesn't really speak to what the objects do, but when the daughter presents her gifts to her father, she says, "A shield to protect you and keep you from harm. And a sword that shines for all to see. Those who gaze upon them will be truthful, and those who wield them must be righteous."

"So, what good is the shield going to do us?" Connor asked, sounding tired of the whole conversation.

"Now that's a good question. It took me a little while to figure it out myself."

Both boys sat up and leaned forward in their chairs.

"The shield protects the bearer from any attack, right? Even an all-powerful magical attack...right?" He paused for effect, but the boys just looked at each other.

"I keep forgetting how little you two know," he said, shaking his head in disappointment. "So this is how it works. To rebuild the Kingdom, it takes two people, right?"

"Right," confirmed the boys.

"Yeah, one to die and one to carry the body home," Connor joked.

Mr. Miller leaned forward and slapped him upside the head. Connor looked surprised, then embarrassed, and Mr. Miller started again.

"One man is in the Hero's Chamber at the top of the tower, the Hero, and the other man is in the Defender's Portal outside the city. The Defender enters the Portal just as the Hero takes his place in the Chamber and when the Portal lights up, he grabs the spike on the floor. The Portal and the Chamber become one and the two men, the Hero and the Defender, are in the same place at the same time. Of course, the Hero can't move, so it's the Defender who takes all the punishment. He's the person defending the Hero from the magical force.

The Kingdom has never been rebuilt because no one has ever been able to survive the devastating onslaught. If the Defender can survive, the Kingdom will rise again!"

Connor had a sly grin on his face. "That sounds pretty good." He reached over and shoved Andrew saying, "That sounds pretty good doesn't it! Doesn't it?!"

Andrew fell back in his chair and smiled. "We could really do this, couldn't we?"

Mr. Miller didn't smile at all. He just looked at the boys, and said, "If we can get there alive we should have the best chance anybody has ever had...if we get there."

"Why do you say it like that?" Connor asked. "It's only three weeks through the Wastelands right? We've got to make it."

"It's four weeks, and there are only three of us. If we're attacked at any point along the way, we're as good as dead."

With a big smile, Connor said, "But not if we use the shield, right?"

Hope flickered across Mr. Miller's dark eyes. In all the time he had kept the shield, the thought of using it against a person had never occurred to him. His self-imposed responsibility had always been to hide it and keep it was safe. But if this was truly the last trip to the Kingdom, why not strap the thing on your arm and let the whole world see it?

"I think you're making a lot of sense right now," Mr. Miller said, "A lot of sense."

After a long night of Connor and Andrew experiencing the book, the three adventurers almost simultaneously came up with a plan to leave sooner rather than later. Over the next week, Mr. Miller would obtain the final items needed for their journey. The boys would begin creating an inventory list of all the items they currently had stored at the house plus all the additional items they would require. They would also have to create a packing plan, making sure every item would be easy to find during the journey.

The next morning Mr. Miller had the wagon ready to go and was leaving the property by the time the sun hit the house. Connor and Andrew stayed behind. They had more than two months' worth of provisions to list, categorize, and figure out how to pack.

It wasn't easy, but in ten days the small party was packed and ready to go. There were six horses and a wagon. Connor and Andrew were each riding a horse, Mr. Miller was driving the wagon with two horses pulling it, and there were two packhorses tied to the back of the wagon. The most precious cargo they had, the shield and the book, had been stowed in an ingenious little space between the bed of the wagon and the bottom of the wagon. Apparently, Mr. Miller was experienced in packing items where they were not likely to be seen.

Chapter 6



The Wastelands

After the scrubby, little pine trees had disappeared, the most exciting thing any of them saw was a rust colored boulder with a mean-looking lizard on it.

The trail, if you could call it a trail, was peppered with dead creosote bushes, tumbleweeds and small cactus that barely looked alive. Each hoof print created a swirl of sand and dust. Each horse left a wake of it, and the whole party made a cloud that was visible for miles. Andrew had a nose full of it.

It had been another weary day of riding. Andrew and Connor had stopped talking shortly after their meager lunch. Neither of them had enough energy left for even simple conversation. Finally, Mr. Miller called a halt to the day, and they all started on the evening ritual.

Making camp every night was a struggle between exhaustion, and the need to have a tent to collapse in. Supper and sleep waited for them when they were done; sometimes supper came first, sometimes it didn't.

Andrew walked his horse around to the others, gathering each of their mounts. First Connor's, then the two horses pulling the wagon and finally the pack animals.

"Mr. Miller?" Andrew called out.

"What is it?"

"There aren't any trees to make a tack line. What should I do?"

"Take the four-foot iron stakes from the back of the wagon and use the five-pound hammer to drive them into the dirt. Make sure the line is tight and don't forget to put the tie lines on the tack before you spike it down."

"This ought to be fun," Andrew thought, pulling Mr. Miller's old gray toward the open area where the tack line would be.

Connor was already working on setting up the tents. Mr. Miller's always went up first, then he put up the tent he and Andrew shared. The smell of the heavily oiled canvas had been a part of every night and day since leaving Mr. Miller's house almost ten days ago.

Tending to the horses was long, tiring, and dirty. It seemed like Andrew was always the last one done and tonight was no exception.

He walked toward the cook fire where Mr. Miller was stirring a pot of something thin and runny, and asked, "Is it even hotter than last night?"

"We entered the Wastelands sometime after we stopped for our noon meal. It won't get under eighty-five in the evenings, and we'll be lucky to see anything less than one hundred and five during the heat of the day."

"A hundred and five?!" Andrew and Connor complained.

Wiping the sweat off his head, Connor said, "That'll kill the horses for sure."

Mr. Miller walked over to grab his waterskin off the front pole of his tent. He held up the old brown skin and squeezed the warm water into his mouth. He only took a mouthful, then turned and faced the boys.

"We can't travel by day anymore, it might kill us all." He corked the waterskin and hung it back on the pole. "Besides, there's only enough water to take us to the Kingdom. If we waste it, we're never gonna make it across the Wastelands."

"You mean we're going to travel at night?" Connor asked. "What about the bandits we saw and everything you've been telling us about thieves? How will we be able to see any of the Wanderers? Come on Mr. Miller, how can we travel when there isn't any light?"

Mr. Miller ignored the questions. Turning to Andrew, he asked, "Was the five-pound hammer heavy enough?"

"Yes, sir. I hit a few rocks when I drove the spikes in and had to move them a couple of times, but I got them in. If the horses get spooked, I think the tack line will give out, but we should be fine if we have a quiet night."

"It'll be quiet," said Mr. Miller. "The Wastelands are always quiet. I just hope we're lucky enough to have a Wanderer before too long."

Connor was standing by the fire looking anxiously at the stew. As he reached for the large wooden spoon in the pot, he asked, "Why do we need a Wanderer to guide us? You've been there before, and you and my dad didn't have a guide."

Mr. Miller dug around in his cook sack and produced their small wooden bowls. He took the spoon out of Connor's hand and told them supper wouldn't be ready for another ten minutes. As the group settled in to wait, Mr. Miller started talking, "There'll be no need to worry about thieves or bandits now, except for the ones who might be after the book or the shield. The usual lot knows where we're going, and I don't think they'll hit us now that we're in the Wastelands. They might take a poke at us on the way back, but we'll worry about that if the time comes."

Through cracked, sunburnt lips, he started whistling a dry, somber tune neither of the boys had heard before. Pulling back his tent flap, he sat under the canopy and started to sing, "Bravely we enter with hope in our eyes, the journey of legend with sons at my side. The Kingdom is calling to me and to you; destiny beckons to all save a few. Some say the righteous will be given a guide, to be led through the Wastelands by a man with no eyes."

Andrew gave Connor a sideways glance and shrugged his shoulders.

Mr. Miller continued, "Over the dunes and in through the wall, trust in your heart or the Hero will fall. The Kingdom is calling to me and to you; destiny beckons to only a few. Walk to the spire on the path with no name, but not if the journey is taken for fame. Cups is the river crossing your way, danger is lurking to sweep you away. When it flows from the source, you'll know you've arrived, from under the wall comes a rushing blue tide. Walk through the door, turn and be greeted, the Kingdom is yours if you stand undefeated."

The Kingdom is calling, the path is still clear; don't take the risk if you have any fear. A champion emerges glowing with Light, all other journeys end on this night. The Kingdom will rise from the ashes of old, bound by a love that cannot be tolled. Come to me Hero, but never alone, the strength you possess is never your own."

He whistled the rhythmic beat of the song as the sun quickly sank behind brilliantly lit clouds with pink borders, thrown up against a turquoise-blue sky.

In a few more minutes, Connor walked over to the cook pot with his bowl out, and sarcastically said, "That was really cheery, thanks. So this Wanderer, he can take us all the way to the Hero's Chamber?"

Mr. Miller shuffled out of his tent. Filling Connor's bowl, he said, "They can make the journey a lot easier through the foothills. And with a Wanderer as your guide, both of you will be able to safely manage the three crossings."

"That sounds really good," Connor said smiling. "So where can we find ourselves a guide?"

Mr. Miller tilted his head up toward Connor, and said in a sharp tone, "You don't find a Wanderer. We've been over this. They find you. That's how it works. You will never see his face, and you will certainly never see him eat or sleep. He will never speak to you, and you'll do well to remember that it's incredibly rude to speak directly to him. We'll be lucky to pick one up. If we do, it will be in the next week or so."

"If the Wanderers can live out here without shelter or homes and they can guide us to the Hero's Chamber, why don't they ever go in?" Andrew asked. "Why don't they accept the challenge?"

"You know what I know from the book and there isn't anything about them in it. The only things I've ever heard about them are legends and lies. The legends say they came from the Kingdom, but nobody really knows. And the lies would scare you. They're not even worth repeating."

"Well, how can they never eat or sleep? That doesn't sound possible," Connor asked.

"Wanderers are not like you and me, that's for sure. They blend in perfectly with the Wastelands and the only time you'll see one is if they want to be seen. It's not as if they become part of the group. Actually, it's just the opposite. They stay out ahead and lead the way. Lots of people think they live in the Wastelands, but I don't see how anybody could live out here."

Connor was sitting in his tent eating his second bowl of stew when he asked, "Why do you think there isn't anything in the book about them?"

Mr. Miller shrugged. When he finished chewing, he said, "All that really matters is they come to help.

Tomorrow when the sun sets, we'll break camp and travel all night. Until then, I suggest we all stay up as long as we can. That way you'll have a chance of sleeping tomorrow during the heat. After that, it should be the same routine until we arrive."

"Just before dawn," he said, sitting back down in his tent with a fresh bowl of stew, "we're all going to feed and water the horses and take them for a short walk around the campsite. We've got a big tarp in the wagon, and we'll put it on the long

poles we brought. That should give the horses some shade during the day. At the very least, it should keep 'em alive a little longer. Then it's off to sleep if you can get any."

Andrew could tell Mr. Miller was concerned about his old gray mare. She was thin and struggled with her footing in the soft terrain. Andrew wasn't sure she could survive two months out in the Wastelands, and Mr. Miller wasn't sure either.

They had all finished their suppers by the time the sun had sunk below the horizon, and Mr. Miller was already snoring in his tent. Connor asked Andrew if they should wake him, but in the end, they agreed to give him a couple of hours of undisturbed sleep.

It got cooler than the boys had expected. It was after midnight, Mr. Miller was still asleep, and they were trying to keep awake by poking the little fire with sticks and twigs.

Connor was holding a long stalk of grass, the end of it was on fire. He brought it close to his face, and asked, "Do you think I'll make it?"

Andrew looked at him, blew out the little flame, and whispered, "You're a nine-toed freak with a history of picking fights and stealing food. You're never getting in there. It's only for respectable people!"

Connor opened his mouth with an exaggerated look of surprise, and said, "I can't believe you just said that! You cost me my toe! I wouldn't be surprised if the gate knocked you down with some blue Lightning and threw you back into the Wastelands!"

They shared a laugh even if it was just to hide how nervous they were.

All of a sudden, the boys heard and felt the weight of the horses stomping at the ground, then they started going crazy.

Mr. Miller stood up before he was even out of his tent. He paid no attention to it as it crumpled to the ground, and he started barking orders, "I'll get the lantern! Connor, get the two swords from the rack. Andrew, get the shield from the wagon as soon as we know the way is clear! Andrew, did you hear the tack line break?"

Andrew was startled by the sound of the horses and by Mr. Miller's urgent commands. "I, uh, no...no sir. We were just talking, and they started up in a panic!"

By the time the words left Andrew's mouth, Mr. Miller had the lantern lit. The flame inside the rusty, old cage threw out its faded, yellow light, casting long shadows around the camp. The wagon was between the tents and the tack line, and two of the horses ran out from behind it. Andrew stood frozen, waiting for Connor to get the swords and anxiously looking toward the sound of the commotion.

Duke's massive black head rose above the canopy of the wagon, and Andrew and Mr. Miller took a step backward. Duke's eyes were wide with fear. His front hooves ripped the canvas, and the spars along the middle of the wagon snapped and splintered under his weight. They heard the steel of the swords as Connor fumbled to hand one to Mr. Miller.

“Stay back!” Mr. Miller yelled. “They’re all off the tack line and Duke’s coming over the wagon! Whatever’s back there is big enough to spook him. Connor, it’s up to you and me to go see what it is.”

Duke’s front legs and chest began pushing the wagon sideways, toward the boys and Mr. Miller. The thick, wooden wheels dug into the loose dirt and Duke’s front legs rammed through the sideboard of the wagon making jagged holes in the oak planks. The canvas top ripped along the frame as Duke’s hind legs kicked and flailed.

Mr. Miller slipped around the side of the wagon with Connor close behind. Their swords flashed in the light of the lantern.

A low, dangerous snarl came from inside the wagon, and the chill of fear ran down Andrew’s spine. With a final rip, the canvas and its remaining supports separated from the wagon. Andrew looked up to see where it would land when Mr. Miller appeared from the other side of the wagon and grabbed his arm. With a sharp tug, he pulled him back toward the tents and shouted, “Watch it, boy!”

The old wagon heaved toward them plowing deeper into the sandy ground. The wooden spokes twisted and broke away from their hubs, wood snapped, and Duke screamed. The canvas thrashed wildly, and Duke’s back legs finally mounted the narrow wagon sending the whole thing toppling over. Andrew and Mr. Miller watched in disbelief as Duke’s long, muscular front legs pushed through the jagged, splintered holes in the sideboard. The smooth, black skin peeled away in strips as he pushed them through.

The old wagon careened sideways and Duke’s bloodied legs were pinned and broken under the twisted frame. All they heard was his heavy, labored breathing as a cloud of dirt and dust billowed up and around them filtering the lantern light to a barely visible glow.

“I hope you’re out there Connor because I think we’re in trouble,” Mr. Miller said to the darkness in a hushed voice.

“On my count, you need to attack whatever is in that wagon. One, two, three, NOW!” cried Mr. Miller.

Isolated and blind within the cloud of dust, Andrew and Mr. Miller heard more ripping canvas, then furious hissing followed by the snarl of a large cat.

“Watch out, it’s got claws!” Connor warned. His sword rang out, Mr. Miller squeezed Andrew’s arm, and everything went silent.

As the dust slowly cleared, the shadows returned, and Mr. Miller released his grip on Andrew’s arm. With his bloody sword in hand, Connor emerged from the other side of the broken wagon. With a blank expression, he walked right past them, dropping his sword to the ground.

Mr. Miller handed the lantern to Andrew and immediately went to the canvas covering Duke’s head. In one clean move, he cut the canvas with his blade, revealing

the misery that was Duke. Legs shattered and bloodied, breathing labored and shallow, Mr. Miller's noble companion lay defeated and broken.

"I honor you and the burdens you have borne. Run free, walk in peace, and may we meet again when the time is right. God speed my friend, I will miss you more than you know."

Mr. Miller leveled the blade of his sword and with a single compassionate thrust, Duke's suffering ended. Mr. Miller wiped off the blade on the canvas, bowed his head and walked back to the tents.

With the lantern in hand, Andrew walked to the far side of the wagon. He tripped over shredded pieces of wood and was surprised to see that Duke had exposed the hidden shield. It reflected the lantern light around the grim scene like a thousand tiny mirrors.

Halfway out of the canvas, lying over the broken sideboard next to Duke was the head and front leg of a giant black panther. Its eyes were open, and its massive paw hovered above the ground. Andrew jumped back, almost dropping the lantern.

"Is this thing still alive?!"

"Not unless it's got nine lives," Connor replied. His voice sounded hollow and lifeless.

Andrew nudged the gigantic paw with his boot, but the animal didn't respond. Stepping closer and holding the lantern low to the ground, he saw a pattern of wounds on Duke's backside. They reminded him of a quilt from the orphanage.

Holding the lantern even closer, he could see every bloody indentation and next to it was an equally nasty bump. There were also deep scratch marks all along his backside. He held the light over the huge cat and started to recognize the same pattern within its black pelt.

Andrew stepped back from the carnage. He knew he had seen this pattern before, but it wasn't on any quilt, it was on Mr. Miller's arms! He felt sorry for Duke and the wild animal. Nothing deserved the pain inflicted by the shield, nothing. With his head low and the lantern even lower, Andrew walked back to the tents.

Throughout the night, Mr. Miller and the boys unloaded the broken wagon. They wearily created three piles of inventory. Things they couldn't live without, things they wanted to bring along, and things that must be left behind.

They placed the heaviest burdens onto the packhorses; they would carry almost three weeks of water for the entire party. The remaining horses would carry the things they couldn't live without and most of the things they wanted to bring along. Last but not least, the three of them would divide the remaining items. No one would be riding, and everyone would have a pack full of supplies on their back.

After hours of effort and several debates on what was and was not necessary, the horses were fully loaded, and forty pound backpacks were awarded to each of the men.

Even in the darkness, they saw the vultures massing above. By daybreak, the sky would be thick with them. The smell of the dead animals was already drawing other unwanted visitors, and if they didn't leave the area soon, they would be in danger of never leaving it at all.

When first light finally arrived, several anxious vultures landed to investigate the blistered and torn remains.

Mr. Miller gave the order, "Packs on, boys. We're heading deep into the Wastelands, and if you're looking for sympathy, you've come to the wrong place. We'll need to make ten miles today, so suck it up and let's get a move on."

Andrew and Connor hoisted their packs, and they all set off on foot.

The horses were skittish as the vulture's curiosity increased. Within an hour, the noises faded away behind them, and the circle of scavengers overhead could just be made out on the horizon.

There wasn't any talking, there weren't any roads, and there was no end in sight. They would continue this pace for at least two more weeks and according to Mr. Miller, they would be lucky if any of the horses survived.

Chapter 7



Heavy Burdens

The small group had marched for hours under the blistering sun when Mr. Miller finally called a halt.

“That’s enough for today, boys. We’ll make camp here. Andrew, water the horses.”

Connor dramatically dropped his pack, flopping face first into the sunbaked sand. Within seconds, he was howling in pain and wiping the sand from his face. Andrew turned to look and found Connor with a bright red cheek and a ring of sand around his face.

“You big dummy! What did you think was gonna happen?!”

“Connor, pitch the tents! We’ve got to get out of the sun for a few hours. Remember, before you put them up, I want you to dig down at least a foot. You don’t want to be sitting on blazing hot sand, you’ll cook yourself.”

In twenty minutes, the horses had finished their rationed water, and the tents were up.

Connor was sitting next to Andrew in their tent panting. He wiped his head and took a long drink from his waterskin. He bumped shoulders with Andrew, and said, “Next time, I’m gonna water the horses, and you can set up the tents.”

“Fine by me. You try lifting those water barrels,” they both finished the sentence by imitating Mr. Miller’s famous words, “without spilling a drop.”

Andrew collapsed onto the bottom of the tent. The thick canvas felt strangely comforting.

“Fantastic!” he said, folding his arms across his chest. “Three more weeks of this and we’ll be dead.”

“I hope the horses don’t die,” Connor said.

“I hope we don’t die,” Andrew replied.

“Nobody’s going to die!” Mr. Miller said from his tent. “Maybe a couple of horses, but you’ll get over that. Now quit your talkin’ and get some sleep.”

“I love that man,” Connor whispered sarcastically.

“Yeah, me too.”

It was late afternoon when Mr. Miller shook the boys’ tent. “Let’s go. Andrew, you’re on horses. Connor, let’s pack it up.”

Andrew stretched his arms, and said, “My shoulders are killing me. How are you holding up?”

“My face is burned, my shoulders are raw and, oh yeah, I’m also missing a toe!” he joked, pushing Andrew against the side of the tent and hustling out the open flap.

Mr. Miller was repacking the horses. His arms were stretched out securing the bundles and Connor shuddered at the sight of the scars.

“How long are we gonna go for this time?”

Without turning, he tightened a strap, and replied, “We’re gonna walk until midnight.”

Andrew came out of the small tent, and said, “Midnight?!”

Mr. Miller finished tucking in the strap, then turned and faced the boys. He seemed thinner and somehow frailer than he had only days ago. He barely opened his mouth, and snarled, “Midnight! Unless you want to die out here! You think we’ve got enough supplies to do this on foot? That wagon and all those supplies we left back there, what did you think those were for? Do you have any idea where we are right now? Do either of you think this isn’t going to be the single hardest thing you’ve ever done?! We’ve got three weeks of walking in this god forsaken Wasteland and today is day one.”

Connor's eyebrows shot up, and Andrew walked over to the packhorses. Pulling out the watering bags, he turned to Mr. Miller, and said, "But you said we'd be there in three weeks, and we left ten days ago."

"Yeah," Connor insisted.

Mr. Miller slowly raised his scarred arm, holding up two fingers. He looked at Connor, then at Andrew and fixed his gaze on the horizon.

"First," he announced, wiggling one of his fingers, "it took us longer to get to the Wastelands than it should have. Longer by two days. Second," he wiggled his other finger, "in case you hadn't noticed, we're on foot! That adds at least four days if not more to our little adventure. Today is day one, and it's gonna be at least a three-week haul. Now get your jobs done and let's get moving."

The cool desert night never set in and five punishing hours later, their packs finally hit the sand for the last time. Their shoulders were full of ache, and their shirts were stained with blood. For more than half an hour, the boys just sat; weary, light headed, and sore.

Mr. Miller unpacked the horses and set up camp. He took care of all the countless details including the tack line, digging pads for the tents, setting up the tents, unpacking the cooking gear and gathering what he could to make a fire.

With his flint and steel, Mr. Miller began throwing sparks at the small bundle of dried sticks. As the tinder began to smoke, Andrew asked Connor, "How are we going to do three more weeks of this?"

"It doesn't matter because I'll be dead in three weeks," Connor muttered, sounding exhausted and utterly defeated.

Mr. Miller walked over and knelt down behind them. He peeled back their blood stained shirts, and they winced as the fabric pulled away from their shoulders. He flipped the thin fabric back over their shoulders declaring, "That's nothing boys. You'll be good to go by tomorrow night."

Connor reached for his shoulder to rub at the ache, but when his hand touched the ruined skin, he took a sharp breath and dropped his hand back to the sand.

"How do you figure?!" Connor yelled angrily. "I can hardly move my shoulders and even if I could put my pack on, I'm so tore up I don't think I could walk ten minutes."

Andrew was just as discouraged, and in a questioning but calm voice, he asked, "How are we gonna make it three weeks out here; especially when day one has knocked us down so hard?"

Mr. Miller stood up, stepped between the boys and knelt again. He was smiling.

Andrew looked at Mr. Miller and saw the same bloody patches on his shoulders. Andrew looked him in the eye, but Connor punched the sand and grumbled with his head down, "Three weeks. We're not gonna make it three days!"

Mr. Miller dipped his hand under Connor's chin and raised his head until their eyes met. "We're all going to make it. You're forgetting something. You both are."

In a few seconds, Mr. Miller could see the flicker of understanding in Andrew's eyes. A smile crept onto his face, and Mr. Miller winked at him.

"I don't know what you're both smiling about! I think you've gone crazy!" Connor shouted. He started to stand up, but Mr. Miller put his hand on Connor's shoulder, easing him back to the sand.

"Why don't you tell him, Andrew?"

"Yeah, why don't you tell me, Andrew?!"

Smirking, Andrew turned to Connor, and said, "Your shoulder doesn't look nearly as bad as your toe use to." He waited to see if Connor would catch the connection.

"My toe? What are you talking about, my toe is finnnnne..." With a grin and a huge sigh of relief, he said, "Oh, thank goodness! The book!"

Mr. Miller clapped them on their shoulders. As they winced, he stood up saying, "We'll all be better in no time! We'll get some food in us, then we'll all sit around and read our little book."

Supper slowly stewed above the small fire as the boys tried to relax. Without a single complaint, Mr. Miller peeled his shirt off, taking more skin with it than he had intended. The moonlight cast faint shadows around the camp, allowing the boys to see the full extent of his scars. The twisted, uneven, purple skin ran from his wrists all the way up to his shoulders. It was hard to look at, even at night.

It was around two in the morning when they had all eaten their fill, and the fire had burned down to embers. Mr. Miller's coffee pot gently puffed steam as it hung low over the coals. The boys were sitting in the sand next to the fire listening to the sounds of the night. Mr. Miller sat opposite them quietly sipping his coffee and smoking his pipe.

Connor moved his shoulders up and down with a grimace, then tried rolling them in circles. "When do you want to start looking at the book?" he asked. "My shoulders could sure use some help."

Mr. Miller blew a ring of smoke at the fire pit, and it held its form nicely. When it reached the lazy trail of smoke coming off the coals, it slowly stretched out until it was pulled into the night sky. He tapped his pipe on the palm of his hand, looked at the little gray mass and dropped the ashes onto the sand.

He took a deep breath that turned into a yawn, stretched his arms wide and let it out, saying, "I can't figure out how to block the Light. I doubt there's anyone around to see it, but I'm not foolish enough to take that chance. We certainly don't want any visitors."

"I've been thinking about that too," Andrew said. "I thought we could use the saddle blankets to cover up one of the tents. What do you think?"

Stuffing his pipe back into the small pouch around his waist, he said, "Maybe. Actually, that's about all I could come up with too."

Neither of them asked Connor. They knew he wouldn't have thought about it.

Mr. Miller leaned back, digging his hands into the warm sand and looking up at the sky. "The quarter moon we had is gone for the night. Whatever light we make will be obvious from miles away, but I don't see as we have much of a choice. Since we're gonna be totally exposed out here, this is how it's gonna work. Connor, you're going to go first. Andrew, you'll be blindfolded with him in the tent, and I'll be out here with the shield on my arm just in case we get company.

Connor, you're gonna have to be tied up with your arms behind you. We don't want any problems. Andrew, you know what to do. Start him out on page seven and remember to keep your blindfold on and your back to the book. Try not to fall asleep either. Are we clear?"

Two heads nodded.

"Good. Andrew, if you hear anything from me, it's either time to close the book, or we have company. Either way, it's time to close the book when you hear my voice. The way I figure it, we all need around three hours. Connor, you're first. Andrew, you're second. Then Connor will be in the tent with me while I finish and Andrew, you'll keep watch with the shield."

Two heads nodded again.

Connor hopped up, and said, "I'll get the blankets."

Andrew slowly stood up and stretched. "I'll get the blindfolds and the cord to bind his hands."

"Good. I'll get the book and the shield."

With less than four hours before first light, Mr. Miller stood watch outside the small tent. He had the shield on his left arm, scanning the black horizon for any sign of movement.

"Go ahead and open the book, Andrew."

He heard Andrew mumble something to Connor just before the blue-white Light poured out of every hole, stitched seam, and rip in the old tent.

Mr. Miller walked around it pulling the blankets over the little rays of Light. In a few minutes, the only thing to give away their location was the dim glow of a half-buried tent miles and miles out into the most inhospitable area on the planet.

Three uneventful hours later, the boys switched places, and Mr. Miller kept his watch. First light crept slowly into the desert sky. The brilliant stars and the black of night faded to a blue-gray. The gray gave way to subdued orange, which melted into pink, which reddened into sunrise. Mr. Miller stripped the blankets off the tent.

A couple hours after sunrise he called into the tent, "Connor, wake up and close the book!"

When he heard Andrew's voice, he said, "Set the book aside and come out."

In seconds, both boys were standing outside the tent with smiles on their faces. Neither was wearing a shirt, and Mr. Miller inspected their shoulders.

"Put your hands on yourselves and tell me how you feel."

Andrew touched his shoulders and felt the soft, smooth skin. He moved them around in big circles making his arms bob up and down. "It's fine. They're fine. My shoulders don't hurt anymore, and the blisters and cuts are gone."

"Yup, me too," Connor said, moving his shoulders up and down.

"Good. Now, Connor, you bind my hands, and I'll meet you in the tent."

Connor loosely bound his hands, and the two entered the tent. When they finished shuffling into place, Mr. Miller called to Andrew, "Give me about three hours, and don't forget to keep an eye out for visitors."

Andrew responded with a grunt and shook himself a little, bringing him back to the present. "Three hours, I got it. Go ahead and open the book, Connor. I've got last watch."

With the visions from the book swimming in his head, he picked up the shield and gently set it against the side of the tent.

Andrew was so distracted by his thoughts, he wasn't really sure how long Mr. Miller and Connor had been in the tent. He was also pretty sure a gang of thieves could have walked up behind him, and he wouldn't have noticed. After what seemed like long enough, he called out to Connor.

Mr. Miller popped out of the tent with his hands still tied. He took a couple of steps and turned his back to Andrew, who quickly freed his wrists. Connor poked his head out of the tent with his blindfold around his neck, and asked, "Do you want the book in your tent Mr. Miller?"

"Bind it up in the oilcloth and hand it out to me. I'll keep it in my tent with the shield." He worked his shoulders up and down, rolling them in circles. Reaching up, he felt the new skin, and declared, "Good as new. Did you see or hear anything?"

"Nope. Not a thing."

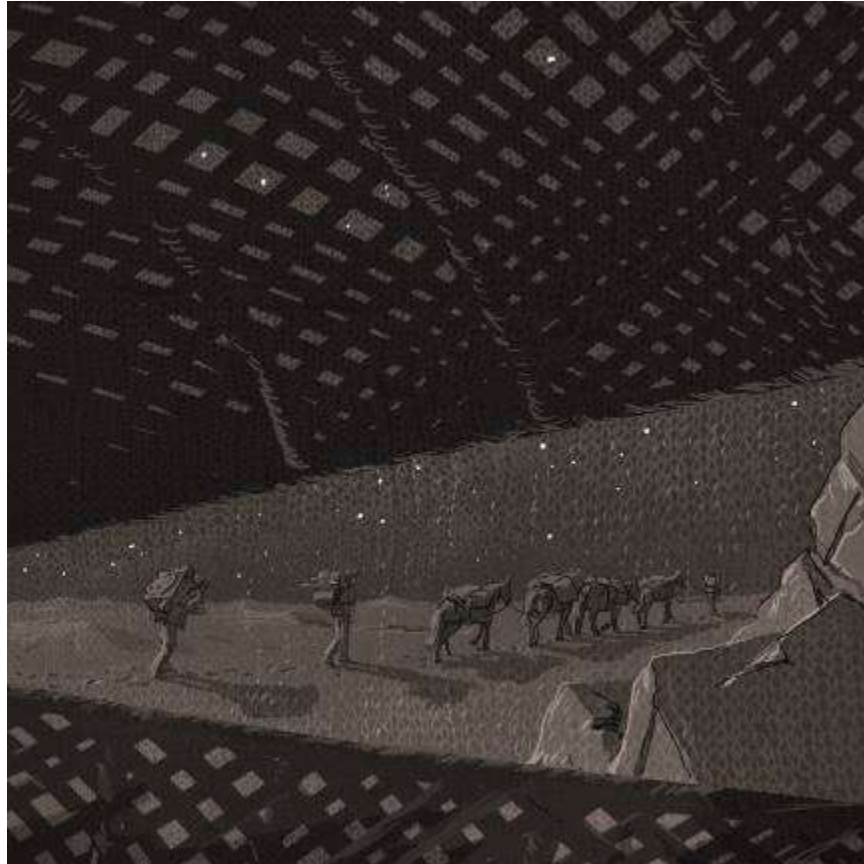
Connor stuck the wrapped book out of the tent, and Mr. Miller took it.

Connor yawned and stretched his arms to the sky, saying, "I'm ready for some shut eye."

"That's the plan," said Mr. Miller. "Make sure the horses are fed and watered. When they're done, you're done. Get some sleep. If you hear anything, call out. I plan on having a late lunch, we'll start our day a couple hours before the sun sets. Don't forget to drink water or the heat will make you sick and we don't need that."

Mr. Miller tucked the oversized book under his arm, picked up the shield and disappeared into his tent.

Chapter 8



Days Turn to Weeks

By all accounts, Mr. Miller was unique and the more time the boys spent with him, the more Andrew recognized it. It struck him as odd the way Mr. Miller never complained. Not about the loss of Duke when the giant panther had attacked, or the destruction of the wagon, or even after trekking through the Wastelands with fifty pounds on his back.

He had never complained about fixing up Connor's toe or about having to buy all the supplies for the journey. He never even complained about his arms. Of course, the only person Andrew really had for comparison was Connor, and he complained about everything, all the time.

If Connor wasn't complaining about the heat, it was hunger. If it wasn't hunger, he was thirsty, or his toe hurt, or his legs ached, or the sun was too bright. Andrew and Mr. Miller just ignored him.

Every day had become indistinguishable from the next. They would walk all night until their bodies couldn't take any more. Then they would each spend three glorious and amazing hours in the book. When everyone was finished, it was off to sleep. A few hours before sunset, they would break camp and start all over again.

They had been in the Wastelands for two weeks when they lost their first packhorse. It happened during the blazing heat of the day as the boys slept. The only thing Mr. Miller said when they awoke that afternoon was that everyone's pack just got heavier.

They broke camp that evening, leaving behind a small pile of items they could no longer carry and the body of the horse. No vultures had come yet. They were too far out in the Wastelands to gather the attention of the scavengers.

As they walked through the barren terrain, mindlessly putting one foot in front of the other, backs aching, shoulders burning, Andrew's mind drifted back into the book.

The desert landscape of the Wastelands faded away. The stars above and even the light of the full moon disappeared, and he was standing in the middle of page ten, the central market of the Kingdom.

The sound of the worn wooden ball with its faded blue paint rolling across the sidewalk pulled him into the moment. With a hollow sound, it hit the edge of the curb, hopped a few inches into the air, fell onto the street and rolled under a beautifully decorated wooden cart loaded with fresh vegetables.

Chasing after his well-worn toy, the little boy nimbly crawled under the cart. The ball came to rest just out of reach and the boy, straining to reach it, pushed against one of the front wheels of the cart.

Reacting to the miniature force and the slope of the street, the cart started rolling backward. The little boy, intent on retrieving his much-loved toy, never even noticed the wheel moving toward him.

The colorfully painted wheel inched its way down the lane, pinning his arm against the road.

Undeterred, the cart continued rolling backward, and the little boy screamed in pain. Andrew shuddered at the sound of the bones breaking.

In a few feet, the cart finally came to rest against the curb, leaving the little boy alone in the street, screaming in pain and cradling his badly broken arm. Andrew was mesmerized.

He moved his attention to the people in the marketplace as they quickly took notice and rushed to help. But, before anyone could reach him, a pinpoint of blue-white Light appeared over his shoulder. The Light rapidly expanded and with a little "pop", she appeared. Standing next to the boy was the Lady of the Light.

She was dressed in traditional robes, just like all the other people in the market, but hers seem to glow. Her mannerisms, her expression, her whole being, radiated love and caring. She glanced down at the boy and quickly asked all the people in the marketplace to form a circle around them.

The people in the marketplace quickly moved closer and those who saw the badly misshapen arm had to look away.

The Lady raised an open hand above her head, and said in a calm and compassionate voice, "My friends, James is badly injured. The cart behind us rolled over his arm and as you can all see it is badly broken.

We're going to need to work together to help him. Is everyone ready?" she asked, in a magically amplified voice.

Andrew was no longer in the Wastelands carrying an unmanageable burden that cut into his shoulders with every step. No, that moment was gone because the only thing he loved more than watching the Lady of the Light was listening to her. Her voice resonated with his soul.

Everyone in the marketplace and even those beyond its walls responded. Andrew watched as the citizens gave their individual and united consensus.

He smiled as the Lady knelt beside James, and whispered in his ear, "Don't be afraid. We're all going to make you better. You'll see. I have to pick you up, then there's going to be a very bright Light. After that, we can go see your mother. All right?"

Between sobs, James nodded.

Standing up, she cradled him in one arm and raised her open hand. With an inflection that almost brought Andrew to tears, she asked everyone within the marketplace, "Will the citizens of our Kingdom please show me their Light?"

Every person in the marketplace held an open hand above their head, and said, "My Light shines for all to see."

Small orbs of blue-white Light formed in their open hands. It moved and pulsed as if it were alive.

"My friends, will you please lend me your Light so I may heal James?"

In unanimous response, the people replied, "My Light is your Light."

The orbs of Light flew to her and in the blink of an eye, she and James were consumed by it.

Andrew put himself inside the sphere of Light where he watched as the Lady took James' arm in her hand and worked her magic. Finally, she added her own Light, creating a radiance too bright to look at. Silently within herself, but revealed within her diary, she thanked the Light for its gifts and a single tear ran down her cheek.

With his newly mended arm, James reached up and touched her face.

"Thank you," he said, in his child's voice. "Can I go and play now?"

"We have to thank our friends first."

She raised her hand back above her head and gathered all the Light to it. The image seen by the people of the Kingdom was that of James touching the Lady's face with his mended arm, wiping away the tear.

Her voice echoed throughout the Kingdom, touching every person within its walls, "I return that which has been given. There is only one Light."

Suddenly, Light shot from her fingertips forming rainbows over the crowd. The colors quickly came together forming drops of glistening Light that fell upon the people. They began to cheer and clap and hug each other. Many approached to inspect the once broken arm and to offer their appreciation.

After much congratulating, the crowd dissipated, and the Lady whispered into James's ear, "Can you please try to be more careful next time, James?"

She knelt to set him down, and he stole a kiss from her cheek, saying, "I will, and thank you, my Lady."

Andrew turned right on cue to watch James' mother Betsi emerge from the small lane into the marketplace. She swept her dark auburn hair to one side and looked around in panic.

When Betsi saw James standing next to the Lady, the ball of dough fell out of her hand, and she stood frozen.

"Betsi, James is fine, but he did create quite a little stir," she said, in her calm and loving voice.

"Mama!"

James ran to hug his mother around her thighs. Before his mother could speak, the Lady walked forward, reached her hand out and pressed her thumb against the woman's forehead.

"It will be easier if I just show you," she said, with a comforting smile.

There was a flash of Light between her thumb and Betsi's forehead. After a few seconds she lowered her hand, Betsi held out her arms and the two embraced with James stuck between them.

Tears streamed down Betsi's face.

"Thank you, Celeste. I'm quite sure we would all be lost without you."

A little voice came from below, "Mama, I can't breathe."

Betsi let go of Celeste and picked up her son. She inspected his arm and kissed his forehead.

"Sweet James," she said, hugging him. "Run and play now outside the windows where I can see you."

"Yes, Mama."

She set him down, and he picked up the ball from next to the curb. With a little giggle, he threw the ball up the lane and ran off to play.

Betsi curtsied to Celeste, and a tear ran down Andrew's cheek.

"Now, now. What's all this?" Celeste asked.

Betsi stood up straight and put her hands on Celeste's shoulders, declaring in a motherly voice, "Supper. You must come to supper. It's simply been far too long. We'll expect you tomorrow night at the usual time." Then her expression softened, "Unless you're too busy to spend an evening with old friends?"

They both smiled warmly, and Andrew tripped over a low pile of sand, coming down hard on his hands and knees. His pack rode up his back and hit him in the back of the head. The loose items strapped to the old canvas pack rattled and clanged.

"Andrew, come on!" Connor yelled, from up ahead. "You're falling behind and besides, it's your turn to lead the horses."

Andrew got up slowly as Betsi, Celeste, and little James faded away into chafed shoulders and an aching back. He struggled to his feet and finally made his way up to Connor.

"What's going on?" Connor asked him as they came side by side.

"Oh you know, just the usual...walking through the Wastelands with a thousand pounds on my back in the middle of the night. How about you?"

Connor pushed him sideways, and Andrew almost lost his footing. "You know what I mean. What page were you stuck in this time?"

"I was in page ten. You know when Celeste saves the little boy after he breaks his arm."

"What?! That page is weird. I hate when his arm breaks. I don't know why that page is in the book! It's not like it matters to anybody. Why in the world were you thinking about that?!"

"Are you joking? Don't you get it?"

"Whatever. I'm stuck in page fifteen with the sword and the shield."

"That's the page I'm starting tonight," Andrew said excitedly. "Is it amazing?"

Connor took a deep breath, and sighed, "Yeah, it's amazing all right. It's even more amazing that we have one of them!"

Andrew took the reins from Connor and began leading the small caravan.

"The dark brown one doesn't look good," Connor said. "He keeps falling behind and tugging on the others."

Andrew nodded. "I don't want to lose another one, but remember what Mr. Miller said."

"Yeah, I know," Connor agreed. "The worst part is I'm not sure how any of us could carry anymore."

"That's the worst part? Did you forget about the horse dying?!"

"You know what I mean. It's not like I want the horses to die, but Mr. Miller won't even let us give them names."

In an attempt to relieve the burning pain in their shoulders and backs, they adjusted their packs. When the banging and clanging quieted down, all they could hear was the soft sound of feet and hooves working their way through the loose sand.

Mr. Miller slowed his pace until he was next to Connor. The three formed a line with Andrew leading the horses on one end, Connor in the middle and Mr. Miller on the right.

"Andrew?" Mr. Miller whispered.

"Yes, sir."

"Shhhh; keep your voice down."

Mr. Miller looked around suspiciously.

"Did you see anything last night?"

Connor and Andrew glanced uncomfortably at each other. Andrew whispered back, "No, I didn't. Did you?"

"I thought I did, but I didn't say anything."

Andrew and Connor turned to Mr. Miller, and Connor said rather loudly, "What do you mean you think you saw something? What do you think you saw? Why didn't you tell us?!"

"Keep your voice down, boy!" Mr. Miller hissed between his teeth.

"Who in the world is going to hear us out here?! Have you been drinking your wat...?"

Mr. Miller's arm shot out in front of Connor's chest, stopping them in their tracks. A second later, his other arm went up in front of Connor's face, and he pointed.

Andrew kept right on walking until he felt oddly alone. Looking to his right, through the corner of his eye, he could see Mr. Miller pointing at something.

Turning his head back around, Andrew's stomach sank, and a little scream jumped out of his mouth.

Chapter 9



Knowledge and Perspective

“The village exists because the Kingdom exists. When the Kingdom falls the village must keep its Promise or all hope is lost.”

The Story of Hope

The etiquette of the Kingdom is presented and explained to each new citizen when they walk through the final archway of the inner wall; when they are granted access to the City of Light for the first time. The process is unassuming and for all but the first citizens of the Kingdom, the Lady has conducted the initiation.

She awaits all new citizens just inside the archway of the inner wall. She is usually standing next to or in front of the Fountain of Knowing, and the brief introduction described below commences without ceremony or fanfare:

The Lady greets each person with a handshake or a hug depending on their preference, and says, "Welcome home. My name is Celeste, and I walk in the Light. I am here to welcome you and to initiate you with knowledge and perspective. As a new citizen, you are asked to do only one thing upon your arrival. You will not be harmed in any way, but you will not be the same when you have completed your task. Please step forward and state your name, then I will hand you a cup of water from the Fountain. I ask only that you drink from the cup."

Inevitably, the new citizens ask questions, but they are only answered with the offer of water from the Fountain and reassured no harm will come to them. After they have given their name to the Lady and sipped from the cup, they are asked to sit on the edge of the Fountain while they come to terms with the gifts they have received. After several minutes, and in some cases hours can go by before a person is ready to move forward, Celeste asks them each the same question; "Do you have wisdom?"

The only answer ever given is, "No. I have knowledge and perspective, but not wisdom. That will take time...lots of time."

Celeste then asks if they would like to bathe or wash up after their long journey. The offer is rarely refused. Subsequently, each person is directed toward a small building just off the main entrance and told that new clothes, should they wish to change, are waiting for them inside. Most people change into the "standard robes" after they have washed, but it is never required.

After refreshing themselves and changing, the newly initiated citizens tend to rummage through their packs, bags, and boxes to remove the few sentimental items they carried across the Wastelands. After they pull these items from their gear, they typically ask Celeste where their old things can be left or if there is some way they can be donated to those outside the City. Some just wander away from their belongings to explore the Kingdom and to find their place in it. No one ever returns to pick up what is left behind. And those who wish to have their effects removed or donated, are accommodated without question.

One of the many things taught to the citizen when the water is accepted is "the Way of the Light". During this silent process, there is a deeply personal commitment made between the citizen and the Light. This promise is not spoken aloud, it is not an agreement between two people; it is an oath, a covenant between the person and the Light.

When the conversation is complete, there is a clear understanding of what is not acceptable. And the consequences are simple.

If you take the Kingdom for granted, and you don't follow "the Way of the Light," you can be banished. Based on the severity of the offense, the exiled may or may not be given a choice of where they are sent.

If a choice is offered to those who have broken their oath, the choice is simple enough. They can either choose to live out the remainder of their life in the village or not.

For those brave enough to re-commit themselves to the Light there is a village nestled in the crags of the far western end of the Spire Mountains. It has no proper name, appears on no maps, and no one has ever visited it except those who have always lived there or those who always will.

Those who do not choose to live in the village are exiled far beyond the borders of the Kingdom, the gifts of knowledge and perspective fade and they may never return.

As with all choices, there is a burden to those who make them. The choice between knowledge and ignorance can be overwhelming. The choice between hope and hopelessness is sometimes even more difficult when others must share the burden.

Those who choose life in the village instead of banishment, bind themselves and their future children, should they have any, to the same commitment of their parents. When this commitment is made, those who are sent from the Kingdom to the village also receive additional knowledge. Knowledge not provided by the water of the Fountain.

Life in the village is not without comfort or friendship. Quite the opposite is true for those who live there. For centuries now, families have been raised in the village.

The knowledge given to those sent there by the Light may not be written down. It must be passed on to the next generation through stories. Each person, each family, and each generation is responsible for keeping the knowledge alive. Over time, this burden has become a privilege, the privilege has become an honor, and it is only through the women of the village that this knowledge can be used to fulfill the Promise.

When the Promise is fulfilled, those who helped keep it will be the first to re-enter the Kingdom. In this way, the debt will be repaid, and the Kingdom will be reborn. But these things can only happen if the knowledge is passed down; if the commitment remains strong and if the "Wanderer's Promise" is kept.

Chapter 10



Consequences

In the late spring, just before sunset eighteen years ago, a little girl was born in the village. Her grandmother said she was small, but with time and love, none of that would matter. One of her aunts said she looked just like her mother. As was the custom, her father attended to his newly born daughter.

He quickly tied and cut the cord, then cleaned the tiny child with a warm wet cloth. Marco held up his daughter for all to see, especially his wife. She smiled broadly, saying, "Quickly Marco, name her before the sun sets."

The back bedroom door was quickly opened and Marco was unceremoniously pushed from the room with his daughter in his arms. The door closed behind him, and he took a purposeful step into the large open room that was the heart of the house.

Before he took his second step, Marco's three sons, his four brothers, his father, and ten of his neighbors all asked the same question, "Is it a boy or a girl?"

Marco smiled. Cradling his tiny daughter, he took his second step toward the front door. "The sun has yet to set my friends, come with me for the naming."

Excitement and smiles filled the room as everyone stood at once. Marco heard the whispers behind him and could tell how excited everyone was that a daughter had been born. He exited his home and turned west, the last rays of the setting sun shone brightly in his eyes. The proud father wriggled his toes into the soft, warm sand, and he held his daughter high above his head. Everyone poured out of the house and nervously gathered behind him. Marco waited patiently as they settled into place.

He took a deep breath, and began, "I celebrate the gift of this child by giving thanks to the Light. Let it be known to all, today there is another Wanderer!"

The small crowd cheered and clapped and slapped each other on the back.

The celebration was quickly stifled by Marco's eldest brother, "Quiet everyone, quiet. Let him finish before the sun sets!"

He lowered his daughter and kissed the back of her tiny head, then raised her up again. He took another deep breath as the crowd quieted.

In a loud, proud voice, he said for all to hear, "May our hope be her destiny, may the Promise be fulfilled. We shall call her Kaya!" As his daughter's name left his mouth, the sun winked below the edge of the world.

Quietly and respectfully every member of the family and everyone who was there to witness the naming ceremony said, "May the Promise be fulfilled."

Marco lowered his daughter into his arms and turned to face his family and friends. Cradled in his arms, Kaya fell fast asleep.

Finally, when they couldn't take it anymore, the group exploded with much more cheering, clapping, and celebration.

Marco smiled as his family and friends came closer to inspect the newborn child. His heart was beating fast, his mind racing at the thought of having a daughter and through it all, he smiled and just tried to enjoy the moment.

As the months turned to years, Kaya grew into a beautiful, helpful, and very curious member of her family. She always sat patiently during her lessons, listening attentively, asking good questions, and thanking everyone who took the time to teach.

Kaya was always probing for the next layer of detail, always searching for new stories and consistently trying to discover the answer to the question, "why?" She never requested the same story twice, and her ability to recall specifics was astounding. Her mother and grandmother had even been corrected on several occasions, and they were quickly running out of stories to tell her.

These stories, the ones her family and neighbors consistently shared, were the real gift given to the children of the village. This shared time created unique relationships

between the children and the adults, and it was because of this the stories could never be written down.

One of the challenges to learning all the stories of the village was that each family had, over time, become the keeper of specific tales. This happened because not everyone exiled to the village was given the same knowledge by the Light. Since the source of all the teaching stories came from those who had chosen the village over banishment, there were many different stories.

All of them had been kept as true as possible to their original telling, but since they could not be written down there was obviously some embellishment over the thousands of years the village had been populated. Accurate or not, these stories were the collective wisdom of the village. And if you wanted to hear a new story you had to meet new people. If you could make yourself welcome enough to be invited into their homes, ultimately you could learn what their family had known for generations.

Kaya's mother Erynn kept a watchful eye on her, but knowing that it takes the village to raise a child, she frequently traveled to distant neighbors to collect her daughter for meals or even bath time. Inevitably, Erynn would get pulled into conversations, or the story telling friends and relatives were having with Kaya. But this was the way things were supposed to be. This time spent with friends and family, face-to-face, smiling, laughing, teaching, and learning was all part of life in the village. It's what builds strong, confident, knowledgeable children. Children who could keep the hope of fulfilling the Wanderer's Promise alive.

One night, shortly after her seventh birthday, Kaya asked something most children didn't ask until they were at least nine or ten. It happened in the evening as she was sitting in her grandmother's lap in front of a small fire in the main room of her house.

The family was gathered in the large room with its high ceiling, and they were talking, working on a myriad of crafts and snacking on fruits harvested earlier in the week. Kaya's grandmother was combing her long brown hair while she affectionately complained about the amount of sand she had in it.

Kaya turned, facing her grandmother with a tear in her eye. Her grandmother was shocked to see the tear and quickly apologized for complaining about the sand. Wiping the tear from Kaya's tiny cheek, she asked, "Why are you crying, little one?"

Kaya reached up and took her grandmother's hand in hers as another tear ran down her cheek. She drew their gathered hands to her heart and looked at her grandmother with a deeply reflective wisdom beyond her years.

Kaya had never been quick to cry, and her grandmother asked in a pleading tone, "What is it my Kaya? Did I upset you?"

"The Kingdom is gone, isn't it?" Kaya asked sounding terribly sad and hopeless. "Nobody lives there anymore do they? We'll never get to live there will we?" she asked desperately. "That's why we live here isn't it?" Another tear ran down her little cheek and Grandmother teared up, too.

It wasn't the barrage of questions that flustered her grandmother, she was used to that. It was the questions themselves and the way they were asked.

Kaya's mother held her hand to her mouth, whispering, "Oh my!" to Marco, who had been talking with her and holding her hand. The whole family had stopped talking, and everyone looked at Kaya with surprise.

"I'm right, aren't I?" she insisted to her mother. She looked around the room and could tell she was right. The tears dripped off her chin.

Kaya's mother opened her arms to her daughter, and said, "Come here my darling."

In her mother's soft embrace, the sobs of sorrow came rolling out of the tiny girl.

After Kaya had calmed down, her mother continued holding her, and said, "I thought you were a little too young for the story you need to hear next, but perhaps it is time." She turned to Marco and, asked, "Do you think she is old enough?"

He nodded, then asked his daughter to stand in front of him; where he could see her properly and speak to her as he would an older child.

Marco took Kaya's tiny hands into his and kissed them. He smiled at her, and she smiled back. He lifted his eyes and looked around the room, meeting each family member's eyes and receiving their confirmation.

Marco returned his eyes and his smile to his daughter, and said, "Little one, there are many stories about the Kingdom you have not heard yet. As you know, some stories can only be told when they are asked for. I think everyone would agree you ask many good questions, but you have never asked these questions before. Why do you ask them now my wonderful daughter?"

Kaya let go of her father's hands and hugged him around the neck. Whispering loudly enough to be heard by everyone, she said, "Because Papa, this is not where we're supposed to be. The village is not home, we must go to the Kingdom. When Grandmother was combing my hair, I was wondering why we don't live in the Kingdom, and I could only come up with one answer, then I got sad."

"Why did you get sad?" he asked, continuing to hold her tightly.

"Because Papa, I've always wanted to go to the Kingdom ever since I was little, and I know you and Mama would have taken us all there if it was possible; that means it must not be possible. The Kingdom must not be there anymore, or that's where we would be."

Marco asked Kaya to take his hands, and he looked into his daughter's deep brown eyes. He smiled, and said, "You make me proud, little one, and I love you. The story you have asked for is not a happy one, are you sure you want to hear what happened to the Kingdom? Do you want to hear why we cannot live there now?"

She nodded, saying, "Yes Papa. Please tell me the story that answers my questions."

Marco lifted his eyes and looking at his mother, he said, "If your grandmother would do us all the honor of telling you the story you just requested, I'm sure she would have a very attentive audience."

Marco's mother smiled, and said, "Yes. I will tell the story, but I've never told it to one so young."

Marco was still smiling and holding Kaya's hands.

"Just tell it to her the same way you first told it to me and we'll see if our little Wanderer understands."

"Very well. Kaya would you like me to tell you a story?"

Kaya took two quick steps and hugged her grandmother.

"Yes, please Grandmother. Tell me the story about what happened to the Kingdom."

She patted her legs, and said, "Very well my little Wanderer. Sit in my lap while I finish combing your hair and I will tell you a story."

Kaya gently sat on her grandmother's lap. Grandmother picked up the comb and started gently working it through her hair.

"Kaya, There are rules in the Kingdom that are taught to every citizen. Simple things really, things like how to treat each other and what not to do. These rules are called "the Way of the Light" and anyone who enters the Kingdom must agree to follow "the way" or they will be made to leave the Kingdom. As you know, this is how people first came to the village.

This doesn't mean the people who came to the village were bad people, it just means they had forgotten their promise to the Light. Their promise to be respectful, to be unselfish, to be fair and helpful and trustworthy. Sometimes people forget.

When you make a promise whether it's to the Light of the Kingdom or to another person, you are expected to keep your promise. If you break a promise, there are consequences. The story I'm going to tell you is about consequences, and I think you will understand what I mean by the time I am done."

Grandmother paused and asked Kaya if she knew what consequence meant. Kaya said she didn't understand, so Grandmother gave an example.

"Kaya, what happens if you don't pick up your room before you go to bed?"

"I always pick up my room before I go to bed, Grandmother."

"I know you do sweetheart, but what would happen if you didn't?"

"I don't know Grandmother because I always pick up my room at night."

Her grandmother smiled and decided to ask another question. "Kaya, what would happen if a Wanderer forgot to take water into the desert when she left the village?"

Kaya thought as the comb worked through her long, dark hair. "I think she would be sorry she didn't have any water."

"Wonderful, my little love, but consequences don't care if you're sorry. What would happen to the Wanderer after several days in the desert without water?"

"They would die, and that would be sad."

"Very good, little one. The consequence for forgetting your water is that you might die of thirst. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Grandmother. And don't worry, I won't forget my water when I go wander." Her brothers laughed a little only because the comment was so cute.

"Wonderful, because I would hate to think of you forgetting an important rule like that."

"I would never forget the rules, Grandmother."

Grandmother waited for the questions to percolate out of her granddaughter.

"Grandmother?"

"Yes, my love."

"Do other people forget the rules?"

"That's a wonderful question. What do you think?"

"I think they do. I think that's how the first people came to the village."

Grandmother stopped combing, kissed the top of Kaya's head, and said, "That's right. You are very smart. The people that came to the village from the Kingdom either forgot the rules or decided to break them. Either way, the consequence was the same."

"Is that why we can't live there anymore because we broke the rules?"

"I don't think you've broken any rules, have you dear?"

"No."

"Then let's continue with the story and maybe we'll find the answers to your question."

"Yes, please."

Grandmother continued combing and started where she had left off. "Living in the Kingdom is a glorious thing. It's the only place, other than our village, where people are free to learn and discuss anything they want. It's also the only place where everyone works together to help each other.

The people who live in the Kingdom don't do this for a reward or for any reason other than it's the right thing to do. The people who live there are one big family. Just like the village is a big family and everyone who can contribute does so willingly. That means everyone is helping, and everyone is trying.

If you stop trying or helping, you will become unwelcome. Especially if you don't change. Nobody has ever been banished from the Kingdom for taking a well-deserved rest. But if you rest for too long, and refuse to help your family, or expect your family to serve you, or to wait on you, or to do things just for you when you aren't helping them...well, then you have to face the consequence. Does this make sense?"

"Yes, Grandmother. Since they are a family, do they all live in the same house like we do?"

There were chuckles from around the room that quickly died away, and Grandmother answered, "Goodness no, little one. There are far too many people in the

Kingdom to live in one house. People lived in the Kingdom as we do. Each family with its own children lives in a different house. Sometimes families share houses, but not everyone lives together. Remember, the Kingdom becomes a big family because everyone is working to make life better for the people around them, not just themselves. That's what makes a family special. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Grandmother."

"Good. Do you have any questions?"

"No."

"All right then, where was I...Oh yes, the Kingdom was a splendid place, and to keep it that way, there had to be a few rules. Not the kinds of rules that make somebody in charge, or the kind of rules that let you boss people around. No, those are silly ideas for a Kingdom rule.

If you put all the rules of the Kingdom together, you would have "the Way of the Light", but if you just looked at the single most important rule, it would be the Sentinel Rule. Can you say that word, Kaya, Sentinel?"

Kaya said, "Sentinel" three times.

"Excellent. Do you know what Sentinel means, little one?"

"No, Grandmother."

"Well, since you're only seven let's just say sentinel means protector. So, the Sentinel Rule is the protecting rule. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Grandmother."

"Wonderful, little flower, you are such a bright little Wanderer. Let me explain the Sentinel Rule for a minute, then you'll understand what it is and how it works."

"Yes, please."

"The Kingdom has only one Sentinel Rule, and it is very easy to understand. The rule is this: Killing a person is not allowed. This rule leaves no room for excuses and the consequences for breaking it are staggering. Let me explain a little more, then I'll see if you understand.

In the Kingdom, if another person kills someone, the person responsible for the killing turns to stone. It happens right away, and they have to stay like that forever.

This unfortunate soul will not be dead. They will live within their tomb of stone; never moving, never blinking, but always watching, always aware."

"Do you have any questions, little one?"

Kaya hesitated, then she said, "No, but I'm already feeling sad again."

"I know. It's a sad story." Grandmother turned to Kaya's parents and asked them if they would like to add anything. They both smiled, and Marco said, "No Mother. You're doing an excellent job, as usual."

"Thank you." Turning her attention back to Kaya, she asked, "Kaya?"

"Yes, Grandmother."

"What do you think will happen if enough people break the Sentinel Rule?"

"I think something bad will happen."

"You're right, something bad does happen," she paused for effect.

"How many times do you think this rule can be broken before the bad thing happens?"

"I don't know Grandmother. I think it should happen right away."

"Well that's not quite the way it works, but you're close. When the Sentinel Rule is broken three times, the Kingdom will fall."

Kaya let out a long sigh, telling the whole family she knew these events had already come and gone.

"You know about the Fountain of Knowing, don't you?"

"Yes, Grandmother."

"Good. Do you remember that everyone who was ever sent to the village knew what the last day of the Kingdom would be like if it happened?"

"Yes, Grandmother. I know the stories."

"Good, because the price of the ultimate consequence was shared with them when they made the decision to join the village. The Light brought the images to them, and they could see why the village was so important."

Grandmother looked around the room, saying, "Because of this, the people of the village have always known what it would be like if the walls came falling down. More than anyone else, we've always known what the cost would be in lives and suffering.

The burden of our knowledge has always weighed heavily upon us, but in this knowledge, you will come to see why there is hope. I think you know everything you need to know to understand the story."

She cleared her throat and took a small sip of water from the cup sitting next to her. Taking a deep breath, she began.

"Every citizen of the Kingdom knew more than could be learned in a hundred lifetimes. The Fountain of Knowing did this in just one sip. It also gave them the gift of perspective, because knowledge is valueless without it.

Perspective allows a person to see where they fit into the Kingdom and into the world, but it's more than that. Perspective allows someone to see how their actions affect the people and the world around them.

Describing the knowledge or the perspective the citizens of the Kingdom had is difficult. All you really need to remember is the citizens of the Kingdom knew right from wrong. They also understood the importance of where they were, how they lived, and the freedom they enjoyed. They did not need laws or money or the countless other petty things people have created to justify their worth in this world.

Because of the gifts received from the Fountain, the citizens of the Kingdom did not debate the value of "the Way of the Light" and they did not question the purpose of the Sentinel Rule. These things were simply a matter of common sense, and since

everyone had already agreed to follow these rules, it may be difficult to imagine how the Kingdom could ever be in danger.

After all, if the only way the Kingdom could be destroyed was to break the Sentinel Rule three times, then the only thing that could threaten it was the people within it. Unfortunately, as I'm sure you've already guessed, that's exactly what happened.

More than a thousand years ago in the central marketplace of the Kingdom, there was a Fountain. It was magically ornate with its multi-layered waterspouts, its enormous basin, and all the playful scenes cast within its polished stone. It would make you smile every time you saw it, even if you'd seen it every day of your life.

Sitting on the edge of the Fountain was a man, perfectly cast in the same white stone as the Fountain. He was seated with his legs slightly apart, leaning forward with his hands out as if they were holding something. His face was determined looking, even a little scary to the children, and in his eyes, you could see hate.

This is the position he was in when, in a jealous rage, he drove his wagon over his neighbor and killed him. It took five hundred years for the Sentinel Rule to be broken the first time.

When it happened, everyone in the Kingdom and yes, everyone in the village, relived the scene. First, everyone experienced the event from the point of view of the man who was killed.

They could feel his heart leap when he first noticed the wagon approaching. They felt his stomach sink when he made eye contact with the driver. And when his body and head were crushed under the wagon, they felt the pain. Then the scene started over, and everyone experienced it from the point of view of the man driving the wagon.

Everyone felt his stomach twist in anger when his neighbor stepped into the street. Everyone felt his heart sink into a cold, black place as he tightened his grip on the reins, urging the wagon team to move faster. They felt the cart bump sickeningly over the man's head and body, then they felt what it was like to be made of stone.

There was no need to discuss what had happened or why. There was no debate over who was right or wrong because everyone already knew.

The bad man's wooden cart stood in the marketplace for almost sixty years. It was never moved or touched by anyone until one day the wheels finally fell off. When that happened, the man made of stone was sitting on a pile of broken wood, leaning to one side and staring into the sky.

A day or two later, the Lady came and moved him to the edge of the fountain where he sat for another one thousand four hundred years. Sometimes the children would play on him, but they were quickly taught what this man had cost the Kingdom. Then it just wasn't any fun to be around him.

The citizens didn't need to be reminded of the consequences they faced should the rule be broken two more times. All they could do was live their lives the best they could and hope someone wouldn't make the same mistake twice.

There was, of course, a second statue in the Kingdom that looked far too real. It was a young woman standing all alone. She was in front of a deep well, miles out in the growing fields." Grandmother paused, pulling the comb from Kaya's hair.

"I think your hair has had quite enough combing for the night."

Kaya turned and hugged her. "Thank you, Grandmother, I love you."

They both smiled, and Grandmother kissed her forehead.

Kaya turned back around and relaxed as Grandmother took another sip of her water.

"When you wander the desert Kaya, you will be able to see these things. They're just piles of sand and rocks of course, but still, if you use your imagination you can see how very real they use to be."

Kaya nodded, snuggling in and relaxing to enjoy the story.

"The young woman by the well was beautiful. She must have just swept back her long curly hair before she put her hands on her hips or perhaps a slight breeze had come along just before her friend hit the bottom of the well and died. She stood there with her hands on her hips, looking at that well for another six hundred years; waiting to hear the last sound she would never hear.

Just like the first time, the citizens of the Kingdom watched the entire event unfold from two different perspectives. They felt the fear of the young woman who fell to her death, just as they felt the jealousy, anger, and pride of the woman who pushed her."



Kaya heard a small scream and shook her head. Her memories of home still clouded her vision like an early morning fog. She almost waved her hands in front of her face to chase them away, but she remembered her place.

After following the small group of three men through the Wastelands for the past two weeks, she was ready to reveal herself. After her reveal, she would lead them through the canyons, ensuring their safe passage through the broken and dangerous landscape.

This was the moment she had been waiting for. She was dressed in her grandmother's Shadow Cloak, it was just before first light, and she stood upon the tallest ridge of sand for several miles.

As she struggled to clear the visions in her mind, Kaya saw the older man with his arm out stopping the younger one with broad shoulders. They were both staring at her,

and the older man was pointing. The smallest of the three men stood only twenty feet away, and he looked absolutely terrified.

Chapter 11



First Impressions

Kaya smiled inside her giant oversized Shadow Cloak. She usually only wore it during the day if she had to travel. But now that she had revealed herself to the Travelers, she would wear it all the time, to protect her identity.

The cloak was really just dark fabric draped over an exaggerated frame of her body. It was made from thin strips of interlacing bamboo that had been painstakingly fastened together. She wore it like a backpack, actually over her real backpack, and it was easily a foot taller and a foot and a half wider than she was.

Kaya recalled the lesson from her teacher, "The cloak gives a Wanderer two important things. It provides shelter from the unforgiving sun, and it safeguards the Wanderer from the eyes of the Travelers." She was currently most thankful for the second benefit.

She couldn't imagine what the Travelers would do if they saw a woman barely taller than her own mother walking alone in the middle of the desert. Thankfully, Travelers had been exposed to this for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. They had all come to assume a large, powerful man was under the cloak and that's just what Kaya was counting on.

According to her teacher, her grandmother, her mother, and every other woman in the village, the rest of the journey was easy until they reached the ruins.

Kaya's primary responsibility for the next four days was to lead the Travelers through the foothills by the easiest route possible. Since she was forbidden to talk to them, all she needed to do was to keep the pace and keep the lead.

"To walk among them is to invite attention," she recalled from another lesson. "The last thing you want is attention. Do your job and watch for the Signs, or you won't come home."

Over the past nine months, Kaya and her teacher had taken five journeys into the desert and to the ruins of the Kingdom. There had been many lessons, most of which ended with the same sentiment of, "...or you won't come home."

Kaya had gotten a great deal of praise from her teacher. She was able to find and remember without a map every water cache, every shelter spot, and every route through the foothills. She had been very adept at traveling the Wanderer's Way down from the Hero's Chamber and was able to recite each of the Wanderer's Signs upon request.

Taking a deep breath, her grandmother's words came to her lips, and she whispered to herself, "For everything there is a first time." She took another deep breath, turned around and walked away from the Travelers.

Making her way down the dune, she heard their voices. They grew louder as she kept walking, an argument had broken out amongst them, but she didn't slow her pace.

She heard the loud clattering of their needless equipment, and she knew they were desperately trying to find her. She smiled again.

It was almost first light, and Kaya reached into her bag, removing a handful of mushrooms. They gave off a faint, green glow. Hopefully, the Travelers would recognize the sign and make camp. If not, there was always a backup plan.

Making a small mound of sand with her feet, she placed the glowing handful of fungus on top of it and retreated into the foothills. She was just out of sight when she heard the oldest man say, "We make camp here boys. We have the sign."

The other two voices quickly responded with, "What sign?!" and, "What are you talking about?!"

Kaya put her mind to recalling the location of the shelter two miles away. Recognizing she was on the right course, she relaxed a little and thought back over the last hour. Did anything she had seen or done qualify as one of the Wanderer's Signs?

In a whisper too soft to be heard, she worked through the puzzle, "Shadow falls face to face. Two and two make three. A waking dream recalls. Touch the moon. The answers are given. Three become two become one. The sky above reflects the valley below."

She furled her eyebrows the way she always did when she was thinking about a difficult problem.

"I still have no idea what any of that means. How am I supposed to watch for the Signs when I don't have any idea what I'm looking for? Touch the moon!" she scoffed to herself in frustration.

As usual, Kaya found the hidden nook without looking at her map, and she made herself right at home in the tiny shelter at the end of a long and winding crevasse. She snacked on her dried fruit and drank from her waterskin.

It had been another long night, and she was tired. As the sun came up, she relaxed against the cool wall of the shelter. Her mind drifted, as it usually did, back to the village. Slipping back into her grandmother's lap, Kaya's eyes fluttered. It was as though the story had never been interrupted.

Grandmother stroked her hand over Kaya's brushed hair and with another kiss to the back of her head, she continued, "Celeste, the Lady of the Light, had been in the marketplace talking with friends when everyone experienced the tragedy. Everyone knew the girls and most people had tears in their eyes. The rest of the day everyone was subdued, there was a feeling of uneasiness throughout the Kingdom, but what could be done?"

Things seemed to change after that. The citizens were on guard, waiting for the final tragic event, but it didn't happen. Over time, people got back to being themselves and life went on.

The only one who noticed the differences was Celeste, but even she couldn't see how the events had changed her. She had slowly become more distant from her friends and when, after long full lives they eventually died, she didn't really engage the next generation. She didn't live among them, she didn't really re-connect. She spent most of her time alone now, secluded in her high tower wondering how it would all end. Wondering if she could have done anything to prevent the Sentinel Rule from being broken twice.

Because of all this brooding, she occasionally got visitors in her tower. People who were concerned about her, or missed her would sometimes climb the three thousand stairs to the top of her spire. They would knock on her door, and if she was there, they would be invited in. It was always amazing to talk to the Lady. She was someone who had been alive for so long, she had an endless number of things to talk about and share.

To Celeste's amazement, a little boy had taken a liking to her, and he just loved to climb. He was only five years old, and Celeste was rather surprised the first time he

showed up at her door. His little face was flush and the first thing he said to her was, "Hello. May I have a drink of water, please?"

The two soon became friends and by the time the boy was six years old, he had been given a very special gift. Celeste had made him a cup, one that would always be full of water. He took it with him wherever he went, especially up her very long flight of stairs. With this gift came a nickname and from then on the boy was simply called "Cups" by everyone, including Celeste.

Cups was a very curious little boy and sometimes when he came to visit, if Celeste wasn't home, he would rummage through her things. He never damaged anything, he was only looking for whatever a six-year-old boy looks for to entertain himself. She knew he wasn't mischievous, but she did worry he might hurt himself while she wasn't there.

"After all," she thought, "the heavy sculptures and other works of art in my room were never intended to be played with by a child."

After giving the issue careful consideration, she focused her abilities on the handle of her door.

"Now then," she said, feeling pleased with her solution. "If my little friend comes to visit and I'm not home, he'll just fall asleep if he touches the handle. Besides, a nap is a wise decision after such a long climb."

Three months later, Celeste was helping in the fields. She was trying to re-connect, trying to make new friends, when it happened. Cups had climbed the long flight of stairs to the top of the tower and knocked on her door, but no one was home. He remembered their talk about not entering her chamber when she wasn't home, but he was tired after his long climb. He thought it would be all right if he just went in and sat in the big, comfortable chair until Celeste got home.

When he touched the handle, he became very drowsy. With a giant yawn, he stepped backward and stumbled down several stairs until he finally sat down. Resting his back against the wall, he yawned again, and his eyelids got heavier. He leaned forward, resting his head on one arm. He had almost set his cup down on the step above him when he fell asleep. The small cup slipped from his little hand and rang out against the stone. The sound of it made his hand flinch, and he knocked the cup over.

The more water that came out, the faster it filled up. The cup that was never empty...Well, poor little Cups couldn't wake up to fix the problem, and since the cup was on the step above his head, he drowned."

Kaya was crying in her grandmother's lap. There were no sobs, just tears. The river Cups always seemed like such a blessing.

"For the people of the Kingdom and the people of the village, time stopped. The little boy's death and everything leading up to it was replayed from two different perspectives.

When it was over, Celeste fell to her knees, and the ground began to shake. Giant paving stones popped up from their permanent resting places. Massive stone archways that stood for centuries turned to sand and the tower itself, the very Beacon of Hope, cracked at its base and began falling toward the mountains. Children, husbands, wives, hopes, dreams, and the Kingdom itself were quickly engulfed in a rising plume of dust and debris.

The people of the village watched through their visions as the towering spire crumbled like frail pottery across the landscape. The only remaining piece, the very tip itself, came to rest high in the foothills to the north.

The screams of a hundred thousand souls were quieted within seconds, and all those who lived in the Kingdom, the City of Light, the City of Hope were abandoning the City, or they were already dead.

Fifty bruised and battered souls gathered outside the broken walls of the city, they were the only survivors. For the first time in their lives, they were afraid. With tear streaked faces and dirty hands they inventoried their supplies, said their goodbyes to the land that had been their home for generations and set out on a hopeless journey across an endless desert.

Twelve men and three women survived. They gathered only one time as a group outside the desert Wastelands. They knew their knowledge and abilities would make them outcasts if they stayed together. Separately they thought they might be able to start new lives and to go relatively unnoticed in the world. Attention was the last thing they wanted.

Not that any of the survivors would have noticed, but the Defender's Portal appeared two weeks later in what remained of the center section of the outer wall. The village knows what that's for and one day you'll learn too."

Kaya awoke with a start. She was sweaty and had been crying in her sleep. She wiped her eyes with the backs of her hands, got to her knees and crawled out of the little shelter. She took a long drink from her waterskin and started preparing to leave.

It was late afternoon, and she wanted to make sure she was visible just before the sun had set. They had a lot of ground to cover tonight, and she didn't want to be late.

Chapter 12



Easy Traveling

Andrew looked down at the small pile of glowing green mushrooms, then at Mr. Miller. "What do you mean that's the sign? What are you talking about?!"

"That's the sign from the Wanderer. I told you we would be lucky to pick one up, and we did! That's the sign to make camp."

"How do you know that's the sign?" Connor insisted. "Have you ever had a guide before? I didn't think you had one last time."

"Quit pesterin' me like a bunch of old hens! Now break out the tents, stake up the horses, and let's get set up before it gets too hot to breathe."

The routine went as usual, but they were noticeably low on supplies, especially water.

The sun started its journey above the horizon just as Andrew sat down in the tent. Mr. Miller tended to the small fire and the cook pot.

Andrew looked at Connor sitting next to him, and said, "We'll be lucky to make it another three days with the water we have. I'm cutting you off. You'll just have to go without."

Stretching his arms wide and giving a fake yawn, Connor pretended not to hear him. With his outstretched arm, he pushed Andrew onto his back, saying, "Yeah, I guess you'll just have to dry up into a skinny little stick out here. Mr. Miller and I will press on. We'll have to see if we can manage without you." He patted Andrew's leg, and said in his best high and mighty voice, "After I've got the Kingdom re-built the way I want it, I'll come back for you."

Andrew laughed and pushed Connor with his foot. "You'll always be my Hero," he said, in a silly, feminine voice.

Mr. Miller kept stirring the cook pot. He looked into the boy's tent where Connor was trying to defend himself against Andrew's foot.

"It's no more than four days to the Kingdom," he said. "Andrew, do you think we'll make it with the water we have?"

"It will take every drop we have to get there. We'll probably have to run dry for half a day. Of course, if there isn't any water when we get there, we're gonna have a terrible time."

"There'll be water. There's always water in the Cups."

Connor knocked Andrew's foot to one side and laid back, putting his full weight on Andrew. "That's too bad Andrew. It looks like you're gonna make it after all."

"Yeah, that's too bad all right! Now get off me or I'm not gonna make it 'til tomorrow."

Connor laughed and lazily rolled off onto his side. Andrew took an exaggerated breath, and said, "At least I know where all the food is going."

"That's enough play time you two. Supper is ready."

Connor got the bowls, and Mr. Miller filled them. After they were all in their usual spots and Mr. Miller had a mouthful of food, he said, "You're right. I've never had a guide before. Never even seen a Wanderer until now, but I know the stories. I know the signs."

He swallowed and took a small drink from his waterskin.

"They're a mysterious bunch. You'll never see his face, and you'll probably never see him come or go. He'll just be here or he won't. His job is to get us through the foothills and, if you're lucky, he'll go up with you."

"His job?" Connor asked. "How is that anybody's job?"

"Yeah, do we have to pay this guy?" Andrew asked sarcastically.

"I can't explain it any better than you can understand it, but I do know we are now his biggest priority. I can also tell you he's been tagging along with us for more than a couple of days. He's probably been with us for at least a week."

"A week?!" Connor asked, sounding surprised. "That's great, but why? Why would someone be out here to show us through the foothills? Why would anyone want to go up to the Chamber with us? None of this makes any sense."

"I'm with Connor on this one. Where did this guy come from anyway? It's not like this is a fun place, and it's not like there's anywhere even close to us where he could have come from. How do we know we can trust this guy?"

"You may not be able to trust this guy, but you're going to have to trust me when I tell you not to worry. There have been Wanderer's in the desert around the Kingdom for as long as anyone can remember. They have never robbed anyone, they've never actually spoken to anyone, and they don't seem to care if any of us live or die. They just show up, take us to where we're going and leave. Most of the time they go up with the Hero. It's pretty rare for him stay around the base camp," he said, taking another bite of his supper.

"As far as where he came from, nobody knows. To tell you the truth nobody's ever gone looking either. You can see how hard it is to get out here. I can't imagine you want to go searching around for another couple of weeks or months or years to find out either, do ya?!"

They could tell Mr. Miller was getting angry. Little bits of spit went flying out of his mouth when he practically shouted, "You two don't realize how easy this little trip has been either!"

"Easy?!" Connor and Andrew shouted.

"Yeah, that's what I said, easy! Why don't you two princesses think about how hard it was for every other person who didn't have the book we're carrying? Have you stopped to think about that yet? Your fathers and I didn't have it. Nobody's ever had it this easy! Most people show up at this point half dead! That guide you're worried about is most people's savior because if you get lost in the foothills, you're dead!

Here we are showin' up all well fed, full of water, and walking the whole way! Nobody does that, and I mean nobody. Now I don't want to hear another word about our guide being trustworthy or where did he come from or nothin' like that. As far as I'm concerned, he was sent by the Kingdom itself, and you two should be thankful!"

Mr. Miller threw his bowl into the fire, and it bounced out, landing in the sand. Sparks flew up from the embers and disappeared when they hit the sunlight streaming in over the tents.

He stood up, his face was red enough to match his arms, and he kept on shouting, "I'm gonna get some sleep, and I suggest you two do the same unless you're afraid to close your eyes! We're not reading the book today either. Let's see how your shoulders

and back feel when it's time to break camp this evening. Then we'll see what you're thankful for!" He stooped over, entered his tent, closed the flaps and that was that.

Connor made a silly face after Mr. Miller turned around, but Andrew hung his head. Connor whispered into Andrew's ear, "I love that man. He's so warm and caring. Just the way a mother should be."

Andrew shook his head like joking around wasn't a good idea right now. He set his bowl on the sand and scooted back into the tent. His shoulders ached, his back ached, and now he wasn't going to get to see the next page of the diary. He wasn't surprised Mr. Miller had gotten upset. They were taking this trip for granted.

They hadn't sacrificed anything to get here, and Mr. Miller had sacrificed everything. They didn't really know what they were doing, and Mr. Miller seemed to know everything. If it weren't for Celeste's diary, Andrew would be questioning everything about this one-way trip into the desert, but with it, after seeing everything he had seen in its pages, well, that's what kept him going.

Two hours before sunset, Andrew and Connor emerged from the tent looking haggard. Mr. Miller, on the other hand, looked well rested. He was already at the cook pot making their breakfast and whistling a little tune.

He jerked his head back in the direction of the horses, and said, "We lost another one in the heat. It was the dark brown one. It looks like we'll all be carrying a little more tonight." He went back to his stirring and whistling.

"I don't think I can carry any more than I am already," Connor said with a yawn.

"Did he die before or after his water ration?" Andrew asked.

"Before."

"Then we've got some extra water," Andrew said, walking over to the tack line. There were only three left, plus a large pile of sand. He called back to Mr. Miller, "We might be all right if we can carry enough food and water."

"That won't be a problem because that's all we're gonna carry from here on out." He jerked his head again in the direction of his tent and Andrew saw the pile of supplies. Connor walked around the fire to see what Mr. Miller had motioned to, and his mouth fell open.

"We can't leave all this stuff. We need it!"

"I'll tell you what Connor. You can carry as much of it as you like. As for the horses and me, the only things we're carrying are food, water, the tents, a large book, and a shield."

They all had a quick breakfast before the repacking began. Connor complained and sulked for most of it while Andrew focused on the items he was going to put into the "can't live without it" pile. When he was done eating, he said to nobody in particular, "The only thing I'm carrying is food, water, and my bowl. Everything else I can live without." He turned to Mr. Miller, and asked, "Are you packed yet or do we need to go through your pack, too?"

Sitting on a small pile of sand, Mr. Miller knocked his bowl out into the fire and stretched his arms wide. He gave a mighty yawn and looked up, saying, "I just finished burying that old horse before you two got up. I suppose we had better get to it."

He scooped up some sand with his bowl and rubbed it around the inside to clean it. He chipped away at some dried on morsel with his thick thumbnail and only after it was clean did he pop up to his feet.

"Times a wastin'. Let's get all the packs and dump them right in front of my tent. We've got a date tonight, and we don't want to be late."

Before he had finished talking, Andrew had already started toward his pack. Connor hadn't moved.

Andrew and Mr. Miller dumped every satchel, every pack, and every container into a pile. Andrew smiled at Mr. Miller, and said, "Now this feels familiar. I vote for two piles this time. Food and water in one pile and everything else goes right here."

"Agreed, except let's put the empty packs and satchels in a third pile. I want to use the best of what we have left."

Connor still didn't move.

In less than fifteen minutes the job was done. Rations were in one pile, packs, satchels, and containers were in another, and the third had everything else.

"The junk pile is smaller than I thought it would be," Andrew said to Mr. Miller.

"I was hoping to see a little more myself. The good news is we've already been traveling pretty light. The bad news is we're still short a horse, and there is plenty to be carried."

"We don't need all the food," Connor said from the ground in front of the tent. "If we're really only four days out from the Kingdom, we only need four days' worth of food."

"What if you need to walk home after this is all done?" Mr. Miller asked, looking over the piles.

Andrew got the spark of an idea, and said, "You know, Connor's right. Why carry it all for four more days? I say we pack enough supplies to last ten days. That's enough for the trip there, two days on site and, if everything goes wrong, whoever is left can walk back to this spot and get whatever they need for the trip home."

Mr. Miller shot a sideways glance at Connor, and said, "That's good thinking, even if it did come from a bad idea."

"It's not like anybody's gonna be coming back," Connor sighed, putting his head back into his hands. "Whatever makes you feel better," he mumbled to the sand.

"All right Andrew, let's make another pile. I say we pack enough food to last for two weeks just in case."

"Sounds good to me."

Within five minutes, they had the fourth pile.

"Let's pack it all and stash it in a place we can find it," Mr. Miller said.

"I say we bury it and flag the location with something."

"Good. Get the shovel and let's take a walk. You get going while I load all of this onto a horse. Don't go too far, it's not like anybody's going to come looking for it. Just find somewhere shady, if you can. I'll walk over in your direction when I'm done."

Andrew grabbed the heavy shovel with its long oak handle and its forged blade. He slung it over his shoulder and set off walking west into the setting sun. The foothills had begun, and there were rises and small crevasses for miles. In a hundred yards, Andrew said, "This looks like as good a place as any."

He put the point of the shovel to the ground next to a small gravelly hill and started to dig. Chipping away at the hard-baked ground, he mumbled, "Not a rock for hundreds of miles and now when I really need to dig a hole, they're everywhere!"

It was slow work. He was dripping with sweat by the time Mr. Miller and the packhorse approached. He wiped his forehead and inspected the hole. It would have to do.

Mr. Miller apparently agreed because he started throwing in the reserve supplies before Andrew was out of the way.

"Did Connor help you at all?"

"He didn't move, and I didn't ask."

The items filled the hole and then some. Mr. Miller picked up the shovel, saying, "I'll bury it. Thanks for digging the hole."

Andrew sat in the shade of the horse and took a drink from the waterskin Mr. Miller had brought with him. "Thanks, I needed a drink."

He stopped shoveling and stared off into the distance.

"What is it?" Andrew asked.

Without making eye contact, he mumbled, "I suppose now is as good a time as any."

"Are you talking to the horse?"

His eyes dropped to meet Andrew's, "To you."

Andrew corked the waterskin.

With a penetrating stare, he said, "Connor's going in first."

"Oh. I mean sure, I kind of figured that on account of him being the oldest and the biggest."

Mr. Miller took his gaze back to the horizon, and said, "I'm not sure it has much to do with either of those things, but I think it's best."

"What about you?"

"I'll have the shield. Everything should be fine."

"Should be," Andrew echoed.

Andrew got to his feet, and the sun hit him right in the eyes. "What about the Wanderer?" he asked, shielding his eyes. "I mean couldn't we just find our way to the Chamber without him?"

“You could, but he’s already put ropes across the river. You’ll never even get wet. Crossing the Cups is the hardest part, but if you have a guide, you’re practically at the Chamber already.”

“What do you mean?”

“Our guide has already walked the path to the Chamber. He knew we were coming. He’s already gone and strung a rope across the Cups with a couple of lines for you to hold on to. All you do is walk across.”

Mr. Miller pulled the reins of the packhorse, and they both started walking back to the tents with the sun at their backs.

“I wish we had a guide the last time. If we did, your dad never would have wound up at the bottom of that pit.”

Andrew nodded, and they were both quiet for a while. The sound of hooves on sand felt familiar and strangely comforting.

“You never would have found the shield...or Celeste’s diary.”

“I know. It’s still a rotten trade, though. Your dad got himself killed, I got my arms all chewed up, and Connor’s dad didn’t make it home either.”

“I wish he was still alive.”

“Me too, Andrew, me too. He would be with us right now if he were. You know that don’t you?”

“Yeah, I know.”

Mr. Miller patted Andrew on the shoulder as they approached the camp.

He walked past Connor and kicked some sand on him. “Wake up! The tents! I told you to pack the tents now get to it!”

Connor’s head slipped off his hand, and he jerked awake.

“Come on!” Andrew complained to Connor, “We’ve got to get ready.”

Connor was slow on his feet and lazier than usual, but with most of the packing already done, they made ready to break camp. Just as they finished, Andrew spotted the larger than life outline of their guide against the horizon.

The horses carried almost everything they needed. The long, backbreaking nights were almost over, and the only thing left to do was make it through the foothills as quickly as possible.

Throughout the evening, Kaya led them deeper into the foothills. The twisting labyrinth of sandy hills and steep ravines all looked the same, but the watchful eyes of the Wanderer kept them safe.

There was little time for conversation, and they only took one break around midnight to eat, drink, and water the horses.

Long after the waning crescent moon disappeared below the horizon, Kaya picked up her pace. She wanted to be out of sight before dropping her small glowing signal. In just a few minutes she had enough of a lead to place her mark and disappear off to the west.

Before she was too far away, she paused. Hearing them discover the mushrooms, she quickly made her way to shelter.

Mr. Miller refused to let the boys into the book again, saying it was too dangerous with the Wanderer around. Connor argued a little and Andrew was disappointed, but they all knew how the book could be 'heard' by others, especially if they were sensitive to it.

Their tents were in a small gorge, giving them some shelter from the relentless sun. They all got more sleep than they had the previous day and awoke to an easy prep and pack. By sunset, they were waiting anxiously for their guide.

When the sun winked below the horizon, Kaya stepped out from behind a sheer wall. Without missing a step, she started guiding them through the maze.

Chapter 13



Base Camp

To reach the Hero's Chamber, the river Cups must be crossed three times. The only way this can be done safely is by anchoring and securing ropes across it. The Wanderer can either do this herself after she arrives at the Kingdom with her Travelers,

or she can signal ahead. By signaling ahead, the Wanderer in the desert, if she's lucky, can catch one of her sisters before she takes down the ropes and leaves the area.

There are three crossings involved when 'stringing the river' and each one requires three lengths of rope. The first length, the one just above the water, is for feet, and the two higher lines are for hands. When done properly, they create an unstable, but functional bridge. Since swimming across the Cups could easily kill the prospective Hero, it was decided long, long ago that the effort of 'stringing the river' was justified.

Uncovering the ropes from their hiding spots, dragging them into place and securing them on both sides of the river usually takes two days. It also requires the Wanderer to walk a dangerous, hidden pathway almost the entire distance to the Hero's Chamber. Once the job is complete, she returns to the Travelers base camp and leads the prospective Hero or Heroes to the Chamber.

It is customary to have three or four Wanderers in the desert around the Kingdom at any one time. Once a Wanderer's group has left the area, or died, it is her responsibility to stand lookout for seven days. If a signal from another Wanderer is seen when the sun is at its highest point, the ropes remain in place. If no signal is spotted, they are taken down on the seventh day, stowed in their proper places and the Wanderer departs.

The day before she led her group from the foothills, Kaya had left her shelter spot early in the morning. She walked for several hours until she climbed up and out of the vast, confusing network of ridges and ravines.

Standing at the outer rim of the Valley of the Crescent Moon, she nimbly climbed the only rock in sight.

Reaching around to her backpack, she removed a piece of folded fabric. With careful fingers, she unwound it until she held a small, round, silver circle in the palm of her hand. She looked down into the mirror that had been in her family for generations.

"I hope this works," she thought.

Through the gauzy material of the Shadow Cloak, she saw the sun directly overhead. Looking down, her shadow made a perfect circle. She was just in time.

Pushing her hand outside the long sleeve of her cloak, the little mirror flashed as it caught the mid-day sun. She tilted it north toward the Kingdom and gave the signal.

The message traveled through the waves of heat radiating off the valley floor and across the vast distance.

She waited patiently, staring into the distance, but there was no response.

She tried again, rocking the mirror to the north three times. Moments later bright flashes of light shimmered across the distance. When the message was complete, she flashed back twice indicating she had received the message and understood it. Kaya wrapped up the precious mirror and tucked it back into her pack.

On her way back to her shelter spot, she couldn't help thinking about the message. "One dead, one dying, one left. Ropes up." Kaya wondered how long it would be before she would be sending the same message.

The next night Kaya, Mr. Miller, Connor, and Andrew slowly emerged from the foothills. The hard-baked dirt turned back into soft sand, and once again the Travelers slowed. As they took to the higher ground, their course turned due north. Their view of the horizon would have returned if it hadn't been for the towering Spire Mountains. Even from this distance, they had to look up to take in the snow-covered peaks.

The moon was little more than a sliver, making the landscape difficult to see. It was one o'clock in the morning when they finished eating and resting. Andrew got to his feet, and asked Mr. Miller, "That's the outer wall, isn't it?"

Connor jumped up spraying sand onto Mr. Miller, shouting, "Where? Where's the outer wall?! I don't see anything!"

Mr. Miller ignored Connor, and calmly replied, "It is. We'll be there tomorrow."

Connor was looking around wildly. "Where is it, Andrew? I don't see anything."

"Look to the north," Andrew said in an exasperated tone. "We've been looking at it since we came out of the foothills."

Connor turned from west to north, and said, "All I see are the mountains."

"See the dark spot at the base of the mountains?" Mr. Miller said, without looking up or turning his head. "That's where we're going."

"Wow, I didn't think that was anything!" he said turning back to Andrew. "Can you believe it?! We're almost there!" He slapped Andrew on the back, and said, "We're almost there!"

"I know." Andrew said unenthusiastically, "I know."

"How can you not be excited?"

"I don't know," Andrew confessed, half wondering himself. "I guess it just doesn't seem real yet. Why are you so excited? Just yesterday, you said we were all going there to die."

"Never mind about that," Connor said. "We're almost there."

Mr. Miller tipped over his small bowl, letting the last few drops hit the sand. Squatting down, he rubbed sand in it and stood up.

"It'll seem real enough in another twenty-four hours. In the meantime, let's get going. Connor, you take the horses and the rear. Andrew and I will keep an eye on our guide."

"All right, let's go," Connor said, a little too enthusiastically.

Andrew just shook his head and stepped behind Mr. Miller. Kaya took point, and they all marched off into the distance.

"I wouldn't be that excited if I was them," Kaya thought, wondering what it would be like when the Chamber lit up the night sky.

She had been to the Chamber on each of her trainings, but she had never been there when a man had entered. She had never seen the blue-white Light pouring from every opening, nor had she felt the heartbreak described by her people when the Hero failed. As the thought of the broken man emerging from the Hero's Chamber settled into her mind's eye she thought, "I just want to get this over with and get home. I'm glad I don't have to string the river."

With each step, the towering pieces of the once mighty outer wall became clearer.

Well before first light, their guide disappeared, and Andrew was the first to spot the small glowing pile of mushrooms.

Turning to Mr. Miller, he asked, "What? Why are we stopping? Why don't we just get there already?"

"Yeah, this doesn't make any sense! It's right there. We could make it in another couple of hours easy," Connor protested.

Mr. Miller picked up the pile of glowing mushrooms. Holding them in front of Andrew and Connor, he said, "It's farther than you think and there's no point in walking during the day. We'll get there soon enough. Let's just make camp, get something to eat, and get some rest. I have a feeling tomorrow is going to be a big day."

That morning, as the sun began to heat the little tents, Connor thrashed and jerked in his sleep. He mumbled half words, tossing and turning as his dream began to take form.

It was the same dream he had been having over and over since Mr. Miller told him he would be the first to enter the Chamber.

Connor saw himself high up in the foothills of the Kingdom on a cloudless night. Andrew stood behind him wearing a heavy cloak with an oversized hood. Half of his face was covered in shadow while the other half was pale and lifeless. He seemed smaller than he should be and menacing, almost evil.

The dreamscape of the foothills shifted with sharply contrasting areas of light and dark. It was as if clouds filtered the moonlight, but the sky was clear. A steady wind blew against Connor's back, filling his ears with its muffling sound. He wasn't dreaming lucidly, and there was no controlling what transpired.

From out of the shadows, a dark building emerged blocking everything else from view. The building was round, made of stone, and when Connor looked up into the darkness, he could just begin to see the curved wall tapering to a point.

He stepped back from the building, but strangely he was no further away. He stepped back again, but there was no avoiding what he had come to do.

He glanced back at Andrew, but Andrew was gone. Turning back to face the building, he was confronted by a massive wooden door. It was easily five feet wide and twelve feet tall.

Connor watched as a large letter 'D' appeared in the door. The poorly chiseled letter defaced the flawless wood.

“That’s better,” he said, with an air of satisfaction.

He stood before the enormous door with his chin up, and his chest held high. The shadows and moonlight moved across his chiseled features, the wind whipping playfully at his hair.

Re-appearing from the shadows, Andrew stood behind Connor. He reached up and pulled back his hood, revealing dark eyes and sunken cheeks. The wind did not blow his greasy, matted hair and the shadows of the dream made him look sinister and sickly.

Glancing back over his shoulder, Connor said, “Don’t worry Andrew, I’ll be right back.”

In a nervous, shaking voice, Andrew asked, “Do you need me to hold your things, Connor?”

“If you must, but honestly, I’ll be right back.”

Slipping off his small pack, Connor handed it back without looking and dropped it into Andrew’s waiting hands. Fumbling with the pack, he clumsily slunk back into the shadows.

In the dimly lit scene, Connor watched himself reach for the large, golden, intricately carved doorknob. His hand easily wrapped around it, twisting the ancient handle until he felt the heavy bolt slide open inside the thick wooden door.

With a light push, the huge door swung open and banged against the inside wall of the Chamber.

“Good luck,” Andrew whispered from somewhere behind Connor.

Connor nodded in acknowledgment, but it was a wasted gesture. He was already focused on his prize. Stepping boldly across the threshold, he walked to the center of the room, folded his arms and waited confidently. It came as no surprise when the Light appeared from a corner of the dark room, and he watched impatiently as the blue-white Light flickered across his face.

Floating in the Light of the Chamber, Connor watched as his life full of good deeds was reviewed. He basked in his own glory and smiled contently as the Light of the Kingdom evaluated his worthiness to be King.

The Light slowly faded from the chamber, but it did not leave him in darkness. Instead, it was replaced by a new source of Light and that Light was coming from Connor.

With great pride, he watched himself step out of the Chamber wearing a magnificent suit of gleaming white armor. On his arm, he carried the shield crafted by Celeste for her father and on his waist, he wore the crystal sword.

Andrew re-emerged from the shadowy background of the dream and knelt before Connor, bowing his head to the ground.

Connor’s eyes widened, his pulse quickened, and Andrew faded from view as mountains of gold appeared for as far as he could see. Sprinkled throughout the golden

mountains were jewels and countless precious glittering things, enough to buy the world ten times over.

Connor kicked in his sleep and mumbled, "King."



That afternoon they were on the move far earlier than expected. The sun was still up, but the shadow of the mountains gave them plenty of shade.

They were all fidgety with excitement and nervousness as they approached the towering rubble.

When they were about a mile from the outer wall, Connor said, "Look at it. It's way bigger than I thought it would be."

"Me too," Andrew agreed. "It's like the wall touches the sky."

"What are you talking about? You both stood next to it when you were in the book. It hasn't changed," Mr. Miller insisted.

"I know, but it just feels different, doesn't it?" Andrew said, turning to Connor.

"Yeah it does, and we're not even there yet!"

Mr. Miller stopped and so did Andrew and Connor. He looked at them and briefly repeated the instructions he had given them just before they broke camp. "When we get to the outer wall, we're gonna set up camp by the Portal. We'll go over the plan one last time. I'm sure you'll both be leaving tonight for the Chamber. We'll need to be quick when we get there. Got it?"

"Got it," they agreed.

Kaya led the way to where the men would need to make their base camp and stopped. Under the protection of her Shadow Cloak, she quickly untied the small stick with the white flag that had been on her pack for more than a year. With butterflies in her stomach, she stuck it in the sand for the first time.

Mr. Miller saw the little flag and urgently started fumbling to remove his backpack. It was only halfway off when his knees gave out and he threw-up on the sand.

Andrew and Connor were staring at the little flag when Mr. Miller fell to his knees.

"That's not good," Connor whispered to Andrew.

Andrew walked up to Mr. Miller and offered him his hand.

"Thanks, but I'll be all right," he said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand and standing up.

His legs wobbled a little as he walked over to the horses and pulled his waterskin out of a saddlebag. After taking a moment, he turned to the boys, saying, "Let's get everything off the horses, this is base camp."

With only the tents and a tack line to set up, they were done in only fifteen minutes.

Mr. Miller gestured with his hand to get Connor and Andrew to come sit with him. When they were all sitting together, he said, "All right, let's go over the plan one last time. Since we have a guide, the river should be easy to cross. That means it shouldn't take any more than a day and a half to get to the Chamber. Remember not to go in when the sun is up, it's always done at night, always. I'll be right over there sitting in front of the Defender's Portal and trust me, I'll see it start up when you enter.

Let's do it like we agreed. Connor's going in first, and I'll have the shield. With that thing on my arm, I'll be able to defend you like nobody's been defended in two thousand years. You'll see, it's gonna go just fine."

"What if it isn't?" asked Andrew.

Connor shoved Andrew, and said in a sarcastic tone, "What could go wrong? The plan is perfect."

Mr. Miller looked at Andrew, and said, "You already know the answer, but I'll say it again just so I've said it one last time. If things don't go as planned, then one or both of us," he nodded toward Connor, "will be dead or dying. It will be up to you to decide what happens next."

Andrew looked down at the sand, and said, "I'm glad you didn't talk about this part of the plan before we came all the way out here because I'm not sure I would have come."

Mr. Miller clapped him on the back, and said, "Don't worry. This is gonna work. I know it is, or we wouldn't have come. In two days, you'll be standing inside the City of Light, the Kingdom itself. You'll see."

Andrew raised his head, looked him in the eyes, and said, "I hope you're right, for all our sakes." He pushed himself up, and they all stood together one last time.

"Take one waterskin each. You can refill it out of the river. You don't need to carry anything else but food."

"What about the tent?" Connor asked.

"The next time you close your eyes you won't need a tent."

Connor's eyebrows went up, and Andrew just shook his head.

"Get the bags we packed last night with your food in it and get ready to go. It looks like your guide is ready."

The boys had started to go when Andrew dropped his bag, turned around and walked up to Mr. Miller. He hugged him and to his surprise, Mr. Miller hugged him back.

"Good luck Mr. Miller."

"We don't need luck Andrew, you'll see."

Andrew backed away, and Connor stepped up, holding out his hand. Mr. Miller took it, and the two shook.

"I'll see you soon."

"I'll be the one with the giant shield. Don't worry, I'll be there for you and we'll see this thing through to the end."

He gripped Connor's hand tightly and pulled him in for a hug.

The last sliver of the old moon was still shining overhead, and Andrew thought he saw tears in Mr. Miller's eyes, when he said, "Get going now and be safe. I'll see you both inside the Kingdom."

Chapter 14



A Slippery Slope

Kaya walked away from the tents toward the far end of the outer wall. She tried not to think about the bodies buried under the sand. With the men approaching, she picked up her pace.

Connor and Andrew understood as much as they could about what was to come, and they fell in line behind the Wanderer.

Walking around the towering rubble, Andrew half expected to see the inner wall, but all they could see was sand and tumbleweeds.

"I thought there would be more left," he said to Connor.

"I know. I can't see anything that even looks like a building."

"Well maybe in a few days there will be a whole city right where we're walking," Andrew said optimistically.

The two walked on in silence, straining their eyes to see any sign of the things they had come to expect from reading the diary.

The terrain behind the wall was more of an endless field than anything else. The soft sand of the open desert had turned to pebbles and rocks, and there were little clumps of grassy looking weeds all around them. The field gradually began to incline, the rocks became harder to avoid, and the mountains made everything feel small in comparison.

At two o'clock in the morning, Kaya stopped. They had been walking since before sunset, and since the objective was to try and keep a steady pace all the way up to the top, she gave them a little extra time to rest.

In less than an hour, the men were standing around looking at her.

"At this pace, we'll make it there by sunset tomorrow," she thought.

Slowly but surely, the unmarked path became more and more difficult. Just before sunrise, they found themselves climbing a steep rock face that crumbled under every step.

"Hey, quit with the rock shower would ya?!" Andrew called up the slope to Connor.

"I'm sorry, I can't help it. This isn't even rock! It just falls apart when you touch it. Grab onto this big clump of grass when you get up here, it's pretty sturdy."

"Can you hear the river?" Andrew shouted over the cascade of rocks and the sound of water in the distance.

"It's gotta be just over this patch of rock if we can ever climb up it!" Connor yelled, sliding backward and showering Andrew in more pebbles and dirt.

Andrew coughed and shielded his eyes. When the dust had cleared, he called up, "I thought this would be easy. How did he even get up there?"

After a lot of climbing up and sliding backward, they finally stood at the top of a small granite rock face. They were sweaty, and Andrew was particularly filthy.

Kaya smiled at the sight of them. She knew the slippery slope was going to be a challenge, not for her, but for the Travelers. Unless you knew the trick of it, the climb could be exhausting and frustrating.

With dirt streaked faces and sand colored hair, Connor and Andrew stared in amazement at the Cups. The raging river poured past them, kicking up white water rapids in the middle and dangerous looking eddies all along the shore.

"Wow! Would you look at that," Andrew said to Connor.

"Look at the color. Look at those rapids! How are we gonna cross this thing?" Connor asked, with nervous excitement.

They were both looking around when off to their left they saw their guide standing on a rope over the middle of the river. He was holding onto two ropes, one over each shoulder and in just a few seconds, he had crossed the entire river.

"I guess that's how," Andrew said.

"I hope that's as easy as he's making it look," Connor said, tightening the small food pack on his back.

"Me too," said Andrew, tightening his small pack and making sure his waterskin was securely fastened.

"Who's going first?" Connor asked.

"After the rock shower you just gave me, I think you can follow me this time. I'm not following you and your nine toes anywhere I don't have to."

"That's fine by me, but if you hear a really big splash guess what?"

"What?"

"You're the first one going in the Chamber."

"Just hold on and follow me," Andrew said, stepping in front of Connor and making his way to the rope bridge.

Kaya was already across when Andrew made his way onto the bridge. She watched anxiously, hoping there wouldn't be an accident.

Andrew was about ten feet out when Connor started onto the rope. It began shaking so violently, they almost fell off.

"Get off before you kill me!" Andrew yelled over the roar of the river.

"Sorry! I didn't know it would do that," Connor said, stepping off the rope. The bridge slowly quieted down, and Andrew gradually stopped swinging back and forth.

"I'll wait here until you're all the way over."

With a huge sigh of relief, Andrew slowly made his way across. It wasn't nearly as easy as their guide made it look, and after what seemed like an hour, he finally put his feet back on solid ground.

He watched anxiously as Connor started his crossing. He wobbled back and forth, struggling to keep the bottom rope steady. Andrew tried to yell advice to him, but the raging river made it impossible to hear.

Watching Connor's hands moving along the ropes made Andrew curious. He followed the thick lines away from the river until they passed over his head.

When he turned around, his feet slipped out from underneath him as if he was standing on ice. He watched helplessly as his toes came up to eye level and he landed hard on his back.

He slid a few feet down the slope and stopped. Stunned and disoriented, he watched the tiny rocks and sand tumble down the steep slope, past the trunk of a twisted, thorny tree until they fell into an abyss.

Kaya watched as Andrew's feet began to kick and push at the ground. He panicked trying to pull himself back from the edge of the slope.

As soon as Andrew was off the slope and away from the ledge, he sprang to his feet. He was terrified, and he started backing up until he bumped right into Connor.

"Hey watch out!" Connor yelled, teetered on the edge of the bank before finally catching his balance.

“What are you doing Andrew?! You almost knocked me into the river!”

Andrew reached up to help Connor away from the river, but Andrew’s hands were trembling, and Connor just stepped past him.

“What’s gotten into you? You could have killed me!”

“I, I, I almost fe...fe...fell in,” he stammered.

“What are you talking about? I saw you cross the river just fine! You would have backed right into the river if you hadn’t almost pushed me in!”

Connor took off his waterskin and poured it over Andrew’s head, saying, “Get a hold of yourself before you get hurt.”

Andrew felt the warm water run down his face and back. His eyes came back into focus, and the panic slowly slipped away.

Connor turned, looking at the ropes and gave a long whistle, “I wonder how he did that?”

Andrew stepped next to him, and said, “I’m sorry about all that. I slipped on the slope right there, and I think I would have gone over the edge if I hadn’t gotten lucky.”

Connor looked down at the slope, then at the thorny tree and finally at the nothingness that came after them. “Is that where your dad...?”

“It has to be. I almost went in myself, that’s what scared me to death.”

“Wow! That is scary.”

Connor paused, then motioned to the bridge, asking, “How do you suppose he got the ropes up there?”

Andrew looked at the ropes strung across the pit and over the back of it. But the back of the pit was a sheer wall, there was no way to reach it.

“I have no idea,” he said. “Where is our rope?”

“What rope?” Connor asked.

“You know, the rope we need to climb down into the pit. The rope we need to lower ourselves down to the Chamber. You know, the rope!”

“Oh, that rope. The last time I saw it was at base camp. Didn’t you grab it?”

“Well, that’s just great!! Now how am I supposed to get my dad out of the pit?!”

“How am I supposed to know? Why didn’t you bring it?”

“Why didn’t I bring it? It was your job to bring the stupid rope! How are we even going to get down to the Chamber?”

“I don’t know. We left in such a hurry, and Mr. Miller didn’t tell me to take it,” Connor explained with his head hung low. “I guess I forgot.”

Andrew turned to Kaya and yelled over the sound of the river, “Hey mister, do you have any rope because my stupid friend here forgot ours?”

Kaya almost answered before she caught herself. “Don’t get involved,” she thought. “Just lead the way, keep your mouth shut or you won’t make it home.” She bit her lip, turned on her heels and led on.

When Kaya turned her back, Andrew yelled, "What's wrong with you! Can't you see we need help?!"

Connor put his hand on Andrew's shoulder, but before he could get a word out Andrew pushed his hand off, saying, "Get away from me."

Connor stepped over to the river and started filling his waterskin. The speed of the water pushed the little bubbles coming out of it downstream before they broke the surface.

"What are we gonna do? I don't think we should go on," Andrew said.

Connor put the stopper in his waterskin and stood up. They were face to face when Connor looked down at Andrew, and said, "I'm sorry about the rope. It was an honest mistake. That guy over there," he said, gesturing to their guide, "he's not going to help us. It's not what he does. Everything from here on out is up to you and me.

I'm sorry about not being able to go down into the pit, but seriously, even if we did have the rope what were you going to carry his bones back in? You didn't even bring a spare bag. Besides, if we're still alive after this he'll either be resting comfortably in the Kingdom, or you can make an extra trip back up here and pick him up. As for me, I'm following that guy.

We'll figure out a way into the Chamber without the rope. Mr. Miller said it wasn't more than a good jump. We don't really need the rope to get to the Chamber, you needed it to go get your dad."

Andrew's face was red, and he wanted to scream at the top of his voice. He couldn't think straight, and he couldn't figure out how it had come to this. Most of his reasoning, his justification for coming out here was to bring back the remains of his father. Taking a deep breath, he tried to calm down.

"I'm going to keep going Andrew," Connor said, stepping around him. "If you're coming, I suggest you fill up your waterskin and hurry up."

Connor walked off, and Andrew was alone by the river. The only thing he could hear was the sound of the rushing water and the thoughts racing through his head. The early morning sun was shining on his face, warning him how hot it was about to get. He took another deep breath and let it out slowly.

"Nothing has changed," he said to himself. "When this is all over I'll come back with the rope and do what I came here to do. Nothing has changed."

Andrew knelt next to the raging river and filled his empty waterskin with cold water. When the bubbles stopped, he lifted the heavy bag out of the water, corked it and put it over his shoulder. He took another deep breath and walked over to the edge of the slope leading down to the pit.

"I'll be back for you," he called into the abyss. "You'll see. I'll be back."

Taking one last deep breath, he let it out slowly, then he did what he had been doing for as long as he could remember. He put one foot in front of the other and tried

not to count the minutes and hours until the end of the journey. The sound of the river faded away until the only thing he could hear was his own footsteps.

As the day dragged on it got blisteringly hot. Kaya wondered how the men could stand walking around in the heat without a Shadow Cloak, but it was irrelevant. She knew they would be at the Chamber tonight, then all she had to do was 'sit watch' for a week, and she was free to go. She wasn't supposed to concern herself with what happened at the Chamber. She wasn't supposed to care if the men lived or died. She wasn't supposed to do anything but get them there alive. The rest was up to them.

Regardless of the outcome, she had a Promise to keep. "The Promise is simple enough," she thought. "Every woman of the village will wander the desert from the age of eighteen to twenty-three. We guide the Travelers to their destination and watch for the Signs. That's it. That's all I have to do, and I'm not going to mess it up on my very first try!"

She wondered what would happen to the larger man when he stepped through the doorway tonight. She wondered if he could answer the questions, she wondered if he even knew about the questions. She wondered how the other man would react if his friend died. There was so much she had never seen and only heard of. She kept thinking how relieved she would be when this was over.

Kaya stopped in the early afternoon to give the men a short break. They were still a few hours from the second crossing, but given the temperature, she thought it was for the best. Waiting for the men, she thought back through the last twenty-four hours and tried to recognize anything that could be a Sign.

She whispered them to herself the way she always did, "Shadow falls face to face. Two and two make three. A waking dream recalls. Touch the moon. The answers are given. Three become two become one. The sky above reflects the valley below."

"I'm not even tired," Connor said to Andrew as they finished their break under the blazing sun.

"I wish I could say the same thing. These hills are killing me. It's just one after another and the sun is relentless." He took a long drink and wiped his mouth. "How high up do you think we are?"

"We're pretty high. I don't know how far we've come, but I know it's not as hot here as it is in the desert. Look," he said, pointing to the horizon, "you can see the ocean from here."

Andrew stood up and looked out over the desert. "It looks like it's a million miles away."

Kaya couldn't imagine anything she had seen over the past twenty-four hours qualified as one of the Signs, and she was getting impatient to leave. After thirty minutes, she hit two rocks together to get their attention, then set off for the next crossing.

By four o'clock, they were ready to cross the Cups a second time. Kaya went first.

"Look at that," Andrew said when Kaya was halfway across the river. "The rope hardly even moves when he's on it. It barely even sags."

Connor smiled and elbowed Andrew, saying, "Yeah, for such a big guy he sure is light on his feet."

Andrew chuckled, but in the back of his mind, it did seem odd.

"I'm going next," said Andrew.

"Fine by me."

When their guide had crossed the river, Andrew took to the ropes. He wobbled more than he wanted to, especially at the middle, but he never lost his footing. He was very thankful for the hand ropes and within a few minutes, he was safely across.

Connor struggled, almost falling in twice.

"That was graceful," Andrew said over the sound of the water as Connor hopped down off the ropes.

"I thought I was gonna get wet for a minute there."

"Speaking of getting wet," Andrew said, "let's fill up our waterskins before we go."

"Good idea. Looks like we'd better hurry, our faithful guide is already leaving!"

The sun had dipped below the mountains, leaving the Wanderer and her two Travelers in the cool shadows. Kaya knew it would be nearly impossible for her uncoordinated Travelers to attempt the final crossing in the pitch black of a moonless night, so she maintained an unforgiving pace.

Just before the cloudless sky turned black, they came to the last crossing.

"What, that's it?! I could practically jump across," Connor scoffed.

"Let's just get this done before my legs fall off!" Andrew moaned wearily.

The Cups was only twenty feet across and just before twilight disappeared, they were safely across.

Kaya halted the march as soon as they were across the river, allowing the men to take their last break. She leaned against one of the giant boulders that seemed to have appeared from nowhere. It had been an exhausting hike, and she was glad they were close to the end. Everyone had made it safely across the river, which meant the trip had been a success. And now, in the final hours, before the men entered the Chamber, she could relax.

Looking up at the night sky and listening to the men talk, she snacked on dried fruit and nuts from her pack.

"We've got to be close now," Connor said.

Andrew collapsed on a small boulder. With a great sigh, he said, "I would love to rest here until tomorrow."

"Like I said, we've got to be close. I hope it's not too hard to find the Chamber in the dark."

Andrew touched his nose to see how bad his sunburn was. He took a sharp breath and pulled his finger away. "I think that guy can find it blindfolded. Can you see this sunburn?" he asked, pointing his nose in Connor's direction.

Connor shook his head.

"I feel a little sick to my stomach."

"Drink your water or you're gonna get sicker," Connor advised, pouring some water over the back of his sunburned neck.

They sat and relaxed as much as they could. Connor was nervous and couldn't seem to stop talking. Andrew was only half listening until he fell asleep. When Connor looked over at Andrew and saw he was asleep, he decided to do the same.

Since they had safely made their final crossing, Kaya knew they were in no hurry. It was cooler than usual because of the altitude, and she took advantage of the downtime by walking a few hundred yards away to change her shirt behind a boulder. Taking off the Shadow Cloak, she stretched her arms wide. It was nice to have it off after wearing it for so long. It wasn't heavy, but it was a little awkward when climbing. It made her top-heavy.

She massaged her shoulders where the straps rubbed and looked up at the crystal-clear sky. She found all the familiar constellations while she sipped at her water. Finally, she pulled on a heavier shirt and sat down to rest her eyes.

Kaya woke up with a panicked jolt. She glanced at the stars and instantly knew it was long after midnight. Her cloak was still off, and she was practically sitting out in the open. Chastising herself for her failure, she quickly got to her feet and put her cloak back on. With a renewed sense of urgency, she walked back to the men and was relieved to find them fast asleep.

She picked up two rocks and knocked them together. Neither Traveler moved. She tried again, but they were both out cold.

"This is like trying to wake up my brothers," she thought.

Not wanting to bang rocks together all night, she walked over to Andrew and kicked his feet. The tips of his shoes swayed back and forth, but the sunburned, exhausted Traveler only stirred and mumbled. Kaya opened her waterskin and poured some onto Andrew's chest. He rolled over and pulled his arms in.

Kaya dumped all her water onto Andrew's head.

"Are we there yet?!" he asked. "Where am I?" He sat up and rubbed his eyes. Looking up at Kaya he asked, "What time is it?"

Kaya ignored him and walked to the river where she refilled her water.

When she returned Andrew had woken up Connor, but the two were obviously groggy. She figured they would wake up on the walk to the Chamber, so she started leading them into the darkness.

Andrew walked next to Connor as they followed their guide for the last time.

"How are you doing? Are you ready for this?"

"Who knows? I guess I'm ready. It sure is dark tonight. I can hardly see a thing."

"I know. I can hardly see our guide. Where did he go anyway?" Andrew asked.

"He's right up ahead," Connor said, pointing into the darkness. "Ouch! Stupid rocks! You know it was sand for weeks, and now when I can hardly see anything, there are rocks everywhere."

Sidestepping a rock the size of his head, Andrew fell in line behind Connor. Outcrops of mountainside and boulders bigger than a house loomed out of the darkness as they walked up steep, rocky slopes and narrow paths.

Twenty minutes later Kaya stopped. Connor almost walked right into her and Andrew bumped into Connor's back.

"Sorry. Why did you stop?"

Connor looked over his shoulder, and said, "I think we're there."

Chapter 15



The Hero's Chamber

“...the towering spire crumbled like frail pottery across the landscape. The only remaining piece came to rest high in the foothills to the north.”

The Story of the Last Day

Following her training, Kaya took a dozen quick steps and scurried up the curved rock face. With her out of the way, the Travelers were free to proceed.

Connor stared into the night trying to see what he had only imagined.

"What is it? What can you see?"

"It's too dark, I can't see anything yet."

"Are you still gonna do it?"

Connor took a deep breath and let it out.

"Yeah, I'm gonna do it."

He took another deep breath, then stepped with his good foot first, leading the way into the darkness.

Making their way down the sloping pathway, they approached the edge of a cliff. To their right was a colossal boulder, bigger than a house. On their left was the sheer wall of the mountain and straight ahead was something that would have been impossible to comprehend even in broad daylight.

The tips of their shoes stopped at the edge of a three-foot gap. On the other side of the gap, sticking straight out from the cliff face and protruding into the empty darkness was the final three hundred feet of the fallen spire. With no visible support, it appeared to float in mid-air.

"What's holding it up?" Andrew asked.

"This is weird," Connor replied. "I didn't expect it to look like this at all."

"Mr. Miller said we had to 'drop in' after we walked out onto it."

Taking a couple of steps backward, Connor said, "I'm just glad it's even with the path. Follow me." He moved forward in a little run, jumping the gap between the spire and the cliff.

Kaya watched them, wondering what it would be like.

Andrew followed Connor's example, and they walked together along the broken section of the tower. Connor motioned to their left, and said, "There isn't anything on this side except a long drop, so be careful."

They explored the length of the spire until they came almost to the end where there had been a major collapse in the wall.

"This doesn't feel very safe Andrew. I don't think this is the right way in."

"Me neither. I think we should go back to the other end and try to get in from there. I think that's where we have to jump down to get you in."

The night wind picked up, rocking the spire back and forth. They put their arms out to steady themselves.

"Whoa! I don't like this at all," Connor said, struggling to keep his balance. "We should go back."

Placing his hand on Connor's back, Andrew steadied him, saying, "There's no way forward. Come on, let's go back and see if we can find the way in."

Connor nodded repeatedly, and they made their way back down the spire until they were about fifty feet from the edge of the cliff.

Connor got down on his hands and knees where the side of the wall had broken away.

"Well?" Andrew asked standing next to him.

"It's not that far."

Andrew knelt down next to him, then got on his belly with his head sticking out over the edge.

He pointed directly below them, and said, "I think the trick is to miss the stone posts and land on the inside of the wall just under where we are now."

Pointing up the hollow shaft, Connor said, "Those posts, they must have been the balusters holding up the handrail to the stairs."

"Look even further, you must be right," Andrew said, pointing in the same direction. "They run up the entire side as far as I can see. I wouldn't try jumping onto them, there's no telling how sturdy they are."

Connor nodded, and asked, "Do you hear the water?"

"I do. Where do you think it's coming from?"

"It doesn't make any sense, especially since we're just dangling out over a huge cliff."

"Then where does it start?" Andrew asked.

"I don't know. It doesn't make any sense."

Andrew stood up unexpectedly and walked back down the spire toward the pathway.

"Hey, where are you going?"

"Hold on, I just want to check something."

Andrew picked up a fist-sized rock from the path and came back next to Connor. He got down on his stomach and threw the rock out into the darkness.

"Count until it hits the bottom."

They both counted silently, but they never heard it hit bottom.

"Don't miss the ledge," Andrew advised.

"I guess not! Maybe I'm glad it's dark out."

"Can you feel the edge of the stone under your hands?" Andrew asked.

"Yeah, it's got a bit of a lip to it. Let's see what we can do about getting down there, shall we?"

They stood up and took off their small food packs and their waterskins.

"Should we throw them down on the ledge just in case?" Andrew asked, not trying to sound like anything bad might happen, but still trying to be cautious.

"You can if you want," Connor replied. "I'm going to leave mine right here."

Andrew didn't want to seem pessimistic, so he set his items down too.

"It's not like we're the first ones to ever do this," Connor said, looking at Andrew.
"I'm just gonna go for it."

"Good luck."

"Thanks, I hope I don't need it."

Connor eased his way over to the ledge and put his back to the darkness with his toes at the very edge. He bent his knees and took a little hop backward, catching the lip of the stone with his fingertips. He swung twice and let go, landing well behind the stone posts.

Andrew gave Connor a couple of seconds to move out of the way, then he repeated the action. The inside of the tower echoed with the sound of his feet hitting the floor.

"Good job missing the posts."

"Thanks. You too," Andrew said, brushing off his hands. The missing wall let in the faint light from the outside world. It was just enough to see by.

"Are you nervous?"

"I'm a little nervous," Connor admitted.

"I don't think you're supposed to think about that right now. Besides, Mr. Miller is down there waiting for you. He's got your back."

"Where do you think I'm supposed to go?"

"I think the Chamber is at the very end."

"Let's go find out," Connor said in a rather brave voice.

With one hand running along the smooth wall, they cautiously made their way down the inside of the huge spire. They had to step over shadowy piles of debris and avoid the broken pieces of stairway and baluster littering the inside of the cylinder.

"Look at that," Andrew said when they were almost to the end. "The whole other side is missing!"

"I know it is. It's missing from here all the way up to the doorway," Connor said in a hushed tone.

"You can see it? Can we get to it?"

"It's just up ahead, but it's all the way to the left. I think it must be right on the edge."

"Look up," Andrew said.

"Wow, half the roof is gone too. I wish we could have dropped in from there, but it looks way too steep. Would you just look at all those stars?"

Staring up at a million, million stars, neither of them felt the urge to hurry toward the open doorway at the end of the spire.

Kaya had moved to a new position almost directly above the Travelers. When the Hero stood before the Light, this was where her teacher told her she would have the best view. She waited anxiously listening to their voices echoing out of the hollow tower.

Finally, in a calm, confident voice, Connor said, "I'm ready."

"You know this is worth it. I wish I were going in first, but it looks like it's up to you." He held out his hand, and said, "Good luck."

Connor knocked Andrew's hand aside and hugged him tightly. "I don't need luck. This is meant to happen, you'll see."

They both slapped each other on the back and by the time they let go, Andrew knew he would see his best friend again.

"Watch out for those stone posts. Don't let your foot get caught in them."

"I'll be fine. I'll see you in a couple of minutes."

Connor made his way over to the exposed side of the spire where short, thick pieces of the old baluster had come to rest. They jutted precariously over the broken ledge while giant hunks of broken, jumbled stairs led to the crooked doorway.

Focusing on his oddly tilted objective, Connor crouched and hopped forward. He avoided the stone posts and landed on a badly tilting piece of the stair.

The wind blew ominously against the spire making it rock from side to side. Connor wobbled, struggling to keep his balance.

Watching helplessly, Andrew held his breath as Connor stepped up and to his left. Teetering dangerously on the edge, he shifted his feet and used the momentum of the rocking spire to reach his hand inside the doorway.

The wind disappeared as quickly as it arrived and the spire shifted unexpectedly. Connor rocked back on his heels and barely managed to grab the inside of the doorframe.

Andrew breathed a sigh of relief as Connor pulled himself toward the opening and hopped in.

"Say hi to Celeste for me."

Connor poked his head back through the doorway, and said with a smile, "Don't worry, I will. See you in a minute." Then he disappeared into the Chamber.

Kaya heard all this and couldn't believe her ears. "Say hi to Celeste?!" Nobody was supposed to know her name except the people of the village. How in the world did this man know who Celeste was? While she was feverishly trying to figure out how any Traveler could know this, a blinding blue-white Light shot from the window in front of her. Half-startled by the incredibly brilliant Light and half-blinded by it, Kaya took a step to her left.

Andrew moved closer to try to see inside, but just when he looked into the doorway, he was blinded.

In the brilliant flash of Light, Kaya completely lost her night vision and her footing. Slipping sideways, she screamed and landed hard on her hip. Gravity took over, and she clawed desperately at the smooth stone. Her legs slipped over the edge of the broken ceiling, rotating her body as she fell into the spire below.

Andrew heard a scream, but it wasn't from Connor. It sounded like a woman. Then he heard something sliding over rock, and little pebbles started showering down on him. When he looked up through the opening, all the stars had vanished.

"Help me!" Kaya screamed.

She tried to protect Andrew by pushing him out of the way with her feet and tipped herself sideways. She came down hard, smashing her head and shoulder against the stone balusters and knocking herself out cold.

Andrew flew backward and felt the air leave his chest just before the back of his head bounced off the wall. With the wind knocked out of him, he fell to his knees.

Kaya's legs hung off the edge of the spire pulling her away from her resting place, into the abyss below. Even with the Light from the Chamber, she looked like a lumpy shadow resting on the floor.

Dazed and confused, Andrew desperately tried to think of anything that fit the shape on the ground.

As she slowly slipped away, the fabric of her Shadow Cloak pulled back, revealing her small, delicate hand.

Instinct took over, and Andrew pushed off from the wall, lunging toward the tiny hand. Just before it fell between the stone posts, he grabbed it.

He was still moving forward, and the weight of the shadow pulled him out and over the edge. His legs flailed around trying to find something, anything to hook onto. At the last second, he got the tip of his shoe on the inside of the Chamber door, but it wasn't enough.

Holding tightly to the little hand, he started to fall. His left leg slipped between the posts, pulling the skin away from his knee and shin, then his ankle twisted and snapped. Kaya's dead weight yanked against his shoulders, wedging his ankle deeper between the posts above.

The Chamber pulsed and flickered as they dangled above an endless sea of black.

He looked down to see the shadow fall away, revealing a slender figure.

"Are you all right?!" he yelled, shaking Kaya's hand. Her arm moved back and forth, and her head rocked from side to side.

"Are you all right?!"

There were mumbles and a low groan, then her head slowly tilted back. The brilliant Light above illuminated the badly bruised, but stunning face of a young woman with deep brown eyes and long dark hair.

She squeezed Andrew's hand and started struggling against him.

"Don't do that," he instructed. "We're in a bit of a bad situation."

"Where are we?" Kaya asked, sounding groggy and confused.

"First things first. You need to hold onto me as much as I'm holding on to you. Grab my wrist with your other hand, or you're going to slip away."

Andrew pulled Kaya up a couple of inches, she grabbed onto his wrist, and they both gripped much harder.

"Good, that's better. Below us is a really long fall, and I'm pinned to the ledge above by what has to be a broken ankle."

"That's not what I had planned," Kaya said, still sounding confused.

"Me neither."

Kaya looked up at Andrew, and said, "I'm going to climb you and get back up there. Then I'll figure out how to get you loose."

"That's a good plan. How can I help?"

"Just don't move. I'm probably going to have to push and pull and I can't guarantee it will feel very good."

"You're our guide, aren't you?"

"I was. Lift me up so I can grab your armpits."

Andrew's arms were getting tired, but he had enough strength to lift her. When her hands were over his head, she reached with her left hand and grabbed at his armpit.

"This isn't going to work. I can't get a grip on you."

"Can you reach my belt?"

"No."

"You either have to grab something, or I have to put you back down."

"I'm going to hug you around your chest. When I do, I'm going to need you to lace your fingers together. I need to step into your hands and push myself up. Do you understand?"

"I think so."

Kaya wrapped her left arm around Andrew's chest, and said, "Ok, let go of my wrist."

She got her other arm around Andrew just in time to keep herself from slipping off.

"Give me your foot," Andrew shouted, just as the Light from the Chamber went out.

With their eyes re-adjusting to the black of night, Andrew fumbled around, and Kaya kned him in the head a couple of times. When she finally got her foot into his hands, she was able to push herself up and grab his belt.

"Bend the knee on your free leg. I have to grab your foot."

Andrew bent his knee, and she grabbed his foot, saying, "Now straighten your leg!"

Pushing his foot toward the sky, he raised her up and she put her foot in his crotch.

Andrew yelled as she got her fingers around the edge of the nearest post. Kaya got her knees over it and pulled herself up to the ledge.

"I made it."

“Good! Do you have any rope?”

“I do. Hold on while I get it out of my pack.”

Fortunately, Kaya’s pack had not fallen off when her Shadow Cloak did. She took it off and quickly found her length of rope in the bottom of the pack. Tying a slipknot at the end, she looked down at Andrew’s ankle. It was too dark to see any coloration, but it was firmly lodged between two posts.

“I’m going to lower the rope to you, and you can put it around your chest.”

“Then what?” he asked.

“Then I can push your ankle out, and you can climb up.”

“What are you going to tie the rope to?”

“Oh. Um, I could tie it to one of the posts, but other than that...,” she said, quickly looking around, “other than that, there isn’t anything up here is there?”

“No, there isn’t.” Andrew hesitated, and said, “I don’t like it. What else can we do?”

Kaya didn’t like it either.

“I can lower the rope, and you can wrap it around your wrist. Then I can pull you up. You’ll be able to grab the edge of the posts like I did, and swing yourself up.”

Andrew thought about it as his leg went numb up to his hip. “I’m not sure I can. I’m facing the wrong way.”

“You should be fine if you come up sideways. When you’ve got a good grip, I’ll push your foot out, and you can climb up.”

“Any other ideas?” Andrew called up.

“That’s about all I’ve got. Plus a terrific headache.”

“Well, since I can’t feel my leg anymore I guess it’s the best option.”

Down came the rope with a small loop tied at the end. Andrew slid it over his hand and snugged it around his wrist. Gripping the rope with both hands, he said, “All right. I’m ready.”

Kaya pulled as Andrew attempted an upside down sit-up. He screamed in pain when his hands were a foot from the ledge and Kaya stopped pulling.

“Don’t stop now!” he cried.

Kaya bent her knees, grabbed the rope as low as she could and gave it one final pull. Andrew’s ankle made a horrible grinding noise.

His fingertips came up over the edge, and he yelled, “Get my ankle out of there!”

“Don’t pass out when I do this.”

“Tie off the rope, just in case!”

Kaya got to her hands and knees and quickly tied off the rope. If Andrew let go and the stone pillar didn’t give way, he would be dangling from his wrist. It was better than nothing.

“We’ve got to hurry. I can’t do this much longer.”

Moving to her right, she put the palm of her hand against the side of his foot and counted to three.

Andrew screamed as his foot scraped across the stone.

His mangled leg dropped down, and while he still had the strength to move, he pulled his good leg up to the ledge. Sweat poured off him as he struggled to shift his weight up and over to safety.

Without hesitating, Kaya put her weight on the end of the posts and reached between them, grabbing Andrew's belt. In one quick movement, she rocked her weight back pulling up, and shouting, "Get up here!"

Andrew pulled with all his strength, then he flopped up onto the railing, and she quickly hauled him away from the edge.

Staring up through the hole in the ceiling Andrew said between gasps, "That was pretty good."

"Thanks. I use to do that to my little brother when he couldn't climb onto the top bunk."

"I'm just glad it worked."

His leg had gone from numb to on fire. He sat up, looking at his ankle when he came face to face with Kaya. It was dark, but not too dark to see the giant bruised lump on the side of her head, but it wasn't the bruise he was staring at.

"How bad does it look?" she asked.

"How bad does what look? Oh, I'm sorry, your bruise is beautiful. I mean your head is beautiful, aaahh! I mean the bruise on your head is big, but it didn't break the skin. How does it feel?"

Kaya's cheeks flushed, and she was glad it was dark. "I can't touch it, and it's basically on fire."

"Yeah, my leg was better off when I couldn't feel it. Do you see Connor anywhere?"

She looked around, but she knew they would have known if he had made it out of the Chamber. "I'm sorry. I don't think he made it out."

Grunting and groaning, Andrew lifted his leg the best he could and turned around to look at the doorway.

"Connor!!" he yelled.

The sound echoed into the night. He got a wild look in his eyes, and pleaded, "Help me up. Help me stand up! Please, I have to go over there!"

He made a weak attempt to get to his feet and fell back down. His swollen ankle hit the floor with a thud, and he screamed.

Kaya got to her feet, blocking the way. "You can't go in there! If you so much as break the threshold of the doorway, you're obligated to go all the way in and face the challenge."

"I don't care about that! Connor needs my help!"

Feeling sick to her stomach, she sat back down next to Andrew and put her hand on his shoulder, saying, "If he's still in there you can't help him. You know that, don't you?"

Tears welled up in Andrew's eyes, and Kaya couldn't seem to help herself either. Lying back down, he was racked with sobs, and the tears flowed down his face onto the cold stone of the fallen spire. Kaya cried in silence with her back against the wall, wondering what had happened to Connor and how she had gotten into this situation.

She moved down to Andrew's foot and could tell the swelling was getting out of control. She also noticed his ripped pants, and she could tell his knee was badly cut and bleeding onto the floor.

"I've got to get your shoe off and see if I can stop the bleeding on your knee."

He pushed himself up on his elbows and looked into the darkness.

"How bad is it?"

"It's not good. I think your ankle is broken, and your knee has a few deep cuts. I've got some first aid supplies if you'll let me clean you up a bit."

"All right, but go easy on the foot, will ya?"

She knew everything in her pack by touch and quickly had a small supply of bandages and ointment. She also had what was left of her water standing by.

"Your shoe needs to come off," she said, trying to untie the leather laces, but the swelling had made them too tight. "I've got to cut it off," she said, pulling out her small knife and making quick work of it.

Slipping off the shoe, she asked, "Did that help at all?"

"Not really," he said, through clenched teeth. "It's still on fire, maybe a little less fire, but definitely still on fire."

"Well you won't thank me for what comes next either," she said, putting some of the ointment onto a bandage. She turned it over and put it on the deepest cuts around his knee. Andrew flinched as she applied pressure.

She was crouching over him when he said, "I didn't even know you were up there. How did you slip?"

Kaya debated how much she should tell him, but given the circumstances she decided it wouldn't hurt to share a little.

"I was standing there so I could see the Chamber light up. When I heard you and Connor talking about Celeste, it surprised me. Then I was blinded. It all happened so fast I don't really know."

"You surprised me too. I didn't see you until you landed on me."

"I tried to kick you out of the way so I didn't land on you, but I guess that didn't work out too well for either of us."

Kaya reached into her pack and took out her last handful of glowing mushrooms.

"Here, put this under your head," she said, offering her pack to Andrew.

He took it, lifted his head and slipped it under.

"Thank you."

"I think I should be thanking you. I know I hit my head pretty hard, but how did I fall off?"

"Well you did kick me out of the way, right into the wall," he said smiling at her, but she was looking down at his knee. "I didn't really see you hit the ground because I was busy flying backward. When I looked up, you were hanging over the side. Honestly, I didn't know it was you until your robe pulled back over your hand. I was surprised I caught you before you slipped all the way over the edge.

Luckily my foot got caught the way it did, or we both would have had a really long fall."

"Thank you for saving me, Andrew. I'm embarrassed, but I'm really glad you were there to help me when I couldn't help myself."

She kept the pressure on his knee and worried until her stomach hurt.

With his head resting on her backpack Andrew asked, "What's your name?"

"My name is Kaya."

"You're welcome, Kaya, I'm glad I could help you after all the help you've been to my friends and me."

Kaya lifted the compress off his knee. "I think the bleeding has stopped. I'm going to let it rest for a while before I clean it up anymore. Would you mind if I put your feet on my legs? If I can elevate them, it might help the swelling."

"If you think it will help, please go right ahead."

She sat cross-legged next to his feet and gently lifted them into her lap. Andrew tried not to complain, but his breathing picked up until the pain settled back down.

"Why were you surprised when you heard us talking about Celeste?"

"Because it's not something you're supposed to know about. You're a Traveler, and Travelers don't know about those things."

"I'm a what? I'm a Traveler?"

"Of course, you are. You're a Traveler just as I am a Wanderer. Surely you know that. After all, you followed me here didn't you?"

"I know you're a Wanderer, but I never knew I was a Traveler?"

"For one who knows about Celeste, it's difficult for me to believe you don't know this. You are a Traveler, and I am a Wanderer it's as simple as that."

"Mr. Miller called you a Wanderer and a guide who would lead us to the Chamber. He never said we were Travelers, but I guess the name fits."

"I am certainly not your "guide" just as this has not been a tour of the Wastelands. I wander. My people have always wandered. We find the Travelers and bring them to the Chamber. You are a Traveler, you seek the Kingdom, and you seek the Light."

"When you put it like that, I have to agree with you. I am a Traveler."

"Are you joking with me? Are you trying to be funny?"

"No, I'm not," he said innocently. "Please don't take it that way. I've never really thought about these titles before, but they make sense to me. You are a Wanderer, and I am a Traveler."

"How do you know about Celeste?" Kaya asked.

"We have her diary. I've read it. It's down at our base camp."

It was too dark for him to see the look of shock on her face, but he could hear it in her voice when she asked, "Is it a large book with gold corners and letters of blue on the front?"

"That's the one. Have you seen it in your dreams?"

Kaya's tone gave away her surprise when she asked, "Andrew, how do you know this?"

"I know it because it was the same way for Connor and me. The closer you get to it the more it calls to you. Especially if you're sensitive to it as we are. Mr. Miller says it's because we have the bloodline of the Kingdom in us. We use to see it in our dreams all the time, but now I just dream about what's in it instead of what it looks like."

"And you have this book at your base camp?"

"Yes."

There was a long silence, and Andrew tried to focus on his breathing instead of the pain radiating up his leg. Kaya felt her head. The lump had not improved, and her head felt lopsided. She was still sick to her stomach and every couple of minutes the room tilted and spun, making things worse. Thirty minutes later, she asked Andrew if she could set his feet down. She needed to stand up and stretch her legs.

He pulled the pack out from behind his head and offered it to her, saying, "Here, can you set it on this? It does feel better when it's raised."

"Of course."

She took the pack and moved it under his foot. Pulling her hand away, she felt something on the bottom of his foot and ran her finger over it a few times.

"That tickles a little and hurts a lot."

"Sorry, but there's something on your foot," she said, picking up the little glowing mushrooms.

It was too difficult to see from a sitting position, so she moved to her knees and bent over. Kaya gasped, and her hand flinched away, throwing the mushrooms everywhere. She shuffled away from him in a panic, and Andrew got scared.

"What is it, Kaya?! What's wrong with my foot?!"

Andrew looked up and saw her hugging her knees to her chest. She wouldn't look at him, and she kept mumbling to herself like she was delusional.

The words didn't make sense, but she kept saying, "Touch the moon," over and over.

Chapter 16



Strange Attractors

Andrew knew he was in trouble. His ankle and his foot were broken at worst and useless at best. He was sitting in the dark with a delusional girl who called herself a Wanderer, and for all he knew Connor was dead or dying.

His mind raced to figure a way out, but in the end, there were only two options. He couldn't assume Mr. Miller was still able to defend him from the Portal below, so going into the Chamber was death for sure. Anything would be safer. That left him with a long, painful descent to the base camp, assuming he could get out of the spire and back to the path. He knew his injury would quickly immobilize him, and if he let that happen, he was as good as dead.

"If these are my choices my decision is easy," he thought. "I've got to go while I still have the strength to do it."

He took his breaths like he was going to dive underwater. He held his fourth one, rolled over onto his chest and brought his forearms under him. It was agony, and he yelled through the pain, but he finally got to one foot and steadied himself against the wall.

"I'm leaving," he said to Kaya. Cold sweat dripped down his face and back, and he tried not to pass out. "Can you help me get out of here?"

Kaya stood up and dusted herself off.

"You won't make it down the mountain."

"I won't live very long if I stay here either. I've got to try."

"What's your plan?" Kaya asked.

"My plan," he said, steadying himself, "My plan is to climb out of here if I can reach the edge where we came in. Then I was going to hop back to the river and soak my foot for a couple of days. I'll see where I go from there."

"I'm not supposed to get involved with this type of thing."

"All I need you to do is help me up to the ledge, then I won't ask for anything else. You can just wander away, and I'll go hang out at the river until I can walk."

Kaya thought about everything she'd been taught and everything she'd been told. She knew what she had to say, but as the words came out, she changed them.

"That sounds like something I can do. How can I help?"

"Can you come over here on my left side? I would like to put my arm around your shoulders. With your help, I should be able to make it down to the drop-in point."

She barely even came up to Andrew's chest, but she took his arm around her shoulders and wrapped her arm around his waist. It is hard to steady him as he hopped along on one leg. The length of the fallen spire was only a few hundred feet, but Andrew needed to stop at least four times to catch his breath and deal with the pain.

By the time they finally approached the end of the tunnel, the night sky had lightened. She helped him over to the ledge, and he looked up.

"It's higher than I remember."

"I have some rope, but it will be difficult to climb because it's thin."

"You mean the rope we used when you pulled me up?"

"That's all I have."

"You're right. It's too thin. I would have to knot it and use my feet to climb, and I don't think we could anchor it well enough."

"I've got to sit down, Kaya. Can you help me down against the wall please?"

Kaya was desperately trying to detach herself from these events. She wasn't supposed to be here, none of this was acceptable. Not only had she been seen by a Traveler, but she'd also been saved by one and introduced herself! She had lost her Shadow Cloak, and now she was sitting deathwatch outside the Chamber.

She got him settled onto the floor, but he winced and bit his lip to keep from screaming on the way down.

"I don't know what else I can do to help you, Andrew."

Looking up, he said, "I think I'm beyond help right now. You know it's not what I had expected. I really don't think..." his voice trailed off, and his eyes got very wide.

"You don't think what?" Kaya asked.

Andrew couldn't respond. He was stuck in the Light. It was all around him as though he had just opened the book and he was frozen in the moment. He relaxed, letting the messages and images come to him.

He saw himself standing in the spire under the hole in roof telling Connor to say hi to Celeste. Next, he watched as Kaya's robed figure fell through the hole above him. Pain echoed through him as he hit the wall and fell to his knees.

Kaya's little hand appeared from beneath her cloak just as he remembered and he watched himself make a rather spectacular leap. The whole thing was happening exactly as he remembered, then he saw it happen.

In his last second attempt to save himself, his foot hooked the inside of the doorway to the Chamber. He had broken the threshold. It was unmistakable and even though he saw it, he could hardly believe it.

The images melted away, and Andrew drifted in the Light. There was another flicker, and a new scene was set before him. He saw himself standing in front of the Chamber door perched on one foot. He looked out of the open side of the spire, out where he and Kaya had fallen just hours ago, and he saw the moon. The first slice of the waxing crescent moon was above the horizon. A cool breeze blew in, and he watched himself let go of the wall and hop into the Chamber. As he crossed over the threshold, Light poured out of it.

The Light surrounding Andrew faded. He felt the cool stone beneath his hands, the wall against his back and the stabbing pain shooting up his leg and into his hip.

"Do you care to explain what just happened?"

Andrew smiled, and he turned his smiling face up toward Kaya, and said, "I don't think I can explain it to you. It's complicated."

"Complicated? You lost your train of thought and blacked out for a few minutes because of the pain. What's so complicated about that?"

"I didn't black out. You might even call it the opposite of black. I was in the Light."

"In the Light? What does that mean?!"

Andrew still had a smile on his face, and it was obviously upsetting to Kaya.

"Are you trying to be funny? Are you joking with me?" he asked her.

"Andrew, what are you talking about? No, I'm not trying to be funny."

"How can you know all about being a Wanderer and how to find the Travelers, but you don't know anything about the Light?"

"I know about the Light. I know where it comes from, and I know why. That's how I know you're not making any sense."

"I told you, it's complicated." The smile faded as first light made its entrance into the new day. "Why don't you have a seat, Kaya? I'm not going anywhere, and there are a few things somebody should know."

"You're not making much sense right now. Do you know that?"

"It doesn't matter Kaya. None of it matters anymore."

She reached down and felt his forehead. There was no fever yet, but she was concerned about this sudden change. She didn't know much about helping with broken body parts or how people reacted when their best friend died. She just tried to appease the Traveler in front of her the best she could.

"Since we're not going anywhere let me put my pack back under your foot. It might help a little."

Slipping off her backpack, she repositioned it under his foot and sat cross-legged off to his side.

"Can I hold your hands?" he asked.

Kaya hesitantly offered her hands, sighing with worry and regret as they came together.

"Don't worry about me Kaya. I'm probably the luckiest Traveler you'll ever meet."

She dropped her head forward, trying to maintain her composure.

"The place I went to just now wasn't a dark place. I was in the Light. It showed me what I couldn't remember, what I would have rejected if I hadn't been shown. I guess the best way to explain what happened is to tell you I had a dream.

In my dream, I saw myself save you from falling, but more importantly, I saw myself enter the Chamber. Well, I guess I didn't exactly enter it, but I did stick my foot through the doorway. I broke the threshold, and now I've got one last thing to do. I have to finish this."

"Andrew. You didn't have a dream. Your eyes were wide open. You were in the middle of a sentence. I didn't see any Light either."

"Like I said, it's complicated. Remember when I told you about Celeste's diary."

"Yes. You said the book was down at your base camp."

"That's right. I'll never make it down there Kaya, and I have to imagine Mr. Miller did about as well as Connor. That means you have to take Celeste's diary. After I teach you how to protect yourself, you can see what I mean about the Light."

"I really don't understand what you're telling me Andrew."

"I'm sorry. It's possible I'm not making any sense at all right now. I'll try to explain it again, all right?"

"Please do."

"I'm not leaving here. I'm not going to try to make it to the river or down the mountain because I have to go back into the Chamber. I entered it when I saved you, and now it is my obligation to go in there and do whatever it is I'm supposed to do. And strangely enough, because of the Light, because of the dream, I can accept it.

Since I won't be leaving this place, I'm asking you to take possession of Celeste's diary and the magic shield. Mr. Miller has them at our base camp. Did that make sense?"

"It did."

"Good. Thank you. I think your job as a Wanderer is done. I think you did a great job, too."

"Andrew I'm not leaving you here to die alone, I can't. I can't believe I'm saying this, but it doesn't matter about being a Wanderer right now. I'm not interested in that. I'm only interested in doing what I can to help you."

Andrew looked off into the reddish-orange glow of the morning sky. "You know, Kaya," he said dreamily, "I wish I could have been the Hero. Not for myself, I just wanted everyone to come home."

"What? What did you just say?"

"You told me you knew where the Light came from and why, but I wonder if that's true." Andrew pointed his finger at Kaya's chest and touched a single finger to it between her breasts. "The Light is right here Kaya. It's in all of us."

Kaya clapped her hands over her mouth, her eyes got wide, and a little scream slipped out from between her fingers.

"What is it? Have I upset you?"

She lowered her trembling hands to her lap, but they wouldn't stop shaking. She fumbled for her waterskin and took a drink, spilling some down her chin.

Taking a deep breath, she raised her hands to Andrew's face, placing one on each of his cheeks. Her forehead was furrowed, and she had an intense look of disbelief on her face. Without lowering her hands, they stared into each other's eyes, and Kaya asked, "Andrew, do you know about the Wanderer's Signs?"

"I can't say I've heard of them. Are they called anything else?"

"No...Well maybe, I guess we usually just call them the Signs."

She lowered her trembling hands into his without taking her eyes from his face.

"I've still never heard of them. Are they important?"

"A Wanderer only has two jobs, Andrew. Her first job is to lead the Travelers to the Chamber by the safest and quickest means possible. Her second job is to watch for the Signs."

"I'm sure that's harder than it sounds," he said, squeezing her hands reassuringly and smiling. "Have you ever seen one of these Signs?"

"No, I haven't, but this is the very first time I've ever wandered on my own. You and Connor are the first Travelers I've ever brought to the Chamber. And just in case you couldn't tell, it's not exactly going the way it's supposed to."

"I'm sorry. Things aren't exactly working out the way I thought they would either."

Kaya closed her eyes, trying to re-focus and to stop the dizzy spinning in her head. When she opened them, she said, "I feel like I'm doing everything wrong."

Andrew just looked into her eyes without saying anything.

"The Signs aren't the type of things you actually plan on seeing, it's not even clear what they are, but there are clues we look for."

"Why?"

"I think it's because they're only supposed to happen when...well nobody knows when and since nobody knows when or what the Signs are, all you get are a bunch of clues."

"What are you supposed to do if you see a Sign?"

"You're supposed to make a choice."

"That's not very helpful."

"I know it's not."

"So what's the problem? Why do you feel like you're doing it wrong?"

"The thing is, lots of Wanderers claim to have seen a Sign or two, but in almost two thousand years nobody has ever seen them all. That's what we're all looking for, but it's never happened."

"Never?"

"Not until tonight."

"Now you're the one confusing me. I thought you just said you've never seen a Sign."

"I did. I'm sorry. This is very exciting and very overwhelming. I've never seen a Sign before, but like I said, this is my first time wandering alone. And it's my first time to the Chamber with Travelers. What I should have said is I've never seen a Sign until tonight, but now that I have, I'm confused."

"Can I help?"

"I don't know. I don't think you're supposed to."

She took her hands back into her lap and balled them into fists. She stood up, looked down at Andrew and in a frustrated voice she said, "I'm not supposed to even be having this conversation, and I'm certainly not supposed to be telling you what the Signs are. None of this is right."

She held her hand up to her bruised face and pulled it away.

"Maybe that's a Sign."

"No," she said, still sounding frustrated. She walked away from Andrew with her fists by her sides. After a few paces, she came back and in a much calmer voice, she said, "The Signs are special. They're supposed to lead the Wanderer to make a decision, to make a choice. But I don't know what that choice is." The frustration returned, and she yelled to the ceiling, "Aaaahh!! I don't even know if I've seen the Signs!"

"Maybe it would help if you told me what the Signs are. I promise not to run down the mountain and tell anyone."

She scrunched up her face and put her hands over her ears. "What am I supposed to do?!" she yelled.

Andrew looked up at her. When she took her hands away from her ears, and the echo faded, he said, "Just follow your heart, Kaya. Let your Light shine."

Tears sprang into Kaya's eyes. With a trembling lip, she turned to Andrew, and whispered, "What did you just say?"

"Did I say something wrong?"

"That's what my grandmother use to tell me every night when she tucked me in. Just follow your heart Kaya and let your Light shine."

Andrew smiled at her, then winced as the pain shot up his leg.

She tried to wipe the tears away, but her face was so sore and bruised she could hardly touch her own cheek.

With her eyes closed, Kaya recited the Wanderer's Signs as though she were speaking to her teacher, "The Signs a Wanderer must always look for may not be easy to find. You must use your eyes, you must use your heart, and you must close your eyes to see. Shadow falls face to face. Two and two make three. A waking dream recalls. Touch the moon. The answers are given. Three become two become one. The sky above reflects the valley below."

She looked at Andrew as though she expected something.

"What? Was that it?"

"Yes, that was it! Do you realize no one outside of my village has ever heard those words?!"

"Thank you for sharing them with me," Andrew said, not wanting to appear callous or ignorant.

"You're welcome. I hope I don't get in too much trouble."

"Your secrets are safe with me. Look, you've obviously had a lot of time to think about this, and since I've had none, would you mind telling me what Signs you've seen? Maybe it will help you work things out."

"All right," she said hesitantly. "I hope this doesn't sound silly, I'm not completely sure about them all."

"Well just tell me what you've got and we'll see."

"The first one has always bothered me because the grammar is wrong and because shadows can't actually fall into each other face to face, it would have to be face to back. At least that's how I see it and like you said, I've had lots of time to think about it.

The cloak a Wanderer wears is called a Shadow Cloak. When I fell last night, and you caught me, my cloak fell off. When I looked up, we were face to face. Shadow falls face to face."

"I guess that makes sense."

"It doesn't sound silly?"

"Not really. I mean it does fit the Sign, and I can't imagine that type of thing happens every day."

"Good. The next one has been seen by lots of Wanderers at one point or another and what I saw fits, but oh never mind, here goes. When you wanted to walk over here, I helped you because your leg is obviously injured. I used my two legs, and you have two legs, but when we were together two and two made three."

"I can see that. None of this seems silly. How long did you say you've been looking for the Signs?"

"About two thousand years."

"And how many is the most anybody has seen before?"

"At one time?" Kaya asked.

"I guess. I mean you tell me. That's the whole point isn't it? To see if you can find them all pretty much at once?"

"Yeah, that's the point. It's an all or nothing kind of thing. The most Signs seen within a single wander, which is much longer than one day, is three."

"I saw you touch the moon."

"I certainly did," she said, with a smile. "That's your birthmark, isn't it?"

"Sure is. Connor and I..." The smile on his face went away, "That makes three. What else do you have?"

"The fourth one made me cry inside, and I tried to hold back when you said it, but you said it."

"Is that why you got so excited? What did I say?"

"I really have a problem telling you about this, but I guess I can't really stop now."

"You don't have to tell me if you don't want to or if you shouldn't." Reaching up, he took her hands back into his.

Kaya squeezed them, then let go and stood up straight. She smiled at Andrew, and he wished he had a hundred more days to live.

"I'm following my heart on this one. You are definitely not supposed to know what I am going to tell you, but I have decided you are the first Traveler in two thousand years who needs to know."

"I can hardly wait."

"Do you know what happens when you walk through the doorway, Andrew?"

"Not really. I have a pretty good idea, but I'm certainly not willing to bet I'm right."

"Well then, I'll let you in on a very well-guarded secret. When you walk through the doorway, three questions will be asked. If you answer yours wrong, your outcome is inevitable."

"What if I get them right?"

"Nobody really knows, but I'm pretty sure we're going to find out tonight."

"So you think I'm going to answer them correctly?"

"You already have."

"I did? How could I have done that? You haven't even told me what the questions are."

"The fourth Sign is 'The answers are given.' When you came back from your dream, you said them both. The first question you'll be asked is 'Why do you seek the Kingdom?' You were not asked the question, but you said you wished you were the Hero so everyone could come home."

Tears welled up in her eyes, and her voice cracked when, she said, "The second question is 'Where is the Light?'. You showed me and told me the correct answer." She put a hand to her chest where Andrew had touched her, and the tears broke free.

"Those are very brave and true words. And they could only be spoken by someone who understands and loves the Kingdom as much as the people of my village."

"What about the third question. You said there were three."

"There are, but I don't think you're the one who has to answer the third question."

"Oh, all right. I guess we'll just leave that one out. You know what? You're doing really well so far. I don't see anything silly about your conclusions."

"I'm starting to feel better about them myself," she said, with a sniff and a little smile.

"The next one has never been seen by anyone, and it is the least spoken of. For you, it is going to be the most obvious one of all. A waking dream recalls."

"You're right, that is an easy one. I can still hardly believe I'm going to walk through that door with virtually no chance of survival. Of course, it's good to know about the questions, but I think there's more to it."

When she finally sat down next to Andrew, they were looking into each other's eyes, and she asked, "What did you see in your dream?"

"I think I told you already, but I'll tell you again if you'd like?"

"Yes, please."

Andrew went over the details again, this time talking through every detail he could recall. When he got to the crescent moon, Kaya said, "That's it. Andrew, that's it!"

"I must have missed it again. What's it?"

"The last two Signs. I haven't seen them because they haven't happened yet."

"Wow! If know when they're going to happen, it would take you from five to all seven. What are the last two?"

"Three becomes two becomes one, and the sky above reflects the valley below. The sky above reflects the valley below is the easiest Sign to see because it happens every thirty days."

"You're going to have to help me on this one. I don't get it."

"The moon, you silly Traveler, the moon. Last night there was no moon, that's why it was so dark. Tonight there will be a special moon. The first waxing crescent moon will appear for about two hours right after sunset. This moon is a reflection of the Valley of the Crescent Moon. None of the other moon phases are quite right. It's always been the first light after the new moon."

She stood again up and started pacing.

"What about the other one? Three becomes one...what did you say it was?"

"Three becomes two becomes one."

"How does that happen?"

"That's the part where I keep doubting myself."

"Please stop doing that."

"What if I'm wrong?" she asked, pacing back and forth.

"If you're telling me you know how to make the last Sign happen, and you're not willing to do it, you're not following your heart! If you won't listen to me, at least listen to your grandmother. Let your Light shine!"

Kaya kept pacing. Her forehead was as wrinkled as an old map.

"Kaya, how many of your rules have you broken tonight?"

"Almost all of them I think."

The sun came up behind her turning the sky to a turquoise blue. Andrew watched her struggling to decide.

She walked all the way down to the Chamber door, looked inside, then came back and stood in front of him with her hands on her hips.

"I'm ready," she said.

"Great."

"Three becomes two becomes one. Kaya, Connor, and Andrew were three, and we have become two. I'm leaving, Andrew. It's the only way two can become one."

"I'll miss you when you're gone."

"If I'm right we'll see each other again before the moon sets."

"That would be nice, but don't make promises you can't keep."

"Will you make me a promise, Andrew?"

"If I can."

"Promise me you will not go into the Hero's Chamber until the moon has touched the horizon, just before it sets?"

"I thought you said the sky above had to reflect the valley below."

"I did. If the moon is still in the sky, it counts. And waiting until the last second gives me a chance, not a promise, but a chance. If you can wait until the last possible moment, I'll do my very best to see you again."

"If it makes you feel better," he said, holding up his right hand with his palm facing out, "I promise."

She knelt down, looking him square in the eyes, and said, "You have to give me time. The only way to do that is by waiting until it's almost too late. You'll be able to see the moon tonight just like you did in your dream. Can you hold out that long? Can you stay awake?"

"I promise."

"Good. I'm counting on you, and I'm sorry, but I'm going to need this back," she said, gently lifting his purple, swollen foot to remove her backpack.

Andrew flinched when she set his foot back down, then she kissed him. He was so surprised, he didn't even have a chance to kiss back.

Kaya jumped up, put her backpack on and bounded up a pile of broken stairs right along the edge. When she reached the top of the stack, she jumped, twisting in midair like an acrobat. It would have been suicide, but her fingers caught the lip of the spire where Andrew and Connor had dropped in and she swung herself up and out.

A few seconds later, she poked her smiling face over the edge. Her long hair hung down, catching the sunlight.

"Here, you might want these," she said, tossing down his and Connor's waterskins and food rations.

"Don't forget your promise."

Then she was gone.

Chapter 17



The Wanderer's Way

Standing above Andrew on the fallen spire, Kaya looked to the east. The sun was just visible through a gap in the mountains, and the colors of the desert sunrise had faded. She knew it was a little after six o'clock in the morning and today she would have no shelter from the elements. With her cloak lost in a place best not visited even if she had the time, all she had was her waterskin and the pack on her back.

Jumping the small gap between the spire and the mountain, she jogged up the path, talking to herself; the way she always did when she was alone.

"I saw the Signs, I've made my choice and even if it's wrong, it's still my choice. I know I could explain all this to Grandmother, and she would understand. I would tell her just like I told Andrew.

I've seen six of the seven Signs, and I know I'll see the seventh before the end of this day. This has to be it! It can't be anything else. It has to be time. Andrew didn't think I was crazy, I don't think I'm crazy, and if I am crazy, then I guess none of this will matter anyway because I'm crazy."

"I am CRAZY!!!" she yelled, then laughed at herself and picked up her pace.

She knew today was a race against time, and her determination and resilience would be tested. She had already done the math in her head a dozen times, and she still wasn't sure she could make it.

"You'll make it. You have to. You will!" she thought, forming her conviction. She talked her way through her calculations again to see if she had missed anything.

"The long way is for the Travelers and it takes almost eighteen hours when you walk it, plus it's uphill. The Wanderer's Way takes a little less, maybe seventeen hours. It's all downhill, but that little path was never meant for speed. I've got fifteen hours until the moon sets. I can do this!"

She came jogging up to the Cups with sweat beading on her forehead. She stopped to refill her waterskin, then crossed the rope bridge and immediately turned left. Running into the distance, with only her training to guide her, Kaya found what she was looking for.

The only advantage to taking the Wanderer's Way was speed, but the price for this was a steep, slippery, difficult journey. One that should be walked with caution not raced down at break-neck speed.

It was going to be a long day and she had no idea what would be waiting for her at the bottom, but it didn't matter. By the time the crescent moon had disappeared from the night sky, everything would be different, even if nothing changed.

Almost immediately, the path narrowed and she had to slow down. Within twenty feet, it squeezed into a tiny ledge, and she had to shuffle sideways, facing the cliff.

She tried not to get frustrated. "Take your time," she told herself. "You can't save him if you're dead or if you're too injured to make it to the bottom. You'll make up the time."

Her mind was sharp today. Even after no sleep and having smashed her head and practically falling to her death. She was ready for this. She knew this path, she knew its turns, and she knew where to slow down and where she could speed up. She focused on nothing else. All she could do was hope Andrew kept his promise. She smiled, thinking about promises. She thought about how every woman in her family and every woman in the village had been out in this horrible wasteland of a desert looking for what she just saw.

"Today is the day," she whispered. "I'm doing it, Grandmother. I'm following my heart. After all, a promise is a promise, and they must be kept."

She only rested briefly the entire day and yet she seemed to be falling behind schedule. The sun had already moved beyond the mountaintops and was quickly making its way to the horizon. Kaya knew she still had time, but it was running out faster than she had hoped.

She had kept well hydrated all day, stopping to fill her waterskin in the Cups whenever she was running low, and she had eaten what she could throughout the day. She had done everything as well as it could be done and now, as twilight settled across the landscape, she climbed the last of the rocky outcrops and emerged into the open desert. The wall was still miles away, and she had less than two hours to get there.

"I can do this," she said aloud. Struggling to find her pace in the sand, she balled her fists and yelled to the sky, "I can do this!"

As the air cooled across the desert, the silver seam of a just visible waxing moon made its entrance onto the night sky.

"I've been waiting for you," she said between breaths. "We've all been waiting for you."

A smile crossed her lips as she whispered to the stars, "That makes seven."

Chapter 18



Promises Fulfilled

Andrew had gotten down to the far end of the spire earlier in the day, and he was thankful for not having to make the effort in his current state.

His ankle and foot had turned black and purple with swelling. Individual toes were becoming hard to distinguish. He hadn't slept in as long as he could remember and every time the pain shot up his leg, little-multicolored spots flashed in front of his eyes. Most of the time now, all he could see was the spots.

As the sun set, he became increasingly afraid of passing out and he knew he couldn't let that happen. All he had to do was stay awake.

Watching the moon begin its journey, he longed to close his eyes and feel nothing. Nothing had to be better than going on like this.

"At least I don't have to walk back," he thought, gritting his teeth and watching the colorful spots.

"Hurry up moon!" he yelled out of the spire.

"Slower please, just a little slower," Kaya pleaded to the moon. She was still running, and her progress in the soft sand was painfully slow.

Her side ached with yet another cramp. Pushing on it, she limped and ran through the pain.

Andrew watched the moon turn pale yellow just above the horizon. His entire leg felt like it was filled with sand and his whole left side was on fire.

"I'm not crawling in there," he said aloud.

Determined not to meet his fate on anything but his feet, he tried rolling over from his back to his chest. He ached everywhere, and sweat poured from his forehead and rolled down his back.

After an exhausting effort, he finally made his way over onto his belly. After more grueling effort, he was finally up to his hands and his one good knee, leaning against the wall and gasping for breath. Sweat dripped off his head, and the colored spots danced as the pain overwhelmed him.

Pushing against the wall, he tried to stand, but the smooth, curved wall and his broken leg made it impossible. His arms shook until they gave out. Waves of nausea and pain rolled over him, threatening to carry him away.

Kaya's face flashed across his mind, and the touch of her kiss brushed his lips. He knew he was out of time.

"I'm NOT crawling in there!" he yelled defiantly into the empty spire. "And I'm NOT going in there on my belly!"

Andrew took a deep breath and pushed himself back to his hands and knee. He put his broken foot to the floor, and yelled, "This is for you Connor and for you Kaya! I will keep my promise!"

He felt the bones in his ankle slip past each other. The pain was unbelievable, the spots were blinding, then he was upright and hopping toward the Chamber door.

Kaya looked up to the sky and saw the moon distorted by the heat coming off the desert sand. The slender crescents rippled in the night sky like a reflection on the water.

"Hold on Andrew, I'm almost there!" she said, rounding the broken edge of the outer wall; the moon disappeared behind it.

As the moon kissed the horizon, Andrew ducked his head and hopped through the tilted doorway. He went a few feet into the darkness, spread his arms wide and closed his eyes.

"I'm not gonna die lying on my back either," he thought, focusing on his balance.

A warm glow shined through his eyelids, the pain in his leg faded away and he floated in the Light.

A hundred feet in front of Kaya Light exploded from the Defender's Portal, ripping the darkness in half. Shielding her eyes from the Light, she saw a figure sitting only a few feet from the doorway. It was casting a long shadow, and as she closed the gap, it began to move.

Slipping her waterskin off in mid-stride, she yelled, "Mr. Miller! Mr. Miller!"

The figure turned, and Kaya saw the shield reflecting the Light from the Portal. It sparkled with all the colors of the rainbow.

Running past him, she dropped her water and yelled, "Here's my water, take as much as you need. Don't worry about the Portal, I'll take care of it."

Mr. Miller could only stare in disbelief.

Opening his eyes, Andrew watched the patterns of the Light. They ebbed and flowed around him in a familiar and comforting way.

"Hello, Andrew Weaver."

It wasn't Celeste's voice like he had been expecting, it was the voice of a man.

"Hello," he said, a little surprised.

"Do you know where you are?"

He thought about the answers he was supposed to give, the ones Kaya said would answer the questions asked, but they didn't seem to fit. He relaxed and considered the question. He didn't think there was a time limit, so he drifted in the Light. After a while, he said, "It would be easier if I could show you my answer instead of telling you."

"You already have."

"Then you know what I know?"

"Of course."

The image of the Kingdom appeared before him. It was exactly like the first page of Celeste's diary and he smiled.

"Andrew Weaver, why do you seek the Kingdom?"

"So the people of the Light can come home."

"Where is the Light?"

"The Light is in all of us," he replied.

Kaya grabbed the corner of the doorway and flung herself into the small room. She slid in on her knees and stopped. The spire was blazing with Light.

"This is my choice," she said, grabbing it with both hands and holding on tight.

Andrew could see and feel the Light within the Chamber become brighter, then he felt Kaya.

She felt Andrew all around her, but she couldn't see him. She was squinting, trying to see into the Light when she heard the question.

"Kaya Elbe, how will you defend this man from himself?"

She knew the answer that was supposed to be given, but it never felt like the right answer until this very moment.

As her strength drained away, she spoke the words from her heart. "I offer him my Light and with it, all my love. I give this man my strength to wield them from above."

The Light grew even brighter, and the spire felt hot in her hands. Her strength began to fade, her hands slid down the spire, and she slumped to the floor, but she didn't let go.

The voice resonated through them as its deep rich tones boomed out the words, *"Kaya Elbe, I reveal to you the man you have chosen to complete the Wanderer's Promise, the one you now defend with your life."*

Within the Light, Kaya and Andrew separated from their physical bodies and became one. Their lives, their feelings, their hopes, and their dreams were open for the other to see and feel; no secrets remained hidden, no feelings left unexposed.

They drifted together in the Light until all had been shared and they were ready to return. When they were separated into their physical bodies, they stood next to each other surrounded by the Light, smiling, hand in hand and heart to heart.

"Have you chosen wisely, Kaya Elbe?"

She looked up at Andrew and their eyes met.

"I have," she said, but her own voice sounded far away.

"And you, Andrew Weaver, do you accept this choice?"

He was lost in Kaya's eyes, and he said, "Yes, now and forever."

The Light around them suddenly took on shades of gold and silver as it began swirling around Kaya. Andrew released her hands, and she was swept above him in a breathtaking spiral of shimmering Light and color. Spreading her arms, she twirled in the air and laughed like she was being tickled.

"Kaya Elbe," said the comforting voice, *"you have fulfilled the Wanderer's Promise."*

"You did it, Kaya! You did it!" Andrew shouted from below.

Andrew was enthralled looking up at Kaya and failed to notice the gold and silver Light swirling around himself.

"Whoa, hey what's going on?" he said, as he was lifted up. He spun higher and higher and the warmth of the Light touched his soul, tickling him and making him giddy. Rising to meet Kaya, he laughed and spread out his arms.

"Andrew Weaver, you have survived the challenge of the Hero's Chamber and by doing so, you have brought hope back to a fading world."

Kaya and Andrew embraced and spun together. The colors slowly faded, and they came to stand next to each other. He reached for her hand at the same time she reached for his. Their fingers interlaced naturally as if they had been together their entire lives.

The voice of the Light echoed all around them, *"The sharing of each other and the bond that now joins you, was for you alone. No others will know of this unless you choose to share it.*

The people of the village will see your time together outside the Hero's Chamber and all other things you experienced on this day when the sun touches each of them for the first time tomorrow. They will see all that has brought about this moment, all that you have done. In this way, the people of the village are invited home. Their commitment has been fulfilled."

Kaya smiled from ear to ear and began glowing from within.

"Kaya, would you like me to send her your message?"

"Yes, please! That would be wonderful."

"It is done."

She was smiling with such enthusiasm, she forgot how hard she was squeezing Andrew's hand. With a smile just as big as Kaya's, he looked into her eyes and squeezed back.

He waited, allowing Kaya all the time she needed to enjoy her moment before he began to speak.

When Kaya's vice-like grip finally relaxed a little, Andrew asked, "Can you please tell me...I mean tell us what hap...", his voice trailed off as he realized speaking the question wasn't necessary. He closed his mouth and asked the question again by thinking it.

"Can you please tell us what happened to Connor? Where is he? Is he hurt? Can he join us now?"

Images began to appear in their minds, and they were taken back to the instant Connor entered the Chamber.

They watched him step over the threshold, and they felt his confidence and his arrogance.

Stepping into the center of the Chamber, he folded his arms as the Light filled the room. Andrew's heart sank.

They watched and listened as the questions were asked.

"Connor Duncan, why do you seek the Kingdom?"

His eyes were closed when the answer leaped from his subconscious mind. Maybe if he had been able to hide the truth, his answer wouldn't have come out the way it did, but there was no hiding his inner desires, not in this place.

As mountains of gold and jewels appeared, Andrew, unaware he had even spoken the words said, "Oh no."

Both of them knew the answer couldn't be taken back even if Connor had wanted to.

Kaya's grip tightened again as they both braced for the second question.

"Where is the Light?"

With his arms still crossed and his eyes closed, Connor spoke his answer with great conviction and courage, "I am the Light. It shines from within me."

Kaya felt sad. She looked at Andrew, his eyes were closed, and there was a look of pain and sadness on his face.

They were startled when they felt the presence of Mr. Miller. Then they saw him, far, far below in the Portal. He was holding onto the spire with one hand, and he had the shield on his other arm.

Andrew's back was covered in a cold sweat, and his grip on Kaya's hand had gone limp. She felt Andrew's overwhelming grief and Kaya squeezed his hand, bracing for the final question.

"Jacob Duncan, how will you defend this man from himself?"

Andrew opened his eyes and looked at Kaya in disbelief. "Jacob who?" he thought to the Light, but there was no answer. The merciless procession only continued.

Mr. Miller's consciousness became their own, and they felt his confusion as his mind grappled with what was happening.

"I will...I will," he stammered, "I will defend him with something you cannot defeat!" he cried out, raising the shield over his head.

Kaya winced, knowing there was no stopping what was to come.

Mr. Miller and Connor were separated from their earthly bodies, just as Andrew and Kaya had been. Their energies met each other for the first time within the infinite domain of the Light. Only in this way could Jacob truly know Connor, the person he was defending with his life.

Through the eyes of Mr. Miller, Andrew watched Connor's facade fall away, revealing his inner demons. Andrew tried to let go of Kaya's hand. He desperately wanted to be anywhere but here, to see anything but this, but she held tight. Instinctively, selflessly, reaching out to him, and she brought him back to himself; back to his center, back to a place of calm reflection.

They watched the disembodied spirits of Connor and Mr. Miller intertwine. Their brief, tumultuous joining sent them spinning away from each other, and Connor's essence violently flashed with agonizing ribbons of Lighting. Mr. Miller quietly returned to his physical self, but Connor's tortured soul remained.

Radiating with pain, dark, vaporous, strands of greed, pride, jealousy, and anger were ruthlessly stripped from Connor's soul. The murky, swirling filaments came together, forming a seething cloud of uncontrollable rage. Lightning flashed, and the terrifying face of a horned gargoyle began pushing against the inside of the cloud, outlining its features with greasy smoke.

Kaya reached over and took Andrew's other hand into hers.

It wasn't clear if the demonic creature was coming out of the cloud or if the cloud was transforming into the winged beast, but it was coming, and it was huge.

Their surreal visions blended with the material world as Connor reappeared on the floor of the Chamber. He was desperately clutching his knees to his chest, his whole body shook with spasms, and every breath sent forth a bone-chilling scream of terror.

Unable to look away and unable to comprehend the evil confronting Mr. Miller, Andrew put his arm around Kaya, and they held each other tightly.

They watched as the Light came into the creature, making it grow into something unimaginably huge, twisted and bent on destruction.

In a blur, their perspective shifted back into the Portal below, and they were looking up, toward the creature. It was all they could see.

Raising its immense fists beyond the limits of the sky the creature arched its thick, muscular neck and bellowed with an evil rage.

Weakened by the link connecting him to Connor and unable to break the bond, Mr. Miller did the only thing he could do, he raised his magic shield.

The force against the shield was catastrophic, but the Defender did not give ground. Mr. Miller maintained his connection with Connor as blow after blow rained down upon him.

The devastating onslaught shattered the bones in his arm, his back was broken, and the tip of the spire was driven through the shield, impaling it.

With his arm firmly attached to the back of the shield, he dangled like a rag doll.

They felt Mr. Miller weakening. It was inevitable, but his resolve to defend Connor, to make good on his commitment to protect the boy was beyond heroic, it was beyond reason. It was unimaginable to either Andrew or Kaya what was keeping him up and in the fight, then he said it.

Just before he lost consciousness, Jacob lifted his head, and screamed, "You cannot have my son!"

Andrew's mouth fell open, and Kaya's grip tightened around him. He tried to form words, but he couldn't think of what to say. His reality was shattered, and his mind desperately tried to comprehend what was happening.

"I'm still right here with you," Kaya thought to him. "We're both still here, and when this is over, we'll both still be right here."

"I don't even know where here is," Andrew thought back.

Connor's father lost consciousness, and his head rolled off to one side. The shield remained in place, sheltering him from the creature above and with his free hand behind him and his back pinning it against the spire, the connection could not be broken.

Andrew and Kaya looked at each other wondering how it would all end when their perspective blurred back into the Hero's Chamber. In a flash of light, Connor

vanished, and the creature howled in pain, evaporating into twisting swirls of smoke and Light.

Immediately after the Chamber went black, another bright flash of Light appeared before them. They heard a “pop” and Connor re-appeared. He was sitting in a small patch of dried grass clutching his knees to his chest, screaming and crying.

When the quietness of the landscape had wrapped around his senses, he cautiously raised his head. Looking around the silent landscape, he stood up on trembling legs. Exhausted, frightened, and disoriented, he tried to step out of the little patch of weeds and tripped.

He crawled across the dusty ground and struggled back to his feet.

Staggering forward, he made his way over to a pile of broken wood and bones. There were wagon wheels half-buried in the sand, and looking to one side, he noticed a bunch of old camping gear and some canvas tarps.

For Andrew, seeing the long forgotten items created a sense of sad relief. He knew where Connor was, but he was far from home and all alone.

Connor looked at the pile of abandoned items, then back at the pile of wood and bones. He didn’t need to see the ring of stones lining their abandoned fire pit to know how far away from the Chamber he was. He hung his head and stared at the ground.

“Where is he, Andrew?” Kaya asked.

Before Andrew could answer, Connor started yelling and kicking at the tarp on the ground. His foot got tangled in it, and he fell over.

He began picking things out of the pile and chucking them, yelling in frustration and anger with every throw.

The scene began to fade from their minds when Andrew answered, “He’s far away now. Back where we lost Duke to the wildcat. He’s right back where we started.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Me too,” Andrew said, shaking his head in disbelief, “Me too.”

They held each other in the Light. It flowed around them like water over two rocks at the bottom of a stream.

With Kaya still in his arms, Andrew asked, “Who is Mr. Miller?”

He almost asked the question again, when the answer came.

“He is Connor Duncan’s father, and he is your friend.”

Andrew paused to consider the answer, and asked, “Where is he now?”

Kaya opened her mouth to answer when the answer came from the Light.

“He is outside the Portal, dying.”

“Can he be saved?” Kaya asked.

“He has been seen in the Light and would be welcome here if you choose.”

“That is what I...,” Kaya began to say, but she was interrupted.

“If you make this choice it will bind him to the same fate as your own.”

Andrew and Kaya separated from their embrace and stood to face each other, holding hands.

He squeezed her hands reassuringly, and thought to her, "He came here to try to do what we did. Even if it didn't mean saving his life, I'm sure he would want this."

She smiled, and thought, "We choose to save Connor Duncan's father, our friend who is dying outside the Portal."

"He will join you shortly, but you must attend to him, or he will be lost to you."

"Thank you," Andrew thought aloud.

"This valley has been too dry for too long," the Light said. "This desert will be replaced by a fertile land and the rains that would not come will visit throughout the year. When the waters have washed away the desert, you will be able to watch the rebirth of the City.

The three of you will be sheltered upon the half-spire, it's already waiting for you. There you will find objects made of magic. Inspect them if you wish, but they may not be removed. You will also find a wooden bowl filled with water from the Fountain of Knowing. You must drink from the bowl before the sun rises. When the valley is restored, and the City rebuilt, we will walk together in the Light.

The ice pack high upon the mountains has been melted. As the water cleanses the valley, it would be dangerous to leave the safety of your lookout."

Kaya and Andrew nodded their heads.

"Kaya, the three other Wanderers in the desert have been returned home, and the village is safe from the flood."

"Thank you," she said.

"This time of rebirth is yours to enjoy. It has been witnessed by very few."

The Light faded until Andrew and Kaya were alone in the night, but they were not standing on the ground. Instead, they floated in mid-air high above the place where the Hero's Chamber had once rested.

Andrew's entire body tensed and Kaya gripped his hands to keep herself from falling.

When she realized they weren't falling, she smiled, and asked with a sense of wonder, "Andrew, are we flying?"

He thought back to the diary, smiled at her and let go of her hands.

Kaya gasped in surprise, and her eyes got wide. She reached for Andrew, but all she found was air.

Andrew hovered in front of her with a big smile on his face until she got use to the feeling. Then, as though he had been doing it his whole life, he swooshed through the air around her, calling out, "Of course we're flying! What else would we be doing?!"

Coming up from behind her, he wrapped his arms around her waist and the two shot high up into the sky.

"All you have to do is think about where you want to go, and that's where you'll go," he whispered into her ear.

"Incredible!" she thought back. "I never anything like this would be possible."

"I'm going to let go of you now."

"All right."

On the count of three, Andrew let go, and Kaya made a wide loop. She wound up right where she started and hugged him tightly. They kissed, hundreds of feet above the ground with only the stars to see them.

"This is unbelievable," she said, "but we should get to the spire to help...to help...Oh Andrew, what is Mr. Miller's name now? It's all been very confusing."

Making their way across the sky, Andrew laughed to himself, but Kaya heard it like it had been out loud.

"What is it? Why are you laughing?"

"I'm laughing because none of it makes sense. The only thing I really know is Jacob Miller and Jacob Duncan have the same first name."

"Well I guess that makes it easier, doesn't it?" she asked.

"It does, actually. I guess the rest of the story is going to have to come from Jacob. Come on. We've got to get to the half-spire."

They focused on their destination and began flying toward it at great speed.

They held hands, and Kaya smiled, asking, "Did you know you're glowing?"

"I am? I thought it was just you."

"I'm glowing, too?"

"You're giving off the Light, just like Celeste did in her diary."

Their destination quickly came into view and Andrew pointed, saying, "Look at it Kaya, it's enormous, and it's only half there! Let's focus on it and I'm sure we'll drift right in."

A pinpoint of Light appeared near the center of the platform. They watched it grow brighter as they glided in for their landing, then there was a "pop" and Jacob appeared. He was lying on his back.

Jacob watched them drift the last few feet out of the sky. He looked at them with bewilderment, and said, "I'm having the strangest dream."

In the center of the platform, a small pedestal supported a wide, shallow bowl of water.

"Let's sit him up and he can take a drink from the bowl," Andrew said to Kaya.

"If you get behind him and prop him up, I'll get the bowl," she said.

Andrew stood behind Jacob and looked down at him, his feet on either side of his head. Jacob just stared at Andrew.

"Jacob. It's me, Andrew."

"Hello, Andrew."

"I'm going to sit you up, and I want you to take a drink of water."

"That's going to hurt, Andrew. My back is broken."

"I'm sorry, but it must be done." Andrew crouched down and pushed his hands under Jacob's shoulders, grabbing him under the armpits.

Jacob moaned.

"Here it comes, on the count of three. One, two..."

On two, Andrew lifted, rocked his weight back and pulled Jacob toward him. He sat down with his knees bent, pulling Jacob into a seated position against his shins.

"Three."

Jacob moaned again.

Kaya took the wooden bowl from the pedestal and brought the smooth edge to Jacob's lips.

"Please drink this."

"Very strange indeed."

"Please Jacob, drink from the bowl, and I'll set you back down. Then you can rest comfortably," Andrew offered encouragingly.

With Andrew steadying Jacob's head, he slowly took a mouthful of water and swallowed.

Kaya carefully set the bowl back on the pedestal, and they waited. A breeze came from the mountains blowing her hair back away from her face, and Jacob's arms rippled and glowed. The purple scars faded, the cruel angles of his broken arm disappeared, and Andrew felt the dead weight come off his legs.

Jacob raised himself into a seated position and looked into Kaya's eyes for the first time. He took the waterskin from across his thighs and squeezed it lightly.

"Thank you, Kaya Elbe. Thank you for what you have done. Because of the water, I have witnessed everything the two of you accomplished tonight. My name is Jacob Duncan, and I would be pleased if you'd call me Jacob."

"Hello, Jacob. Welcome home," she said, with a smile. "Can I help you to your feet?"

"Yes, please, I think that would be fine."

He offered Kaya his hands, and she pulled him to his feet. Reaching down he picked up the waterskin and gave it to her, saying, "I was very thirsty, thank you again."

"You're very welcome."

Jacob did an about-face and looked down at Andrew.

"And you!" he said, extending his hand with a huge smile. "Every time we meet, I'm picking you up off the ground."

He pulled Andrew to his feet and hugged him tightly.

"Congratulations my friend, you've saved us all."

Letting go of Andrew, he stepped back. Looking at them, he held his arms out wide, and said, "What am I saying? Congratulations to both of you!"

He offered each of them a hand, and they formed a little circle.

“By the way, did either of you know you’re glowing?”

Kaya looked at Andrew, and said, “I just noticed your clothes. Andrew, look at your clothes.”

“Why? Do they look like yours?” he asked.

Kaya looked down at herself, and thought, “Andrew, this is incredible.”

“It is, isn’t it?” Jacob said to them. “Come now, you must each drink from the bowl. This is amazing, please drink.”

Taking the bowl from the pedestal, he offered it to Kaya.

She offered her hand to Andrew, and said, “Let’s drink together, shall we?”

“Wonderful,” he said, stepping next to her. As Jacob steadied the bowl, they both sipped from the wide rim.

He set it back down and rubbed his hands up and down his arms. “Magnificent,” he whispered.

Kaya and Andrew stood hand in hand facing each other as they came to terms with the gifts they had been given.

“I know the name of every star in the sky,” he said to Kaya.

“I feel like I’ve traveled the world and visited the planets,” she said.

Jacob came between them and wrapped his arms around them. Andrew put an arm around his shoulders, and Kaya put one around his waist. As the sound of rushing water approached from the distance, they all embraced, and Jacob said, “Welcome home my friends, welcome home.”

Chapter 19



Unexpected Gifts

Far away in the village, Kaya's grandmother awoke from her dream and sat up. She flipped off her covers and literally jumped out of bed. Her heart was beating faster than it had in years and tears of joy were streaming down her face.

She walked with a hop in her step to her bedroom door, trying not to scream the whole time. As soon as she opened it, the message came out.

"She did it! She did it!! She did it!!!" Grandmother began shouting at the top of her lungs.

She started banging on doors, yelling, "She did it! She did it!" the whole time.

It was all she could do to not run out into the village and announce it to the world, but she knew she needed to tell the family first.

Excitement and panic exploded in the house as everyone came out of their bedrooms and quickly made their way downstairs.

Grandmother pushed the table in the middle of the great room over on its side and started dancing around the room. With her hands to her mouth, she skipped around the room singing, "She did it, she did it, our little Kaya did it. She did it, she did it, our little Kaya did it."

The entire family quickly gathered around the room and watched the unprecedented display in astonishment. Kaya's mother was at the bottom of the stairs looking on in disbelief when Grandmother danced over and took both of her hands. Skipping about the room and singing, she led Erynn around in a circle, but Erynn was more concerned about Grandmother than the song she was singing.

Stepping forward, Marco grabbed his mother by the shoulders. She let go of Erynn, but her feet didn't stop dancing, and she had a half-crazy look on her tear stained face.

"Mother! What are you talking about? What's happened?"

Grandmother stepped back and did a pirouette. Then she stepped forward again, grabbing Marco by the shoulders. She raised her head, looked directly into his eyes, and clapped her hands on either side of his face, saying, "She did it, Marco! She did it!"

Letting go of Marco's face, she danced over to Erynn and grabbed her by the shoulders. They locked eyes as Erynn looked for signs of madness, but all she could see were tears of joy, and Grandmother said, "She did it, Erynn! Our little Wanderer did it!"

Grandmother did another lap around the room, and as she passed Marco, she held out her hand. When she came around again, Marco hesitantly reached out, and she latched on. The two started around the room and by the time they made a third lap Erynn had taken ahold of Marco's hand, and they were all skipping around the room. Finally, Grandmother stopped, and they all turned to face each other in the center of the room as the rest of the family looked on in disbelief.

"She did it?" Marco asked.

"She did it!" Grandmother responded.

"She did it?" Erynn asked.

"She did it! It's happening right this very second. She sent me the Light, and it wasn't a dream."

Grandmother raised her hands and touched both of their cheeks.

“It’s over. We all get to go home. The Wanderer’s Promise is fulfilled, and we’re all going home!”

The doubting looks on Marco and Erynn’s faces softened as they hugged Grandmother, and the whole family joined them as they sang, “She did it, she did it, our little Kaya did it!”

They all stopped singing when everything started to vibrate, and the objects around the room began to dance in place. The little clay figures on the mantel chattered and glided around in circles. The candleholders drifted sideways and the tinkling sound they made against the wood chimed in with the little figures dancing on the mantel. Even the furniture was wandering about on its own.

“Mother, what’s happening?!” Marco asked in surprise.

Grandmother smiled and in a giddy voice, she said, “It’s beginning.” Looking around the room, she said, “We’ve waited almost two thousand years for this, and now it is our precious Kaya who bears the gift.”

Looking over at her two grandsons, she said, “Go wake the village! Tell them the Promise is fulfilled. Everyone must witness what is about to happen, everyone must know it is time to go home!”

With a loud cheer of excitement, the entire family went running outside to see what they could see.

Kaya’s brothers started pounding on doors as the rest of the family stood out in front of the house they had lived in for hundreds of years. They all turned toward the mountain and looked up into a gust of wind that shouldn’t have been there.

The tiny sliver of a moon had already retreated below the horizon, and the family struggled to see the surge of water racing down the mountain. The ground below them vibrated, and they all held hands as they sank lower into the warm sand.

One of Grandmother’s great-grandchildren was being held and looking over his mother’s shoulder when, she said, “Look, Mama, stars.”

Everyone turned to look at the six white dots, when they heard, “Pop, pop, pop, pop, pop, pop,” and in front of Kaya’s family stood three very surprised looking Wanderers and three very startled looking horses.



Kaya, Andrew, and Jacob held hands as they stood on the north side of the platform facing the mountains. The wind blew at them with enough force, they had to lean into it to keep from blowing backward.

“Here it comes,” Kaya said.

"Look at the size of that wave," Jacob said with a whistle.

The platform was hundreds of feet high, but they stepped back from the edge anticipating the splash.

When the splash never happened, they stepped forward, looking down. To their surprise, the water parted just a few feet in front of the wall and smoothly flowed around it.

"I hope I never get used to things like that," Andrew said, in an awe-struck voice.

"Me too," Jacob agreed.

While the flood of water rushed by, the three newest citizens inspected the items of magic on display. They were illuminated from below, and most were resting on crystal pedestals. Some objects they knew from before they drank the water, some they did not.

The first item was the shield. It was standing upright on a three-legged stand like an artist's canvas on an easel. Next to it, on a rectangular stack of crystal blocks was a beautiful sword and next to the sword was the book. Off to the side, on its own small pedestal was a ring made of gold and the last item was a small cup, standing upright, filled with water.

Andrew and Jacob stood in front of the sword while Kaya lifted up the book.

"I wouldn't open that," Jacob said, but Kaya already knew what she was holding. The Fountain of Knowing had taken care of that.

"It's just the way we saw it," Andrew said to Jacob, reaching out and picking up the crystal sword. The grip fit his hand perfectly. "It's light as a feather."

He handed it to Jacob who swished it through the air.

"It's perfect. Just the way it's supposed to be," Jacob said with a smile, setting it back down.

They walked down the row to Kaya, who was holding the ring in the palm of her hand.

"The Ring of Truth," she said, without taking her eyes from it.

Jacob held out his open hand, and she tipped the ring into it. He gazed at it in the dim light and closed his hand around it.

Looking at Andrew, he said, "Your hair is red."

Andrew smiled.

Jacob opened his hand and put on the ring. He looked at Andrew again, and said, "Your hair is rrrrrr, rrrrrr, brown."

Taking the ring off, he said, with a smile, "Yup, it still works."

Kaya and Andrew laughed as Jacob handed the ring to Andrew.

"Can you put it back on for a minute?" Andrew asked Jacob.

"Of course," he replied, as Andrew handed the ring back.

Sliding the ring back onto his finger, he asked, "What questions would you ask of me?"

"I'm sorry to do it this way, but I need to be able to believe your answers this time," Andrew said.

"I understand. Trust me, it hasn't been comfortable pretending to be someone I'm not."

Jacob paused, took the ring off again, and set it back on the pedestal.

"I'll tell you what," he said, glancing between the two of them, "Why don't you ask me whatever it is you want, and I'll answer with the ring off. That will make me feel better. Then I'll put the ring back on and repeat the same information. Would that be all right with both of you?"

Andrew nodded, saying, "I'm good with that."

"Me too," Kaya agreed.

"Wonderful," Jacob said to both of them. "What's on your mind, Andrew?"

"Do I even need to ask?"

"No, you don't," Jacob said, feeling a little embarrassed. "Let's go back to the beginning, shall we?"

"I would appreciate that. I think that's where my questions begin anyway. Please, take me back to the beginning," Andrew beseeched.

"Very well my friends, but I think I know a faster way or maybe a better way. It's certainly going to be a new way."

"If the two of you could please stand together," Jacob said, motioning with his hands for the two of them to get closer to each other.

Kaya looked at Andrew with a questioning look on her face but did as Jacob asked. She stepped next to Andrew, and asked, "Is this close enough?"

"That will do just fine," he said, raising both of his hands to shoulder height. "I've never done this before. Let's hope it's as easy as it looks."

"Are you going to do what I think you're going to do?" Kaya asked.

Moving his hands toward both of their faces, he said, "I'm certainly going to give it a try." His hands stopped. "Do either of you have any objection?"

Andrew and Kaya looked at each other, then Andrew thought to both of them, "I'm all right with this. It should be interesting to see how well it works. Kaya, how do you feel about this?"

She thought back to both of them, "I don't believe that it can hurt any of us, at least I don't remember anything about physical pain or it being able to hurt us. Let's give it a try."

Jacob's hands started to move toward their foreheads, when Kaya said, "Don't forget to keep your focus. I think that's the key. Focus on what it is you want us to see and the rest should happen by itself."

"I will do my best," he replied in his mind, then he very lightly placed a thumb in the center of each of their foreheads.

"Back to the beginning," he said, closing his eyes, "back to the beginning."

Jacob thought about the time he first met Andrew, shortly after his birth. Andrew and Kaya were inundated with Jacob's memories and feelings.

Jacob shared trivial events in his life as well as deeply profound moments still very much alive with emotion. At first, it was overwhelming for Andrew as he met his mother and father through Jacob's eyes. Then, almost immediately after his disembodied introduction, a wave of shock and grief hit him as he lived through the time of his mother's death.

The trials and tribulations of Jacob's life played through their minds. They felt his inner struggle when he and George Weaver turned Andrew and Connor over to the care of the headmaster at the orphanage.

They watched the journey across the Wastelands race by until they reached the Kingdom. Time slowed for Andrew, and he watched every detail.

They felt the bone crushing pain when the shield destroyed Jacob's arms, and they survived the devastating anguish that unfolded during those dark days.

They suffered with him on his journey back across the Wastelands. They watched the years pass by as he struggled through life with his crippling injury; barely managing to care for himself. They felt the heart-wrenching grief and the conflict within him when he knew he couldn't rescue Connor and Andrew from the orphanage.

It wasn't long until Andrew recognized himself, bloodied and breathless, approaching Jacob on horseback. Jacob's heart and mind were racing.

When the tragedy of the Defender's Portal unfolded, Kaya started to cry. It was the second time he had lost his son, and it was more than either Andrew or Kaya could endure.

Jacob lowered his hands to his sides and slowly opened his eyes. Kaya was crying. The streams of tears dripped from her cheeks and chin onto the stone platform. Andrew stood stiffly. He was expressionless, his eyes were wide open, but there was no focus to them.

Jacob turned his attention to Kaya and looked into her eyes. He could see the impact of what he had shared.

"I guess it worked, didn't it?" he asked her in a quiet voice.

Kaya's lip quivered as she opened her mouth, trying to find the words that wouldn't come. She took a small step toward him, slipped her hands under his arms and wrapped them around him, burying her face into his chest.

In a voice just above a whisper, and filled with grief the only thing she could say was, "Oh Jacob."

It took Andrew a few more minutes to wander back, but eventually he started looking around. He saw Kaya standing next to Jacob, and they were both looking at him.

"How are you?" Kaya whispered. Her face still wet with tears.

"I'm better," he said, still sounding far away.

"Are you all the way back yet?" Jacob asked.

Andrew rubbed his eyes and looked around the platform until his eyes finally came back to Jacob and Kaya. He could see the tears on her face and the look of concern on Jacob's.

Andrew cleared his throat and met Jacob's eyes. For the first time since they had met, so many years ago, he saw the real Jacob Duncan.

"I'm sorry for doubting you. It won't happen again."

Putting his arm around Kaya's shoulders, Jacob smiled and offered his open hand to Andrew. Andrew took it, and Jacob asked, "I think we're all together now, aren't we?"

"Almost," Andrew said.

Jacob and Kaya looked puzzled as Andrew let go of Jacob's hand and took the small ring off the table.

He slipped it on his left ring finger and looked at Kaya. She smiled at him, and he smiled back.

"Kaya Elbe, I love you. I hope our life together is as wonderful and amazing and fulfilling as we both know it can be. Thank you for risking everything for me, thank you for choosing me."

"Whoa, where did that come from?" Jacob asked, looking surprised.

He took off the ring, but before he could set it down, Kaya stepped forward and kissed him. Jacob looked on as Andrew dropped the ring on the pedestal and wrapped his arms around her.

Jacob was speechless until they both turned to him with a smile, and Kaya said, "Jacob, we spent a little extra time together when we were in the Light. Andrew and I have chosen to be together."

"Oh," Jacob said, with a little hesitation. "Well, congratulations."

"Thank you," they said at the same time.

The three friends stood atop the half-spire talking and watching throughout the night as the raging water from the mountains gradually slowed to a trickle. Just before first light, Jacob turned to Andrew and Kaya, and said, "This perspective thing is really strange. Are either of you playing around with it in your head?"

"I'm doing it right now," Kaya said.

"Me too," Andrew said with a smile.

"What are you seeing, Kaya?" Jacob asked.

Kaya furled her forehead and closed her eyes.

"I hardly know where to start."

"Does it flip back and forth? Is it your memory, but not your memory?" Jacob asked.

Kaya nodded her head.

Andrew was staring off to the east with a blank expression.

"It's almost like looking at yourself in a mirror, but it's not just my reflection I see. Even when I look at myself, it's not...it's not..."

Kaya completed Andrew's thought with "It's not always the right reflection of yourself, like it might be your twin, but it's not."

"That's close enough," Jacob said, "I've got the same thing going on in my head, too." He closed his eyes, and said, "Now see if this is happening to you, too. When I focus on something specific, like when I was sitting outside of the Portal and Kaya, you came running toward me."

"All right," Kaya said, "I'm there."

"Well it's strange because I can see how it happened from inside my head, but my memory or my point of view or, what the heck do you call it?"

"Your perspective?" Andrew offered.

"It's happening right now," Jacob narrated. "I'm thinking about the moment and flip, there it goes. Now I see myself the way you must have seen me and there's a feeling of purpose and something else I can't quite describe. I feel like I'm watching things through your eyes. There it goes again. It just flipped to the other view, the one from above." Jacob sighed, overwhelmed by emotions. "The feeling now is very different. What I'm seeing is overwhelmingly important, I can feel it! But at the same time, it doesn't really matter if I'm there or not. See," he said, not realizing his eyes were still closed and the thought was his alone, "See, there I go fading away as you round the corner into the Portal." Jacob opened his eyes to look at his friends. Andrew looked at him with an amused expression.

With her forehead scrunched up and her eyes closed, Kaya said, "There I am running toward you, Jacob, and Wow! The Light just exploded from the Portal, and I see your shadow. Then you're right, it just sort of flips and now I see myself running. My face is lit up, and I'm slipping off my waterskin. I drop it into...," she had her hands out in front of her with her palms up as if she was going to catch something, "...into your hands. I feel disappointed and...Oh, there it goes again. I'm above us now watching the whole thing over again."

Kaya took a slow, unsteady breath and with a trembling voice, she said, "This is the most important...Oh wait, I'm in the Portal now." Very softly, she put her hands to her lips.

"What is it Kaya, what do you see?" Andrew asked.

"This is my choice," she whispered, in time with the image of herself. She watched herself grab the brilliantly glowing spire and she felt the connection to Andrew. Tears dripped off her small chin, and her voice broke with emotion, as she whispered, "This is everything." Her lower lip trembled, and she struggled to say, "I didn't know there was this much love and hope in the whole world." A smile spread across her face wrinkling the corner of her closed eyes, and she asked, "Is that really me?"

"It sure is," Andrew replied.

She opened her eyes and wiped the tears away. She stepped toward Andrew and hugged him. He hugged her back.

Jacob wrapped his arms around them and just held on. As the three friends embraced, the first rays of sunlight slipped over the horizon.

Chapter 20



Sunrise

As the light brightened their shining faces, the air around them began resonating with a deep hum.

"Here we go," Jacob whispered.

Standing between them, Kaya joined hands with Andrew and Jacob.

"Here we go," she said.

Jacob pointed due south at what used to be the open desert, and they marveled at the transformation.

The desert sands had been replaced by rolling hills of green, and the ocean shore was now just miles away. As they stared in amazement, the humming grew louder.

When the sun cleared the horizon, the spire began to glow. The stone blocks beneath their feet transformed into transparent crystal and each one channeled the blue-white Light of the Kingdom until it erupted from the top of the platform. Soaring into the early morning sky the endless tower of Light was brighter than the sun.

With a hopefulness equal to the brightness of the Light, Andrew thought to Kaya and Jacob, "The Beacon is lit!"

With the sound and splendor of the Light engulfing them, Jacob thought back, "I never thought I would live to see the day."

The humming unexpectedly fell away and in the silence, the spire pulled the Light out of the sky, back down through the clear blocks and into the ground. The spire returned to its stone-like appearance and the ground rippled with the energy of the Light. The ripple of energy traveled across the landscape like a pebble hitting a quiet pool and a "BOOM!" shook them to their core.

As quickly as the Light had faded, it returned with its deep resonating hum and exploded from the spire, illuminating the sky above. It flowed around them, and they watched as a second ripple of energy traveled across the land. With nervous excitement, they felt another "Boom!" calling out to the world.

While the Beacon thundered its deafening rhythm and rippled its powerful flowing energy throughout the Valley of the Crescent Moon, Andrew, Kaya and Jacob watched as two parallel lines of Light appeared in the distance.

Andrew pointed, tracing the lines from the southern border all the way to the Spire Mountains in the west.

With each resonating pulse of the Beacon, the lines of Light grew from the ground.

"It's the walls of the Kingdom! It's got to be," Jacob thought aloud.

"They're growing right out of the ground?!" Andrew thought back.

"With every pulse of the Beacon they're growing," Kaya responded.

"Wow!" Jacob said in awe.

They were transfixed on the scene below as it rippled in rhythm with Kaya's heartbeat. Jacob cheered when the archways of the inner and outer wall started taking form.

"This is incredible," Kaya thought, squeezing both of their hands.

"Amazing," Andrew yelled over the hum of the Light.

When the walls were half of their final height, the Light pulsing into the ground began to illuminate the outline of buildings.

Jacob let go of Kaya's hand and stepped over to Andrew.

"It's just like the map on the floor of the Defender's Portal," he said, placing his hand on Andrew's shoulder.

"Did you ever imagine we'd be seeing the real thing?"

"I'm still in shock," Jacob said, dropping his hand to his side.



Back in the village, the three Wanderers stood like statues looking at Kaya's family. They had arrived without Shadow Cloaks or even their backpacks, and as they struggled with what had just happened, the sound of rushing water filled the air.

The Wanderers looked at each other through the darkness, then looked back at the horses that arrived with them.

Finally, as though she couldn't take it anymore, one of them said to the other two, "Am I dreaming?"

"Not unless we're all having the same dream," Kaya's grandmother said, rushing over to meet them.

"Grandmother Elbe is that you?"

"Solita, Adhara, Khepri, it's me, my darlings. You're back in the village, you're safe."

Gathering them to her, she hugged them all at once.

"But how Grandmother? How are we here?" Solita asked.

The roar of the water became deafening, and the village looked up to see a wave of water obscuring the stars. Crashing against an unseen barrier, the water flowed over and around the village.

The children screamed, and the people panicked as the water arched over the entire village, but Grandmother Elbe stood tall.

"Do not panic my friends," she called out above the chaos. "We are safe from the water. We are all safe here tonight." She kept repeating the message until the crashing sounds quieted to that of a moving river.

The endless flow of water pulled the heat of the desert into it, cooling the air and slowly, the truth of her words was accepted.

Grandmother gathered the three Wanderers back to her, and when they were close, she said, "Kaya has fulfilled the Promise!"

Even in the darkness, she could see the looks of disbelief on their faces. She waited patiently as they each worked the words through their minds.

When the looks of disbelief melted into surprise, she said, "Go now. Find your families and tell the village we must all gather to watch the sunrise."

None of them moved.

"Look up," she said, pointing to the wall of water over their heads. "When the water is gone, we must all gather to watch the sunrise. Now go and tell your families you're safe."

Solita, Adhara, and Khepri each hugged Grandmother Elbe and ran toward their homes.

Within minutes, everyone had left their houses and gathered in the heart of the village. Throughout the night, with the help of her family, Grandmother Elbe spread the message of the Wanderer's Promise and told them the coming sunrise was not to be missed.

The water flowed over the barrier throughout the night until it had finally run itself dry, just before first light. With Grandmother Elbe and Kaya's entire family at the head of the crowd, the entire village walked out from within the steep walls of the surrounding mountainside to watch the sunrise. As they came to the edge of the village, they stopped.

The sand filled streets no longer flowed out into an open desert. The desert had been washed away, and the border of the village was now a steep slope of sand.

"It's perfect," Marco said to his mother, looking down the hill. "We can all sit here and watch the sun come up. There's room enough for everyone."

As the people of the village comfortably settled into position, they watched the landscape before them transition from shadows of gray to shades of green.

At first, the people thought the new landscape, this new world before them, was what they were all waiting to see. Then the sun peeked over the horizon.

With the first rays of light flickering across their faces, silence fell over the people. No one spoke. No one moved an inch until everyone had seen everything from both Kaya and Andrew's point of view. When they had seen and felt all that had transpired at the Kingdom over the past twenty-four hours, they slowly came out of what seemed like a dream.

With tears running down his face Marco turned to Erynn, and whispered, "She did it."

Before Erynn could respond a blinding white Light shot into the sky.

Chapter 21



The Call

With each rhythmic pulse, the Kingdom grew. When it stopped, the Light from the half-spire, the Light of the Beacon, rose without interruption into the cloudless blue of the morning sky.

Kaya, Andrew, and Jacob walked around the edge of the platform looking at the elaborate patterns formed by the buildings, roads, bridges, and aqueducts. They radiated out from the base of the spire and blended perfectly with the surrounding landscape.

“It still feels like a dream,” Kaya thought aloud. “Did you ever dare to dream you would be here to see this?”

Before either of them could answer, they felt the call from below.

Jacob was confused by the message, and he asked, "Where are we supposed to go? I don't understand what's happening."

"We have to leave the spire now. We're going to the Fountain at the south entrance," Andrew said.

"We are? Why are we going there?"

Kaya turned around from the edge of the platform and walked over to Jacob. She put her hand on his chest, and said, "If you listen to what your heart is telling you, you'll understand."

He closed his eyes and breathed deeply while she kept her hand on his chest. After several deep breaths, he opened his eyes, and there was a sparkle in them.

"He's here, isn't He?" Jacob whispered.

Kaya nodded, and lowering her hand, she asked Andrew "Do you suppose Jacob can fly?"

Jacob raised his eyebrows in surprise and turned to Andrew.

"Fly?" he asked.

Andrew decided to have a little fun at Jacob's expense so he teasingly replied, "Oh yes, it's being done by all the fashionable people in the Kingdom these days. Haven't you heard?"

Jacob turned to Kaya for confirmation, his eyebrows still raised.

Kaya took Jacob's hand into hers, and asked him, "Do you remember when Andrew and I found you last night? When you were on your back."

Jacob paused, considering the question.

"I thought I was delusional or dreaming. Are you telling me it was real? Are you telling me you and Andrew actually flew out of the night sky, just the way I saw it happen?"

Kaya squeezed his hand and smiled. In a slightly giddy voice, she asked, "Would you like to give it a try?"

Jacob only nodded.

"Shall we?" Andrew asked mischievously.

"Let's see how he does," Kaya agreed, grinning back at Andrew.

They stood on either side of Jacob and asked him to put an arm around each of their shoulders. He did as they asked while they each wrapped an arm around his waist.

"Straight up?" Andrew thought to them.

"Straight up," Kaya thought back.

Jacob's arms tightened around their shoulders as they left the surface of the platform.

"He's as light as a feather," Kaya thought to Andrew.

"Let's take him up high enough to catch him if he doesn't float," Andrew thought back.

"How are you doing Jacob?" Kaya asked him aloud.

With the enthusiasm of a little boy opening a giant birthday gift, Jacob yelled into the morning sky, "Incredible!"

They flew faster and higher in the rising column of Light until the details of the buildings faded away, and the streets of the Kingdom melted into the landscape of the City.

"All right, let's see if he can float," Andrew said.

Kaya and Andrew let go of Jacob's waist and dropped away.

His fingers fumbled to grab onto their shoulders, and he called out, "Hey, wait. This isn't funny."

"Come back!" he yelled, bobbing in mid-air.

Andrew and Kaya flew out of the column of Light and around him several times.

"See," Andrew thought aloud, "You float just like a cork."

"And if you can float," Kaya thought to them, "you can fly!"

"Come on Jacob," Andrew called out, flying past him on his back like he was lounging in the sun. "It's just like Celeste's diary. All you have to do is think about where you want to go and off you go."

Listening to Andrew's advice, Jacob's panic faded into curiosity.

"Just like I'm in the book?" he called out to them as they flew by.

"Just like you're in the book," Andrew confirmed. "She wrote it that way because she could fly too."

"This ought to be fun," Jacob thought aloud.

"It's wonderful Jacob! Come join us, won't you?" Kaya encouraged him.

Jacob focused his mind and shot up even higher, twisting and turning like a bird. He zoomed back down to Kaya and Andrew and flew circles around them. Then he hovered in front of them with his arms crossed over his chest.

"Just like I'm in the book!" he said, with a huge smile.

The smile faded, and Jacob looked sad. Andrew and Kaya felt the emotions radiate from him and touch their hearts.

"Say the words, Jacob, tell us what it is," Kaya pleaded to him.

Andrew floated closer to his friend, put his hand on his shoulder, and said, "I think I know."

Jacob raised his head to look into Andrew's eyes, when Andrew confided, "I miss him too. I wish he could be here with us."

Jacob nodded and cleared his throat. "I don't think I'll ever stop missing him," he said.

Floating in next to them, Kaya put a hand on each of their shoulders, and said, "I hope neither of you ever stops missing him. I also hope he comes to terms with what happened in the Chamber and that he learns and grows, and eventually comes to join us."

They felt Jacob's hopefulness returning when Andrew said, "We all drank the water and it's even in Celeste's diary. You know it's possible. Especially since he's not in the village."

"You're both right, my friends," Jacob said, with gratitude. "If he grows into half the man I know he can be, it is possible."

"Jacob, in case you hadn't noticed, we're flying! My mouth isn't moving, and I'm talking to you," Andrew flew in an upside down circle and came back to exactly where he had been, and said, "Anything is possible my friends, anything at..."

The sound of his words trailed off as they felt the call from below.

"We must go," Kaya thought to them.

"To the Fountain of Knowing at the south entrance," Andrew said, completing her thought.

"Off we go," Jacob said, as the three inaugural members of the Kingdom began moving quickly through the sky.

Focusing on their destination, they reached a blurring speed. Within seconds, they stood facing the Fountain of Knowing.

Jacob reached out to the waist-high edge of the Fountain and steadied himself.

"Did either of you even try to land or did we just arrive here?" he asked.

"I was going too fast to land," Kaya said, steadying herself against the Fountain.

"I agree with Kaya," Andrew said, turning to Jacob. "I have no idea how I landed, but I'm glad it wasn't really up to me because I would have crashed."

"That's the strangest..." Jacob began to say when the Light of a thousand suns appeared behind them throwing their shadows onto the ground and into the distance far beyond the archway of the inner wall.

"Oh my," Kaya whispered.

Andrew instinctively turned toward the Light, and while he couldn't see into it, he knew its source. Kaya glanced over at him and mouthed the words, "Tell him."

"We have to go now," he said to Jacob.

"Where are you going?" Jacob asked.

Andrew put his arm around Jacob's shoulders, and the two looked at each other.

"We're all going Jacob, the three of us."

"I didn't realize that," he said, with a little grin.

"It was the only way to save you last night."

Andrew and Jacob turned back to face the waves of Light washing over them. Stepping in front of them, Kaya whispered, "We're all in this together, wherever it takes us. I hope you don't mind. Andrew and I just couldn't see it any other way."

Andrew wrapped his other arm around Kaya while Jacob put an arm around each of them and the three embraced.

"Thank you," Jacob said to them. "Thank you for everything."

The three separated, joined hands and turned back toward the Light. Kaya was in the middle, Andrew was on her right and Jacob was on her left. The Fountain trickled and splashed playfully behind their backs.

The silhouette of a person moved toward them, but it wasn't coming out of the Light, it was bringing the Light with it. As the figure came closer, the Light grew. It overwhelmed everything around them until there was nothing; nothing but a white, featureless, endless space.

The voice of the Light spoke, and their grip on each other tightened.

"We'll be leaving this place in a moment."

The three friends unconsciously nodded.

"Before we go, you'll each need to leave something behind. Please take a seat on the edge of the Fountain."

"I can't see the Fountain anymore," Andrew thought aloud.

"It's here Andrew," Kaya said, pulling his hand back to touch the edge.

Each of them fumbled a little, and eventually, they sat on the side of the Fountain with their feet dangling just above the ground.

"Thank you," said the Light, in His deep and comforting baritone voice. *"Now, if you would each place the fingers of your right hand into the water, we'll be ready to start our journey."*

The water of the Fountain was lower than the edge they were sitting on, and they leaned over and reached down. When each of them had all five fingers submerged, the water changed.

"My hand is stuck!" Jacob yelled, pulling against the immovable object attached to his hand.

"Mine is too," Andrew and Kaya responded.

"None of you are stuck," the voice resonated through their minds. *"Quite the contrary actually. If each of you would please stand, I think you'll see things a little differently."*

Andrew pulled and pulled until his shoulder hurt, but he still couldn't stand up. Jacob grabbed his wrist with his left hand and pulled until he thought he was going to break it, but he couldn't stand up either.

Kaya tugged at her hand a couple of times, but she knew it wasn't going to come unstuck. She fought off the instinct to panic and calmed herself the way her grandmother had taught her. When she had steadied her breathing and relaxed her mind, she realized where she really was, where they all were.

Sitting on the edge of the Fountain, surrounded by nothing but empty white Light, she thought, "Anything is possible." She took a breath and let it out, saying, "I'm in the Light, and anything is possible."

She focused on standing up, and she made herself do it, but without moving a muscle.

Her hand came free from the Fountain, her feet dropped toward the ground, and the Light began to pull away. At first, she could only feel it rushing by. When her feet touched the ground, the Light took on its familiar shades of blue and began pooling around a central point.

Daylight flickered in her peripheral vision, and she watched as the blue-white Light flowed into the silhouette of a person. Like filling a cup with water, the Light filled the shape until all the Light was gone and an elderly man stood in front of her.

He was wearing the same robes as Kaya, and He gave off the same faint glow. He had a short, thick nose, a flowing white beard and when He smiled, lines appeared around His large blue eyes and Kaya felt love.

He opened His arms, saying, *"It's either a hug or a handshake, and I'm pretty sure I know which one you're going to take."*

Kaya practically floated into His welcoming arms.

"Welcome home, little one. I'm very, very proud of you," He said hugging her, *"Welcome home."*

She went weak in the knees as the sound of His voice, and the comfort of His embrace filled her with more love, hope, peace and confidence than anyone would have ever dreamed possible.

Andrew was still yanking at his hand when he felt a tug on his soul, then part of it seemed to vanish.

"Kaya," he called out, but there was no answer.

"Kaya!!" he yelled into the infinite, featureless Light.

"I think Kaya figured it out," he thought to Jacob, but there was no answer.

"Jacob!" he yelled, "Jacob!" but there was still no answer.

Exhausted and aching from the effort, he stopped pulling. He tried not to panic, but his mind was racing. There had to be a trick to getting free, but he couldn't figure it out. Leaning down against the edge, he rolled over onto his side.

With his hand stuck in something he couldn't see and his body lying on the edge of a Fountain that no longer seemed to exist, he closed his eyes and found himself drifting in the Light. He slowed his breathing and let his mind wander.

It took time, but eventually Andrew realized where he was. He knew this place even if there was nothing in it and no amount of strength or physical force mattered here.

Sitting back up, Andrew opened his eyes, focused his mind and willed himself to stand up.

Like water running down a drain, the Light that filled his world was immediately pulled toward a central point just a few feet in front of him. It swirled and pulled at him as his feet fell toward the polished stone street. The Light rippled with streaks of blue, and he watched its churning motion and its unbelievable speed. When his toes touched

the ground, daylight had already become visible at the fringes of the Light and the world around him began to feel more familiar.

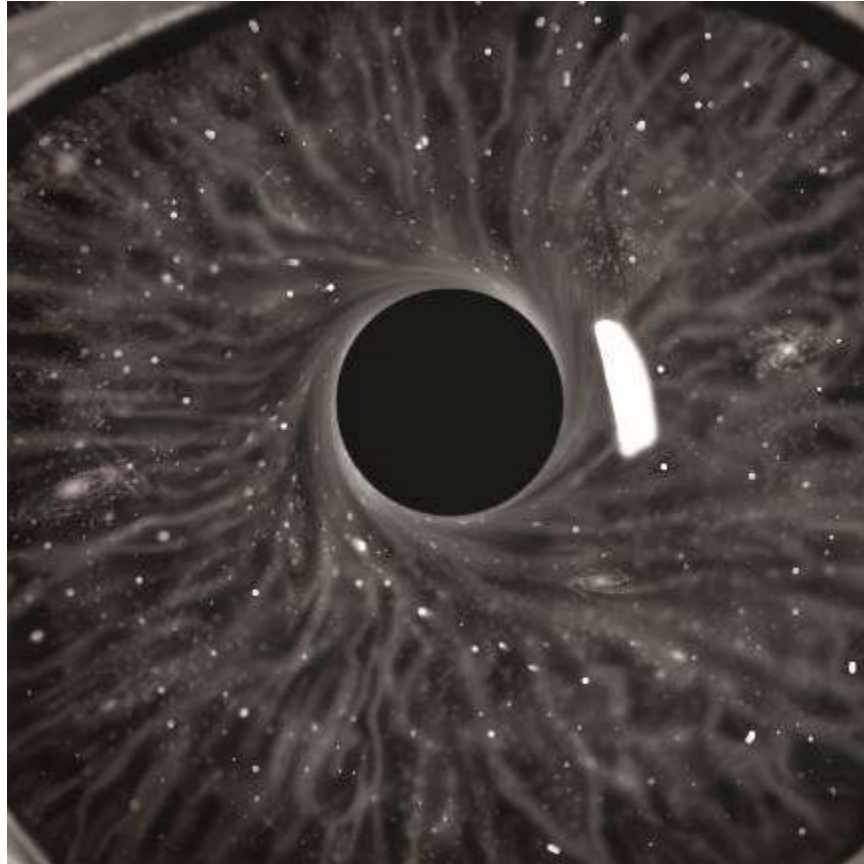
He stared intently at the Light as it gathered and concentrated into the shape of a person; filling the silhouette until a man stood before him with His arms open wide.

"What took you?" Jacob asked with a grin, but Andrew didn't hear him. He barely even noticed Kaya and Jacob standing next to the man.

"I think I'll take that hug now," the man said to Andrew, and the two embraced like Father and son.

"Welcome home, Andrew. Welcome home."

Chapter 22



Wisdom

After his greeting, Andrew noticed Kaya and Jacob standing off to the side. He hugged Kaya, saying, "I felt you leave. I could feel it in my heart."

"I would never leave you, my love," she said, squeezing him tightly and kissing his cheek. "I just went ahead and waited for you, but I didn't leave."

Keeping one arm around Kaya, he held out his other hand to Jacob, and said, "And you!"

Jacob grabbed his hand and shook it vigorously.

"What about me?" he demanded with a smile. "You're the one who took so long. I practically had it figured out before Kaya."

"He sure did," she whispered, loud enough for everyone to hear. "That's why it took him another fifteen minutes to show up."

"How long was I in there?" he asked.

"You were hanging out at the Fountain for about an hour," she replied.

"An hour? It didn't feel..."

The man interjected, *"It's not important how long it took any of you to stand up. The Fountain is now being utilized for one of its many purposes, and it is time for us to move on."*

Turning back toward the man, Andrew noticed something odd. They were still standing next to the Fountain of Knowing, the buildings around them were unchanged, but something was different about the light.

Andrew turned his face to the sun, but the light didn't warm him. It didn't shine the way it was supposed to either. Looking around the courtyard, he noticed the buildings, the Fountain and even the light and shadows had a softened appearance. Everything he could see other than Kaya, Jacob, and the man had a hazy, slightly out of focus appearance.

"Turn around," Jacob said to Andrew.

"Why?" he asked, turning to look at the Fountain, "What's behind mmmme...?" What he saw perplexed his brain so badly, he barely got the words out.

Andrew looked back and forth between the Fountain and his friends, and they all heard the unfiltered questions pouring out of his mind.

The man put His hand on Andrew's shoulder while he stared at the Fountain in disbelief.

"Yes, that's you sitting there and yes that's Kaya and Jacob too," the man said, in response to Andrew's unspoken questions.

"Well," He corrected Himself, *"It's your bodies at least."*

Kaya and Jacob looked on with amusement, only because they had already gone through what Andrew was now trying to understand.

"I said you would need to leave something behind before we could begin our journey. I just didn't tell you what "it" was."

"But if I'm there," Andrew said, pointing to himself sitting on the edge of the Fountain, slightly bent over to one side with his hand in the sparkling water, "how am I here?"

"Look at the water," the man offered. *"Is it moving?"*

Andrew stepped toward the Fountain until he was standing just inches in front of Kaya.

"No, I mean I don't think so."

"Look up."

Looking up at the top of the Fountain, he saw the pulse of water that should have been moving, but it wasn't. It had stopped in mid-flow.

"I guess it's not moving at all. Is it?"

"No, it's not," the man replied. *"What you're looking at is you. It is all of you, but you're not there right now. You're with me, and you're not in any physical place you can understand."*

Andrew turned away from the Fountain. He had a confused look on his face, and Jacob said, "Yeah, it took me a few minutes to get it too. It still only makes sense to me if I look away from the Fountain and try not to think about it."

"Try not to think about what?" Andrew asked in a pleading voice. "What's happened? Where are we?"

The man patiently and compassionately spoke into their minds, *"Andrew, that's your body sitting on the edge of the Fountain, and your hand is in the water because it's keeping your body safe and alive. Your body will be fine for as long as we need it to be, for as long as our journey lasts, because time doesn't matter anymore. We'll come back here before we even left. When we're done, you'll understand."*

The important thing is we are all together now, not as physical beings, but as curious creatures of energy and Light. This is what you really are, what everyone really is."

Andrew turned back toward the man and began to ask another question, when the man said, *"Your questions are fantastic, and each one of them will be answered and explained until you can explain things back to me, but for right now the easiest way to begin is simply to begin."*

Kaya and Jacob, whose questions had been mostly put off for the better part of an hour, were anxious to proceed.

"Let's all join hands now and we'll begin our adventure," the man said encouragingly.

Kaya took His hand, and indescribable feelings shot up and down her spine. Jacob took Kaya's hand and held out his other to Andrew, but Andrew just stood there looking dazed and confused.

Andrew's hands were down by his sides, and he unconsciously started thinking a barrage of questions. His friends watched him turn to face the man, and he asked, "What's your name? What should we call youuu...?"

Andrew looked into the man's eyes and gasped. The blue of His iris gently twirled and time slowed down. Andrew felt himself leaving in slow motion, but his brain was processing at full speed.

Kaya and Jacob watched and listened with anticipation. They knew he was falling into the infinitely deep universe of blue-white Light they had already been consumed by. They knew their friend was tumbling into the eyes of the man who had pulled them from time and space, and they knew he would re-emerge with the same unanswered questions.

Andrew's mind was pulled into the whirlpool of blue-white Light. He felt as though he was shrinking.

His entire field of vision became an uncountable number of blue-white stars. Each one of them produced a heavenly Light as they moved together in perfect harmony; slowly drifting and swirling around the perfectly black pupil on their endless journey. The depth of the star field swallowed his mind, and his mouth hung open as his consciousness was overwhelmed by infinity.

Andrew fought against insanity, but it would have been so easy to give in. Resisting the path to nowhere, he directed his consciousness toward the inky black center of his universe.

He felt reality slipping away as he reached the event horizon of the black hole. Relinquishing to his task, he abandoned reality and plunged into the infinite darkness.

Once again, he felt himself leaving a reality he thought could go no further. He felt the impossibly immense forces of gravity transform him into bits and pieces of stardust until he was lost in the nothingness between what was and what could be.

The man blinked and Andrew returned to the place he had never left. Reaching up with a single finger, the man pushed up on Andrew's chin, closing his mouth.

Kaya and Jacob smiled. Jacob reached down and took Andrew's hand. The man lowered his hand and held it open for Andrew.

"Names are for people with bodies," He said, with a wink. *"Now take my hand and let's see how many of those other questions we can answer."*

Andrew took the open hand and immediately felt like a small piece of fabric caught by the wind, spiraling higher and higher into the sky.

The man spoke enthusiastically to them all as His deep echoing voice filled their minds, *"We need to go back to the beginning of things, to the first Kingdom of Light. By traveling through your own history, you will come to understand many things about your future."*

The circle they formed with their interlocking hands pulsed with Light in a rhythmic pattern.

"Do not be alarmed by the changes to come. Remember, as we travel on our journey we will all be together, no harm can come to any of you, and we will ultimately be returning to exactly where and when we left."

The pulsing Light intensified until it was a constant glow. Inside the Light, the four adventurers transformed into nebulous spheres of energy.

Kaya had become an orb with golden hues around the edges, and her center was a deep blue. Andrew shined with brilliant shades of orange and bits of green around his edges, and his center was pure white. Jacob flashed both green and gold in his aura, and his center was light blue.

"You all look spectacular, and now that we're ready to travel, let's begin."

There was a "pop," and everything went pitch black. "Pop," came the sound again and the four Travelers emerged from nowhere into the sky high above the ground with the Kingdom in the distance.

"If it feels like you're still holding hands that's good. It means you are sharing yourself with another."

Andrew looked down at his hand, but he didn't have one. He looked at Kaya and Jacob, but they were only radiant clouds of Light.

"Do I look like a big ball of Light?" Andrew asked cautiously.

"You do," Kaya answered in surprise.

"Do I?" Jacob asked them.

"You do too," she answered again.

"The Kingdom in front of us is the first of seven Kingdoms," the man paused. "Are we all paying attention?"

"I'm not," Kaya said apologetically. "I'm still trying to figure out where my body went."

"Me too," echoed Andrew and Jacob.

"I'm sorry," the man apologized. "I always forget how strange and difficult this is for the new ones.

Your physical bodies are back at the Fountain. What you are now is what you have always been. You are adventurers and travelers. Your bodies no longer limit you, and you are certainly not dead. Death only comes to physical things, and as you will come to appreciate, your real self is made of energy that cannot be destroyed. Look into each other and tell me what you see."

"I see a big ball of Light," Jacob responded.

"Me too," said Andrew.

"Kaya, what do you see?" the man asked.

"I can tell Andrew and Jacob are very close to me. I can feel their presence, and I can hear their feelings. I can see my friends for what they are, not what they looked like, and I can easily tell them from one another."

"Well yeah, I get that too," Jacob said, a bit embarrassed, "but you still look like a ball of Light."

"I felt you smile when you said that," Andrew said.

"Good, now go fly around in the sky and look around the City. Get it out of your system. You don't have to stay together because you'll never be further apart than a thought."

They hesitated, and Andrew yelled, "Last one to the spire is a glowing ball of Light!" and he shot off into the distance.

"Go on," He said, to Kaya and Jacob. *"If you can't enjoy this, you're probably doing it wrong."*

With that, both Kaya and Jacob streaked off in pursuit of their friend.

Andrew waited at the tip of the spire while Kaya and Jacob raced toward him.

"This is a very tall spire," she thought, slowing her speed to join Andrew. "I've never seen it completed and I just can't believe how high up we are."

"Let's go explore the City," Jacob urged.

"I would like to begin in the mountains, then come down into the City," Kaya said.

"I've got to start in the City," Jacob said urgently, "but it's all right if we split up."

Andrew thought about what he wanted to see first, and said, "I'm going to the City too. I've waited too long to see the real thing, and I'm way too excited to put it off."

"Have fun! I'll be down when I've seen what there is to see in the mountains." Focusing on her destination, she moved as a streak of Light toward the snow covered peaks.

Jacob flew around the tip of the spire, then dropped like a stone toward the City below.

"Hey, wait for me," Andrew called out, falling in behind him.

It could have been days, months, or possibly even years that they explored the twisting streets, the endless buildings and the surrounding areas within the sprawling City. Time had no meaning and they each took full advantage of the opportunity to explore and investigate every nook and cranny of their new home.

When the places that once felt strange and new had become familiar and comfortable, they were summoned. Responding quickly, they each left what they were investigating and came to meet their guide at the very tip of the spire.

"I trust you've each had ample time to explore everything you wished to see?"

They all responded positively.

"Good. Then we will begin where we left off. I have brought you here to see and experience things that have happened throughout the brief history of your world. This is the first of many times and places we will visit.

In order to execute your responsibilities when we return to your time, you must learn from those who came before you.

The questions bubbling out of each of you are excellent. Since you're all keen to know what it is you'll be doing when you return, I'll begin building your foundation of knowledge.

The planet you live on, the solar system around you, every star in the sky, the galaxy surrounding you and everything else within my universe is by my design. The only exception and I cannot stress this enough, is the City we are now floating above."

"I told you He was God," Jacob thought to his friends.

"Shhhh!" Kaya snipped.

"It's all right Kaya. You've each had the same thought numerous times since we met at the Fountain. In fact, Andrew is thinking it right now."

"Sorry."

"There is no reason to apologize for the things you think about. Now, where was I... Oh yes, if I didn't create this City, who did? That's an excellent question Andrew, and it's the answer to that very question that brings us together.

Also, because Kaya and Jacob are now wondering if I have done anything to try and find out who did create the City, I can assure you, I have done everything within my power to identify its creator. I've even gone so far as to create more than a trillion copies of this wonderful little planet, just in case the appearance of this City is tied to the earth itself or to some other countless number of seemingly improbable scenarios.

Most of the copies even have delightful little people like you running around on them, but trying to duplicate the original has never been as simple as I would have liked it to be. I hate to

bore you with the cosmic details. Suffice it to say, I have done all things possible to identify the source of the City and its purpose.

I will also confirm for each of you that while I may not know the answer to either of these questions, I do know how to get them.

I believe your questions have allowed me to get ahead of myself. Now where was I... Oh yes, let me remind you about the rules governing this City. Rules that were not put into Celeste's diary because I asked her not to. Rules that each of you knows, but have yet to understand. Rules that have been shared with you by the water you drank upon the half-spire.

I'm getting there Jacob, hold on.

The reason each of you drank from the bowl at the top of the platform is because it is you who gave new life to the City. Your actions created a chain of events that have ultimately revealed, only to you, the purpose of the Kingdom. Only those who drink from the bowl atop the half-spire are given this knowledge and the burdens that come with it.

Normally that's the two people who emerged triumphantly from the Chamber, but in your case, there is a third."

Andrew whispered to himself, but everyone heard it, "Three thousand years."

"Or half the world," Kaya whispered, completing the shared memory.

"That is correct. Half the world's population or three thousand years. Those are the actual burdens bestowed upon you. If the City stands for three thousand years or if half the people of this world should come to fill its walls, then yes. The Kingdom will stand forever."

"I remember that too," Jacob announced with surprise, "but I don't think I would have thought of it if you hadn't reminded me."

"It is curious, the difference between knowledge and wisdom, isn't it Jacob?"

Kaya's mind was working through all they had been told when her thinking got tangled.

"If you didn't create the City, how is it you were there in the Chamber, how did you become part of this?" Immediately she began to stammer and apologize, "I, I, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it to sound the way it did."

"There is no need to apologize Kaya. Your question is excellent, and your logic is flawless. The reason I am a part of this is because every time two people complete the connection between the Hero's Chamber and the Defender's Portal I am inexplicably and quite literally pulled into the Chamber along with them."

There was an uncomfortable pause in the conversation while Kaya, Andrew, and Jacob considered the magnitude of the statement.

Jacob was the first to articulate a question in a coherent way, and he asked, "With all due respect, and quite frankly that's all my respect, are you telling us you, the creator of everything, are somehow an unwitting part of whatever is happening in this City?"

"That, my dear Jacob, is precisely what I'm telling you."

Despite their situation and regardless of the outcome of their journey, Andrew had one overwhelming question. "Why are we here?" he bravely asked his Creator.

"Of all my creations, I love none more than those whom I have gifted with my own sense of curiosity, with my own sense of wonder.

You are here because you needed to be, because you had to be, and because your world and the people on it need you. More than you know and more than I can reveal.

Unfortunately, and perhaps what will be most difficult for you to understand, is that you are not just here for yourselves or for the people that inhabit your world. And yet I cannot tell you more without risking the corruption of what is possible, of what will be."

"Is that it?" Jacob asked with as much discretion as possible. "Can you be any more specific?"

"Perhaps I can, Jacob," He said in a pondering voice. "Kaya, your question is the same as Jacob's. I will answer them together with the information you already know.

Your new responsibilities, the ones you volunteered for when you drank from the bowl may appear simple, but looks can be deceiving.

First, you will share in the task of welcoming new citizens to the City. This is done by performing the customary greeting at the Fountain of Knowing whenever someone is granted citizenship. There are three such Fountains, one at each entrance. This task must be upheld at all times and under all conditions. Failure to do so would be catastrophic.

Second, you are all responsible and equally capable of utilizing the Light within each citizen to heal those who have been injured. However, I caution you not to underestimate the complexity of your obligation, for you are not only bound to those who suffer physically.

Third, you have all been charged with keeping the purpose of the Kingdom to yourselves. Revealing what you know would also be disastrous. Additionally, you have all accepted that none of these obligations will be considered complete or fulfilled until the Kingdom has stood for three thousand years or half of the world's population is sheltered within its walls."

It was overwhelming to have it all laid out in front of them. Futility and sadness filled their hearts, and Kaya asked, "Can you help us?"

"Please help us," Andrew echoed.

The Light of the man grew brighter, and the three friends swam in a bottomless sea of love and hope. Fear and sadness were replaced by optimism and courage.

"That's better," He said, with a smile. "Your mission is not hopeless, but your future is always changing. To afford you the greatest possibility of success, I have decided to offer each of you something no other person has ever experienced. What I offer cannot be given, it must be taken, and those who hunger for it will find their appetite insatiable.

The reason we are together, the reason for our journey and our travels to come, is to allow each of you to gain wisdom. You already received the gift of knowledge when you drank from the bowl, and you will now be given the opportunity to apply what you think you know.

To live out many lives. To experience lifetimes of decisions and to learn from your successes and your mistakes. You must take these steps together, and you must learn from each other.

The wisdom you gain will be taken back to the moment we left. It's the only thing that can save you from the burden of time." His words faded as His thoughts wandered.

"Time is an odd thing for those who live within it," He said, in a detached voice, "and while you may never truly understand my words, you should each know that you have already succeeded, the doorway is open."

Kaya reached out with her heart until she felt Andrew and Jacob's hands. They all gave each other a reassuring squeeze and the world beneath them shimmered and flickered as if it were coming back to life.



"A daughter," was all Kaya could think about as she watched a small caravan emerge from the foothills. The thought of children had always been far from her mind and yet here she was being told about what would most certainly be. An incalculable number of contradictory thoughts scrambled through her brain.

Andrew watched the small group trudging out of the foothills and wondered what it was like for them to see what had never been seen. He focused on the scene before them, but in the back of his mind, he was sure there was something else needing his attention.

Watching the leader of the caravan, Jacob smiled. She was realizing her wildest, most impossible dream had just come true.

Pushing the thoughts of her future to the back of her mind, Kaya watched the seven determined Travelers struggle through the desert sands. Their emotions washed over her, pulling her into their struggle.

"The woman leading this group was called here. Not by my doing, but by the City itself. She has been traveling for more than two months. In that time, she has recruited two friends, happened upon three like-minded individuals and found a desperate wandering soul. They all share the same unexplainable desire to reach a destination that did not exist until today.

Just because I cannot tell you why this woman, why Marcia, is compelled to do what she is doing, it does not preclude me from knowing that it is happening. The mystery, if we can call it that, is "why." We will not find the answer to that question here, but you can witness the beginning."

"Can they see us?" Kaya asked.

"We are not visible to any of them, but if you get to close you can be felt by any living creature. We are here to observe, not to interact. That part will come soon enough. For now, just watch."

"How can the City already exist if she didn't do what Kaya and I did?"

"Remember, this is the First Kingdom. How it came to be is beyond explanation. One day ago, it did not exist and today it does. I have brought the three of you here to witness the beginning of a cycle that has lasted for more than twenty thousand years."

"Twenty thousand years?!"

"Yes Kaya, twenty thousand."

"So right now," Jacob asked in amazement, "Right now is twenty thousand years ago?"

"It doesn't really look any different," Andrew observed.

"We'll be doing quite a bit of time traveling before we go back to when we left. You'll need to try to get used to the fact that your physical bodies are sitting on the edge of the Fountain of Knowing in the seventh cycle of the City of Light. And right now, that moment is twenty thousand years away."

"That's not possible," Andrew thought, but his thoughts were overheard.

"Andrew does not believe this is possible. Jacob, you are also staggered by the idea and Kaya is skeptical, but not in total denial. Good. That is right where I hoped you would be. Until you can accept the fact that anything is possible, you will not be ready to return."

"So, we're here hovering above the very first Kingdom, watching the very first people enter the Kingdom, for the very first time, and all this happened twenty thousand years ago?" Kaya asked.

"But none of this existed until today, and you don't know how it got here or why?" Andrew added.

"And we're not dead. We're just blobs of Light that can fly because our bodies are hanging out at the Fountain twenty thousand years in the future?" Jacob threw in for good measure.

"That's close enough, for now."

Marcia's dark hair was streaked with gray, but the look in her eyes was that of a child. Wrinkles flared from the corner of her eyes as the smile on her face brightened, and she dropped the reins of the horse she had been leading for more days than she could count.

She looked back at her friends to make sure she wasn't dreaming, then back at the City from her dreams.

"I never thought I was crazy until right now!" she said to her weary band of Travelers.

"It is there," Sakra said to Marcia, "You have led us to the place of dreams. You have brought us all home."

To be continued...

Beyond The Hero's Chamber



Stalemate

In the fleeting moment linking the Defender with the Hero, Jacob came to know his son. It was miraculous to embrace the essence of the boy he always loved, but heartbreaking to feel the abandonment, shame, and anguish caused by so many years apart.

He reached out to soothe Connor's anger and bitterness, but the emotions recoiled, tightening into a knot of greed and pride. The dark, swirling mass overshadowed the boy Jacob once knew, and it began growing, making him feel small and unwelcome. Though the joining was brief, Jacob was not the only one learning.

At precisely the same time, Connor curiously probed the essence of the man defending him from far below. In a bewildering blur, the knowledge and skills of a Blacksmith and those of a Cooper transferred without words from father to son.

Connor watched Jacob Miller transform into Jacob Duncan, and he was electrified with emotions that spawned an unbelievable pain. His breath caught in his throat, his

back arched in agony and with each beat of his heart he stiffened. He was unable to move and unable to look away from the visions in his head.

Lightning coursed through Connor as it flashed in the Chamber, transforming his view of the world. He witnessed and experienced a lifetime of people and places from Jacob's perspective.

When the thunder subsided, the two men pulled away from each other and time stopped. In their private, timeless void, ribbons of emotions became flesh and nowhere became the past.

Jacob stood at the bottom of the steps leading up to the orphanage while Connor looked down upon his father.

Connor glanced from side to side, almost turning completely around. He knew the tragedy this place had to offer, and it fanned the coals of hatred within him like the bellows to a forge.

"Do you remember this place?!" he demanded of Jacob.

Jacob nodded, knowing there was no right way to undo this wrong.

"I'm not sure how you could! You only spent enough time here to abandon me!"

"Connor I'm..."

"How could you lie to me this whole time?!"

Jacob began to answer, but Connor wasn't interested in answers.

"Why did you leave me here all alone?!" he screamed.

Anger, loathing and bitterness rose like the welts of a switch across the fabric of Connor's soul. He and Jacob separated and the orphanage dissolved.

Jacob watched helplessly while the Light ruthlessly harvested the strongest emotions from his son.

Connor writhed and screamed in pain as the very essence of his being was torn to pieces.

With the menacing goliath of evil towering over Jacob and bellowing with rage, he knew there was no escape. He had gambled and lost.

Minutes later, his life slipping away, Jacob wedged his hand between the glowing spire and his broken back.

"You cannot have my son!" he screamed at the towering creature.

As the massive fists came crashing down, Jacob whispered, "Stalemate."

To be continued...

Thank you for reading my book.
If you enjoyed it, please do me the favor of leaving a review.

“Beyond The Hero’s Chamber”
will be available in July, 2016.

My Team of Heroes

The following brave souls rolled up their sleeves and cleared more than a few nights and weekends to edit, proof read and generally mark up what use to be a difficult to read collection of ideas and visualizations. Through this process, each of them has brought something to me that I did not or could not see at the time.

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Marcia Adams Ho

Special thanks to Mrs. Wilson's 4th grade class, 2013-2014, Blakely Elementary.

About the Author



About the Author

Ian Newton lives with his amazing wife on the Kitsap peninsula in Washington. He is a pharmacist, photographer, stargazer, artist, inventor, avid outdoorsman and father to three sons. He is currently working on the second half of this story. The title of second book is "Beyond the Hero's Chamber" and it will be available in the summer of 2016.

He's also a dreamer, but he's not the only one.

About the Illustrator



About the Illustrator

Tucked away in a nondescript Southern California home, Marcia Adams Ho illustrates a world full of color. She creates art with detail that both draws the eye in and gives the author's story a magical reality while keeping the reader's imagination alive.

Marcia graduated with a BFA from Art Center College of Design and began her career as a background artist in animation. She currently freelances as an illustrator and produces fine art paintings in her studio. More of Marcia's work can be viewed at marciaadamsho.com.