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“The Crimson Harvester”

by Sam Vary

CHAPTER 1

The door at the top of the dungeon steps slid open with a steely clatter.

A young girl of about 9 sat bolt upright in a cell at the end of a dim corridor, her eyes wide and staring. She began to tremble all over. The old man who had taken her prisoner was now finally coming to collect his dues.

She looked around desperately for a place to hide, though she knew there was no shelter to be had. Even if she tried to go under the cot on which she sat, a row of torches glowing in the hall eliminated every shadow. Even if there *had* been somewhere to run, her legs wouldn't do her any good – they had transformed into twin blocks of wood. Her heart thudded dully in her chest; her veins ran with ice water.

She heard a leathery thump as a pair of boots descended the dungeon steps. In another minute, the tall man was standing in front of her cell.

"Please, sir," she stammered. "I want my parents. I want to go home."

Without a word he slipped a loop of keys from his pocket and selected one with long, slender fingers. He unlocked the cell and let the barred gate swing open before

finally raising his eyes to look at the girl. His maroon cloak shimmered in the torchlight, and she shrank back against the brick wall under his gaze.

“Get up,” he growled. “It’s time to go.”

He’d been nice before. Almost fatherly. The little girl had even begun to trust him, and believe his promises of a better life. Now the guise had fallen. All she wanted was to be back on the farm with her family. She didn’t care if the Harvest yielded nothing. She only wanted to see her parents again.

“My daddy will find me. He’ll come and rescue me and you’ll be sorry,” she said. There was a sliver of defiance in her voice that surprised them both.

“Oh, I don’t think so,” the king said. “He’s dead now. Killed himself in the barn out behind your house three days ago, as a matter of fact. He already knew you were gone for good. Now come on, there’s no point in delaying the inevitable.”

His words took a moment to hit home, but when they did, shock and disbelief washed over her like a black tidal wave. Sobs racked her thin frame. She tried to accuse him of lying, that her daddy would never do a thing like that, but no words would come.

Vladimir Cruor, the Red King of Zimarron, had run out of patience.

He strode into the cell and snatched the girl by her hair. Her sobs morphed into screams of pain and terror as he dragged her out roughly into the corridor, the noise ricocheting off the glistening stone walls of the dungeon, which contained seven other cells besides hers. There had been other children, but Cruor had processed them several weeks earlier, and the rooms now stood empty. On the floor behind the second set of bars was a large pool of dried blood, the only trace that remained of a boy named Jethro. He’d been a bit older than the little girl, a bit stronger, and in the end Vlad had needed

to summon Henrietta to help subdue the lad. Her razor-sharp teeth had pacified him in a hurry.

Cruor could handle one little girl on his own just fine, however.

He pulled her along the stone floor without much difficulty, in spite of her prolonged kicking and screaming. He had enough sympathy in his boiled old heart to at least carry her under one arm when they ascended the dungeon steps, but that was the extent of his mercy. Now that her time in his care was drawing to a close, he had mostly lost interest in bedside manner. A wry grin crossed his lips. *Her pain and suffering will be over soon enough*, he thought.

They went through the dungeon entrance and around a corner, down another long hallway hung with ancient tapestries. Cruor came to a stop at the base of a spiral tower, which jutted straight up through the center of his fortress. A black archway gaped at them like a toothless maw. As the pair entered the tower, the shadowy entrance seemed to swallow them whole.

The king ascended the steps with the little girl still under his arm. She had ceased to struggle, apparently having exhausted herself. This came as a welcome development. He was no longer the young ruler he had once been, but he insisted on carrying out this unpleasant business himself as much as possible.

They reached the top of the tower and found themselves in front of an oaken door. With his free hand, Cruor took another key and slid it into a large padlock. This lock was attached to a chain which had been wound tightly around a bolt-style handle. As he released the hasp of the padlock, the chain slid to the floor with a ringing clatter.

They stepped into the room.

A surreal, tinny tune shuddered out of a music box off to one side, seemingly wound by an unseen hand. The cover snapped open; a blue ballerina dipped and pirouetted within. Cruor lowered the girl, and she barely managed to stay standing under her own power. Her lips moved in a soundless whisper. "Why," might have been the word she was trying to form, but nothing would come. Her entire body was paralyzed with fear. And yet bizarrely, questions rose to mind. Logical questions. For instance, why was there was a crib in one corner? Or why the king would have a bizarre rendition of a child's bedroom at the top of a tower? She suddenly realized that the mobile which spun lazily above the crib was made from bones. She could not tell whether they were chicken wings or kids' fingers. An assortment of button-eyed dolls and wooden toys lay scattered about the floor, as though someone else had suddenly been interrupted while playing. A large chest with an intricate design carved into its lid sat in the opposite corner. She thought she could hear a soft thumping noise from within, but it could have been the maddening pulse of blood in her own ears. Then, a loud bang drew her attention immediately to something else, beside the crib. Something she hadn't had time to consider yet.

The closet door.

The king raised one hand and snapped his fingers twice in quick succession – *clack clack!* The girl flinched, still not daring to move – or hope. She tried to fill her mind with images of relaxing on the farm, watching her father break in wild horses that would later become the proud mounts of the Zimarron calvary. In her young heart, she knew her luck had run out.

At Cruor's signal, the closet door slammed outward. It left a dent in the periwinkle blue wallpaper as the handle hit the opposite wall. More accurately, it

enhanced an existing dent. This door was not opened gently very often. Cruor turned quickly to leave, reattaching the chain and locking the door behind him. Henrietta would take it from here.

Eyes glowed in the closet like twin rubies. A forked tongue flicked out, just enough to be visible from the gloom. Long toenails clacked as the thing glided forward with reptilian ease.

The girl began to scream.

CHAPTER 2

Roger Detwiler sat on the floor of his father's study, nodding his head in rhythm as the lead singer of Steppenwolf lurched into another gritty chorus. The spinning of the record player was almost as pleasantly hypnotic as the music itself. In that mild Maine summer of 1999, Roger had found himself deeply in love with his father's record collection. He often lost track of time while listening.

A gentle knock came at the study door and broke the boy from his trance. It was his little brother George.

"Roger, come down! Dad says you have to help set the table," he said. George's voice sounded surprisingly confident for an 8-year-old.

Roger reluctantly switched off the record player, and the music whirled to a stop.

"Be right there, buddy," he said.

#

Following their evening repast, the boys spent their pre-bedtime hour reading with their dad Leo, sprawled out his king-sized bed, absorbed in their current books. After a time,

Roger and Leo looked over and realized that George had conked out, and their dad said it was time for bed. Roger got up and trudged down the hall to the bedroom they shared, while Leo carried George over one shoulder behind them.

Twin beds stood side by side, with a patchwork quilt covering each one. Leo tucked George under his covers, and Roger climbed into his own bed, still feeling wide awake and not ready to sleep. Across the room, George curled up on his side and began to snore softly.

Leo knelt beside Roger's bed and said in a low, confidential tone, "There's something I want to give you, but I had to wait for George to fall asleep first."

"What is it?" Roger asked, his curiosity piqued.

Leo withdrew a small knife from his pocket, which folded neatly into a wooden handle. Roger could make out the word *Barlow* engraved on a metal band around the top of the grip.

"I've had this since I was a kid, but I want you to have it. You're almost a teenager now, and I figure you can handle a little more responsibility. So here, it's yours, but be careful – I just got it sharpened."

He held out the pocketknife and Roger took it, testing its weight.

"Wow, it's great Dad.. thank you," Roger said, unsure what else to add.

"You're welcome," Leo said, sounding a little self-conscious himself. "I'm.. I'm going to get George something special too, soon."

"Don't worry," Roger said, "he and I can share it. We'll carve our names in the treehouse together." This made Leo smile.

Roger put it on the nightstand and gathered the covers up below his chin. It was still early enough in the summer to make sleeping under a blanket comfortable, and he felt nothing but warmth and security.

“Sounds good, buddy. Now get some rest,” Leo said. He switched off the light and gently closed the door before heading downstairs, where Roger assumed he’d smoke a pipe and read the evening paper. Roger realized that he was sleepier than he’d thought at first, and quickly began to drift.

#

Vladimir Cruor stood in a dark chamber and stared into a glimmering green reflecting pool. His faithful manservant Mandrake wrung his hands nervously off to one side.

“There’s no one left, Mandrake,” Cruor said with an air of defeat. They’d already been in the room for three hours.

“Sire, perhaps it’s time to explore other options.”

“If we cross the threshold into the Earth-realm, there could be no going back,” he muttered.

“But there are no viable children left here. Begging your pardon, sire, but we’ve used them all up. If we don’t go over there to look, an uprising here in Zimarron will be inevitable.”

“Don’t you think I know that?”

“Yes, of course. I didn’t mean to offend.”

“You have someone in mind?”

“I do indeed. If I may...”

Mandrake stepped forward and swirled his finger in the pool before Vladimir. A watery picture of a white house drew into focus.

“Two boys, both strong of mind and heart. The older one could keep the machine running for a year or more.”

Cruor raised an eyebrow.

“It’ll be the standard dream insertion. I’ll get word to the Grimsrud brothers to handle intake. You can go this very evening, if you like.”

“Well, what are we waiting for?”

“Very good sire, I’ll prepare the elixir immediately.”

#

Roger slept deeply for an hour or two. Then, he began to have a lucid dream unlike anything he’d ever experienced before in his life. It started with a deep voice in his head.

“Open your eyes, son.”

Roger blinked and looked around. The room around him was completely dark. Moonlight streamed in the window and cast a scattered interplay of silver light and black shadows across the foot of his bed.

A tall, dark figure was standing in the corner of his room.

Roger jerked backwards in terror and tried to cry out, but no sound would come. His movements felt sluggish, but he still had no idea he was dreaming.

The same voice seemed to swirled through the room again like audible tendrils of mist.

“Calm down, son. I mean you no harm, but it’s time to get up. There’s something I need you to see.”

Roger was surprised to detect nothing malevolent in the voice, and so arose, albeit sluggishly. He began to walk across the room. But the faster he tried to move, the more he seemed to slow down. It took considerable effort just to reach the doorway. A

pale glow emanated from the hallway beyond, and in the moonlight Roger could now see that his strange visitor was wearing some kind of red robe. The tall man turned his back and stepped into the hall. He raised one bony finger and beckoned Roger to follow.

“That’s right, this way. I won’t bite...”

Roger followed, urged on by his own curiosity. He stepped forward, confidently at first, then hesitating on the threshold of the bedroom. Some sixth sense suddenly cried out that something might be wrong with this picture. He glanced back over his shoulder. The bedroom behind him appeared to tilt one way, then gently back in the opposite direction. It created a pleasant, swaying effect in his blurred vision. At last he turned back, raised one foot, and placed it just beyond the door.

“There’s a good lad.”

Roger snapped his gaze forward.

The figure turned around.

Roger found himself staring at an old man who stood directly before him, dressed all in crimson. He leered down at the boy, baring crooked teeth that gave off a distinctly wolfish appearance. Roger gazed upon the leathery face, transfixed. Watery blue eyes stared back at him, glinting in the moonlight. The skin of the man’s hands looked as old and hard as driftwood, tanned to a deep bronze hue. In one hand he gripped a sturdy wooden staff that came up to his hunched shoulders.

“Would you like to know my name?” the man asked. His grin stretched wider, showing a red-tinged gum line and more jagged incisors. Roger swallowed hard.

“Ah... y-yes? What is it?”

“Vladimir Cruor, at your service!” He said with a flourish of one hand. “Don’t be frightened, son. I said I mean you no harm, and I wouldn’t tell a lie to such a nice, *supple* young man.” He grinned and licked his lips.

“I’m not afraid,” Roger said, hoping he sounded more confident than he felt.

“Well! That’s very good to hear, because where we’re going you’ll have to be brave. Would you like to see something amazing?”

Roger nodded, but his sense that something might be wrong grew stronger with each passing moment. He couldn’t understand how the man had gotten into his house, and glanced anxiously in the direction of his father’s bedroom. He kept his cool, however, and when Cruor again gestured for him to follow, Roger’s curiosity got the better of him once more.

The stairs creaked under their weight as Roger trailed the robed figure downstairs to the landing below. Suddenly, the old man turned and placed a large, gnarled hand on the boy’s shoulder. A shudder crawled up Roger’s spine.

“Come outside. It’s only a little farther, I promise.”

Together, they stepped into the cool night air. Cruor strode in the direction of the forest, which stood, gnarled and enchanting, a short distance beyond the house.

Roger strode down the hill after his guide. He had the distinct impression that he was floating, or as though someone else were controlling his legs for him.

In another moment they had arrived at the edge of the forest. Roger had followed without hesitation, and now felt prepared to keep moving, go wherever this robed figure asked him to go; and yet a palpable sense of foreboding grew within his chest.

They entered the woods. Up close now, Roger saw that the bark of the trees around him was slimy and black, and the jutting branches seemed to stretch toward him

like skeletal arms, bobbing slightly in the breeze. A carpet of dead leaves crackled with decay underfoot. Cruor kept glancing back to smile at Roger. He seemed eager for the boy to place his trust in him, but there was a cold light in those icy blue eyes that was both dead and alive at the same time.

The old man stopped at the foot of a tree that seemed to tower above the rest, and was quite a bit thicker than just about any of the other trees that Roger could see as well. The boy dutifully came up to stand beside him. In the center of the tree he saw a large opening, the kind where one might imagine a family of squirrels making its home – that, or a poisonous snake, coiled and fat, waiting to strike if an exploratory hand were to reach inside. He looked around and was vaguely surprised to find that the forest was utterly silent. Not even the hoot of an owl or the chirping of crickets greeted his ears.

“Here we are, Roger.” He gestured to the tree. “I want you to look inside. There’s a doorway here, and a land of untold wonders just beyond. A whole world that can be yours if you’re as brave as you say you are.” Cruor motioned towards the opening with his staff.

Feeling like a puppet on a string, Roger leaned forward to peer inside the tree.

What he saw next left him breathless.

A magnificent blue whirlpool of light forced him to shield his eyes for a brief moment. It was more dazzling and wondrous than any natural phenomenon he had ever seen before. The pool seemed to be infinitely deep, yet he could see that it was perfectly enshrined within the dark tree. The edges of the vortex bubbled and foamed like the tide of a hungry ocean, and he found himself completely entranced, staring as deeply as possible into its center. He was hypnotized. He suddenly felt a desperate urge to reach out and touch its surface.

As if privy to his thoughts, Cruor said "That's all right, go ahead and reach in. There's a world in there, Roger, one of unimaginable wealth and beauty. It can all be yours if you do what I say. Climb into the tree, son. My friends and I are all just *dying* to see you."

Roger sensed he had arrived at a crossroads, but perhaps it was more than that. He felt an almost crushing weight to his decision as he gazed into the blue abyss.

Suddenly, behind them, a branch snapped.

"Roger?" a soft, familiar voice called out. "What are you doing?"

He spun toward the sound and tried to speak as he blinked again.

He said, "George, is that you?"

Suddenly he was awake, and the man in red had disappeared. A wave of confusion swept over him as he realized he was barefoot in the forest in the middle of the night. He saw George coming towards him from the edge of the trees.

"Roger, it's me! What are you doing out here? You got up and I followed you," his little brother said. "It's cold out here. Can we please go back inside?"

"Sure, sure – wow, did I sleepwalk... out here? I was just having the weirdest dream..."

"Roger, I was *scared*. I woke up and you were gone. I came outside and you had already walked down the hill and were almost in the woods."

"Wow, I... I don't know what... let's just go inside, okay? I'm sorry I scared you."

They headed back towards the house, but George paused, a look of concern writ large on his face.

"What were you looking at inside that tree?" he asked.

Roger glanced back, trying to locate the one, but the memory of the dream itself was fading too quickly from his mind. He realized he had already lost track of the tree in the darkness.

He shook his head. "I'm not really sure, buddy."

"I know which one it was," George said. "We've climbed that tree before. Remember I fell down and landed right on my back?"

"Yeah, you got the wind knocked out of you pretty good, all right," Roger said, yawning.

"You were just standing there and looking inside that same tree. You seemed awful interested in whatever it was."

"Yeah, I don't know. Let's talk about it tomorrow."

The brothers trooped back up the hill toward the house, past the stone wall with the alligator-shaped rock, and finally up the wooden steps that led to the porch.

When they were back in the bedroom, Roger crawled back under the covers, blissfully unaware of the mud and detritus he had tracked into the room. George got into bed as well without another word. He glanced over to make sure his big brother was all right. Within minutes sleep had swept over Roger once more.

But George stayed awake.

CHAPTER 3

George waited until he was absolutely sure that Roger had fallen back asleep. He listened to his breathing, and when it had drifted into a constant rhythm, he put his feet on the floor and silently padded out of the room and downstairs. He was puzzled, but his curiosity was aflame. When had Roger ever sleepwalked before? And what had been so fascinating inside that tree?

In the darkened living room, George slipped on a pair of sneakers, tugged the laces tight and walked out the back door, then out across the moonlit field.

The chill air gave George goosebumps, but in an almost pleasant, refreshing way. The lawn felt springy underneath his Chucks, and he almost started skipping as he drew near the forest, eager to solve the little mystery at hand. George held a pretty serious grudge against that tree for the way it had betrayed his trust a summer ago, by taking a perfectly sturdy-looking branch and turning it into a rotten, crackling booby trap. It had given way almost as soon as he had placed his full weight upon it.

George hesitated for a moment at the edge of the woods, glancing longingly back toward the safety of the big white farmhouse. But no, he'd come too far to chicken out

now. He looked for the tree, and spotted it almost at once. He touched his pocket and realized he had kept his lucky toy train with him. It had been in the pocket of the red shorts he'd put on before going out to follow Roger, and he ran one finger over its little wooden wheels. They spun in a familiar, reassuring way at his touch.

He made his way to the tree, feeling bolder with each step.

The looming oak seemed mostly as he remembered it. He walked around to the side that faced away from the house, and immediately saw what it was that Roger had been staring at so intently. The gaping mouth in the tree trunk was something that had never been there before, at least as far as George could remember. The edge of the hole seemed to crinkle, like the lips of a toothless mouth.

He promptly stuck his head inside the knot, and gasped.

Flashing blue lights met his gaze, and he had to squint hard against the glare. The forest around him swirled in relief. But rather than faze him, the glowing portal sent a burst of adrenaline through his veins. *Roger must have thought this thing was only in his dream, or he forgot about it as soon as he woke up*, he reasoned. But here he stood, wide awake himself and staring right at it: a pool of brilliant light inside a tree that looked completely normal on the outside. The light hummed with energy and sloped into what seemed like infinity.

He wanted to reach his hand in. Hell, he wanted to climb inside altogether. He didn't want to get electrocuted, but it was so hauntingly beautiful.

That was when a voice floated up from below.

"I can make all your wildest dreams come true..."

George froze. The woods creaked softly around him in the night breeze. It was the only sound. The glowing vortex did not change, both in brilliance and agitation. George stared and held his breath, listening for the voice.

Another deep moan rose up to greet his ears.

"Come down, my son, everyone is waiting for you! Don't disappoint them..."

He did not worry about what might await him on the other side. The weight of his own head seemed to be pressing him forward. He was all but powerless to resist.

Before George even realized what he was doing, he had scrambled up and over the edge of the knot. His eyes were glowing orbs. He plunged headfirst into the vortex.

Then, everything went black.

#

When Roger opened his eyes to sun streaming into his room the next morning, nothing seemed out of the ordinary. Not at first, anyway. George often arose earlier than his older brother did, and when Roger glanced over and noticed that the other bed was empty, he assumed he'd gone downstairs to watch cartoons. He swung his legs over the side of the bed and dug the crust out of his eyes.

It was at that moment that he spied another crust that had resulted from the previous night. He was momentarily shocked to find that he had a thick layer of mud caked on his feet. He lifted up the blankets to see he had made quite a mess in there as well. His face turned red as he thought about what his dad might say when he told him he needed a change of sheets.

As the fog of sleep lifted, Roger's midnight adventure suddenly returned to him in a rush of clarity. He remembered how George had woken him up, and how they'd gone back in the house together, but at the time he'd been too disoriented to know what had

brought him out to the woods. Now in the light of day, he thought about how strange that dream had been after all. He decided to get up and join George downstairs for some Looney Tunes in the family room.

Strange. He didn't hear the customary explosions and xylophone music, and when he came around the corner at the bottom of the stairs, there was no one in the room. He glanced around the room in confusion, unable to comprehend George's absence. The kitchen was silent as well.

Roger's eyes drifted down to the carpet, where he noticed some faint shoe prints forming a track out the back door. These led onto the back porch, and traced the same route the two had taken to come back inside the previous night. More of the dream seemed to brighten up in his memory. *What was it that voice had said, something about another world?* he thought. It still didn't make sense, but the image of the foaming blue portal inside the tree came back with a jolt. His heart sank.

"Oh Jesus, George, you've got to be kidding me," he groaned. He burst out the door and broke into a run toward the woods.

It wasn't hard to tell the direction in which his little brother must have been headed, assuming that he had left the house. Plus, George *had* mentioned he knew which tree it was. *That's right! It was the one he fell out of when we tried to climb it last year.*

Roger got to the edge of the forest and saw it at once: a large, slightly rotten oak with bark that seemed to have taken on a much darker hue since the last time he really looked at it. He inched closer despite a strange sense of revulsion.

He suddenly spotted something lying on the ground. It was a toy train, and he recognized it immediately. It was from a Thomas the Tank Engine set that the boys'

grandparents had given George for Christmas a couple years ago. Roger plucked it off the ground and turned it over in his hand, knowing full well that it was the same one that George kept around for good luck.

He circled the tree and found what he was looking for on the opposite side: a huge hole in the trunk that a kid could easily climb through. He felt a shiver as he looked at its black, staring eye. *He must have stood right here, and ... what? Leaned over, dropped the train, and jumped inside?* He thought back to the way those lights had seemed to hypnotize him. He was beginning to doubt it had really been a dream at all.

“Oh George, what have you gotten yourself into...” Roger murmured.

He glanced around to make sure he was alone, then put his hands on the edge of the opening and looked inside.

He blinked hard as the same brilliant wave of light met his eyes. Before him churned a whirlpool of twinkling crystals. The vortex crackled with thin beams like static electricity. At that moment a breeze rose up behind him, ruffling his hair and and causing a layer of goosebumps to break out all over his arms. He now knew beyond a doubt that George had gone through. The only thing left to do was go in after him. He had to rescue him, plain and simple. Roger steeled his nerves and prepared to dive in.

He placed his hands on the edge and grimaced. An oily sort of perspiration had begun to form on the edge of the opening. The body of the tree almost seemed to be pulsating in a way that made him think of alligator skin – that same slick roughness, but alive somehow. He forced all thoughts of his own safety aside, and concentrated entirely on his resolve to get George back. He could not live without his brother.

Roger crawled into the opening and balanced there with his stomach over the lip. *God I hope you're in there George.*

He took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and plunged head-first into the blue.

CHAPTER 4

George had a slight headache when he came around, but it began to dissipate almost immediately. He had no idea how much time had passed. He remembered tumbling into the blue whirlpool, but that had been his last conscious thought before he wound up... here. Wherever *here* was. He sat up and patted himself down to make sure he was still in one piece. The air felt cool on his skin, and he looked up to see a glittering canopy of stars overhead. *There must be an infinite number of them up there*, he thought. A few went streaking through space, then disappeared in the blink of an eye.

The chilly night air seemed to draw in around him like a cloak. There was something in the atmosphere that felt very different from the woods around their house in Maine; it was more *still* somehow, and he could no longer hear any of the peepers or crickets that he had always associated with home. A thick, dead silence hung in the air.

He looked around. The moon was hidden behind a dense cloud on an otherwise clear night, but the stars provided enough light for George to get at least some sense of the terrain. A barbed wire fence stretched along a road that ran to his left and right

behind him, and to his right was a smaller road – more of a path, really – that led straight to... *it*.

“It” was a three-story mansion. Its hulking shape was just visible in the dark, and stood at the end of the path. The huge A-frame of the roof formed an imposing silhouette against the sky, and several windows on the front stared back at George like blank, glassy eyes. He got up and made his way closer.

He decided it would be best to proceed very carefully, but he knew he needed to find help. One foot followed the other, and before long he was right outside the front door. The structure seemed even more disproportionately large now that he had gotten close enough to see the front door. *Too big for anyone normal to live here*, George thought. He gulped hard against the knot of fear that had suddenly formed in his throat.

George looked around to the left. His ears detected nothing. *So far, so good*. He decided to check out the opposite side of the house.

He rounded the far corner and immediately saw a warm glow emanating from a window on the first floor. In the pale light he thought he could make out a field beyond the backyard of the house, but it was difficult to tell what was out there. He focused his attention on the window, and moved to position himself just below it. Suddenly the sounds of voices inside greeted his ears. The rest of the house was dark and silent.

The window was too high off the ground for him to see through. Looking down, however, he found a pile of discarded crates, and he could read the words ZIMARRON BARLEY CO. stamped on the side of each one in ornate lettering. Thinking quickly, George managed to fashion a crude stepladder by turning them upside down and stacking them up, two crates ascending to three. He climbed onto the first step and then the second, bracing his hands against the side of the house to prevent the wobbly structure from

toppling. It was just high enough for him to raise his eyes over the windowsill and peer inside.

Spread out before him was a large kitchen. A doorway at the back of the room appeared to lead deeper into the house. A cavernous wood-burning stove stood off to one side, and a fire glowed heartily in its iron belly. Split wood lay neatly stacked beside it in a sort of basket framed with wire and metal struts. There was a sink with a large white basin and an old-fashioned water pump mounted just above it. Shelves made of simple boards lined the far wall and held what looked like clay plates and cooking utensils. Against the far wall stood a tall wooden rack.

Inside the rack stood three towering scythes.

The gleaming blades looked sharp enough to cleave a boy in two with one stroke. They were attached to thick wooden handles that stood easily twice as high as George. He doubted he would be strong enough to even lift one of those things, let alone wield it, and he estimated their length to be over six feet. The blades traced a thin curve along the wall like some murderous lunar shape, but what really made his heart pound was situated right in the middle of the room.

Three huge men hunched over a round kitchen table. Their heads bowed inward so that he couldn't make out their faces, only their hunched backs and the black, wide-brimmed hats they wore. The most striking characteristic however, was their sheer size. Standing upright, they must have been at least seven feet, and the chairs they occupied could have accommodated four children George's size.

He cocked his ear and got as close as he dared without coming into view through the window. He was surprised to find he could understand most of what they were

saying. The two giants on the far side of the table seemed to be listening intently, while the one with his back to the window spoke:

“Now look gentlemen, the instructions we received were crystal clear. Cruor has seen fit to place the exit portal near our house, a stupefying bit of good luck and a show of faith in us besides. Now’s our chance to secure a real harvest for the first time in who knows how many years.”

One of the other men piped up: “That’s all well and good Daniel, but how much longer can we afford to wait? You know better than anyone that we can’t afford to anger the king. Not after what happened last time. If we foul this up, our punishment will be ten times greater than the reward, which he may or may not deliver. I think we’re taking a massive risk by getting involved at all.”

And the third: “I agree with Cassius, but on the other hand, we need this. Desperately. We’ll do what we’ve agreed to do: deliver the boy, unharmed, and that’ll be the end of it. If anything should spiral beyond our control, I hardly think he’ll blame us. Besides, if we don’t take this chance, we could starve. Perhaps you’ve forgotten, but the drought this year has essentially brought the Realm to its knees. Barring Vladimir’s mercy, we shall surely die right here on this land.”

“A good point, Isaac, but you’re insane if you think he’ll be understanding of any... mix-ups,” said the apparent leader, Daniel. “We will await the boy, and when he appears, we shall remand him into our custody, deliver him to Vladimir, and there this... contract will end. And we do everything clean. You two may fail to realize this, but the situation in the Realm has been dire for some time. Without the boy, Vladimir’s wouldn’t think twice about starving the entire realm to death. I believe that.”

It dawned on George with sudden clarity that might be talking quite specifically about *him*. He felt a whisper of fear creeping around at the edge of his senses.

Cassius spoke up again: "All I'm saying is we've been waiting for hours and not so much as a field mouse has appeared. What if something went wrong? We all know what happened to the last group of farmers that blew an intake assignment."

An involuntary shiver sputtered up George's spine, and his shoulders shook in a rapid undulation. To his horror, it was just enough to upset the delicate balance that he had attained on top of his crate tower.

The little staircase toppled without further warning. George flew backward and landed in the dirt, sending up a considerable cloud of dust. A couple of the wooden boxes bounced off the siding of the house with a loud clatter. A scraping of chairs and muffled voices immediately followed from within the kitchen.

He was still recovering his wind and getting to his feet when he heard the rushed approach of their footsteps. George whirled around, knowing they were already upon him.

He was not wrong.

Three hulking figures stared at him from the corner of the house, about 20 feet away. Their expressions contained an odd mixture of surprise, relief, and fascination. In the dark, they appeared even more monstrous, and the largest of the three – Daniel, George remembered – stood a pace or two in front in a clear position of power. He eased toward him, the way a hunter might approach an animal in a trap. His hands were outstretched.

Daniel clapped both mitts down on George's shoulders. He was too terrified to make a sound, let alone try and escape. It was far too late for that, anyway. His tongue had turned into what felt like a soggy, balled-up sock, and his knees rattled violently.

The giant's companions – or brothers, as they appeared to be – stood behind him with their arms crossed, watching with leery interest.

“Well, well, well,” Daniel said. “What have we got ourselves here?”

CHAPTER 5

The rush of adrenaline seemed almost too much to bear, and Roger had to fight to stay conscious as he barreled through the cosmic wormhole. He felt his gorge start to rise and prayed that he wasn't about to puke all over the inside of the vortex.

The route began to slope away under Roger's legs, and he instinctively raked his fingers along the sides to try and slow his descent somehow. Unsurprisingly, this had no discernible effect, but he felt a curious rushing sensation not unlike dragging your fingers through water while cruising in a motorboat.

He had managed to keep his balance until now, but he got the distinct feeling that in another second or two he would lose control and start tumbling head over heels. Just when it seemed like he was about to start spinning at a terrifying speed, a massive stretch of barren land suddenly appeared below him. It was hard to say whether it held any beauty as the diorama continued to unfold and the blue matter of the vortex receded; speed blurred Roger's vision enough so that he couldn't make out much detail just yet. *Just keep your eyes open, keep breathing, don't panic*, he repeated to himself, but the tension was beginning to overwhelm his young mind and he started to panic, his

tears wicked away by the currents streaming over his body as he fell. He wasn't a coward, but he certainly didn't want to die, and if his young life ended here, who would ever find out about it? And what about George, for that matter? He pictured himself thudding down in the dust just inches from his own brother's corpse, which had lain there since the previous evening. It was a grim thought and Roger pushed it from his mind, but nevertheless sickening waves of panic had begun to sweep over him.

All at once the tremendous speed of his descent began to taper off, and the danger of losing control seemed to pass for the moment. Instead, something billowy and soft pressed up against him from below, and he felt like he was sliding over the top of a very large parachute. There was nothing actually visible underneath, but the feeling of buoyancy was there all right. With a quick glance back over his shoulder, Roger realized that he had completely exited the sparkling blue vortex, and now fell freely through the open sky. The air tasted clean and refreshing in his lungs, and the sun shone brightly above the horizon to his left. With what little time he had to study the layout before landing, he saw a desolate dirt road rimmed by barbed wire that trailed off endlessly in both directions, and a large, old-fashioned farmhouse farther in the distance off a short access road. Black, rickety shutters created a sharp contrast against the dirty wooden siding of the house, and a somewhat crooked brick chimney stuck up from the roof like an unruly lick of hair. Beyond that, as far as he could tell, lay a field of some sort, but there was little he could make out beyond that with the huge house obstructing his view.

That was all he had time to survey before he at last came to rest in the dust, not far from the road he had spotted. The current Roger had been floating on deposited him in the dirt, just as softly as if he had flown down on a magic carpet.

He plopped down in a cloud of dust. Despite managing to land directly on the seat of his pants, there was no sharp jolt to his tailbone.

He got up, dusted off the seat of his jeans, and took in his surroundings. Ahead stood the strange farmhouse with its raggedy shutters; he was definitely not crazy about the place's overall appearance. There were signs of decay and depreciation all over the building. He couldn't imagine who might live there, and wasn't sure he wanted to find out. The condition of the place held right in keeping with the rest of the scenery that now lay around him, which was, in a word, dusty. However, like the surrounding landscape, there was an underlying sense that perhaps it hadn't always looked this bad. The house in particular seemed as though it had probably once been a very nice place to live, but a lack of resources had caused it to fall somewhat into disrepair over the years. There was no color to the landscape except an all-encompassing golden-brown, the color of a freshly baked pie crust. It seemed like a place where water was perhaps a most valuable and precious commodity to its scattered residents. He was somehow unsurprised to see a pair of tumbleweeds rolling across the open prairie to my right, while a few lonely waves of dust spun up out of the ground behind them before scattering like big waves breaking on the seashore.

He looked down the road and noticed a slight rise in the ground, just beyond what appeared to be a rickety gate. It consisted of nothing but a pole that sloped down to touch the ground at one end while resting in a taller, slingshot-shaped holder at the other end. The barbed wire turned in an abrupt right angle and bordered the rise in the ground. *Train tracks*, Roger thought at once, and he clasped George's toy train, which miraculously hadn't fallen out of his pocket during the journey through the portal.

He set off towards the house. George was nowhere in sight, and he decided that if he had landed in the same spot, which he had a hunch George had, he would have headed for the house as well to look for help. Or, if he was simply struck with amazement by what happened after he jumped into the tree, he might just have wanted to explore. He wondered with trepidation what men or creatures could possibly inhabit such a ghoulish house.

Roger would die before he let someone hurt his brother.

#

The house was only a little over two hundred yards from the place where Roger had first stood up to pat the dust off his pants, and he crossed the distance in under five minutes. When he got closer, he realized it was much bigger than originally thought, and three stories loomed overhead. The windows were dead, black eyes; the door like a mouth with a muzzle on it. Around the side he could see the edges of the field that he'd identified from his bird's-eye view. Dense wheat (or was it barley?) swayed in the wind, the frizzy tops undulating in long waves towards some low hills and the horizon beyond. The image was calming, and a floaty feeling wafted through his mind that was not unlike *déjà vu*. Was there anything familiar about this place at all though? None of it even seemed real. Roger was positive that he had no idea where he was and had never been here before, wherever or whatever "here" was, and this frightened him badly.

He made his way around to the right side of the house to get a better look at the field. In doing so, he happened upon a scattered pile of wooden crates. The air was hot and dry, much like the surrounding terrain, and he hoped whoever had bought the milk also had a cold place to keep it. This weather was definitely not early Maine

summertime. The parched landscape made it clear that this place hadn't seen rainfall in a *very* long time, and Roger suddenly realized he was very thirsty.

Just above the pile of discarded crates he noticed a large window, made up of four outsized panes of dirty glass divided by thin white framing. The panes were not exactly the same size, and gave off the impression of a sort of dust-covered pinwheel. He could see no discernible activity from within, and decided to continue around the side of the house.

Roger made his way around to the back, where he found himself gazing out over the immense, shimmering field. A lone crow flapped lazily into the air, rising from the rows like a puff of black smoke. What Roger had seen from the sky had been spectacular, and looking at it from the ground only served to enhance the impression. The field stretched on for what seemed like miles towards rolling hills in the distance. Though Roger realized later that discretion might have been a better policy, he thought it was possible that George had wandered out into the field. Not seeing another option, he cried out.

"Hello? George? Anybody out there?"

No sooner had his voice split the silence, than three enormous, bearded faces stuck up out of the swaying wheat with liquid speed. The figures stood a good distance away, though Roger could feel their gaze zoom in on him with terrifying awareness. They watched the small boy at the edge of the field for a minute longer. Roger was startled, but did not think they were dangerous at first glance. He decided to call out again.

"Um, hello, out there! I'm looking for my little brother, I think he's lost!" he enunciated each word to make sure they heard him correctly.

They turned inward, appearing to confer amongst themselves, and a second later started coming towards Roger in long strides that broke the even flow of the barley. They carried long-handled scythes over their beefy shoulders as though they weighed nothing. The blades glinted in the sun; they looked murderously sharp.

The men were dressed in a style similar to what Roger remembered Vladimir Cruor wearing in the dream. Their overall appearance seemed a little more ragged, a little dirtier somehow than the dream figure's outfit, and a hard day's worth of sweat gleamed on their foreheads. It occurred to him that he could be dead wrong about the time of day, and that it was actually late afternoon as opposed to mid-morning. This thought only left him feeling even more disoriented than before.

Black wide-brimmed hats adorned their heads, cocked at an angle that shaded their features like the gunslingers in an old Western movie. Thick tangles of black hair obscured their faces, as did the shadows from their hat brims.

In spite of their somehow-familiar appearance – he wondered for an instant if he had ended up in some vaguely cult-like community, something like the Amish village where the boys had once stopped with their mother on a drive home from a trip to Pennsylvania – these men didn't exactly look like regular garden-variety human beings. They were enormous for one thing, at least eight feet tall and extremely burly. *Could George have crossed paths with these giants, and if he had, would they have hurt him?* Roger tried to shake off this possibility almost as quickly as it had entered his mind. For some reason they didn't *look* violent, but he thought that could have been akin to the way a grizzly bear looks fairly placid until it gets angry. His intuition told him they weren't a threat, but then again, he had very little on which to base such convictions. The scythe blades were mercifully clean, he noticed, *but the giants could have easily*

wiped them off after they hacked my brother to pieces, a grim voice whispered in his head.

He shuddered, and forced himself to banish such grim flights of fancy from his mind. He waited patiently by the edge of the field, feeling frozen with fear but at the same time confident that he could handle whatever challenge might lie ahead.

These guys know something about George, and I'm going to find out what it is, he thought.

The men came to the grassy strip that lay between the house and the field and stood at the edge, staring at Roger with eyes that looked as though they could swallow him up with their fierce fascination alone.

Roger spoke in a shaky, hesitant voice: "Um, excuse me, but I'm looking for my little brother. His name's George. Have you seen him? I think he might have come this way looking for help." He paused, thinking for a moment about how best to explain the situation. "Also, where exactly am I?"

Despite the three workers' intimidating size, their body language soon seemed like nothing more than benign interest, and Roger relaxed a little in spite of himself. They leaned on the handles of their mowing implements, and the man in the middle - the one Roger assumed was the youngest - spoke up. His voice was deep and accented in a way that Roger imagined the English peasants in his daydream might have spoken.

"Slow down son, there'll be plenty of time for questions later. I think we'd better go inside and talk." He stepped forward, and Roger resisted the instinctive urge to retreat. "Ah, but where are my manners! Please allow me to introduce myself: my name is Daniel and these..." he made a sweeping gesture at the behemoths standing behind

him “are my brothers, Cassius and Isaac.” They each touched a finger to the brims of their hats in greeting, as though synchronized.

Daniel shouldered his scythe once more and began to walk around towards the front of the house, motioning for Roger to follow. He did, and the two brothers marched dutifully behind them. Daniel took out a large loop of keys from his pocket, each one about the size of a serving fork, and unlocked the wide front door. Roger wondered briefly what the other keys might unlock as they stepped inside.

The foursome made their way into a wide foyer, which was divided by a tremendous stairway. To their right stood an open doorway that led into the kitchen, and Cassius and Isaac went through and laid their scythes against the wall. They began to load chunks of split wood into an iron stove that was just visible beyond the entry way. Daniel placed a reassuring hand on the boy’s shoulder.

“Mister,” Roger started, “I’d love to stay and all but I really need to find my brother. Have you seen him or not?” His own boldness surprised him, but he decided the situation demanded it.

“No son, but let’s step into the kitchen and we can talk it over.” His booming voice ricocheted off the rafters and the floorboards.

“Well... all right,” Roger conceded.

Daniel led the boy inside and had him take a seat in a chair that was far too big for him. The round table was even further out of proportion to his thin frame. Cassius and Isaac finished loading the stove, which crackled pleasantly in the background. The giants’ eyes twinkled and glistened above their untamed beards. Roger’s father, who had been clean-shaven all his life, would have chuckled at what he probably would have perceived as a lack of discipline in the self-grooming department.

Roger and Daniel stared across the table at one another. He was frantically trying to figure out whether these men were lying. *They could be keeping him prisoner somewhere in this house, for all I know*, he thought, although somehow he doubted that was the precise truth. But perhaps it was not far off.

“Now then,” Daniel said, “you say you’re looking for your brother, and he may be lost. What does he look like?” His gaze seemed to convey both concern and sympathy.

“Well, when I last saw him, he was wearing a pair of red shorts and a pajama top.”

Cassius and Isaac joined them at the table. Roger thought a strange look flitted between them at his description, but he couldn’t be sure.

“No, can’t say we’ve seen anyone by that description. Is there anything else you can tell us about him?”

“Like I said, his name is George, and I think he’s lost. I followed him through the...” he paused, trying to choose his words carefully. “He disappeared and I’m pretty sure he came this way. Where could he have gone if he didn’t come here?”

“Now just a minute, where did you say you came from?” Cassius asked. It was the first time he had spoken, and his voice quality and accent was almost identical to Daniel’s.

“I came from... Maine,” Roger said, not sure what else to say.

“Maine?” Isaac asked, looking perplexed.

“Perhaps he means the Isle of Majn, that little fishing village up by the Northern Rim,” said Daniel.

“Ah yes, I think we had an uncle who lived there for a few years,” Isaac said, appearing reassured.

“No matter,” said Daniel. “The issue at hand is this young man’s brother, who is lost, and possibly in danger. Isn’t that right, young master... eh...”

“Roger,” he said, “and who said anything about George being in danger?” His heartbeat quickened. He was starting to feel ill at ease with these oversized gentlemen.

“Oh no, of course not, please don’t misunderstand me my boy,” said Daniel, backpedaling. “But if he’s lost, and you’re out here trying to find him, it stands to reason that he needs our help, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Yeah, I guess that makes sense, sir,” he agreed.

Roger glanced out the window and noticed that the sun had begun to dip behind the horizon. He stifled a yawn and looked back at the brothers. He hadn’t realized it up until that moment, but he was exhausted, not to mention incredibly sore for some reason. *Must have been all that bouncing around on a cosmic waterslide.* He had only been in this world for an hour at most, but the journey had had the strange effect of depleting almost all his energy.

“You must be exhausted. If you really came here from the Isle of Mayn – although, I’m not quite sure how you managed such a feat – then your journey must have been arduous. If you’d like, you can sleep in our guest room tonight, and tomorrow we’ll discuss this further. We’ll see what we can do about tracking down your missing brother.”

The thought of sleep appealed tremendously to him, and once more a yawn escaped his lips.

“I really need to find him,” Roger protested. He grew drowsier by the minute. His body felt even more drained than it had a second ago.

“Of course, of course, but a young buck like yourself needs to save his strength! You get some rest, and I promise my brothers and I will do everything in our power to help you locate him... tomorrow,” Daniel said with a finality that Roger found it difficult to argue with.

“Well ... if you say so,” It occurred to him to ask them once again just where exactly he had ended up, but he was just too tired. *This isn't normal*, he thought feverishly. *Something is very wrong here*.

Daniel took him by the hand, dwarfing it completely with his, and led Roger out of the kitchen and up the central staircase. There was a tiny bedroom at the end of a long hall, though it only seemed small when compared to the other living quarters that we passed on our way.

The giant led him into a sparsely furnished bedroom. It reminded Roger of the rustic quarters in which he had found himself during the dream the previous night. There was a single bed stuck in the corner, and he saw a sprig of hay poking out from the bottom of the mattress. On top, they'd spread what looked like a very warm quilt. On the far wall stood a dresser and a mirror above it. The mirror had a hairline crack down the middle. The surface of the dresser was bare save for an oil lamp, which Daniel showed him how to use. The floorboards creaked under his considerable weight as he moved about the room, giving Roger the grand tour, which lasted all of a minute. It wouldn't occur to Roger until later how strange it was that they would have a room so much smaller than any other in the house, but at the time he was too exhausted to care.

“Well, I hope this suits you, Roger. We'll be downstairs for the time being if you need anything. Anything at all,” he said. He whispered this last phrase in a tone that he probably meant to sound hospitable, but didn't quite make it.

“Sure Daniel, thanks,” he managed, unable to keep his eyelids from drooping any longer.

He staggered to the bed and collapsed on it face down, not even bothering to turn back the covers. He was out before my face hit the pillow.

Daniel closed the door softly behind him, and was gone.

CHAPTER 6

When Roger finally awoke, the room was black as pitch. His neck felt stiff, and a thin line of drool had just begun to leak out of his mouth before he woke up, already having formed a minor puddle on the pillow. He felt fine minus the stiff neck, and turned over onto his back, arriving at his senses and remembering where he was. He had an idea that George was in real trouble, and he tried to jog his brain out of its post-nap slumber.

Roger swung his feet over the side of the bed, and spotted a sliver of light gleaming up through the cracks in the floorboards. It seemed as though his hosts had not retired yet, and were still in their kitchen. He could already hear the bubbly sounds of conversation, and as he crouched down, and the voices got louder, the words became intelligible. When he pressed his ear against the gap, they became clearer still. He listened intently.

“So what do you plan to do with him?” said Isaac. His voice sounded hollow and muffled coming through the wooden crevice.

"This complicates things somewhat. The deal with Vladimir was for one boy, which we delivered as promised. He's in Vladimir's hands now, and our part is played," Daniel said.

"But don't you think he would be twice as pleased if we brought him a second child?" said Cassius.

Daniel paused. "I suppose you may have a point, brother. Vladimir could reward us doubly for such... exemplary work."

"Exactly as I was thinking," Isaac said. "Without his help, we could go hungry. This has been, as you know, an exceedingly dry year, and if Vladimir doesn't help us turn things around, I just don't know..." he trailed off. "The Harvest could be a disaster."

"Believe me, I'm aware of that," Daniel said.

"You have a point. We certainly want to tread lightly here," Isaac conceded.

"If we handle this... development... improperly, we might incur his wrath. If he decides to punish us rather than reward us, we'd find our lives in serious danger," Cassius added.

Daniel did not speak, and seemed to be considering this last point carefully. My ear had grown numb from being pressed so hard against the bedroom floor.

"Right again, my brothers. We must try to look at this from every angle. There's no question that this could benefit us immensely *if* we play our cards right."

"So what do you propose, Daniel?" Cassius said.

"No need to frighten the boy any more than we have to. We'll let him sleep, and then in the morning we'll deliver him to Vladimir and let *him* sort this mess out. His orders were to deliver one heir, but we're going to give him two. I'm sure he can think of

some use for the new child. And once they are both in Vladimir's care... escape will be out of the question."

Roger didn't like the sound of this one bit. His heart had begun to thud rapidly as he realized where they planned to take him.

"For once, I find myself in complete agreement," said Cassius. "We'll hitch up the wagon and bring him along to Vladimir at first light. There our involvement shall end, and we will most assuredly have our harvest. His highness will be very pleased, I have no doubt. This may be the opportunity to prove ourselves we've been waiting for."

"Very good gentlemen, I think the matter is settled. Any last thoughts, brother Isaac?" said Daniel with the formal efficiency of a politician.

"I think we're pushing our luck if we wait until morning. I'd be in favor of taking him right now."

"And tip the boy off that something is wrong, and reveal that we have no intention of helping him rescue his brother?" Cassius said.

"On the contrary, all we'd have to say is we've just received news regarding his brother's whereabouts, and we consider it our responsibility to reunite them forthright," Isaac mused. "It wouldn't necessarily be a lie, and he did seem eager to act as quickly as possible. He might go along with it quite willingly, I think."

Daniel said, "No, we'll wait until morning. We simply do not want to risk scaring him – he could jump off the wagon and make a dash for freedom for all we know. And what then? If he ran off into the night, we might find it... challenging... to bring him back in one piece. You know well enough that the local wildlife can be rather ferocious this time of year. Have you forgotten what happened to the child who showed up five harvests back claiming to be from some strange land called 'O-hi-o'? The one who went

outside to relieve himself an hour after we'd put him to sleep? His bones – those we could find, anyway – were strewn about our field for yards. He never even stood a chance."

A shiver of fear ran up Roger's spine. *Local wildlife?* If he stuck around until morning, they would take him to George all right – and Vladimir Cruor, apparently – but as a helpless captive. Roger doubted he'd get another chance to escape if he didn't leave that night.

He stroked the Barlow knife in his pocket, and prayed it would be enough to protect him if there ever came a need. He unglued his ear from the floor and looked around. The window above his bed had an old-fashioned clasp that he was able to unlatch, allowing him to push the window open on its hinges and create a space about a foot wide. Plenty of room for a young boy to squeeze through. He dragged the sheets off the bed and began to tie a rope ladder with knots for footholds. The brothers' muted chatter continued in the kitchen below. Roger only had two medium-sized cotton sheets at his disposal, but they were sturdy enough, and once he tied them together they formed a usable length of about 20 feet. He lashed one end to the bedpost – the frame must have weighed a ton, judging from the huge beams they'd used to build it, and refused to budge an inch when he tested it with a few hearty tugs – and threaded the other end through the window. It fluttered down through the night air and stopped short about five feet off the ground. He heard the squeak of chairs being pushed back from the table as the giants wrapped up their discussion. Roger knew he had to act fast.

Strapping his backpack tight around his shoulders, he wriggled out feet first while gripping the window sill with white-knuckled fingers. He climbed down the rope ladder as fast as he could, dropping through the air for the remaining five feet at the bottom.

He was free.

#

A wave of déjà vu hit him as he recalled how he'd landed after traveling through the vortex. The air was quiet around him. He stood listening for a moment or two longer, making sure that no signs of stirring elicited from the sleeping house. He felt like he'd stepped out of a spaceship and onto the surface of the moon - impossibly far from home, and alone.

Roger decided to set out towards the train tracks. He glanced around, straining his ears for any sounds of approaching danger. He hadn't liked that remark about the 'local wildlife' one bit, and it was starting to dawn on him that leaving the house might not have been the wisest course of action. *But what choice do I have?* he thought. The brothers had already taken him prisoner, they just hadn't admitted it yet. If he had let it get to that point of no return, then all hope of rescuing George would have vanished. He desperately wished he could go back in time and prevent George from coming here. *Why would he have entered the portal without telling me? Did something force him to go through?* Roger thought. He remembered the sucking feeling that had seemed to tug at his forehead in the dream as he'd stood there staring in, a hypnotic sensation that he had little power to control.

He skirted the barbed wire fence by jogging up the narrow access path that connected the farmhouse to the main road, which he then followed all the way to the slight rise that he had spotted earlier. Beyond there were indeed train tracks; gleaming rungs of steel that went on infinitely in both directions, built on thick wooden railroad ties that looked almost new. These were not the dilapidated, overgrown railroad ties that

he and George used to walk along near the old soccer fields a couple miles from their house; these were modern tracks that almost certainly saw regular use.

He realized that he had no idea which direction he should head in. Somewhere in the distance a wolf howled – or perhaps something far more sinister. In truth he had no idea what might be lurking out there on the dark prairie, waiting to leap out and tear him limb from limb with snapping, drooling jaws. He pulled his thin shirt tighter around my shoulders and pressed on.

He remembered a trick he had seen in an old movie, and bent down to feel the rails. To Roger's surprise, he immediately detected a tiny rumble that began to grow. It was barely perceptible at first, but the unmistakable tremble under his fingers steadily increased. He looked up, away from the house, and sure enough a luminescent white orb was streaking towards him, piercing the darkness. Now, he could just make out a smoke stack, which belched plumes of used-up coal into the air, where the black cloud then threaded backwards as the locomotive made its way around a bend in the track. It was the type of train that hadn't seen wide use on Earth for about 80 years. An old-fashioned cow-catcher protruded from the front, and a large red star gleamed on the front of the engine. Roger estimated that it would reach his present location in under two minutes, and there was no way he was going to miss a ride out of here.

Glancing back over his shoulder, he checked the house of Daniel, Cassius, and Isaac for any signs of activity, or discovery of his escape. To his chagrin, a light flickered on upstairs right as he looked. Based on what he could remember of the house's layout, the light appeared to be in the bedroom he'd recently vacated, and he could just make out one enormous shadow moving about behind the curtain. The curtain abruptly rose,

and there stood Daniel, clearly framed in the lit window. He flung the curtain back in anger, and then stormed off to alert Isaac and Cassius of Roger's escape.

The train chugged closer. Roger got into a ready position, preparing to run alongside the train and leap aboard when he got his chance.

In spite of his distance from the house, and the loudening thunder of the train, he could hear the sound of heavy boots stomping down wooden steps not two hundred yards from where he stood. Soon they would emerge into the courtyard. The train was getting closer, and suddenly the brothers whirled into view, running full tilt around the side of the house. Their scythes gleamed dully in the moonlight.

To Roger's amazement, the train suddenly began to slow down as soon as it got near him. He ran, but a gentle wind had arisen around my feet, twirling into a minor dust devil that appeared to grow larger with every second. The stars seemed to twinkle even brighter in spite of the overwhelming beam of light coming from the train.

He increased his trot to a full-on gallop. His legs pumped up and down in time with the train's steady rhythm. It was not as difficult as he had imagined to keep pace, but the slight ridge that lifted the tracks up above the surrounding plains would make it complicated to jump into an open boxcar, though he could see several with gaping bays. Roger reached up with his left hand, but the jouncing backpack had begun to wear him out. He could feel his endurance slowly ebbing away, and tried to recall the last time he and George had had a decent foot race. Usually he'd be up for this sort of dash, and back home he had hoped to try out for middle school soccer in the fall, but some residual exhaustion from the journey hampered his efforts. His muscles had begun to feel like jelly; his bones were the toast.

Meanwhile, the cyclone that had swirled up around his feet grew more powerful, and kept pace with him step for step. It was then that Roger felt the soles of my shoes lift off the ground. One minute he was running as fast as his young legs could carry him, the next he was sprinting through thin air, a look of bewilderment and surprise plastered all over his face.

Before Roger could even process what was happening, and too frightened to stop running lest the miniature tornado drop him, he found himself level with the opening of an open boxcar, which had JEBEDIAH'S COAL painted in gaudy white letters on its blood-red sidewall. His legs chugged through the air, faster and faster until he thought his lungs might burst, wondering how long the miniature twister that buoyed him through the air would last. The railcars forged ahead alongside with bone-rattling momentum. He knew it was now or never.

Roger twisted his body sideways, and with a final burst of strength, he hurled himself into the open boxcar.

#

Roger collapsed in a heap on the dusty wooden floor. The scent of sawdust greeted him, and he looked around to try and get his bearings. The locomotive sped along through the night.

He listened carefully, but the only thing his ears could detect was the low rumble of the train's wheels. Roger thought he had eluded the clutches of Daniel and his gargantuan brothers, but what might be lurking here in the dark recesses of the boxcar? He squinted into the darkness, imagining dripping fangs and twinkling eyes where the starlight glinted at the corners of his vision.

[You're all right son, there's nothing to be afraid of in here.]

Roger stopped moving and held his breath. *Did I really just hear that?* A voice had filtered into his head just as clearly as if someone had spoken out loud. As if to confirm his fears, he heard a scratching on the wooden floorboards that almost sounded like fingernails dragging over a chalkboard. A tapping, too, came out of the gloom, like the talon of a monster drumming away as he impatiently awaiting his supper. The scratching came closer.

“Easy child, I won’t hurt you. You were movin’ at a mighty gallop when you finally tumbled in here. I’m sure whatever was after ya gave up the chase by now.”

Stepping out of the shadows with its head cocked to one side was a small black raven, its feathers shiny and sleek like fine Indian ink.

Roger’s jaw dropped. “What the...?” he stammered.

“Not from around here, that’s plain to see! And what were you doing running around the plains at night?” His beak moved in motions that matched up with the words coming from his mouth in what might have been called a country caw, if birds were known to have accents. “Don’t you know the prairie wolves would lick your bones clean if they ever caught up with you?” he asked.

“I... I’m not from here, I’m lost. I need to find my brother, I think he might be in trouble.” He couldn’t believe it. He was actually having a conversation with a crow. Stranger things had been happening lately, granted, but the appearance of an intelligent bird had surpassed anything he might have been prepared for. “Those men were going to take me to see a man called Vladimir Cruor. I think he took my brother prisoner.”

Roger’s new acquaintance fluffed his wings with what appeared to be indignation. “That old lout? Mucking up matters in the Realm, that’s about the long and short of

what he's good for. Never seen a lick of decency or good work out of him in all my years of livin'. And he played me a nasty old trick, too, oh yes he did."

"You know him?" Roger asked.

"Of course I do, he rules this land! Runs the show with an iron fist when you get right down to it. All the folks livin' here better do what he say, otherwise they're apt to lose a year's worth of harvestin'. There are things a sight worse than that, too, he's been known to bring about, that is, in times of wrath, as they say. He and I have a ... personal connection, too." He looked down at his scaled feet mournfully. "He's the reason I ride this old tin box, if you want to know the truth of it."

"I'm sorry, but who are you?" He was starting – just barely – to get used to the idea of conversing with a bird.

"Oh, where are my manners, forgot to introduce myself. My name is Percival Crawston the Third, but you can call me Percy." He extended a wingtip. "Pleased to make your acquaintance."

Roger gingerly took one feather in his thumb and forefinger and gave it a brief shake. The feathers felt smooth and oily.

"Well, I'm Roger," he said, finding his voice at last. His throat had gone decidedly dry in the last two minutes since the conversation had begun. "I honestly have no idea where I am. You said 'the Realm'? What is that?"

"Child, you really aren't from around here, are ya? The Realm is here! It's everywhere! No one knows just how far the borders stretch out but I'll tell you, this place is enormous. You can just keep on walking forever and you'll never see the same thing twice."

"Aren't we on like... a foreign planet? If you walked long enough wouldn't you come around the other side and end up back where you started?"

"Heavens no, where'd you get such an idea?" Percy had folded his legs beneath him and now sat almost like a duck on the wooden floor. Roger had never seen a bird looking quite so... civilized. He imagined him donning a bowler and smoking a corncob pipe. He decided to join him on the floor, crossing his legs beneath him Indian-style.

"The Realm doesn't circle around, it just ... stretches out. Forever," Percy said.

"Oh..."

"So you think Vladimir Cruor has your brother?"

Roger brightened at their return to the topic of George. *This bird knows something that can help me, and I'm going to find out what it is*, he thought. Percy cocked his head at the boy once again.

"I'm almost positive. The men whose house I was at before... they put me in a bedroom and left me to sleep, but I could hear their conversation through the floorboards. They said they were gonna bring me there too, I think."

"Well it's a damn good thing you got out of there. I think I know the men you mean – not the most pleasant of types, all brawn and no brains, but they sure know how to swing a scythe. That'd be Daniel Grimsrud and his two brothers. Mother was a giant, father an ogre, had three boys. They sure grew up to be big," he paused, "and hairy!"

"Tell me more about Vladimir Cruor," Roger pressed. "The brothers said he wants to keep us here. I climbed out the window before I could hear much more, but I remember one thing – they used the word 'heir' when they were talking about us. I don't think they know me and George are brothers, but I'm pretty sure they don't want to let us go home."

"You sure they weren't talking about the air? Sounds the same, heir, air." A look of consternation had worked its way into Percy's facial features. "This might be worse than we thought."

"I know what they said."

"Of course, don't mean to be contrary. Hmm. This is a puzzle indeed, what to do, what to do..." He got up and began to pace in little circles. The train's course remained straight as an arrow.

Roger felt decidedly out-of-whack, however, and began to doubt his ability to continue the conversation. Everything he thought he knew about reality was coming unstuck at the seams. *Stay focused. You need information, and he could even become some kind of ally. You need all the help you can get.*

"You said you're stuck on this train because of something Vladimir did, right?" he asked.

Percy stopped pacing and looked up. "What's that? Oh yes, I do indeed, ever since he stripped me of my license to fly, sonny. That old bastard played me a real nasty trick when he clipped my wings." He blinked. "Scuse the rough language there, pal, forgot to mind my manners."

Roger paid no mind. "So you can't fly? Vladimir took away your ability to fly, is that it?" He wiped a sweaty palm across his forehead. "Why would he do such a thing?"

"He decided he had to punish me," Percy said. "Because of one stupid little mistake, he took away the greatest gift I ever had." He now wore an expression that reminded Roger of his dad's face when he was hankering for a puff of pipe tobacco and a cold beer after a long day at the office. Percy went on: "I used to be able to soar all around the Realm, go anyplace I wanted to. Those days are gone now – but there's

something I can do about it!" He perked up. "An old woman named Mother Florence. I'm going to see her. She has a campsite not far from here and I know she can help. She might even know how to get your brother back, too," he said.

"Mother Florence?"

"Yes, very wise, very wise indeed," Percy muttered, beginning to pace in those frantic little circles once more. "She'll know just what to do about your brother, no doubt about it, and as for me..." the starlight glinted in his eyes, black as polished buttons.

"I plan on getting my wings back."

CHAPTER 7

The old king sat at the head of a long table, drumming his fingers impatiently. Daniel, Cassius, and Isaac stood before him in the great dining hall, which also served as Vladimir Cruor's receiving chamber when there were serious conversations to be had. The candelabra at the center of the table sent flickers dancing across the stone wall. The scent of roasting meat floated in from the kitchen, which lay behind a smaller door to the rear. Daniel licked his lips.

He was flanked by his two brothers. They waited patiently for Vladimir to speak. Isaac and Cassius looked utterly distraught. Vladimir could execute them on the spot, if he wanted to. Daniel knew that Isaac had seen the boy running alongside that train, and it stood to reason that he had made it aboard safely. By then he could be anywhere. Of course, the boy knew nothing about the geography of the Realm. Another lost boy, another tragedy in the making, perhaps one that had already occurred. *How many times had the master brought children through, only to have it end in disaster?* Daniel wondered. And who knew what Vladimir Cruor really wanted with these two little boys. The king worked in mysterious ways.

“How could you let him get away?” Vladimir suddenly bellowed. “*That* boy was the right one! He’s the one I want! First you show up with the wrong brother, and now here you are telling me that this other child – Roger, you say – was in your house... AND YOU LET HIM CLIMB OUT THE WINDOW?!”

“Sir, in all honesty, there was no way he could have known our intention was to bring him to you, or that his brother was being held here.” Cassius says. Daniel shot him a withering look. The wrong choice of words could get them killed. Cassius gave a barely perceptible shrug in return.

“When I want you to speak, I’ll ask you a direct question.” The words dripped from the king’s tongue like poison. Daniel resisted the urge to flinch as Vladimir aimed his gaze directly at him. No one dared to point out the fact that Vladimir *had* asked a question just prior to Cassius’s protest.

“Daniel, this was your job. You should know I’m holding you lot fully responsible. I thought you had some sense in you, but when the three of you work together, you become just as incompetent as a gaggle of lobotomized geese.”

Daniel’s skin prickled with indignation at Vladimir’s callous, ignorant words. He wanted to raise his voice and tell the king he had no right to speak to them that way, perhaps seize him by his wrinkled old throat and shake him until his long, hated life drained away forever, thereby freeing the Realm and giving people a real chance to live their lives in harmony... but no, they weren’t strong enough. Talking back would mean a sure death for all three of them. It was not safe to let his mind wander along such lines – one never knew who could ‘overhear’ such thoughts.

"We live only to serve you," Daniel heard himself say. It was like watching someone else acting out a role on stage. "Please tell us how we may atone for this act of carelessness."

This appeared to placate him, but the impression was only temporary. Daniel knew he could not completely assuage Vladimir Cruor's infamous temper with such a plain and simple apology.

"It's too late," Vladimir waved a hand with disgust. "This is not the first time that the Grimsrud clan has failed me, Daniel, though I fully intend for it to be the last."

"I'm calling in the Rangers. They used to say, 'if you want something done right, you must do it yourself.' Wise words, but I have a saying that I think you'll appreciate too: if you don't want something fouled up all to hell, you must call the Rangers to finish the job. I should have assigned this task to them in the first place."

Vladimir grimaced, as if experiencing sudden heart pain. *If you are, I hope it hurts, you old bastard*, Daniel thought. The other voice in his brain chastised him again for not keeping his thoughts in line. *You think no one in this house can read your mind and report it to Vladimir?* the voice said.

"The Rangers, sir? I thought you wanted the boy unharmed." Cassius, speaking out of turn again. Daniel winced and hoped that the implication did not transform Vladimir Cruor into a whirling dervish of rage once more.

"I want him brought to me you fools!" He slammed his fist down on the oaken table, the thud adding to the cacophony of his voice now bouncing around the airy chamber. "The longer he's out there, the better the odds that he'll get snapped up by some roving pack of wolves." He paused. "You might also be interested to know that that troublesome crow Percy inhabits an old freight train that goes by your place, and I'm

almost certain Roger boarded it after he slipped through your fingers. For all we know, they could be on their way to see Mother Florence right now.”

“Mother Florence, sir? I thought she was just a myth,” Daniel said.

Vladimir shot him a look that could curdle milk. “That bitch is no myth,” he said, drawing out each word. “She is real, and sits out there at her camp with those two brats, scheming and plotting against me constantly. You can only find her if she wants to be found – or, if you track someone whom she has allowed to approach. For that reason she has managed to stay just out of reach all these years. Every scout I’ve sent to determine her location has ended up going mad. When they came back – those that stayed sane long enough to return, anyway – the Rangers had no choice but to put them down like rabid dogs.” He looked as though he had tasted something sour. “I’d like nothing better than to see her behind bars, locked in my dungeon for the next hundred years or so.”

Mother Florence. The name conjured up images of Daniel’s childhood, his own enormous ma balancing him on one tree-trunk thigh, telling the tales of an ancient woman who lived on the plains, caring for her two children, Hector and Maisie. She had told him about her great talents, as she called them. The ability to read minds, and, in some cases, predict the future.

Vladimir glared at them now, his eyes full of unfiltered hatred.

“Well, what are you waiting for, an invitation? I’m done with you. Get the hell out of here!”

Isaac opened his mouth to protest, or perhaps to ask for one more chance, but he knew it was a bad idea. Without Vladimir’s help, the Harvest would be lost; this was the reality all three of them faced. A sudden urge to walk up to the table and spit viciously upon the wood in defiance threatened to overwhelm Daniel. Vladimir noticed Isaac’s

desire to add something, and even more vitriol seeped into his expression. His skin had taken on a decidedly angry red hue, and Daniel half-expected steam to billow from his ears at any second.

“Get out of my sight!” he screamed.

Daniel blinked as a few tiny flecks of spittle flew from Vladimir’s mouth. Without another word, the brothers Grimsrud turned to leave.

#

The dungeon was cold, but not uncomfortably so. The air felt refreshing on George’s skin and in his lungs, and the aroma of hay teased at his nose. He could hear dripping water somewhere over by the darkened stairwell. He imagined the tiny splash it made as the droplets formed a little puddle, perhaps draining off into some crack or flaw in the floor until it returned to the ground deep below the foundations of this house.

He tried to stop his knees from shaking, with little success. A short while ago he’d heard the distinctive stamp of heavy boots upstairs, probably in that dining hall where the men had brought him when they’d first arrived, he thought, but he could have been wrong. George’s understanding of the house’s layout was disjointed at best, but he *had* gotten a good look at the entrance hall, which was shrouded in woven tapestries of brilliant color and design, and lit by massive torches on the walls that reminded him of the movie *Dracula*, which he and Roger had secretly watched when they were younger, without their dad’s permission.

George had nothing to do except listen to the water drip, and he realized he had started to cry. The prickly sensation in his eyes had given way to a few tears, which rolled down his smooth cheeks and plunged to the ground with the same patter as the drops in the stairway.

The sudden sound of a large metallic bolt sliding out of place interrupted his troubled thoughts. Ancient hinges at the top of the stairs groaned in protest as the door opened, and a visitor's shoes rasped on the steps as he – or it – descended to the row of cells.

“Hello?” George called out, feeling some strange burst of confidence as he found his voice. “Is somebody there?” He realized that he missed Roger almost more than he missed home, freedom, or his dad. The tears began to roll faster as he played over various terrible fates that would likely await him a few hours from now, perhaps at the hands of some hooded executioner.

“Calm down boy, don't get yourself in a tizzy, I'm only coming 'round to have a quick word.” George didn't recognize the voice, though the accent sounded vaguely familiar.

Presently a man drew into view, one who walked with a rather large kink in his spine. It jutted into the air like a cat's arched back, and his crooked shoulders framed a pinched old face that was speckled with warts. He clutched a cane in one hand, while the other held a glowing lantern aloft. George watched him approach with a knotted fist of trepidation twisting its way into his stomach. A flicker of light from the lantern glinted off his teeth. They looked sharp. He approached the George's cell in shuffling, lurching steps, a cane clacking down for assurance as he made his way closer. He figured my best course of action would be to sit still and wait.

He walked up to the bars of the cell and stood there, staring in with wide, searching eyes. He squinted and held his lantern a little higher, trying to get a better look at the boy. George, in turn, took a couple steps backwards; there was a rotten smell coming off the man in waves.

“Now look here, sonny jim, I don’t mean to scare you. The old man upstairs just wants to have a word with ya, explain why you’re here and that sort of thing. I’m sure you’ve got a handful of questions, ain’t ya?” he spoke with a mild-mannered politeness that surprisingly made George feel a bit more at ease. “He knows he’s got a bit of explainin’ to do. Come on, let me getcha out of that cell there.” He reached for a large ring of keys hooked to one of his belt loops. George had no desire to go upstairs, but the prospect of getting out of the cell for the time being certainly held its appeal.

The key clanged in the lock and the door yawned open. The figure stood before him, looking down at George the way a lion might look at a trapped gazelle.

“Who are you?” he pleaded. “I don’t know where I am and I want to go home. My big brother, Roger... he’ll be looking for me!”

“Goodness me, where *are* my manners! Forgot to introduce m’self. Name’s Mandrake. Lord Cruor entrusts me with only the most sensitive matters, but don’t think of me as a jailor, little fellow; I’m more of a caretaker, and I keep the place looking pretty spiffy if I do say so myself.”

George didn’t care about any of that. What he wanted to know was how long he’d have to wait before being reunited with his family.

“Why am I locked up here? I didn’t do *anything* wrong,” George said, trying to sound as convincing as possible.

“All in good time. But first, let me escort you upstairs. The man we’re about to see doesn’t like to be kept waiting.”

Perhaps the last thing in the world that George wanted at that moment was to see “The Man Upstairs”, but he figured he had little choice in the matter. He stepped out of the cell with his head down until he was standing beside Mandrake.

“There’s a good sport! I promise you’ll be very interested to hear what he has to say,” he wheezed.

CHAPTER 8

Two gunmen on pale white horses crested a low hill that overlooked an endless dusty plain that stretched out below. Pearl-handled revolvers stuck out of hand-stitched holsters embroidered with gold thread by the shamans of a gun-loving tribe of nomads who frequented the prairies to the north. The trim on their leather chaps bounced in time with their horses' canter as they drew to a stop. For all intents and purposes, they were identical in appearance, and one could have sworn they were twins.

"I reckon if we ride all day we'll make it to the Cruor estate by sundown," the first rider remarked, studying a scuffed patch on his leather riding gloves. The other man looked up, silently assessing the sun's position in the bright blue sky.

"Aye, we've got an early start. Good thing the summons came when it did."

"Sounds like those three yokels really screwed the pooch this time."

"You could say that."

"Think Vladimir'll pay us good this time?"

"I don't know Martin, you know he can never make up his mind this far in advance. We'll see how our fortunes sway with the task at hand, then worry about

compensation later.” He paused, then added: “I swear you have a one-track mind sometimes.”

“Ah just think we ought to receive our dues, is that so wrong?”

“Naw, it’s a fair point, brother, fair point.”

The rider named Martin leaned over in his saddle and spat a healthy dollop of tobacco juice onto the ground.

“Well, I s’pose it’s not as if we have a whole lot of choice in the matter, anyhow,” he said. “We’d better get a move-on.”

They each gave their steeds a jolting kick in the ribs with matching spurs and were away. The hooves of their white horses sent up a massive cloud of dust as the descended the bluff and streaked out across the prairie like white lightning.

#

“Step this way son, and watch your feet, these stairs can be treacherous,” Mandrake said as he aimed the lantern towards the top of the dungeon steps. “You’ll pardon the master for keeping you waiting.” He stopped and turned to look at George with an embarrassed expression. “By the way, young sir, er... what do they call you in the land you come from?” he asked.

“George,” he said. “My name is George.” The pronunciation of his own name sounded almost alien since he hadn’t said it aloud in so long, but at the same time it instilled a little more self-confidence somehow.

He doubted that what “the master” wanted to show him would placate his frazzled nerves, but he went willingly enough. Mandrake guided him down a narrow

hallway that led to another side door. This one opened into the great dining hall that he had briefly glimpsed upon arrival. A fire roared in the hearth, and an imposing figure sat at the head of the long oaken table. It looked to George like he spent a lot of time at that post. He looked as comfortable in that carved, high-back chair as a snake wrapped around a mangrove branch.

“Well if it isn’t my newest star pupil!” the man said in a booming voice. When George met his eyes for that first time, he noticed that the expression on his face actually made him seem anxious to meet the boy, as though some great hope rested on his shoulders. Mandrake stood George at attention on the other side of the table, then hurried over to the old man and whispered something in his ear.

“George, of course! Good English name. Take a seat, if you like. Now, do you know who *I* am?”

George opted to tuck himself into a smaller chair at the corner of the table, unconsciously choosing one that would minimize eye contact. In his heart, he already had a glimmer of an idea as to who he was, couldn’t quite put a finger on it.

“No... I’m not sure, I guess.”

He chuckled, as though George had just told some childish joke.

“That’s very good, boy, plenty of time for introductions after all. They call me Vladimir Cruor,” he said.

“You’re probably wondering why I’ve brought you here, and the truth is we had a little bit of a mix-up. You see, the real goal was for me to meet your *brother*. I think we both know that he’s already made his way to the Realm and is on his way here to rescue you at this very moment. Isn’t that right, George?”

George had no idea that Roger had in fact come through the tree in search of him, but he fervently hoped that Vladimir was telling the truth.

“What do you want from me?” he asked hesitantly. It seemed like a reasonable enough question.

“Now now, it’s not what I want *from* you...” he intoned, smiling at George with red, cracked lips. “We’re in this together here, don’t you see? One team, you and me, same side.”

“Then why can’t I go home? This place is scary.”

Vladimir laughed. “You’ll need some time to fully adjust, but let me be the first to tell you, this is your home now! You’ve yet to see just how wonderful the Realm can be. In fact, there’s something that I’ve been meaning to show you.”

“What is it?” he asked, curious enough.

“It’s in my study. Mandrake, would you kindly take leave of us for a while?”

Mandrake obediently slipped out of a side-door and was gone. Vladimir himself got up with a slight wheeze and motioned for the little boy to follow. He did so. They walked side by side to the back of the room, then descended through an opening down a stone staircase that led to another chamber, this one a round room that appeared to be part of some kind of tower at the center of the house. In truth he hadn’t gotten a great look at the exterior of the building, but he knew full well that the structure this man called home was enormous. He wouldn’t have been the least bit surprised to know that they were in fact standing inside the base of a tower that shot up through the center of the mansion like some kind of taproot. George’s one and only impression up to that point had been that the place was like a castle. One thought kept pecking at his brain: *What have I gotten myself into, and will I ever see my brother and my dad again?*

“Step this way, son, don’t be frightened.”

Without another word, Vladimir yanked on a torch holder in one wall, and the stone panel began to separate, spreading apart right before their very eyes. The pieces fit together like a jigsaw puzzle, but the lines had been almost invisible prior to Vladimir pulling on the lever. The tall man looked on with mild interest as though he had done it a thousand times.

Of course, George had never seen anything like this mechanism in his entire life, and was dumbstruck. He hardly even registered his gnarled hand on my shoulder as he gently pushed him forward, urging him to go inside and see what lay in store.

“Don’t be frightened,” Vladimir said.

George again found himself without many options to choose from, and moved forward into the opening. As soon as he crossed the threshold, he felt the temperature increase a good ten degrees or so. Just when he was starting to worry about finding my way in the dark, a green orb of light seemed to ooze into luminescence and guide my footsteps along the cobblestone floor. George proceeded forward with some faint semblance of confidence, if only from the fact that he could see where he was going. Vladimir followed close behind.

As it turned out, the orb that guided him emanated from a pool of the same green light. Whether it was actually water or some other liquid was anyone’s guess. The pool was contained in a sort of well that he had never seen before, one that was almost certainly man-made, but nonetheless looked as though it had formed quite naturally, almost like a birdbath fashioned from an extraordinarily thick stalagmite through thousands of years of water dripping straight down from above.

Vladimir approached the glowing pool. He bent slightly at the waist to twirl its contents with one long, bony index finger. George decided that it was most definitely not water when he saw how viscous it was. Sparkling globules of the stuff clung to Vladimir's finger, then dribbled back into the basin with a heavy plop when he withdrew his hand and gave it a brisk shake. The chamber was completely unfurnished save for the glowing urn in the center.

"Come closer, my son. Look into these waters. They'll show you anything you want to see... *if* you know how to look."

George walked up to the edge as if in a trance and peered inside. Vladimir swirled his finger on the surface once more, and no sooner had he done so than an image appeared on the top of the liquid, clear as day and sharper than any picture George had ever seen on TV. It looked like an old-fashioned locomotive, rumbling along through a prairie.

"I've already ascertained the whereabouts of your brother, George. Those nice men who brought you here saw him board this train, which is now headed more or less in our general direction. If he stays on its current course, he'll arrive at our doorstep by sundown. Pretty convenient, wouldn't you say?"

George's heart leapt into his throat. "You're going to throw him in the dungeon too, aren't you?!" he half-shouted, adrenaline and fear coursing through my veins.

"Heavens no! He'll *stay* with us, granted, but I'll make sure that you're moved into rooms that should be more suitable for growing boys. This mansion holds many beautiful chambers, and you're welcome to the one of your choosing. There are just some... preliminary precautions we're forced to take, purely in order to ensure your

safety, you see. That's why we're having you stay in the basement suites for now!" He flashed a winning smile.

"It's a dungeon," George stated flatly in protest.

"Enough." There was an edge to the old man's voice now. "Think of it as a temporary relocation zone." He paused and motioned towards the fluid image in the astral birdbath. "You see now how your brother has already made friends with a very unsavory character?"

He had plenty more to say, but bit the words off cleanly before they came out and focused on the projection instead. Sure enough, the image had moved closer until it was now flying in tandem right alongside the train, looking in on the open doors of a certain boxcar with the words JEBEDIAH'S COAL painted on the side. George was almost unsurprised to see Roger himself sitting in the opening of the boxcar, his legs dangling over the side with that unmistakable carelessness that so often seemed to characterize my big brother.

"That's Roger!" he exclaimed, too glad to see him to contain his excitement.

"It certainly is," Vladimir replied, returning to a more pleasant tone. "I'm afraid he's taken up with a talking crow named Percy, who has plagued this region for more years than I'd care to admit. I'll be honest with you, George: I'm a little disappointed in your brother's choice of friends." He leered at him with a sinister grin. "Very disappointed indeed."

"A crow?" George asked.

"Yes, a crow. And a very clever, *treacherous* crow at that. Once Roger joins us, we'll have to separate them. It'll be for his own good." Now Vladimir hardly seemed to be addressing him at all, off in some personal world where his own musings took

precedence over everything else. "It's just as I suspected. I believe they're trying to see Mother Florence. Another minor problem, to be sure, and one that can easily be remedied." He turned back to George. "I'm afraid you'll have to excuse me, but I have pressing business I must attend to. Mandrake will return you to your quarters at once." He laughed then, a harsh bark that sounded more like a sea lion than a man. George's skin crawled and he thought that maybe getting back to his cell might not be such a bad thing after all. As long as he didn't have to spend another minute in this frightening old man's company.

And away from that smell... he thought. You know, the one like old dirty pennies. I know you know that scent. Roger had it on him when he came home from trying to ride his bike faster than usual to keep up with the older boys, his knees all scraped to heck and bloody. That smell is pretty much the same thing you're smelling now, don't try to deny it. And what are those brown stains on his teeth??

Vladimir seemed to have all but forgotten about him, and stood staring into the pool that had moments ago shown Roger. Now the liquid looked cloudy, and the image was incoherent.

Unbeknownst to George, Mandrake had already appeared in the chamber, seemingly unbidden. He jumped when his hand clapped down on his shoulder to lead him back to the cell.

What he felt was nothing short of relief.

#

Roger's posterior was starting to grow numb from the train's ceaseless rattling as it surged along the tracks. He had the strangest sensation that they were breaking new

ground, as if some magical force were dropping fresh tracks just ahead of the lumbering behemoth to create a route that had never been traveled before.

He had fallen asleep for a few hours it seemed, and his new feathered friend had apparently done the same. Percy lay a few feet away in a crumple of his own black wings and almost looked dead. When Roger blinked, sat up, and looked around however, the bird also began to stir, and the boy watched as he sort of pulled himself together and peered at him through bleary yellow eyes.

"Sleep well, fella?" Percy asked.

"I guess so. My butt hurts though, and I haven't had anything to eat in a while."

"I know how you feel. Sleeping on trains takes a lot of getting used to," he remarked, yawning. *I had no idea birds could yawn*, Roger thought.

"Before we fell asleep last night, you were going to tell me something," Roger said. "Something about a woman who you thought might be able to help me find my brother. What was her name again?"

"Oh yes of course, Mother *Florence* is her name, she's the one we're going to see!"

Roger thought back to our conversation and realized the situation was indeed grave. Based on what he had heard at the giants' house, George could be in a lot of trouble, and so far he had only managed to stir the pot by escaping from people who would almost certainly make the connection between me and him.

"I just didn't really understand how she could help us. Shouldn't I just go to the house and break him out of wherever Vladimir's got him locked up?"

Percy looked at Roger as though he had just sprouted a second head.

"Are you insane? Just waltz right in there, grab the keys, and spring George from Vladimir Cruor's personal dungeon, is that it?" He paced about muttering to himself.

“Isn’t that a fine idea, absolutely, why didn’t I think of that to get my wings back! Sneak in the back door and reverse the spell. Genius!”

Percy’s sarcastic tone stung a bit.

“Look, Percy, I’m sorry, but I really don’t know what’s going on here, and I have no clue who Vladimir Cruor *is*, anyway. So could you maybe fill me in on a few of the details?” Roger spread his hands in an entreating gesture.

“Fair enough, I shouldn’t have been so quick to judge. I remember when I was a foreigner here, too.” He scratched at something in the dirt with one yellow claw.

“Sometimes I wish I could go home. Vladimir put me in this situation, that’s true, but he also brought me here in the first place. But that was *eons* ago, not really worth mentioning now ...” he trailed off. Roger could hear what sounded like a lifetime’s worth of self-doubt in his voice, and it brought on a sudden wave of sympathy – both for the bird as well as himself, for the fact that he’d gotten stuck in a situation like this with no idea how to save George or get back home.

Percy *had* managed to pique his curiosity, however.

“What do you mean, ‘just walk in and undo the spell’?” he asked. “You’re saying Vladimir took away your ability to fly... with magic?”

“Damn straight he did.”

Roger rubbed my eyes. “So what happened?”

“I used to *work* for that old cur, if you can believe it. Not much of a story really, and I’d be lyin’ if I said it didn’t pain me some to tell it, but here goes ...

“Seems like a long time has passed, and I can’t quite recall how many years ago this happened, but safe to say it was at least five harvests ago.” He laughed like it was just some witty phrase he remembered.”

“That fall – when Vladimir decided to strip me of my birthright, my *gift* – we were having a huge year in terms of the Harvest. Vladimir was feeling particularly benevolent, and when that happens you can be sure that most of the farmers around Zimarron are going home happy at the end of another successful day to get in bed with their wives, feeling all content and cozy and such.

“Anyway, this farmer by the name of Gertrude was so pleased at the success of his dairy cows all that year that he decided to make Vladimir a gift of two fine calves. The man came one day in a wagon and cart carrying the two gentle creatures, and although I wasn’t there to see it, I’m sure Vladimir was touched. He has his moments of humanity after all. The farmer warned that the calves had to be tended to with the utmost care, since they were particularly vulnerable at that life stage, and so on, but he also said that they were two of the rarest calves ever to be born in the Realm. They bore identical golden birthmarks on their right flanks, and the farmer insisted that the signs indicated possibly sacred beings.”

“Vladimir hired you to look after them, is that it?” Roger asked. “What made him give you the job? How did you even meet him in the first place?” Once the questions started they were difficult to stop.

“Easy there, soldier, I’ll answer everything in good time. The fact is, I was just flying by when Vladimir called out to me. Only, he didn’t use his voice – not one that I could hear with my ears, anyway. He used his *mind*. Words bloomed in my head like any other personal thought that I might have, but I knew it was not my own. Remember how I said hello when you first boarded the train?”

Roger said that he did.

“Vlad’s not the only one in the Realm who’s got a knack for that type of conversation,” he said with a smirk. “Just about anyone can pick it up, although in my experience it’s a pretty common trait amongst intelligent birds such as myself. It takes a little time and practice, but it’s really no trick at all.”

“You mean it takes practice to learn how to hear it, or to transmit it?” Roger asked.

“Both, actually.”

“But so how could you influence my thoughts when we hadn’t even met yet?”

“Some people are naturally gifted, and I’ve learned to read the signs in a human’s aura. You had just tumbled into my boxcar all in a heap, and I knew from that alone you’d be bewildered and disoriented. Plus, you practically reeked of fear and vulnerability, so that gave me enough to go on. When I pick up on all those signals, it’s easy enough to access where a person’s mind would be most receptive to a message. All I wanted to do was placate your fears, and your mind took up the signal like a fish speeding off with a lure in its lip.

“Anyway, back to the story. Vladimir calls out to me since he sees me soaring by overhead, and I had done some work for him in the past, settling accounts with the farmers and such, so he must have recognized me or something. I get his message loud and clear – it’s a job offer. I swoop down to the mansion just in time to see the old dairy farmer shuttling off with his wife in their rickety old wagon, and Vlad’s standing there with the calves flanking him, one on each side just as calm as – well, just as calm as Hindu cows.”

Roger wondered how Percy knew what Hindus were – unless... *did he say he hadn’t always lived in Zimarron?* Vladimir had ‘brought him here,’ but he sensed that

that was a story for another time. *Remember, your job here is to get George and get home, not figure out the life story of an admittedly very remarkable bird.*

Percy fluffed his feathers and got back to the story.

“I come down and Vlad’s standing there looking like a proud father with his two chubby sons – I think he had already picked names for them even, although I can’t recall what they were – and he told me that they were to be locked in a pen he kept out back; my job would be simply to watch over them using my enhanced bird-vision, raising the alarm if any intruders or wildlife decided to make an unwelcome guest appearance. I agreed, signed on the dotted line, what have you. Speaking of which, Vladimir had in fact prepared a contract – conjured it out of thin air so far as I could tell, just sort of pulled it out from behind his back like some kind of devil – and had me scratch a little X at the bottom. And just like that my feathered ass became the property of Vladimir Cruor.”

#

Mandrake’s grip on George’s shoulder was firm as they walked back through the house along the same route they’d originally traveled. And when they came to the dungeon door, Mandrake glanced at him with a seemingly apologetic look.

“Sorry, little fella,” he said. “Master’s orders. I’ll see about getting you moved to a more suitable room. Soon.” With that, he unlocked the door with a key from the huge ring on his belt, and led him downstairs.

Once George was back in his cell, Mandrake closed the upstairs door firmly behind him, sliding the bolt into place with a resounding clank. Things looked grim, but not altogether hopeless. The sight of Roger in the pool, and the knowledge that he was here in this world, gave him an immense burst of hope.

He could hear a strong wind howling under the eaves of Vladimir Cruor's mansion. Somewhere high up he could also make out the sound of rafters creaking, and he wondered if a major storm might not be brewing at that very moment.

Listening to the wind banking off the roof could hardly have been considered a decent way to pass the time, so he proceeded to pace around, trying not to cry. *Well, maybe Roger is coming to get you. That might take a little while (although I have a feeling it won't), so what are you going to do in the meantime? You'll starve or die of boredom before long.*

He didn't really think *that* would happen, but he was definitely getting bored. He glanced desperately around the cell trying to find something to distract himself. There wasn't much to see: the cot, a toilet that was little more than a wooden box with a hole in the top, (he couldn't see any bolts or nails, but it certainly wouldn't budge when he gave it a hesitant shove with his foot), and a rubber ball, one that was a little smaller than a soccer ball, and covered in a creepy red and yellow pattern that bore a large white star on one side.

He picked it up, squeezing it once to test the pressure, then bounced it on the ground. It rose back up to land in his hands. He walked over to the iron bars and held the ball up, pressing it against the gap – to his pleasure, it wouldn't fit through. Good - that meant he could kick the toy around for a while without losing it. The rubber texture and bounciness of the ball held something undeniably creepy, given the context, and he wondered who else might have played with it in this very same cell.

Other kids?

With that thought, he punted it against the far wall, perhaps a little harder than he intended owing to the pent-up fear and frustration at being held prisoner by a

weirdly sympathetic yet impotent servant and his frightening old master who smelled like the back of a haybarn. He punted the ball.

Whang! It ricocheted off the cinder blocks and flew straight back at him like a cannonball. Its speed caught him by surprise and forced him to duck. It caromed off the bars – lucky he checked; if the ball had been a bit smaller it would have landed in the corridor to roll away, leaving him to hope for Mandrake to make another appearance and bring it back – and bounced back to land on the floor, the white star spinning crazily as it rolled, finally disappearing under the cot. It finally came to a rest underneath with a slight bap against the wall.

George sighed. The ball had hardly provided him with the level of amusement he had been seeking. He closed my eyes, taking a deep breath and counting backwards from ten to stay calm, a trick his daddy had taught him. He got down on his hands and knees to go prospecting under the bed.

The dungeon was dimly lit by two torches which flanked the staircase at the end of the corridor, but there was enough of a glow to see the space under the cot quite clearly. The ball lay off to one side, forgotten now. He gazed for what seemed like many minutes at the far wall. His lips trembled, and he felt his eyes sting with tears for what felt like the dozenth time that day.

George could make out a terrifying milieu of words, numbers, and odd diagrams – all scratched in scraggly blocks of handwriting on the wall under the bed. Despite the panicked, desperate qualities most of them displayed, the messages were clearly the work of more than one person, and judging from the relative roughness and smoothness of certain images and phrases, some were fresh, and some might have been unspeakably old. There were lines too, the old four-vertical-and-one-horizontal slashes to make five.

There were a lot of them. The anonymous authors of the messages had, over time, managed to cover almost the entire surface, to the point where hardly a square inch of unblemished wood remained.

After reading a few of the notes, George wondered why they had felt the need to repeat what was basically the same message along the whole five-foot section. His eyes fixated on one whose letters were carved with neat, almost desperately deliberate fashion. It was as if the final hour had at last come at hand for the poor doomed soul who had written it.

The message was essentially like all the others, but urgent, almost pleading in its brevity. It read:

GET OUT WHILE YOU STILL CAN

CHAPTER 9

Dusk fell, and the stars began to come out, winking in the prairie sky like an old Lite-Brite. The pale riders had ridden hard through the day to reach the Cruor estate. They were tired and hungry, but the thought of showing such a side to Vladimir Cruor never even crossed their minds. He had summoned them – this they knew – and when a job came along, any displays of weakness fell under the category of “utterly unthinkable.” The Rangers knew their fearsome reputation, one which Vladimir had played no small part in helping to inspire, and they too are insistent on maintaining their frightening façade.

Most prairie dwellers recalled the time the duo set fire to Farmer Hepsworth’s barn after he’d failed to deliver his tribute crops on time; or there was that fearful night when the Rangers descended upon a peaceful town hall meeting in one of the Realm’s more built-up business districts many miles to the north. That night, they had employed unseen aides to lock the doors from the outside and hijacked the meeting to deliver a fiery sermon. Martin had screamed bloody murder and intimidation at the parishioners while Luther stood off to one side with his arms crossed looking stoic. Martin told them

in his brutish tone that they had forgotten the benevolence of their Master, and to remember all that he had given them, lest their homes and livelihoods be laid to waste by one terrible storm that would swallow them up like Jonah and the whale.

Much time had passed since those days, however. Now such tales were relegated to the late-night conversations of old sharecroppers and their wives in dim kitchens with the curtains drawn. The commoners knew well enough that one could never be too sure who – or what – might be listening, regardless of the distance between their homestead and Vlad's mansion. Rumor had it the king had spies in every corner of his domain. Some hinted at an elaborate network of torture chambers spread throughout the land. No one knew just how many men are on his payroll, volunteers and conscripts alike.

Martin and Luther fell into this latter category, and they certainly relished their work. Fear and intimidation were their bread and butter, and Vladimir relied on them like he relied on his own two hands. They carried out their missions not just with ruthless efficiency, but with bloodthirsty enthusiasm. Oftentimes, while lying in bed waiting for sleep to overtake him (or some semblance of sleep; they say Vladimir only ever "rests," and with one eye open at that, like a dragon), he'll think of some old errand that he has sent the Rangers on, reminiscing with pleasure at how they must have swooped in, possibly trampling a child or an old woman under the hooves of their wild horses – both stark white in color – as they roared into town to deliver the latest message of forced obedience and complacency. Although, to say "complacency" implies that perhaps the good folk who call the Realm home – and there are many, the Realm exists in a borderless state where the ends are as yet undiscovered – are unaware of some terrible danger looming over their heads. They know this danger well, and most

have become acquainted with Vladimir's wrathful temperament, and tendency to rain fire and destruction on whomever he likes when displeased.

The riders approached the door to the fortress on foot. They led their white horses along by matching black leather bridles.

"Come in, it's all right, those buffoons left a while ago," Vladimir says, greeting his Rangers as they step through the door with perceptible caution. They may be long-time employees of the Master of the Realm, but that does not mean they feel at ease around him; they've learned not to underestimate his temper.

"What is it you would have us do?" Luther asked.

"Very simple. There's a boy out there, riding that confounded train – you know, the one the conductor insists on driving around, picking up stragglers who happen to need a lift – and I want him. He's worth a lot to me – alive, mind you – and I want you to adopt a very careful approach to this mission."

The Rangers nodded their heads in understanding. "You think they're off to see Mother Florence?" Martin said.

"I can't say for sure – the boy seems to be dampening my attempts to read his thoughts somehow – but I do know he's with that dratted crow Percy. I should have taken care of that pest a long time ago... at any rate, Percy is probably advising the boy on how best to retrieve his brother from my clutches."

"Deliver the boy. Sounds simple enough," Luther remarked with confidence.

"Of course, I know you men are quite keen on adventure, and I wouldn't want to prohibit you from any extracurricular objectives along the way, so to speak. Maybe create a bit of havoc at that old wench's campsite, for instance."

The Rangers exchanged sly matching grins.

"That shouldn't present much of a problem." Martin muttered.

"Mother Florence is difficult to find. They say you can't get to that site unless she wants you to find her. But with your tracking skills, perhaps you can fulfill this extra order. You will be rewarded handsomely."

"No trouble at all, boss. We'll find the site, give the old woman something to think about for your trouble – then grab the boy when he shows up."

"Sounds fine to me, fellas. Now make haste! It's already been several hours since he managed to escape those blundering Grimsrud brothers. Speaking of which, I want that meddlesome crow punished for taking part in this fiasco – destroy him as well."

"Certainly, Master." Martin and Luther knew the Grimsrud brothers well – those giant good-for-nothings had been causing problems for the master for as long as either of them could remember. The Rangers took no greater pleasure than in fulfilling a task that has already been bungled by inferior workers. Such opportunities allowed them to further cement their reputations as ruthless henchmen.

Without another word, they made for the exit. Their eyes glowed like hot coals.

#

How long can this train ride possibly go on? Roger thought as he watched Percy groom his feathers for what seemed like the thousandth time that morning. Spend too much time on this train and George'll be dead before you even figure out where they're keeping him, let alone see him in the flesh. He doubted that his efforts would fall quite so short, but nonetheless he had begun to grow very anxious. Nevertheless, he wanted to hear Percy's story.

“Well, so? You signed a contract that Vladimir conjured out of thin air. Then what?” Some definite impatience had begun to work its way into Roger’s voice.

“I agreed to watch the calves,” Percy said, with a flourish of his wing. “The responsibility was all mine, and I understood that. The very first evening was particularly fine, as I remember – there I was, perched up high on a weather vane that overlooked the pen Vladimir had built. They milled about in that useless manner cows have and I started to get bored pretty quickly. The moon was out, not a breath of breeze – perfect conditions for a little midnight soar, so I looked around, made sure no one else was watching, and took off.

“In the beginning I meant it to be just a quick out-and-back – to the little patch of forest beyond the foothills, at most – but I suppose the night air got the best of me, and I was out for longer than expected. Quite a bit longer.” He shuddered as he prepared to tell what Roger presumed to be the grisly outcome of the story.

“You may not know this, but the wildlife around the Realm can be... kinda fierce. That season the coyotes were acting particularly ravenous and I... well, I should have been there to raise the alarm, but when I got back it was too late.” He grimaced in a way that Roger guessed only birds could, somehow twisting his beak with regret. “There was blood everywhere. I couldn’t save them, I...” He held a wing over his face for a second to regain his composure. “It was a goddamn mess. Vladimir heard their bellowing and appeared just as I arrived on the scene. He...” Percy paused, as if trying to summon the strength to recount what happened next. “He pointed his gnarled old finger at me and shot out a bolt of blue lightning that damn near caused me to go blind. That passed - I still see pretty good, for a bird – but it did plenty of damage in other ways.” He lifted his right wing – Roger had already noticed how he favored the left, and raising the right

appeared to require considerable effort - and revealed a gruesome scar that bulged purple and showed in a bald patch where there once had been healthy feathers.

“What on earth did he do to you?” Roger asked, awestruck.

“Clipped my wings, simple as that. Only had to wreck this one here though, had enough mercy I suppose to leave me with one good wing. Doesn’t matter though, the damage was enough. I lost consciousness, must have dropped like a sack full of flour. Woke up on the edge of an abandoned salt mine some distance to the south. Took me damn near a week to get back to any recognizable part of the Realm, and either way I’ve been stuck looking for Mother Florence ever since.” He shuffled his feet, as though ashamed for still not having achieved his goals. “She’ll help us out though, my boy, she’ll know what to do.” A bit of confidence returned to his squawky voice. “Say, you hungry?”

Roger was famished. All his thoughts had been devoted toward advancing a solution that would free George and get him home safely, and he had forgotten all about his stomach, which he now realized was rumbling about as hard as the train.

“Say no more. I’ve got a few other tricks besides just knowing how to read your mind.” He tottered over to the corner of the boxcar and returned with a checkered handkerchief. “It takes a special kind of bird to survive in the Realm under Vladimir Cruor’s rule.” He waved the handkerchief over the floor with his beak and dropped it, and Roger watched the cloth puff up as it fell. Instead of hitting the ground and lying flat, however, it stayed upright as a tent shielding some object, a large lump invisible before but now made apparent from having the cloth draped over it. The lump was shaped like a loaf of bread.

“Did you just...?” he started, but Percy had already whisked away the handkerchief to reveal a steaming, golden-crust hunk of fresh bread that smelled like

a warm slice of heaven. Through some trick with the napkin he had seemingly conjured breakfast out of thin air. Roger's mouth began to water immediately.

"Well, don't be shy, let's eat!" he said, tearing off a generous hunk with his beak and lobbing it in Roger's direction.

#

George sat with his back to the opposite cell wall, clutching his head and trying to keep his thoughts from reeling out of control. The notes under the bed had given him a bad shock, to be sure, but if he was to have any hope of escaping he needed to keep his wits about him. Roger couldn't run the entire operation on his own, and he'd be damned if he was going to just sit in his cell without doing anything to try and help them get home.

But what? he thought. You can't get out of here by yourself; the only thing would be to fake sick for Mandrake. Get him to open the door to check, then run for the door. He had pulled off a fake fever to get out of school with his daddy a couple times, but the stakes were considerably lower in those cases.

He rubbed his fingers against his temples in a symmetrical motion as he had seen his father do on a number of occasions when he was having one of his "work headaches," and he did start to feel a little better, but then the pain pulsed jaggedly behind his left eyebrow and the gray cot wavered at the edge of his vision. He was too frightened by what he had seen written underneath to look at it for too long.

He got to his feet and paced around a bit, wondering if Mandrake might make another appearance that evening. George guessed that it was probably only late afternoon, and he'd have a while to wait, if Mandrake even planned to bring him any dinner. That painful, empty gnawing had begun to increase in his belly, and he realized he'd probably need to get used to it. At least for the time being.

The ball lay forgotten beside the cot, where it had come to rest against one leg after bouncing into that dark place to reveal the writing on the wall. Who were these children who came here before me? George wondered. They almost certainly were children, after all. The note that had jumped out at him was painstakingly formed, but the others were scrawled in a way that only a child's hand could have produced. A few displayed the backwards R's and S's that George associated with his own travails in learning to print by hand.

[Relax, child. Vladimir has a reason for everything he does, and you'd do well to remember that.]

That invasive line of thinking again, as though someone were projecting their own thoughts into his head. This impression was impossible to ignore, as the voice seemed to rise out of nowhere.

[You could be a very lucky boy, George, if Vladimir decides you'd make a worthy heir. Think of this as a trial period. It's for you to sit tight while he makes other preparations. Preparations to transform you into a true member of the Realm. He likes you, George, and soon you'll be living the kind of life that you could scarcely have imagined.]

He didn't like the sound of that one bit, he clutched his head. It felt like someone - or something - had forced its way into his mind like an uninvited houseguest. There was definitely an outside source projecting this voice, though it spoke in an unidentifiable whisper.

[I have many names. Mandrake perhaps is one of my personalities, but I'll tell you I live in this house – through this house. I can be everywhere at once, if it pleases

the Master. I sense a great strength in you, and don't doubt that you'll find yourself up to the task that Vladimir wants you for.]

[I don't want to do any tasks! I want my big brother, and I want to go home.] I was beginning to sound childish, but I didn't care.

[Your brother may very well join you in time. I hear Vladimir wanted him in the first place, but you stumbled through and now both of you could be eligible for a big promotion.]

I was starting to have trouble following this line of thinking, one of the major factors being that I was scared witless, had been ever since I saw the messages.

[Leave me alone!] I shouted, concentrating my mind to make it as loud a thought as possible. To my relief, it seemed as though the foreign voice in my head shrank back a bit at that, as if it hadn't expected something so forceful .

All he really wanted was for it to leave him alone.

Played out in my mind's eye, it didn't seem as foolproof as I had been counting on. Maybe quite the opposite of foolproof, whatever that might be. Wherever he was, I fervently hoped that Roger was having better luck at finding a way out of this mess that I had gotten us into. I closed my eyes and let my thoughts wander – the other voice had apparently obeyed my request and gone somewhere to let me cool off for the time being – and soon I felt drowsiness creeping over my eyelids . I let it take over, my back inching down the wall, head sliding to rest on my left shoulder. When people sleep they don't have a care in the world, I thought. Maybe if I die, going to heaven will just be like having a really nice dream, only you never have to wake up. I could be okay with that.

I was gone.

#

Roger dusted the last few crumbs off the front of his shirt and sat back with his eyes closed, a smile of pure satisfaction splayed across his face. He belched.

“That was good!” Roger exclaimed to Percy, who was still pecking at his meal across from him.

“Glad you enjoyed it,” he mumbled between bites.

“How long until we get there, do you think?”

Percy took a break from the loaf to consider this. “Well, the thing about that is – we can’t exactly just leap out the side of the train and expect to find her. In fact, if we did that, I can pretty much guarantee we’d end up as wolf-food within the hour. That, or cursed to wander the plains until we starved or went insane. No, we need a more precise means of getting to her camp, and that will require some diligence on our part.” He paused, and his voice took on a grave tone. “There are three challenges on this train, Roger, which we must overcome if we are to have any hope of proceeding further in this adventure of ours.”

“Challenges?” he gulped.

“Yes, in a way. I wanted us to have something in our bellies before we got started. They are not for the faint of heart.”

“What are you talking about? What do we have to do?” This just gets worse and worse, he thought. Losing George in the first place was bad enough, but now you’re mixed up with a talking crow who needs you to take on some challenges? What are the odds that he’s been pulling your leg this entire time, or using you? You might have made a very stupid decision by leaving those brothers and hopping this train, but you just had

to make a run for it. They were planning to bring you straight to George after all, a free ride, and you left.

But he knew the brothers were not going to help him. He had no choice but to escape.

[Roger, can you please pay attention so I can tell you about the tasks now?]

He broke from his thoughts and looked at Percy. He had forgotten that he could get a pretty good read on my mind when he wanted to, and he turned red as he realized Percy had likely overheard the paranoid speculation that the crow planned to use him.

“I’m not pulling your leg, son, the Realm is a dangerous place and this is serious business.

“Now, do I have your full attention?”

CHAPTER 10

Confusion and despair swept over George like a black shroud. The iron bars gleamed in the torchlight, and his mind did its best to bat away the fierce terror that continued to encompass all the rest of his emotions. He palmed sweat off his forehead and tried to steady his rapid breathing.

It wasn't just being in a dungeon that scared him. He could hear something down there. Something that made a slight shuffling sound as it dragged its horrid body along the corridor.

You're either imagining things or still dreaming. You may be in trouble but at least you're alone in here.

But was he, really?

George stepped over to the bars and wrapped his arms around them. His heart felt as though it had been dipped into ice water. It thudded dully somewhere in my throat, and I swallowed hard, as if trying to push it back down to the place where a heart belongs. An image rose in his mind of a long, scaly beast, which looked like a fat boa

constrictor crossed with a hog. In his imagination it grunted and dragged itself closer to where he stood, trapped and helpless.

George strained his ears, at the same time praying not to hear anything else.

He glanced toward the end of the hall where the twin torches lit the stairs leading up and out of his prison. Shadows danced across the walls like a grotesque puppet show, and to his over-exhausted mind they looked nothing less than monstrous. In one corner a clown with glistening fangs emerged, its claw-like hands reaching out in the flickering light to take him by the throat and sink its teeth into his neck to guzzle his blood. This began to morph almost as soon as he could tell what it was, now changing to a mummy with rotting bandages drooping off its decomposing face. The head creaked backwards on its unspeakably old and disfigured shoulders, and the mouth yawned open to reveal putrid teeth, which only grew more elongated the more the head tipped back.

Shuff...shuff...shuff... That sound again. George's nerves seemed to be on fire with adrenaline, and a terrible thought occurred to him: what if this isn't a dungeon at all, but a kind of zoo? A place where Vladimir Cruor keeps his favorite pet creatures – human or otherwise – on display for some bizarre purpose? Maybe he's planning to invite all his friends over, just so they can stand around and stare at me? And to what end? Feed me to some terrible lizard he keeps in some other freaky pen for the grand finale?

The idea had a horrible plausibility to it. I He stepped back from the bars and staggered backwards to the cot, my heart seemingly having crawled even farther up my windpipe. The sound was still out there; he knew it was real now, that sound moving slowly up the hallway to come and slink between the bars of my cell and devour me alive. The face of a wolf now loomed up at him from the wall. Loose slobber ran in rivulets down each sharpened fang. He could hear its wet, monstrous tongue slapping

against moist lips that would savor each morsel as the beast licked the gristle from his bones. I've never felt more powerless in my entire life, before or since.

He sat down on the cot and began to weep. The thing in the corridor continued to inch closer towards him, still hidden by the dark shadows along the floor that dripped down from where they danced and morphed into those horrifying shapes before my eyes on the wall. The dim glow from the twin torches only created a small sphere of light that illuminated little more than the immediate area surrounding the bottom of the stairs, and whatever lay out there could make its approach unseen, so long as it stayed low to the ground.

Closer and closer it crept, and George shrank back against the cell wall as much as humanly possible. That was when the voice entered his head again.

[Don't be afraid, George. I'm just a friend of Vlad's. He keeps me around the castle to keep an eye on things. I won't bite, I just want to have a look at you...]

The loathsome thing at last drew into focus as it finally reached the cell. A candle that Mandrake had lit before leaving threw a warm shade of light that at any other time would be extremely comforting. Here, in this place, and given the thing it illuminated, the effect was nothing short of hideous.

The creature that now stood before him was very long. Its tail looped back far enough behind its body to curl over on itself multiple times in a grotesque parody of a pig's tail. Black bristles poked out from the pink flesh of its tail. A hairless body was attached to it, speckled and muddy, like a pig that had spent the day rolling around in the mud. A few twisted feathers poked out of a hide made of scales larger than any George had ever seen. Like dragon scales, he thought

His eyes traveled along its full length to arrive at last at its head, which bobbed near the bars, peering in, while emitting a low hissing sound.

Its head was the worst part.

A black, forked tongue darted out – long in an exaggerated way, like the tail – and flicked between the bars towards him as if sampling the air. He remembered reading somewhere that snakes kept their sense of smell in the tongue. The air reeked of its breath, an eye-watering odor like rotten onions and wet garbage, and he found himself forced to suppress his gag reflex. Its eyes were black and lifeless, plugged into its smooth face like buttons above a pointed snout that was just thick enough to prevent the creature from sticking its whole head through the bars.

[Just wanted to have a look at you, my boy. You're going to be very famous soon. The entire Realm shall know your name, and hear stories of your greatness proclaimed by Vladimir himself.]

[What stories of greatness? What are you going to do to me?]

[You'll see, son. It won't be long now. Your time is fast approaching.]

Where was that voice coming from? I He felt his consciousness slipping away like grains of sand through his fingers – the adrenaline had taxed his system in a way that he hadn't known possible. He gave his head a brisk shake and forced himself to hold on. Don't be such a coward, he can't get in here. If he could, it'd be a whole different story, but you're safe in here... for now.

[Child, be calm, I don't mean to upset you. I won't come any closer, if my appearance really frightens you that badly.] As if you have a choice, I thought. If you were skinny enough to get inside I think I'd be screaming my lungs out as I watched you devour me alive. Like in that National Geographic show where the boa constrictor

unhinges its jaws to eat a whole pig. Except I don't think you'd swallow me whole, would you? You'd tear me limb from limb with those disgusting shark teeth.

Then, the thing with which I would have thought it'd be impossible to communicate or reason grinned at me. Its lips curled back in a gruesome parody of a human smile, exposing jagged teeth that gleamed in the light from my candle. He could hear my thoughts. Without realizing it, I'd been having a full conversation with this monster in my head. As the enormity of that fact started to sink in, the loathsome beast continued to stare at me, its head bobbing rhythmically up and down, the tongue darting out to taste the air. Its midsection seemed to throb – in multiple places – with some alien heartbeat. I shuddered as I tried to imagine what the beast's insides might look like. Please, leave me alone. Please go away, I pleaded wordlessly.

The hiss seemed to turn raspier, like a change in tone from pleasant to cold and aloof.

[All right. I can see you're not in the mood to chat. But I'd be lying if I said I wouldn't be paying you another visit quite soon, my boy.]

With that, it drew back, turned, and slunk down along the corridor, heading back to whatever vile pit or nest it might call home. A friend of Vladimir's, all right. He probably sleeps with that thing like its his doggy, George thought.

He waited for some rebuttal from the beast, but none came. It only pulsed forward with that shuff... shuff... shuff like an overfed python carving a trail through the leaves and detritus of a steaming jungle floor.

Roger looked at Percy with growing impatience and waited for him to describe the tasks that lay ahead, tasks that he now viewed as just a few more obstacles standing between me and my brother.

“Well? I’m listening.”

“Good. Now that I have your undivided attention I can tell you everything I know about what lies ahead... which is very, very little.” He paused. Roger gaped at him.

“You don’t know?”

“I know what I’ve heard, which is this: there are three boxcars between us and the conductor. In order to reach Mother Florence’s campsite, we must successfully complete the challenges, one after the other, all or none, contained in each boxcar. The successful completion of each challenge will provide us with a golden key without which we cannot hope to pass through the following door. If we manage to make it through all three in one piece, we’ll be considered worthy to speak with the man up front and request an unscheduled stop. Without the assistance of the conductor, who is said to know the Realm like the back of his hand, one can never hope to get where they are going, and we would end up riding the rails until the end of time, which would almost certainly result in us losing our minds and starving to death.

“Those boxcars form a kind of magical barrier between him and us. It prevents him from having to deal with more unruly customers who might distract him from his duties, and of course it also determines who is worthy of his help and guidance. Naturally, we already know we’re worthy, but we’ll never convince him without the proof of having made it through the three cars. I think we’ve got a good shot – by myself, I never thought I’d muster the courage to attempt it, but now that we’re together, I’d say we have a distinct advantage, wouldn’t you?”

“You make it sound like it’s pretty dangerous in there,” Roger said.

“Oh yes, extremely dangerous. Would never even dream of going in there without an able-bodied accomplice. I think you’ve got the right stuff though, kid. Both of us brought to the Realm against our will, winding up on the same train – has the ring of destiny to it, don’t you think?”

Roger didn’t think. He only nodded with that puzzled expression never quite leaving his face. This is getting to be a bit much to handle, my friend, he thought.

[Not at all,] came Percy’s voice right back in his head. [Just take deep breaths and remember some advice that I picked up along my travels: don’t panic!]

That sounded pretty reasonable to Roger. He consciously slowed his breathing and steeled his nerves, which had already begun to feel taxed and useless.

“So, how do we get started then?”

“That’s the spirit! I thought you’d never ask. The game begins just beyond the door of this very carriage.”

He glanced over and saw the door Percy spoke of, which up to that point he had somehow failed to notice. In fact, Roger could have sworn that it hadn’t been there when he collapsed in a heap on the floor just before meeting Percy. It was big, taking up almost the entire far wall, and built from panels; it door reminded him of the oversized entrance to the house where the giant brothers lived, but it appeared strangely out of place given the rusty supports and cheap clapboard siding that surrounded it.

“If you’d be so kind, please go over and give the door three good knocks. The first one does not require a key – well, other than the willingness to proceed, which is asking a lot, given the unspeakable danger that almost certainly lies just beyond this threshold...” Percy chuckled.

Roger glared at him. "Do you want me to help you or not?"

"Yes, of course, I'm sorry, we'll be quite fine, I'm sure. Now, if you don't mind, I've been waiting quite a while to have my chance to visit Mother Florence, and without you I'm afraid we don't stand a chance. Believe me, you have my deepest gratitude for arriving when you did. I don't think I could have waited around much longer, but I could never have attempted this alone, as I've already said."

Roger sighed. "Fine. Let's get this over with."

He strode over to the door, hoping he looked more confident than he felt, and pounded the door three times, bizarrely hoping that it wouldn't be considered a rude or forceful knock, given the fact that I had no idea what might be waiting to greet me on the other side.

The first boxcar turned out to contain something extremely foul-tempered indeed.

#

"Hector, quit kicking up dust and come give me and your sister a hand with the dishes!"

Mother Florence's son glanced back with resentment in his gaze.

"But mom, I only just started playing," he groaned.

"I don't care, I fixed you a nice meal, and you're going to help clean up, just like we do every night. Come on, quick like a bunny!"

Hector trotted over to where Mother Florence and her daughter Maisie were scrubbing dishes in a large soapy basin. She could sense something in the air, and when that happened, it usually meant visitors were on their way. Their sleeping tent stood off to one side of the clearing where they had made their camp this month. Rarely did they

stay in one place for long; the Realm could be a cruel place at times when you belonged on Vladimir Cruor's "naughty" list. Maisie polished a tin plate. A warm feeling of pride bloomed in Florence's chest at her little girl's diligence.

"Thank you, Maisie, there's a good girl." Hector meanwhile grabbed a handful of wooden spoons and began wiping them with a rag.

Dust swirled about their campsite and rippled the canvas fabric of the careworn tent. An enchanted barrier glimmered in a wide circle around the clearing, a necessary precaution when trying to raise two young children in the barren wilderness that Vladimir had banished them to. They used to have a home, but that was a long time ago. Before Florence angered him by spurning his advances, finally walking out the door after his final attempt, leaving him to rage in that awful fortress he called home. She wondered if he was in there now, and if he still thought about her.

If her instincts were correct about the people headed for her camp – and the nature of their visit – Vladimir might have cause for great concern indeed. The aura that she picked up from them – there were two, that much was certain – spelled nothing less than a grave threat to Vladimir Cruor's seat of power, for she detected something powerful in them as well, a desire so strong it could tear a hole in the fabric of this world. Someone needing rescue? Waiting long and painful years to reclaim a valuable gift that was stolen? The wishes and motives that I'm sensing blend together like the fingerpaints that I conjured out of thin air for Maisie and Hector on their last birthday.

Well, she thought, if they want to find me, they must have a pretty good idea of the dedication it will take to find this camp.

She could tell they were traveling by train – anyone who really wants to come and see me must ride the rails – and if they expect that crotchety old conductor to make a

special stop, they'll have to survive those three boxcars of yore. I even helped design those challenges, knowing how easily Vladimir might decide to dispatch someone or something – those dreadful Rangers, most likely – to teach me a little lesson in humility before one's superiors. I can tell that the visitors are good people, though. If they survive the journey and actually make it here, I'll be more than happy to help.

The dishes were finished and placed in their small crate to dry. The children looked exhausted. Maisie tugged on her mother's dress and asked if she might tell her and Hector a bedtime story.

"I know just the one," she said with a smile. "Would you like to hear about the evil prince who courted the damsel, only to find that cruelty and fear were no way to win a woman's heart?" They looked a little perplexed, but nodded nonetheless. Evil princes usually had a way of piquing the curiosity of young children. Courtship and love they knew less about, but fairy tales about failed romances did not get enough credit, in Florence's opinion.

She led them into the tent and closed the flap. They both needed a little help getting into their nighties – blue for Hector and scarlet for Maisie. Florence had already folded back the corner of their shared bedroll, which I've filled with enchanted feathers to insulate them against the Realm's harsh nighttime temperatures. With her two cubs wrapped cozily in their bedding, looking up at me with shining eyes, Mother Florence began her tale:

"Once upon a time, there was a kind farmer who lived alone in a big house out on the prairie. He cared deeply about his work, and made sure that the harvest each year was even more bountiful than the one that preceded it. But those crops alone could not

fill up his heart – something was lacking, and he began to grow bitter when he found himself unable to determine what it was.

“He continued to work hard, but his heart had already begun to grow black and corrupted from loneliness. He had invented a technique that allowed his farm to produce far more than anyone else’s, and before long the villagers wanted to know what his secret was, for it seemed that as the farmer’s crops thrived, their own fortunes suffered, almost to the point where they were unable to put food on the table each night for their families. This continued for several years, and the Realm teetered on the brink of outright famine. No one but the kind farmer prospered, only he had lost his kindness somewhere along the way, it seemed. No more did he offer gifts to his friends when they celebrated a birth or a marriage; no more did he host lavish gatherings where whisky flowed like water and warm, fresh bread lined the tables. He kept it all to himself, and the villagers began to think that he had brought a curse on them, using some enchantment to sap their livelihoods and provide only for himself.

“As things progressed in this manner, the farmer, whom we can call Ivan, became extremely wealthy. He hired new people to work for him, as the borders of his property constantly seemed to be expanding, even swallowing up the bankrupt estates of men who had once considered him a dear friend. But still, he was not happy. The hole in his heart had only seemed to widen, filling up with poison and bile as it did so, and all the land and wealth in the Realm could not seem to change it.

“You see, Ivan wanted a wife more than anything, someone to assuage the deep isolation he felt, in spite of the fact that he was constantly surrounded by servants who tended to his every need.

“Magic has long been present in the Realm, as you two know, and I myself became proficient in its use many years ago, but it has a tendency to hide itself. Everybody knows it exists, but there are not many people who know how to wield it effectively. The disenfranchised landowners who used to rely on Ivan for help suspected that he had begun training in the dark arts, and that perhaps he had begun to use a form of black magic to sap their power and influence and essentially make life miserable for everyone. All they could do was sit up late with their wives in candlelit kitchens, hoping against hope that things would improve soon, and what recourse they might have when things inevitably grew worse, instead. Which, of course, they did. One autumn in the midst of the famine, Ivan managed to pull in a record-breaking harvest, which he sold for a tidy profit to rich businessmen from the east.”

Florence gazed into the faces of her two babies and wondered whether to go on with this particular tale. She had never told them what happened next. She took a deep breath and decided to continue.

“That same year, people’s children started disappearing.”

CHAPTER 11

No sooner had Roger thumped his fist against the door for the third time than it began to swing open in a wide berth that seemed to go on forever. What it revealed was breathtaking.

A massive, sloping hill covered in lush green grass spread out before him as far as his eyes could see. Percy moved over to stand next to the boy and gazed out as well, equally dumbstruck.

“Well, I’ll be...” Percy murmured. With that, they stepped through the door, and onto the grass, which felt springy and good beneath their feet. The rattle of the train was gone, which came as a huge relief to Roger’s sore body. A slight breeze stirred his hair and ruffled Percy’s feathers. The air smelled like freshly harvested pollen. Pink flowers, strange and tall, dotted the field that lay before them, and Percy and Roger cautiously began to move forward.

“Percy... what is this place?” he asked.

“I couldn’t tell you, seems like a beautiful day in here though, don’t you think?” Percy replied cheerfully.

“I don’t know, I’m getting the creeps.”

“Don’t worry, look, I can already see the next door at the bottom of the hill.”

Percy pointed his good wing down the slope and, sure enough, an oak door identical to the one they had just passed through appeared to rise up directly out of the ground.

Roger couldn’t see anything that it might lead to – as far as he could tell, it was simply standing out in the open field – but the atmosphere around it did seem to possess a kind of shimmering quality, like the air above the hood of the family Subaru after a long drive on a hot summer day.

“Yeah, I see it. Let’s just get there quickly, okay?”

“Anything you say, boss.”

They continued their trek through the grass, which was ankle-high and waved in the breeze like angel’s hair. The fresh air tasted marvelous, and Roger bent to smell one of the strange pink flowers that seemed to sprout everywhere around the two travelers, and were most likely the source of the overriding scent. Somewhere a bee hummed its merry tune, and save for that mild breath of air, all was still.

“Hey Percy, come check out this flower, it’s really weird!” Roger called over to his feathered companion. The flower he had paused to inspect resembled a very large tulip, with a pink bell that drooped slightly towards the ground under its own weight. Out of this cup extended a thick white pistil; as he watched, fascinated, the pistil began to twitch and point about, as if probing the atmosphere for sensory information about a possible nearby intruder.

“Not now Roger, we’re wasting precious time. Come along, if you please.”

“Oh and by the way, what’s the challenge here? Walk across a field on a beautiful day? Pretty daunting!” he laughed. “Back where I come from, ‘a walk in the park’ usually

isn't considered too difficult." Percy rolled his eyes and continued on ahead. I bent to examine the flower closer, its pistil still switching back and forth like the tail of an anxious puppy. Roger was so close now that his nose almost grazed the protruding segment as he took a good sniff. Catherine... it smells like our old tabby Catherine after she's been digging around in the root cellar, I thought, like a boy in a dream. Then, abruptly, it stopped moving.

At that moment, the earth began to tremble, and Roger felt the grass that had previously seemed so spongy beneath his feet start to separate, giving rise to a bubble of earth that increased in volume so quickly that he lost his footing and fell flat on his back. Somewhere at the edge of his senses Percy screamed. The crow's voice was drowned out by the earthquake that accompanied the rising mound, and before Roger had any idea what was happening, the dirt clods fell away to reveal what could only be described as a beast out of his worst nightmare. Ragged teeth gnashed at the air as a gigantic mole-like creature tossed bits of sod off its body, reminding Roger of the individual squares that he had once seen laid down for an artificial soccer field. Its black fur had a healthy lustre to it – for one demented second he even thought that he could make out his own reflection in its hide. Then, it opened its mouth, tilted its head back to the artificial sky that loomed above, and let out a roar that was the most tremendous sound that Roger had ever heard in his young life.

It thrashed its paws in a horrible spasmodic motion. The eyes were dead and black, and for an instant I had a flash of déjà vu, as if those eyes had appeared to me in a dream on some recent night, belonging to some snake-like creature that hissed and dragged itself along on its belly. Attached to its forehead was the long green stalk and pink cup of the flower that Roger had previously admired as picturesque and

enchanted. It reminded him of a certain fish that lived in the depths of the ocean where no light could penetrate, luring its prey with the help of a long protrusion that glowed at the tip like a demon reading lamp.

He scrambled to his feet, located Percy, and scooped the bird up into his arms like the ragged bundle that he was, and He began to run. The monster immediately lurched in their direction and began to lumber along at a positively frightening pace behind them. All of this happened in the course of five seconds or less, and his mind went blank. Roger ran as fast as his legs could carry him, and, for the second time in several hours, it felt as though his lungs might burst from the effort.

Then, like a flash of lightning from a clear blue sky, he remembered the Barlow knife that his father had given him the night before all this madness started. Still running, he fumbled awkwardly around in his pockets as he begged his own body to keep up the pace, and maintained his grip on Percy, who was squawking in terror as he looked over his shoulder to keep an eye on the distance between them and their pursuer. It was closing on them with terrifying speed.

“Roger this thing is getting closer and it looks hungry run!” Percy screamed.

The boy’s mind was like an artist’s canvas smeared with the black paint of terror. The fingers of his right hand at last grasped the handle of the knife, which bounced wildly around in his pocket. I struggled to grip it, and finally was able to take hold, In the same instant, he withdrew the weapon and flipped it open with his thumbnail in one fluid motion. Using his thumbnail, I managed to flip the knife open, still running full-speed down the hill. His legs felt like they were pedaling a bicycle that was going far too fast to be considered safe, and his mind flashed back to that summer morning when his attempt to jump the stone wall at the bottom of our hill back home had ended in

disaster. He also had a crazy thought of his dad teaching him never to run with sharp objects. Leo had never seemed so far away as he did in that moment, and Roger realized he had hardly had two thoughts about him or his home back in Maine since this wild journey began.

“Percy, hold on!” he cried in desperation, and in midstride he spun around and lashed out with the open pocketknife. At that moment, the small knife was transformed into a magnificent broadsword worthy of a king, while I was a knight clad in silver armor ready to do battle.

Two things happened in blistering succession. First, the monstrous beast that Roger had apparently unearthed by stopping to look at the flower drew close enough to lunge forward for the kill, its horrible teeth slicing the air and showering the pair with foaming saliva, blind eyes rolling madly in its head. Then, the tip of his blade connected with the stem of the flower attached to its forehead with a meaty shik sound, and a gout of maroon blood spurted from the fresh wound. The flower, having been severed neatly near its base, tumbled to the ground in a flutter of pink petals from the tulip-like bell, which had practically exploded in the same second.

The creature let out a low howl that resembled what Roger imagined a cow in terrible pain must sound like. The noise was deafening, and caused the earth to shake, and in his confusion he dropped Percy – as well as the knife – and tumbled headlong to the ground as he tried to clap his hands over his ears and block out the vibrations of the behemoth’s agonized moan. He begged whatever starry apparition might be watching over the Realm to spare his life, and allow him to continue on this quest to save his little brother. Percy lay beside him in a tangle of feathers and did not appear to be moving; he added a quick side-prayer to ask that his companion’s life be spared as well. Percy lay in

the grass covering his head, waiting for the giant mole's teeth to sink into his neck and dispatch him from the world forever.

But the fatal bite never came.

Slowly, Roger lowered his hands, which had created a sweaty kind of suction effect from having been pressed so tightly against his ears. To his surprise, they were greeted by silence when his hearing came back to normal (aside from the slight ringing that remained from the creature's insane braying).

"Percy? Are you all right?" Fear stole into his gut like indigestion, and his heart made an attempt to clamber straight into his throat. To Roger's joy, Percy began to stir. Waves of relief coursed over him like an ocean, and his heartbeat returned to some semblance of a proper rhythm.

"I think so... Roger, what in the bluearnation was that?" the bird managed to murmur. He tapped his body in various places with the tip of his good wing, like a person checking to make sure nothing was broken.

Roger sat up and turned around to try and answer his question. What he saw was a tiny black mole scurrying off in the opposite direction they had been running in, appearing to make a hasty retreat towards whatever it considered to be shelter – someplace underground, he assumed. The flower that had previously extended from the glistening black fur of its forehead lay shriveled on the grass, the beautiful pink bell reduced to nothing more than a bed of petals strewn upon the surrounding earth. Before his eyes, the thick green stalk continued to shrink and diminish, as though some invisible force had sucked all the water out of the plant's cells. In a matter of seconds, the lack of its former host had reduced the flower to a wrinkled green straw that was almost indiscernible from the grass in which it now lay, and he watched in fascination as

the tiny black creature disappeared from view. It appeared to have burrowed straight back into the earth to hide from us.

“Was that the challenge, Percy?” he asked breathlessly.

“Ah, yes, I would say so. Looks like we passed thanks to you. Good lad.” He got up and brushed himself off, looking very indignant at having been jostled around so violently. “Now, before anything else comes out of the earth to try and tear our heads off, can we please get a move-on?”

Roger nodded his head in silent agreement. After their sprint for survival, the next door stood no more than a hundred feet from their current position. Roger looked around for the knife, and spotted it in the grass a little ways off to his left. He jogged over to retrieve it, deeply relieved. Somewhere in the back of his mind, it occurred to him that he had just had his first real brush with death. He shuddered, and felt his stomach lurch as the bread from earlier threatened to make a mad dash for daylight.

The two companions soldiered on towards the second door, and whatever might lie in wait behind it.

#

Martin clambered down from his horse to inspect a set of animal tracks in the dust. Removing one glove, he licked his finger and held it up to test the wind, which teased the long, greasy locks of hair under his wide-brimmed hat.

“More wolves,” he said with barely concealed disappointment.

“If we have any hope of finding them, we’ll need information on where that train is headed,” Luther remarked, picking at a glob of mud stuck to his chaps.

“Don’t you think I know that?” Martin replied. “We’re running out of time.”

“The tracks shouldn’t be too far from here. We need to get moving or they’ll get to Mother Florence’s long before we find them. You know what Vladimir is apt to do if we fail, don’t you?”

Martin thought back to a time when they were just boys living on the farm that their father Edward had built on land they had purchased in the west. The harvest had been kind that year, but in the months that followed everything had suddenly seemed to wilt away. Their land dried up and became fruitless and barren, like the womb of a woman who could no longer bear children. Their father had been driven to madness by three straight years of failed crops, along with the disappearance of their baby sister Margie. He had hung himself with a length of rope that had once been used to lash together bulging bushels of wheat, once a symbol of their prosperity. Neighbors and friends formed search parties to comb the dusty prairie in search of their sister in the year before Edward had died, but to no avail. Eventually the search efforts ended, and they conceded that the girl had succumbed to exposure somewhere in the wilderness, or been picked off by one of the large predatory birds that often roamed the skies of the Realm. For them, a six-year old girl would seemed a very fine meal.

Certain types of wildlife that inhabit the Realm hold a very fearsome reputation.

For instance, the long-toothed jackrabbit, a creature that has been sighted with varying frequency by travelers and farmers alike throughout the years, feeds on young coyotes that are unfortunate enough to be caught out in the open without the protection of their much larger and fiercer parents. They say an adult jackrabbit can ambush a man with a leap of terrifying force, often resulting in limb or two lost to its

slobbering jaws. Such attacks have become rarer in recent years, with new restrictions and curfews enforced by Vladimir and his merry band of henchmen who patrol the area. Martin and Luther frequently participate in this kind of work.

Another animal that manages to instill a deep, abiding fear in the inhabitants of the Realm is the blue-tailed velociraptor, a flying menace that has been known on occasion to pluck entire sheep from their pens, to be devoured in the caves and mountain lairs that they call home. Farmers often place wire mesh roofs over the areas where the livestock are kept as a precaution against just this issue, and parents are sure to keep a close eye on any small children that might be wont to go out and play during the bird's normal feeding time. Martin has an idea that just such a creature had carried off his sister all those years ago, and Luther might agree if you somehow managed to get him talking on the very touchy subject of her disappearance, but they well remember their father's rants about the rape of the land being perpetrated by Vladimir Cruor, and the likelihood that he had kidnapped her for "some vile purpose out in that mansion of his." The boys were terribly frightened by their father's whisky-fueled ravings, which often turned into a drunken rage at a moment's notice, but holding such suspicions these days would be a very dangerous proposition indeed, given their current employer and his penchant for mind-reading.

"If they've already begun the process of putting in a request with the conductor to get dropped off at her campsite, it may already be too late to find the train. I've heard that once someone undertakes those three challenges, the train enters some other realm to make them possible and becomes invisible to any onlookers who might happen upon its previous location," Martin mused, more to himself than to Luther, who had begun to irritate him in the past few hours. The job was a high-stakes affair, he knew, though if

someone had asked him why, he would have had difficulty coming up with an answer. Something of deep importance to Vladimir, more so than any of the other errands they'd completed in the ten year history of their employment with him.

"Then we'll have to get to the campsite ahead of them some other way," Luther said.

"Aye. Nip the problem in the bud, like Dad used to say."

"How the hell are we gonna find that campsite without the conductor?"

Martin looked down at the tracks again. The dust had already begun to spin them into obscurity before his very eyes. Behind him, his steed whinnied impatiently.

"There are ways," Martin said, standing up to survey the plains once more with eyes that gleamed and sparkled like freshly cut diamonds.

CHAPTER 12

Mother Florence was beginning to question her decision to continue with the story. Maisie was now clutching her brother with fear, but maybe that was a healthy fear; she looked like she enjoyed the thick suspense. The look on Hector's face was a mixture of embarrassment and concern at his sister's grip on his shoulder. Florence didn't usually like to tell scary stories, but something about that evening had brought on the urge to tell it. Somewhere in the middle of this tale she began to get another feeling in addition to the sense that the pair riding the train – good people – were on their way to see them and ask for my help. What struck her was a black sense of foreboding, thick and palpable like the air right before a thunderstorm, full of dark energy. She tried to shake it off but found herself unable to do so. More guests were on their way, but there was a white flash that went off in her head when she tried to identify the source of the aura. She had a terrible feeling that this new energy meant them great harm. She ignored it for the time being and went on:

“When the first child went missing – a little girl named Margaret – people thought that she had been carried off by one of the ravenous flying creatures that

populated the area. As you know, most of them have been nearly hunted to extinction, but in those days, thirty or forty years ago, the land was rife with them. No one in their right mind would let any child out to play after dark, because even if the birds didn't get them, the farmers and villagers had a strong feeling that there was something else lurking in the dark that presented an even greater threat. No one could say exactly what though. They started to come up with all kinds of stories to explain what might have happened to the girl, but no one suspected that Ivan had anything to do with it. Not at first, anyway.

“After a time, the search efforts were abandoned. No one would say that she died, out of respect for the poor thing's family, but everyone pretty much knew anyway.”

The children's eyes had grown to the size of dinner plates. Some force had taken hold of Mother Florence, though, and she seemed to have little recourse but to go on with the story. For whatever reason, imparting this tale to them had become of the utmost importance. She felt a little guilty, but go on with my story. I'll tell it to the end – at least, the end of what little I know regarding the true nature of these affairs I'm describing.

“The girl's father, Edward, went mad,” she went on. In fact, Florence had known the man, and remembered him with fondness. He had been a friend, but his sons Martin and Luther had always seemed destined for trouble following a series of family tragedies. But could anyone blame them for what they became after such suffering?

“Meanwhile, Ivan sat in his mansion, musing on how to increase his farm's output even past its already record-breaking numbers, when he was visited by a young woman who was not of this Realm. She had come from another faraway land, traveling by tree-portal, and upon arriving she found that she knew no one, and had little idea of

where to settle down and start a family. She knew what she was doing – that wasn't the issue – but she had had to leave her old home in a hurry when the father of her children became violent and threatened her life, and the lives of her son and daughter. One night, when she knew the travel lanes were open for movement between the various Realms that make up our universe, she bundled her babies up in warm blankets and set out under the cover of darkness. When she arrived in the new place, she found herself standing right in front of that enormous, cold building that Ivan called home."

"What happened next, mama?" Hector asked. He seemed to be much more into this story than his sister, who is all but trembling with fear. Is it so strange that I'm enjoying this?

"Well, the woman had stories before arriving at that place. Her friends had told her, 'Don't go! Things aren't right over there, somehow...' but she knew she had to get away and start a new life for herself, and for the sake of her children." She leaned over to stroke Maisie's hair as she spoke, and thought about how dear she was to her. How dear they both were. The little girl calmed perceptibly at her touch. "She hadn't any idea that Ivan might be behind some of the bad things that had been happening in the area, and of course was unacquainted with him to begin with. Only later would she learn his true nature, but at that time she felt confident and optimistic, and went marching right up to what would turn out to be Ivan's front door. On the door was a large brass knocker, with which she gave three sharp knocks.

"Almost at once Ivan appeared at the door, as though he had been standing there waiting for her. She was startled at first, but he calmed her down with soothing words and a beguiling charm that helped her feel at ease. Then, he invited her into the house.

“Everything seemed normal as she crossed the threshold into the stranger’s home. There was nothing to tell her ‘beware!’, nothing that might indicate some plot afoot. He gave her coffee and some biscuits and read poems to her to make her feel safe. She made herself at home and listened with genuine interest. It was when he began to make strange proposals that she grew uneasy. First, there were questions.

“‘What do you fancy in a man?’ he asked.

“‘I don’t rightly know. It seems as though the last man I thought seemed decent turned out to be an unreliable miser without one good bone in his body,’ she replied with confidence.

“‘You’ve got a bit of spark to you,’ said Ivan. ‘I wonder, have you any children?’

“‘Yes, two,’ she said. ‘I love them very much.’

“‘Where are they now?’ he asked

“‘At home, sleeping. They have yet to truly adjust to life in this new place, this Realm as everyone seems to call it. I have no doubt that they’ll find it to be quite suitable after some time goes by.’

“‘Yes, indeed. One can hope, at any rate!’

“He laughed at this last bit and continued to offer me – er, that is, Ivan continued to offer the woman his hospitality, and they conversed late into the night.

“‘I have no doubt that you make a very fine mother,’ he said at last, after the lady and Ivan had had some nips of brandy to begin winding down the evening. ‘I suspect you also find that your life lacks something... essential, do you not?’

“The woman didn’t know just how to respond to this strangely personal question. She sat back in her chair to consider it a moment. ‘I’m afraid I don’t have much idea of what you’re talking about,’ she finally answered.

She realized that she no longer much cared whether this story was too frightening for Hector and Maisie. This is my story, and I intend to tell it to its final word. It's as if something powerful has taken hold of me, and I cannot stop the words from flowing forth. I expect by morning they'll be wondering whether or not I actually went so far as to traumatize them with what I really hadn't meant to be anything more than a rather light fairy tale to send them off to the Sandman. Things don't always turn out the way you planned, though. If living in the Realm has taught me anything worthwhile, I suppose it's that.

"Well, go on mama, what happened after that?" A surprising glimmer of enthusiasm from Maisie, who had loosened her clutch on Hector's arm somewhat, to his apparent relief. He rubbed absently at the spot, massaging away the indents of her grip. "What did he say to her next?"

"The old farmer, Ivan – for in fact he had begun to get on in years, and the youthful charm and looks that had once complemented his generous personality had disappeared just the same as his benevolence had when he discovered that gaping hole in his heart. In fact, that had always seemed to be the source of his problems, even in spite of all his wealth and successful farming. He had searched so long for happiness, and even then it eluded him. He wanted so much to say the right thing, perhaps warm this woman's heart and have her desire to share his bed – but it was never to be.

"As she sipped her tea, she slowly began to realize that something was not right in the house. He kept looking at her during awkward pauses in the conversation (which were rather frequent, to her chagrin) and drumming his fingers on the upholstered arm of his satin couch, as if waiting for her to drop to her knees and propose to him.

“‘It’s true that you’re new to the Realm,’ he said, ‘and I’m sure things are all very hectic right now. But have you ever considered taking a new husband?’

“The beautiful damsel found this to be very forward, and had already seen the way he was looking at her. His eyes resembled those of a wolf who might speak to a lamb, convincing her that he knows a shortcut to the way home, only he plans on slaughtering her when the opportunity presents itself. She felt decidedly uneasy. Something told her that it was time to leave.

“‘I’m very tired,’ she said, ‘but I’m awfully far from home. I left my children in a tent near the entrance to the portal, and tomorrow I’m planning to bring them over and begin arranging our settlement in this place.’

“‘Would you care to stay in one of my guest rooms?’ he asked. ‘It’s very comfortable, and my servants will attend to your every need.’

“‘That’s very kind of you,’ she said. ‘Are you sure that’d be all right?’

“‘Why, certainly, I suppose so, why not?’

“‘It’s awfully generous.’ She yawned.

“‘Don’t mention it. I know how dangerous it can be out there on the plains after dark. You really shouldn’t be going anywhere at all at this point.’

“Something in his tone made her uneasy – that is, building on the feeling that had already begun to heighten several minutes prior – but she knew there wasn’t much choice when it came to walking across the plains after the sun had fallen. Those long-toothed jackrabbits could tear a woman apart in seconds, as she well knew. She agreed to stay in the guest room.

“He led her to a partition of the house that was closed off by a large black door at the end of a corridor; she could tell it lay somewhere in the middle, and as they

ascended the steep, torch-lined stone staircase that ultimately led to her temporary quarters, it became clear that she would be sleeping in some kind of tower. He left her alone to cast off her dusty traveling garments and lie in the large straw bed, the sheets of which some thoughtful manservant had managed to fold back into an inviting triangle of cotton linen.”

Hector had a sleepy glaze over his eyes, and Maisie doesn’t look like she can stay up much longer, but I know that the story will end soon.

There was only a bit left to tell, and Florence thought they could last five more minutes.

#

Daniel leaned back in his chair and touched the lit end of a match to his pipe. Isaac and Cassius sat across from him at the kitchen table, staring back in that intense way that Daniel supposed all three of them shared. They waited patiently for him to speak.

“What you’re talking about is treason and would no doubt lead to our execution should we be caught,” Daniel said, weighing his words carefully. “And what real reason do we have to go after those boys, anyhow? Guilt? I seem to recall you being rather ecstatic when Vladimir paid us for that last delivery, the last successful one, which by the way was over ten summers ago.”

The frowns that now creased their foreheads were identical. Sometimes Daniel could barely tell them apart.

“Things have been going from bad to worse for a while now, a fact that maybe you seem to conveniently forget when the pay is good, just like the rest of us. But we both

feel that something should be done. The tyranny has gone on too long, in our opinion,” Isaac said.

“Bad to worse is right, but it’s not as though Vladimir controls every last square of land in the Realm; he merely influences it by being a medium for something higher. There’s something else that’s been going on in the Realm. If we revolt, you think that will fix everything? The problems won’t go away overnight, lads.”

“It’d be a start,” Cassius grumbled.

“With Vladimir out of the way, the Realm could finally breathe again. People wouldn’t be living in fear any longer. And we’d be heroes,” Isaac added.

“There’s no way we could get to him, and even if we did his powers are vastly superior to ours. I’m afraid we wouldn’t stand a chance,” Daniel replied.

“But maybe that’s just it!” Isaac chimed in. “What if Vladimir has spent his life convincing everyone in the Realm that he is a being of unlimited power and could strike them down with the flick of a finger, when in reality he’s just a gnarled old man who knows a good trick or two, but is hardly immortal. Maybe he is a conduit to a higher power, but if we take his place, that line of communication will belong to us.”

“You’re talking about a bunch of old wives’ tales,” Daniel said, although he appreciated his brother’s fervor. “I’d like to do something about this whole mess too, don’t get me wrong, but things aren’t as simple as they seem. If Vladimir dies, things could fall apart completely. He’s been around for decades, and in all that time, no one has ever challenged his seat of power. Why? What could be keeping everyone in fear?”

“Maybe it’s the company he keeps,” Cassius suggested. “All those people who claim to ‘work’ for him – they’re some of the slimiest sorts you can imagine. That disgusting pet he keeps around the basement, for instance.”

“Imagine that poor boy, locked up alone down there for everyone to look at. Why does he always put them in the dungeon?” Isaac said.

“Probably scares them senseless,” replied Daniel.

“I have little doubt that several of Vladimir’s freakish ‘employees’ have already dropped by to pay him a visit,” Cassius added.

Daniel paused, drumming his fingers on the table. He was surprised to find he was seriously considering it. Were they to do something about Vladimir Cruor, it would require a monumental effort. Return the boys safely back through the portal that Vladimir had essentially used to kidnap both of them, and in doing so risk their very lives by attempting to dethrone Vladimir in the process? It actually doesn’t sound that bad in my head when I chew it over like that, but again there’s the whole all-but-certain-death side of things, which I have to say I’m not crazy about.

“All right boys, I guess I’m in. What we need now is a plan.”

#

“Percy, I swear, if the next two boxcars are going to be anything like that last one, you can count me out,” Roger exclaimed. I blushed a little at having cursed (or, using the Lord’s name in vain, I guess the adults called it), but I found myself wanting to use certain words that I’d heard about in school. The desire to use expletives seemed to coincide with the increasingly stressful situations I was being forced to deal with. Shit was probably the worst one I knew, except for that legendary one that started with F, of which I didn’t know the meaning, or whether I’d even heard it correctly, and either way I probably lacked the courage to say it out loud. The second door had already yawned open, showing nothing but darkness. They had decided to pause for a minute to catch

their breath, which came out in ragged gasps after the helter-skelter sprint down the hill, before proceeding forth.

“Shouldn’t ... talk ... like that,” he wheezed. I immediately felt embarrassed.

“Seriously, are we going to die on the next one? Because we sure as hell – er, heck – came this close to being eaten alive back there. If I get killed, who’s going to save George? I’d rather go back and find him on my own, if this is going to lead to me losing my head trying to see some old woman I know nothing about!” Roger’s voice rose sharply at the end, and he suddenly realized he was on the verge of tears. Percy only stared back at him with a glum expression, his breathing now back under control.

“Are you finished?” Percy asked.

Roger felt his anger dissipate and conceded he had nothing else to say for the moment.

“Good. Now I’m pretty sure the next task won’t be quite as bad. It was a good thing you had that knife in your pocket, although it makes me trust you a little less, considering you were armed this whole time and didn’t see fit to tell me about it. But we’ve got to keep moving forward. What do you say?”

“All right. You first,” Roger said.

“Right, I suspected as much. Well, off we go then.”

Without another word, Percy stepped into the opening.

#

“Percy? Everything okay in there?” Roger called out. The raven had disappeared from sight as though he’d just stepped behind a black curtain.

“Just fine! Come on through, it’s safe, I think.” His voice sounded oddly distant.
“Don’t be scared, come on through!”

Drawing a deep breath, Roger did as he suggested. As he moved through the door, a stiff breeze ruffled his hair and cooled his face, as if he had just walked across the mouth of a cavernous wind tunnel. All he could see was darkness. Then, a hazy picture of what lay around them drew into focus. He could hear the sound of water dripping onto wet stone, and could make out jutting rock formations that gave off a faint, greenish gleam. Slick cavern walls surrounded us, and Roger turned around to discover the door had disappeared. It had been replaced by more smooth rock. The place looked as though it had remained undisturbed for thousands of years, if not longer.

Roger and Percy found themselves standing on a narrow ledge some distance above the bottom of the cavern, and they could hear a curious rushing sound. Roger inched closer to the edge of the precipice, and, craning his neck, peered over. The source of that sound was none other than a swirling, black river, which frothed and churned with rapids. He swallowed hard and had to step back as a minor wave of vertigo swept over him. I remembered my Dad talking about something called vertigo the last time we had gone on a mountain hike together, although at the time I had only known ‘vertigo’ as a character from a Sega game called Primal Rage. I understood it now, though; my legs felt like they had been cobbled together with paper clips and chewing gum, and I scrambled back from the edge.

“Feeling all right, son?” Percy asked with genuine concern.

“Yes, just got light-headed there for a minute. That’s a long way down.”

“Indeed. I would recommend staying away from the edge from now on, as a precaution.” This sounded like sage advice to Roger.

“So, where do we go?” he asked.

Percy pointed his good wing to the right, showing a path that grew out of the ledge they were on. The narrow shelf of rock curled around and appeared to lead deeper into the cavern.

“Stay close to the wall,” Percy said, although Roger couldn’t see that they had much choice in the matter. The rock shelf that they had to walk on was about two feet wide at most. Percy would have no trouble, but Roger knew he would have to keep his back pressed flat against the rock face to keep his balance. That, and not look down.

Roger’s sneakers squeaked ominously on the slick surface as the pair began to inch along. He steeled himself, and kept moving forward. What else is there to do? It sure as hell doesn’t look like you can exactly take back your decision to start this whole process. Sure, maybe you think George was a little stupid for going out into the woods alone at night and getting sucked into that portal, but he’s your little brother, and you’re going to get him out of this mess, one way or the other. It’s nobody’s fault.

I repeated the last line in my head several times as a kind of mantra while I shimmied along behind Percy, my hands pressed flat against the smooth surface to my right.

“Percy,” he hissed, “where are we going?”

“Forward, for the time being. Maybe things will get clearer up around the bend.”

“Percy, I don’t like this place. If we fell in that river, we’d drown like rats. You too, with your wing.”

“Don’t you think I know that?” he snapped. Maybe Percy had a temper, too. His yellow feet looked to be having an equally difficult time maintaining their purchase on the slippery rock. “Just concentrate on keeping away from the edge and moving slowly.”

They continued to make steady progress and soon arrived at the first bend. The river roared below.

It was then that Roger saw the torches, and the caves.

“Percy, what is this place?” he whispered, his voice quaking.

“Try to stay calm son, and keep moving. I was a little afraid of this.”

“Afraid of what, exactly?”

“I’ve heard stories about the... things that live in the second boxcar,” he said.

“What kind of things?” he asked, not sure that he really wanted to know.

“Things that live here and feed off the darkness like vampires,” Percy said. “If we stay on the ledge, we should be all right.”

“I think I can hear something moving,” Roger said, and indeed he could. It sounded like the patter of mice he sometimes heard coming from the walls of his house on a cold winter night. As they squinted into the gloom to look at the arched cave entrances cut into the stone, short, hunched-over creatures began to emerge. Beneath their hoods Roger could see no faces. The torches cast a flickering light that made the stones gleam on their side of the ravenous chasm. The black water churned steadily on below.

Roger stifled a scream as a hissing sound filled his ears. It sounded like a chorus of a thousand people whispering violent threats and vitriol under their breath. They’re calling out to us, he thought, but something tells me this isn’t what you’d call a warm

welcome. More and more of the robed figures continued to spill out of their dark nests, until it seemed like an endless number of them lined the walls.

“Percy,” he murmured, “what if there are some on our side?”

“Just keep walking, everything will be all right.”

“What are they going to do to us?”

“You don’t want to know, trust me.”

“Percy, come on, seriously, you have to tell me what those things are capable of.”

“They’ll drain your life force faster than one of the Grimsrud brothers can drain a mug of beer, okay? As long as we keep walking and don’t make eye contact, everything should be fine.”

This caused Roger to snap his eyes to the ledge in a hurry. He scurried along faster, almost jostling Percy in an effort to push the pace.

“Careful now! You’ll run me over, or worse, send your damn fool self tumbling down into that gorge,” he said. There was anger in his voice. Roger realized that he could sense his own blood getting hot again, and suddenly he felt an inexplicable urge to draw back and plant a good kick straight into the miserable bird’s wings, sending him down to the waters below. A squawk of surprise would be his last words. Roger lurched forward as if in a trance, the sound of the water growing louder in his ears. His shoulders slumped, and his head seemed to sway as if it were tied to several balloons being buffeted about in a strong wind. He realized his senses were beginning to fall away from him, and he gave his head a brisk shake, like a fatigued driver trying to stay awake along a desolate stretch of highway. Percy looked back with a mixture of concern and impatience.

“Roger, are you all right?”

"I... I just got dizzy again for a second, I'm fine."

"That's the second time that's happened since we stepped into this section. I'm afraid they might be having a bad effect on you."

"They...? Who?" He was having trouble concentrating.

"The cave dwellers up there on the ledge, I think they might be affecting your mind. I admit it's been getting to me somewhat as well. Did you feel inexplicably angry just now, some urge – to hurt me perhaps? Well, did you?"

"How did you know that? Percy, I would never hurt you. Something just came over me, it was like... it was in the air."

"That may be, but listen to me very carefully. You have to put up a shield. Put it up with your mind any way you can, so that they can't get in. Even if you just think to yourself shield...shield...shield... or imagine yourself taking cover behind a huge wooden buckler. It's better than nothing, you've got to try and remember a tongue twister or some other way to occupy your mind and cloak your thoughts."

Roger's eyes registered the path in front of him as he walked along in step with Percy, slowly regaining his confidence. The wet roughness of the wall felt cool against his bare hands as he slid them along to keep balance.

(Keep repeating the song, don't think about anything else, head out on the highway, lookin' for adventure, don't think about anything else.)

It was working. Roger no longer felt any anger.

The shuffling procession of hooded strangers on the opposite wall had at last come to a halt, and they stood watching the duo. There was no denying the impression that their hissings were, in reality, death threats. Roger continued to fight what felt like a winning battle against the onset of terror and rage. For whatever reason, he started to

nervously grope around in his pockets and came across two quarters, which he supposed had probably been change from the last time he and George had ridden their bikes to the corner store to buy some chips and a couple bottles of Stewart's cream soda. He played with them anxiously, turning them over in his hands and having a random thought of that Batman nemesis Harvey "Two-Face" Dent, with the face of Lady Liberty clean on one side, scratched and disfigured on the other. Once, George and I tried to make our own versions of such a coin using some pennies and a rusty nail.

"What if they find a way to get across? Don't you think there might be a bridge around here somewhere?"

"It's possible. But maybe that's their side, and for some reason they just... never come over here." Percy said this in a voice that made it sound plausible enough.

"Regardless of what they might be up to right now, our goal is to find the next door and pass through it, come hell or high water. And it looks like there's plenty of 'high water' to kill us both if we're not careful."

As Roger had suspected earlier, the roaring sound in his ears was getting louder. He craned his neck over towards the edge as far as he dared, and to my horror realized that the river was rising. Slowly, but steadily, it was rising. I swallowed against the cold lump of dread that had formed in my throat.

"Percy, the water's getting higher!"

"Keep walking son, we're almost there, I think."

The ledge had begun to slope down gradually, and appeared to be curling towards the river. If we continued on this course, the charging river was going to swallow us whole – if those robed things on the ledge don't get us first, that is.

“Roger, pay attention. Look down there.” Roger shook himself out of his trance and raised his eyes what looked like a small strip of rough sand that led down to the water’s edge. There, the waves lapped and frothed with the tide. Moored on the beach was a small boat that looked like a miniature version of a viking funeral ship. A tall, robed figure stood up at the helm, and I had to stop myself from taking a startled step backwards when I saw him, which would have likely sent me tumbling from the shelf. In spite of his fear, Percy shuffled forward until he was standing on the expanse of sand, and Roger rushed to join him, not wanting to spend another second on the rock shelf. He relaxed a bit when he felt the sure footing of his sneakers in the sand, but unease scurried through his mind like spiders as he gazed up at the figure standing before them. He remained perfectly motionless, the same blackness under his hood obscuring any facial features he may or may not have had. It might have been my imagination, or a trick of the light caused by the torches on the far wall, but Roger thought he could see two golden, flickering lights roughly where his eyes should be. The figure looked far away somehow, as though seen the wrong end of a telescope.

This one was considerably larger than any of the others that watched, hissing, from afar, and although I kept my mental shield up as Percy had instructed, I could make out yet another mind-voice piercing the fog in my brain: [To cross the river you must pay the toll...] Those golden eyes seemed to grow brighter as he registered these new thoughts, equally invasive, though unthreatening.

“Percy, are you picking up any of that?”

“Yes... this must be the ferryman.”

“What’s his name, do you know?” I asked.

“I believe his name is Charon.”

#

Time seemed to have lost all meaning in the little cell that George now called home. Either Vladimir had completely forgotten about him, or the moments were dragging by at an even slower rate than he thought. He felt as though it had been days since they first stuck him down there, but through the tiny slit at the other end of the corridor, could still see daylight seeping through. If there was any correlation between the time of day in Carlisle, Maine, and how the hours passed in this place that everyone kept calling “the Realm,” I would have gotten here extremely early in the morning, since I left in the middle of the night, and those giant brothers trundled me off to Vladimir’s house right away. So, perhaps it was mid-afternoon, but I had no way of knowing for sure. It was dark when I arrived, and at some point the sun must have risen – but was it the same sun that lit our days back home? Something told me I had not only traveled to another dimension, but to another planet as well. Nothing made sense. When time fails to matter or be measured in a meaningful way, I suppose that’s when you can say you’ve really lost your bearings. Besides, I was terrified.

That hideous beast that had paid him a visit left nightmare visions waddling about in his brain like grotesque shadow puppets. There were black pictures of ugly things with piebald hides, shuffling along on their bellies and tasting the air with their tongues.

How are you ever going to get out of here? he thought. What if something happens to Roger?

What if something already did happen?

CHAPTER 13

“What happens next, mama?” Maisie asked. Her eyes were still the size of golf balls, but she had apparently become enthralled with the story. Hector, too, sat listening with a fascinated look upon his face.

“Yeah, what did the prince do after he put her to bed in the guest room?” he added.

“The prince had one of his servants bring her milk and honey to put her at ease and help her fall asleep, which she gratefully accepted. But as she lay her head down upon the silky sheets – a luxury she had never experienced, before or since – her mind began to wander to dark places, and some things the prince had said earlier seemed to come back to her, understood now in a darker light, though she couldn’t quite put her finger on what she had detected in his tone, which had seemed so cordial over tea. That feeling refused to leave her, and consequently she found herself tossing and turning as the minutes ticked by.

“Meanwhile, Ivan had descended the stairs of the tower, going all the way down, past the first floor, and into the secret chamber where he kept perhaps one of the

greatest artifacts the Realm has ever known. It was a pool of water that lay in a curved stone formation, and with it he was able to keep an eye on all that belonged to him, which, at that time, was a sizable portion of the entire Realm itself. Some were areas known to the villagers, likely to be found on maps and so forth, and others that were unknown and yet to be discovered. Nonetheless, Vladimir had found a way to extend his influence to mysterious lands untraveled by our kind, populated instead by... others, and he took control of their livelihoods as well.”

“Mom, I thought the evil prince’s name was Ivan,” Hector said. She shook herself from the trance of storytelling.

“What’d I say?”

“Vladimir.”

“Oh, sorry dear, my mistake. You’re absolutely right, it’s Ivan.

“Anyway, the prince, Ivan, gazed deep into the reflecting pool, and asked it to show him the beautiful young woman he had bid good night just moments earlier. The water swirled and frothed, then settled. With the calming of the water, an image began to form: the woman, who had just left everything behind to come to the Realm and seek a better life, tossing and turning on her bed, helpless to fall asleep though she wanted nothing more. She was tired to the bone, but the thoughts wouldn’t go away. What does he want from me? She thought, the words in her mind coming through in dark snatches that only caused her to sink deeper into despair. She felt a sudden urge to run from the house, setting out down the road to try and find shelter in the nearest village, though she knew this would be a dangerous undertaking. She decided to get up and have a look around the room.

“Ivan watched all this with growing interest, his wolfish eyes scanning her figure, probably while thinking impure thoughts.” Hector gave her a quizzical look. “He watched as she got out from under the covers and began pacing around the room, picking up objects and examining them: a comb on the dresser, a small decorative scarecrow doll that had been placed beside the mirror, and on the nightstand, a candlestick in an iron holder, red wax streaking down in long rivulets. He didn’t really know what she was up to, but he enjoyed watching her unseen. It made him think he could do anything, and not worry about the consequences.

“At that point, she turned around and walked over to the bookshelf that stood in the corner of the room, which contained many volumes on agricultural technique, sharecropping, weather patterns, and the like. There was some fiction too, including several plays by Shakespeare. He was a very famous writer from planet Earth, and his works were so well-loved that the Librarians’ Association of the Realm decided to send a few helpers across to import the writing.

“At any rate, he watched as she browsed the shelves, when a sudden thought occurred to him that he wondered why he hadn’t had much earlier: I truly hope she doesn’t suddenly develop an interest in Jack London, he thought, another author that had been deemed culturally significant, and some of his works were imported to the Realm. Ivan had several books by this man; in fact, Jack London was his favorite author, but she had no way of knowing that. The book that she so happened upon was one titled *White Fang*, which is a story about a wolf, an animal that we have in the Realm as well. Ivan watched her hand hover over a copy of *Hamlet* by Shakespeare, which she had heard some great things about, mainly in terms of the way it dealt with feminine

insanity, but the stark title of *White Fang* grabbed her attention, and she reached her hand higher to select it from the shelf.

“Instead of sliding out easily from in between the two other novels that flanked it, the bottom corner wouldn’t budge, and the book tilted out at an angle when she pulled. This was immediately followed by a large clanking sound, then ratcheting gears as the entire bookcase swung away before her astonished eyes.

“Little to her knowledge, Ivan had already called one of his most faithful servants to handle the breach of security that this meddlesome woman had unwittingly caused. The creature he called upon to chase the woman out of the house was not a man, but a combination of several animals that he had enchanted to do his bidding. It was a cross between a rat, a pig, and a snake, so large that it had to drag itself along on its belly with its scrabbling claws, its thick tail trailing out behind.

“What the lady saw behind the bookcase looked, at first glance, like an ordinary child’s bedroom. Judging from the blue wallpaper, she guessed a boy’s. A comfortable-looking, if rather dusty, cot stood in the center of the tiny room, which was really no bigger than a closet. It smelled of moth balls. What her eyes settled upon, however, was the pile of what looked at first like dirty rags in one corner. Slowly, like a woman in a dream, she stepped through the opening behind the bookcase.

“She leaned over to examine the rags. Some of them were stained a dirty brown, the color old and caked. When she got closer, she realized that it was clothing; dozens of shirts for little boys, probably between the ages of eight and thirteen.

“Suddenly, a powerful horror seized her and she swung about in a dizzying spin, trying to find the way out of the room that held such unspeakable terror. There, on the wall, was a blue elephant holding a balloon. A mobile with strange flying machines spun

round and round above the cot with no occupant. There were also scores of black bootmarks on the floor, lots of different sizes. They made no sense, unless... unless the people who made them were struggling. One seemed bigger than all the rest, and that, right there... were those animal tracks?

“At that moment, she finally whirled into place and the two foot gap beside the bookcase came into view. She ran for the exit – but it was too late. The evil prince’s favorite servant curled its loathsome head around the corner, its tongue flicking out to taste the air, and she knew it could smell her. Its eyes were gray and lifeless, and the white, matted fur on its fat side shone with some kind of oil. She froze in fear, her heart thudding dully in her chest.

“Do you want me to go on?” Florence asked her children softly.

They nodded, but with hesitation, as if the beast Florence had seen all those years ago might be lurking just beyond the edge of their campsite., and she knows it probably won’t go away later on. Of course, I’m the young lady in the fairy tale, and they’re probably wondering how I’m managing to come up with so many details for what should have been a brief bedtime story. For whatever reason, telling them this story seems very important this evening.

“Well, the woman was so terrified that she leapt through the gap by the bookcase and only really got to look at the creature for a split second on her way out the door. Then, she fled down the stairs of the tower and outside through the front exit. Somehow, the house’s maze-like hallways had allowed her to make a quick escape, as though the prince wanted her to leave and the house had somehow organized itself to make the route clear.

“Once outside, she tasted the crisp night air and heaved a sigh of relief. She had escaped. The prince had acted kindly enough, she thought, but what did that room mean? I suppose at that time she knew – the stories about children disappearing in the Realm had been passed around for years, traveling by hearsay to other dimensions as well. It was not surprising that she had also heard the rumors about the children who never came home from playing to eat dinner with their families. They were mostly boys who disappeared, but she remembered hearing about one or two cases of a girl vanishing. It was always the same story: no one saw her taken, and no one took her; she was just gone. And for some reason that bizarre fact made her extra uneasy when she would hear the morbid bits of gossip, back when it was just beginning to happen and people were still insisting that a number of search parties be formed in order to find the children. They never turned anything up though – not until her own discovery in the prince’s house, that is.

“She fled from him, and no one chased after her, but she didn’t feel safe until she had made it to the doors of an inn at the neighboring town. She begged for help, telling them that there was a monster living at the old mansion on the outskirts of the plains to the west, but when people realized what house she was talking about, they immediately cut her off to say that they ‘wouldn’t be able to provide any assistance,’ but if she’d like a warm room in the inn, they’d be happy to accommodate her.

“Protesting half-heartedly, she relented to let them lead her upstairs. Once down with a feather pillow underneath her head, she no longer had any trouble falling asleep, as her nerves were taxed and her body exhausted. She fell into a deep slumber, sleeping for almost a day and a half. When she awoke, she went downstairs to converse with the innkeeper, who was going about his business as on any other day. And why shouldn’t

he? She felt that something had to be done about the terrible secret that she had glimpsed, like a forbidden jewel kept in a locked box, but they would hear none of it, and the innkeeper even began to grow angry when she had timidly tried to bring it up again. She knew then that no one would help her, and her best bet would probably be to just move along and mind her own business. She managed to gather a few belongings through the charity of the people in town, who pitied her, and then set out on the plains, armed only with a few weak safety enchantments that could protect her, should any wild animals threaten her progress, or her life. She constructed a new portal to transport her children across, knowing that they could never return, lest they face perhaps an even greater evil in the children's father, and they made their home on the plains, never to return to that house, and making a living by providing wayward travelers with a warm place to sleep in their guest tent, or helping with various problems: some were physical, and the woman had been trained as a doctor some time ago, using enchantments to heal such afflictions as mumps, measles, and planter's warts, but others had larger problems, to which she applied sage advice, and not infrequently some magic remedies to ease the situation as best she could.

"Thus they lived, and continue to live to this day, but the thoughts of that black house never really left the woman's mind, and she wondered if there might come a day when she would be called upon to return... either voluntarily, or otherwise."

This seems like a strange place to end the story, but I haven't anything left to tell, and the children look ready to pass out in each other's arms. Hector's eyelids flutter, as if some invisible hand is pressing down upon them.

"So the lady lived happily ever after?" Hector asked.

“Yes, my love. She and her children live happily ever after, because they know that all they’ll ever need is each other, and that love that binds us... er, I mean them.”

“That was a good story mom, I liked it,” Maisie said, barely still awake. “I’m sleepy.”

“Me too, dear, it’s very late.”

The children curled up under the blanket together, and before a full minute had passed they were both fast asleep. Florence gazed at them with adoration for a moment longer, then left the tent to stand outside and stare out into the night. A faint blue aura glimmered around the edge of the campsite, and she was glad for the warmth and safety that it provided their humble home. She strained her ears to catch any sounds, expecting to pick up only the lonely howl of a coyote, or perhaps the mating grunts of a wild jackrabbit. Instead, what she heard were thundering hoofbeats.

Her heart sank like a broken elevator.

She knew who it was.

#

“Percy, I’m scared. What are we supposed to do? Those things are still trying to take over my thoughts.”

“Hang on kid, keep the shield up, and stay calm. All he wants is the fare, and then we can cross and get to the last boxcar.”

“Fare?”

“Yes. Two coins of equal value must be exchanged for passage across the River Styx.”

Roger thought back to his unit on ancient Greece that had involved an abridged reading of the Odyssey. He hadn't paid as much attention as he probably should have, but the River Styx stood out clearly in his mind.

"Percy... are we in the Underworld?" Roger asked. His voice trembled.

"Some people call it that, yes," Percy said.

Roger swallowed hard. His legs felt rubbery, and he could sense Charon's intense stare on his face, as though he were sitting too close to a campfire.

"Pull yourself together son. We need to figure out how to pay the fare."

Roger suddenly had an idea. He dug around in his pocket and felt the two quarters he'd grabbed off the nightstand before he left. He wondered whether the things staring at them from the opposite ledge were, in fact, dead.

"What's in your hand?" Percy asked.

Roger showed him the quarters, and the bird's yellow eyes lit up.

"Seems as though you might have saved the day for the second time, my friend," he said. Roger heard a strong note of affection in his voice, and realized he cared about his feathered companion a great deal as well.

"Go give him the coins, Roger. You can do it."

His shaking legs carried him towards the bow of the vessel. The surging rapids seemed to have abated somewhat. Perhaps the robed figures controlled that, too. Roger tried not to lower the shield he had constructed in his mind, but their thoughts tickled his brain like so many fingernails. He kept moving, undeterred. His palms sweated freely and he hoped the coins didn't slip out of his hand.

Roger held out his hand.

The helmsman's hooded face peered down to review the fare, and for a moment Roger thought that he'd refuse to accept the coins. A skeletal hand slid out from under his sleeve, and plucked the quarters from his sweating fingers, the bones rasping against Roger's skin for a split second. The touch left him feeling woozy and somehow in shock. He deposited the change into a large pocket sewn into the front of his robe. The twin lights under his hood where his eyes should have been seemed to sparkle brighter for an instant as he did so. With the fare now paid, Roger felt a warm glow enter his mind. With a broad sweep of his left arm, which revealed his other skeletal hand, he granted them access to the vessel, and with it safe passage to the opposite bank.

Though the shield Percy had instructed me to raise remained in place, I could sense a change in the attitude of our ominous observers clustered on the ledges and outside of cave entrances on the cliffs that rose above the river. Percy and Roger moved forward like sleepwalkers and stepped gingerly over the bow and into the boat, taking seats on a bench behind the ferryman, who remained standing, eyes forward all the time.

Without a word (Roger certainly hadn't expected him to say anything, but the silence was unnerving nonetheless) he reached down to retrieve a very long oar from a rack built into the gunwale. He hefted it over the side and pushed off hard from the shore. The white bones of his forearms gleamed dully in the darkness.

The boat slid backwards into the water, and Roger immediately felt the current swing them around to aim at the opposite shore. Charon skillfully manipulated the course by plunging his oar into the foaming waters. Roger held fast to the lip of the bench with both hands, and glanced at Percy to make sure he was all right. He covered his beak with one wing in a pretty good imitation of a person who might be about to

hurl. His eyes seemed to grow more fearful with each passing second as the ferry listed nauseatingly from side to side. The ferryman's footing remained solid throughout.

It occurred to Roger that these beings in the caves probably relied on the ferryman for transport on a regular basis. Which brings us to our next little realization, Roger old boy. Or should I say next recollection? Because you remember what Charon's job really was, don't you? You aren't in the Underworld until you cross the river. Charon brings you across when you die. The things on the ledge? They only needed him once. They're all dead Roger, every last one of them.

Percy looked at me with a kind of fascinated terror and I realized he had probably been listening in on my thoughts. I wondered how much he might know about Greek mythology, but it looked like my epiphany had come as a bit of a shock to him either way. I was comforted by one other thought: in Greek mythology, several of the heroes managed to pass into the underworld on Charon's ferry to complete various missions, but they were able to escape again with their lives in spite of the tremendous danger. Orpheus was one. But he messed that one up pretty badly, didn't he. He couldn't help glancing backwards just once to make sure his wife was really behind him, breaking the only rule he needed to follow to get her out of there. I wondered if I would have enough faith to press on in that sort of situation – enough faith to get Georgie back home. We'll just have to wait and see, won't we?

Percy still looked like he was about to lose his lunch, but Roger felt more or less all right, considering. The voices had stopped trying to gain access to his mind, it seemed, and he even let his mental shield slip down a bit, like a knight who'd been pelted with arrows and needed to see if the barrage had ended. He concentrated on the

crests of white water that appeared amidst all that black. Charon guided the boat down the slope of each wave.

“Don’t touch the water, Percy!” Roger said.

He started to say something, then finally vomited on the floor of the boat. A few soggy blobs of bread and some half-chewed earthworms lay drying in a sticky mess on the floorboards.

“Feel better?”

That time, Percy did nod, and emphatically. The opposite bank was approaching faster than they might have guessed at first. The river was no more than a hundred meters across at its widest point. We were moving at a rather alarming clip, although the course was more of a zigzag than a direct line, given the strength of the current, and I wondered how he was going to dock this thing when all I could see on the opposite side was a sheer rock wall.

“Percy, I think we have to retrieve something on the other side, then travel back across the river on this boat in order to pass on to the next challenge,” I said, having to shout a bit over the water’s roar. “That’s how it’s always worked in the stories. I’m guessing it’s a key, or some other way to make the door visible, back there where we started out.” I felt confident, like I was beginning to get the hang of these “challenges.” Maybe they’re custom-made, I thought. They all have solutions that touch you somehow: cutting that thing’s flower off with the knife that Dad just happened to give you the night before, and now the River Styx – perhaps not the real River Styx, but maybe only a simulation or hologram, like the Holodeck on the Starship Enterprise. But if that were true, how could a boxcar run such a complex program? It occurred to me not

for the first time that I had in fact arrived on an alien planet, presumably located several galaxies away from my own.

To their amazement, the ferryman was able to swing the oar out of the water and pull them in as they approached the low bank. Also, the river itself seemed to have settled down noticeably. Perhaps it only got agitated when travelers were preparing to cross – or, it might have had more to do with our invasive status in the eyes of the cave-dwellers whose side we're now on, I thought.

As Percy and Roger climbed out and found our footing on the narrow ledge, they suddenly looked up to see them. The robed figures stared down at the pair with eyes that glimmered with the same light as the ferryman's. He held us in place with a steady hand on the oar, which was locked into a stone notch seemingly built for the purpose.

“Roger, look!”

He did, gazing up ahead on the path that was really more of a stone staircase flanked by huge grey boulders. It reminded him of another Greek myth that had captured his imagination: the one about Sisyphus, the king of Thessaly who was forced to roll a giant rock up a steep incline to watch it tumble back down to the bottom again for all eternity. The hill that stood before them was the spitting image of what Roger had imagined in his mind while reading. He didn't like the looks of it one bit, and wondered what it would really be like to get stuck in an endless task like that – and whether that might be a dangerous possibility in this situation that Percy and I now found ourselves in. A small yellow object gleamed dully at the top of the stony hill, catching his attention, but he couldn't quite make it out.

“Percy, do you see that thing up there?”

“Yep, it’s a key, just as I suspected.” He kept forgetting not to underestimate Percy’s eyesight.

“You think we can just walk up there, grab it, and take the ferry back to the other side?” Roger wondered aloud. A booming voice suddenly filled his head, and he had to plant his hands on the wall to keep from stumbling backwards in surprise.

“To pass through this arena you must retrieve the key and return from whence you came,” the deep voice said. “A new door will carry you through, but only if you are strong of heart, and sound of mind. Only a true hero can take the key - one who would sacrifice his life for the good of another. You must be willing to take this leap if you are to leave these halls alive.”

I knew Charon was addressing us, but I found that I was completely unable to turn around and actually look at him. It was as though a pair of invisible hands were holding my head in place to prevent my neck from swiveling. He went on: “Roll the boulder at the foot of the hill to the top. Once this task has been completed, hold it in place to access the key. You must not drop the boulder before the key is in your hands, or you will be trapped here as living souls amongst the dead forever.”

At the bottom of the hill there were indeed two huge boulders: one smaller, but awkwardly shaped, and the larger smooth and round – heavier, but likely easier to roll.

“Well Percy, you heard the man. What do you say we get to work?” he said. “You want to take the smooth one? I think I can almost move it by myself.”

“I suppose, but you can’t seriously believe that I’m going to be much help in this situation, do you?” he replied.

“Let’s find out,” Roger said, cracking his knuckles.

“We need to be careful about how we proceed. That thing could roll over and crush me.”

“Yeah, you and me both. Let’s just try not to think about that.”

Roger laid his hands on the blue-gray rock and gave it a shove. It rocked easily in the slight indentation in which it rested. He pushed back harder, timing it with the forward momentum. The technique worked like a charm, and soon the boulder was free. He controlled it easily, maneuvering it into place at the very bottom of the steps. Through the center of the stairway there was a kind of groove that appeared to be designed for the purpose of rolling boulders. In fact, the whole thing seemed constructed for this purpose alone, and he wondered if Sisyphus might not be off somewhere nearby, having a cigarette break or something while Charon set this up for us.

He centered the boulder and found his footing on the left side of the stairs while motioning for Percy to take up position on the right. He obediently got into place, placing his one good wing on the rock. It hadn’t occurred to Roger that he wouldn’t be able to push with both wings, and he gave another withering look that left him feeling embarrassed and stubborn.

“I don’t think this is going to work, son,” he said in a dry voice.

“We have to try,” Roger said. “Let me see if I can move it on my own.”

He got a grip and began to push. The rock moved easily at first, and I got it about a foot up the narrow trough before it wouldn’t go any farther. It had felt manageable a second ago, and now it wouldn’t budge even one more inch.

“Percy, come on, let’s see if it’ll go any farther if we push it together.”

He begrudgingly laid his wing on the stone and tested it. Roger guessed he was adding no more than a pound or two of extra pressure on the rock, but to his great surprise, it did start moving.

“Percy, we’re doing it!” he shouted, overjoyed. The tiny extra bit of help that he was able to provide seemed to make all a major difference. aybe it wasn’t the extra push that Percy could provide – that truly was insignificant – but I got the feeling that it was the fact that we were combining our strength that allowed us to progress up the hill with the boulder, which I now felt convinced was enchanted.

“If we keep pushing together, I think we can make it to the top,” Roger gasped, almost out of breath. Percy was concentrating too hard on the task at hand to offer much of a reply, only sending out a wave of thought that I registered as agreement. Thoughts of Sisyphus struggling up the slope flooded his weary mind: his biceps standing out in rippling, stark relief, wearing a tattered loincloth soaked with sweat that clung to his wasted thighs, a ragged length of beard draped around his neck. Roger wondered how he looked, bending slightly to sniff at my armpits; at that time I was still too young to emit any truly offensive body odor, but my hygienic situation was far from pleasant. I had skipped a bath the night before, and had already been in the Realm for what felt like a year and a day – although in reality it has probably in fact been far less than a day, and your perception of time has pretty much lost all bearing on what your body may or may not be actually experiencing, regardless of your mind – but I was getting lost on a tangent when I needed to be concentrating on the task at hand. His palms only seemed to get slicker as the seconds dragged on, and he realized he had been just a hair away from losing his grip on the rock.

He steadied himself and continued the climb; even with Percy's somehow critical contribution, it was exhausting, mind-numbing work, and his muscles already ached fiercely. The top of the hill seemed like an infinite distance above, and seeds of doubt had already begun to work their way into Roger's brain like hungry earthworms. He did his best to prevent them from taking hold. Hot anger began to rise in his temples. [No, stop it Roger, it's those things trying to get into your head again! You have to concentrate; bring the shield back up before it's too late!] It was Percy, coming through on just the right frequency for Roger to hear him and heed his advice. He looked up just in time to see a robed creature reach down from a ledge and reach for his hair. He ducked, and his skeletal grip flailed wide, then almost tumbled straight off the ledge, which would have probably send the demon cascading back down the side of the hill and into the waters of the Styx. He doubted this would be a huge problem, considering the kid was already dead, but then again I didn't really want to find out. I knew it would mean the end of my little adventure, if it did manage to give my hair a yank and send me sliding helplessly into the water.

Roger steeled himself as the thing appeared to gather itself for another vicious attack.

CHAPTER 14

The Rangers swooped down on the campsite like a hurricane. Mother Florence stood in shock outside the tent, desperately trying to figure out how on earth they managed to find her. In fact, the boy Roger and his companion Percy were drawing very close to the old plain-dweller's campsite, which although nomadic in nature had been in the safe place for many years, and the energy signature it put out into the atmosphere had grown larger over that time until it registered in a wide berth over the surrounding area when the conductor needed to drop people off from the train. Anyone who wants to see her must pass through the three tests, she knows, and that has only happened once or twice in the last twenty years, but nevertheless, when someone or something approaches the successful completion of the tasks, her campsite emits a kind of homing beacon that can be picked up by friend and foe alike.

Vladimir knew it was right to dispatch the Rangers when he did, she thinks. If they hadn't been nearby when the conductor was making his final approach, they would have missed their chance entirely. And now they're here. I must protect the children, she thought, but in her heart she knew it was already too late. The riders bore down with

terrifying speed. Florence turned to run back inside the tent, stumbling and wondering how they could have penetrated the force field.

That was when Luther grabbed the terrified woman by the high white collar of her nightdress and hauled her roughly off the ground. He squeezed the back of her neck so hard that she immediately began to lose consciousness.

Meanwhile, Martin concentrated on destroying as much of the surrounding campsite as possible. The steed's iron-shod hooves threw up great clods of earth, and Martin feverishly urged the beast on as it snorted and whinnied, trampling everything in sight. Luther stood patiently off to one side, having already dismounted and bound Florence's arms and ankles with rope. Her body flopped over as he hefted her unceremoniously onto the rump of his horse. He knew who she was, and briefly worried that he might have hurt her, but orders were orders, and he intended to follow them to the letter. If they had hesitated, or held back even just a little, Florence might have had time to conjure an enchantment powerful enough to knock him off his horse and turn the tables completely around on them. He knew that brutal force and terror were so often the best way to get things done - because they got results.

When Martin finished ripping down every last inch of the settlement save for the tent where the children sat shivering with fear, Luther led his horse over and they prepared to take Maisie and Hector into custody. Martin dismounted as well, and uncurled a length of rope from the horn of his saddle. Through the flap in the tent they could see flames leaping up from a smashed gas lamp that Martin's horse had knocked over into a pile of hay, the heat caressing their faces. They huddled closer to one another, but were torn apart when Martin's horse ripped the tent in two beneath its relentless hooves. The children screamed, but before they could react any further Luther

scooped Hector up with one strong arm, planted him on the empty saddle, then lashed his legs together with rope until he was completely immobile. Martin did the same with Maisie, her mind blank with terror as he knotted it around her legs.

This all took place in a matter of seconds, and although such events often seemed to stretch on endlessly in the minds of the Rangers' victims, Mother Florence perceived hardly anything, and the children are too shocked to form any memories of the kidnapping.

With the campsite destroyed and their bounties gathered, the riders streaked out across the darkened plain, urging their horses faster with vicious kicks of their spurs, their human cargo bouncing violently.

They ride hard, and if someone were to watch them streaking by, they might be able to make out the faintest bit of white luminescence trailing off behind the horses. Night has fallen in the Realm once more, and this time there are no stars.

#

"Percy keep pushing I'm losing my grip!" Roger gasped. Desperation clawed at his senses as he tried to keep from panicking.

"Relax, I just need a quick break," Percy replied, dusting off his chest-feathers. Then he actually leaned against the rock with his weight in the downhill direction.

"Percy, what are you doing?! I can't hold it for long without you, and it doesn't help that you're pressing on it in the wrong direction." Black fear streaked through him, and he glanced over his shoulder, expecting to see the same horrible robed figure make another attempt to grab him. To his surprise, it had disappeared, perhaps back through the entrance of one of the caves that lined the walls.

[You're on their side now, and when you cross the river, boy, they can do whatever they want to you.] Charon's voice again.

Percy jumped back from the boulder when he realized he was actually contributing to Roger's ensuing loss of grip on the slick surface. He laid his good wing – so useless-seeming when compared to the overall size of the boulder – on the rock and, incredibly, it seemed enough to stabilize the whole operation. For some reason, with Percy helping, the task was somehow manageable, in a this-can't-be-happening-unless-it's-magic sense. It seemed clear that his participation was a critical piece of the puzzle, a puzzle that we'd need to solve or die trying if we were to have any hope of making it on to the next boxcar.

"Look, you really have to help me with this, it won't work without you. There's some sort of enchantment so I can't do it by myself."

"You're right, I'm sorry, I really just lost my breath for half a second. It's tough staying on guard all the time with those things hovering around." His eyes held a terror that I had already seen once, when the creature in the previous section had risen out of the earth and almost eaten us alive.

Their progress employed the same technique that the tortoise had used to beat the hare, but it was anything but easy or pleasant. Minutes passed that felt like hours, but I could sense that this miserable job was nearing its end. Sisyphus would have to cut his break short, because I didn't plan on sticking around any longer than it took us to grab the key and get the hell out of here. [Getting comfortable with using the old profanity, are we?] This could have been me or Percy, it wasn't clear. Even though I hadn't actually said the word out loud, I felt my cheeks redden.

In a fit of anger Roger redoubled his efforts to get the cursed boulder up the slope. It lurched forward, and with one final surge they at last arrived at the top. It settled into a notch that was similar to the one the boulder had started out in. Something felt unsteady about it, though, and Roger suddenly became fearful of having to hold the rock on his own, since Percy now needed to grab the key from the pedestal. He remembered Charon's warning: if they let the boulder roll back down the hill, they'd lose access to the key, and wind up stuck on the dead side of the Styx forever. He couldn't fail George and wind up trapped down there. He steeled his resolve and made a tiny adjustment to his grip on the rock. Percy held on, too. They both paused to think.

Roger looked over to see the glimmering pedestal that he had glimpsed from afar when they had just disembarked from the ferry. It was a golden stand encrusted with jewels. The top was housed in a bell of glass. When he and Percy got the boulder in place, the dome slid back to reveal the key, free and clear of any other obstructions. It lay on a stand that was made of something Roger thought might be ebony, and the surface gleaming like a polished piano key. Percy immediately darted out from his position and hopped madly at the side of the table, the key just out of his reach. At that same instant, the rock throbbed backwards against Roger in a violent jolt that almost caused him to lose his balance and go tumbling backwards down the stairs to fall into the clutches of those robed freaks.

"Percy, I can't hold this thing much longer!" Roger cried in desperation. He glanced back only for a moment before resuming his insane hop around the pedestal.

"Hang on, I've almost got it!"

With that, he sprang up and with extraordinary dexterity managed to pluck the key neatly from where it lay. Roger was busy summoning all his strength to keep the

rock in place, and it felt like his grip might give out at any second, but when Percy got the key, somehow the weight stopped pressing. He hesitantly stopped resisting what he thought would be the bringer of his death, and the enormous artifact remained steady. Percy hopped back as if nothing had happened, the key dangling from his beak.

“I got the key! Did you see that jump back there? Almost made me feel like I was flying again!”

They stood at the top of the rocky mound carved there in the banks of the River Styx and Roger felt a strange itch, like he was in desperate need of something, that some void deep inside him had opened up.

“Percy, while you were busy hopping around, that thing almost crushed me. It needed the strength of us both to make it up the hill, however minimal your contribution may have been.”

“I resent that. You said it yourself, you needed me. Now can we please get back to the other side of the river?”

“Sounds good to me.”

They hustled down the slope without giving the clearing at the top a second glance. Roger was glad they were leaving; he could feel death closing in on them even as they ran. Indeed, the cave-dwellers continued to shuffle about on their perches, trying to get a better look at the travelers. However unconsciously, Roger managed to keep his mental shield up to prevent them from entering his thoughts, and it looked to him like Percy had done the same.

The pair skidded to a stop at the bottom of the slope, which was fortunate since a few more inches would have sent them tumbling into the water. Charon was right where

they'd left him, apparently still waiting for them, and Roger felt a strange flood of gratitude towards him for staying put.

Despite Roger's thoughts of Orpheus just moments earlier, he decided to throw one last glance backwards before boarding the boat with Percy, who had already hopped over the bow. The ferryman prepared to push off again with his long, black oar.

What Roger saw when he turned his head was an old man – at least, that was what his eyes registered at first – but upon closer inspection what he saw was a monster. Skin draped off his bones in loose flaps, and his nails and beard grew long, ragged, and tattered. The flesh of his face was covered with dark, cancerous-looking spots. A stained loincloth was wrapped around his wasted thighs. Even from the bottom of the hill, the stench of him was almost unbearable: sweat, vomit, and urine wafted down in a cloud.

[Stop it, it's just those things trying to get ahold of you, can't you see he's working with them? Stop looking at that man and get on the boat.]

Roger did his best to obey this voice, but found himself unable to tear his gaze away from the demon now standing at the top of the hill, in all his misery; he actually seemed proud to be up there. Roger felt horrified by what he saw, but could not tear his eyes away. This was Sisyphus, a relic from the underworld whose task Roger and Percy had completed one single time, using all their strength and resources. As Roger watched, the old man laid one foot on the boulder, adjacent to the now-empty pedestal that once held a key – this was now receding into the ground like a reverse-growing orchid, emitting a bone-jarring rumble as it went – and gave it one massive shove. The thing took off like a shot and came crashing down the mountain, headed on a direct (and definitely promising to be lethal) collision course with the boat.

“Roger, get to the boat, hurry hurry now now now!” Percy screamed at him. He did not need to be told twice.

The boulder crashed down the hill with increasing momentum, certain to smash the boat to smithereens and obliterate its occupants.

CHAPTER 15

“Now son, I want to shoot straight with you here and tell you that we’re gonna have to wait a little while before we can move you to your permanent quarters. I know it’s dark and kinda scary down here, but at least it’s warm, and most importantly, I know you’re safe. I’ve had Mandrake bring down a few extra blankets for you. And a jigsaw puzzle.” Vladimir nodded at Mandrake, who was standing at attention on one side, the gifts in hand.

“I carved it myself, master George.” He held out a box and beamed at him through the bars of his cell with a gap-toothed grin. “It’s a harvest scene. I think you’ll enjoy it!”

That smile made George break out in goosebumps all over again.

Vladimir was sitting on a stool beside his cell. George was too upset to talk to him, or perhaps was just too scared. Though he had only encountered Vladimir once or twice, he had come to be the person George feared most in that awful place, the one who radiated evil like a hot furnace. He had no doubt that it was his sick pet that had come to visit earlier. He didn’t know what sick game the king was playing, but he had begun to

grow desperate to figure out some way to escape. He only wanted to find out whether he'd actually survive long enough to see Roger again. He'd concluded that Vladimir was either going to use him for some sick sacrificial ceremony out in the cornfield, or he was going to feed the boy to his lapdog, which was easily the most hideous thing George had ever seen in his scant few years. I guess when you leave Earth, there's a whole new world of possibilities of what you might see, I thought.

George stared back at Vladimir through the bars, trying to make his face look tough on the outside, but inwardly he was holding back tears. Vladimir gave George an understanding look, as though he thought he could read the boy's mind. It occurred to him that if his pet snake, or rat, or whatever it was, was capable of invading someone's thoughts, his master would probably possess that talent as well. I got the impression that he just hadn't bothered to use it on me yet.

He's sizing you up, trying to wait you out. Don't give in George, don't play his games!

"You're a very willful young fellow, aren't you?" he asked. George said nothing. "I assure you I'm not playing any games, my young friend. The fact is we're going to have some new visitors arriving shortly, and I thought it'd be... beneficial for you all to get to know each other. In fact I believe two of them are children who should be just about your age. You'll get along famously, I'm sure. In time, you'll probably come to regard them as your own brother and sister.

"You needn't worry. Your brother, I'm sad to say, remains unaccounted for. Something tells me he will be joining us soon, however," he added with a wry tone. "He's got to show up eventually, otherwise what kind of a brother would he be?"

“Don’t talk about him,” he muttered. He hadn’t really meant to say that out loud, but it didn’t. “We don’t belong here. When he comes to get me you’ll have to let us go.”

“But why should I let you go, when you’ll both be so much happier here? You’ll be together and he’ll always be there for you. And what’s there to miss back home? Your father? He’s already forgotten about you.” He broke into a strange sort of grin. “He never loved you anyway, he couldn’t move on from your mother’s death. Admit it, you’ll be better off to him gone.”

He couldn’t hold back any longer, and a few tears slid down his cheek.

“There, there my boy, don’t be upset. Things are going to get one hundred percent better. With Roger here, what’s the problem? I’ll see to it that you have everything you need.”

At that moment, George felt a slight change in him.

“If Roger and I can be together... then maybe,” he managed to stammer. “Maybe that would be all right.”

Vladimir’s face spread into a grin that only enhanced his wolfish appearance. That “click” that had taken place in his mind a moment earlier gave George a weird illusion of being at ease, but his skin still crawled when he saw that smile.

“I can tell you’re already beginning to come around! You’re a smart lad Georgie, there’s talent in your eyes, a bit of fire.” He got up, dusting off his pants and drawing to his full height, which was not insignificant. As he stroked his beard, seeming to consider something, the hairs pulled down on the wrinkled skin of his face, lending him the appearance of a mummified corpse.

“We have much more to discuss, but don’t be frightened – I won’t send Henrietta down to bother you again. Not yet, anyway. And one more thing: if your brother does

show up, just tell him that you both need to wait for me here like good little boys. If he tries to get any smart ideas about escaping, which we both know is not the right thing to do, you'll stop him, won't you? If you can't do it yourself, we might need to call for some help. Henrietta can be very territorial, and should she deem him a threat... well, you never know what could happen." He headed for the staircase at the end of the hall, but turned back before ascending the steps.

"I'm glad we're finally getting to know one another better, George. Everything's going to be all right." His steps echoed up the stairs, followed by the clang of the metal door, and the shriek of the bolt as it slid back into place.

#

Charon bid the pair farewell with a wave of his bony hand as they stepped off the boat.

"Percy, I've got to tell you, I'm getting a bit tired of these so-called 'challenges'," Roger said, sounding a bit testier than perhaps he had meant to. "We almost got killed back there, more than once. I don't know if you noticed while you were hopping around trying to grab the key." He felt for it in his pocket to make sure it was still there. "But the boulder was this close to rolling backwards and crushing me to death."

"Now, now, Roger, calm down. Only one hurdle remains, and if what I've heard is true, this last test won't be nearly as risky."

Roger could only hope he was telling the truth. He trusted him – to an extent – he was the only helpful creature he'd met in the Realm so far, and he'd already made peace with the fact that he couldn't go it alone. He knew the lay of the land, and without him Roger would have been lost.

They inched their way up the sandy embankment until they were standing on a ledge above the river once more. Roger couldn't figure it out; the mighty Styx was moving at its usual steady pace, but the inexorable rise that they had seen upon our arrival had abated so far as I could tell. The violent churning of the rapids had settled to mere swells in the current, and the water level looked about even with where it had been before I had noticed anything happening. Something about our presence was definitely causing a reaction in the river, as if it were a living moat trying to protect some priceless treasure.

Roger took the key from his pocket to have a closer look. It appeared incredibly ancient – there was no doubt about that – and the ornate metalwork that formed the handle struck him as something that may not have been made by human hands. It was unlike any craftsmanship he'd ever seen before, and the weight of the object was far greater than he had expected. In fact, it felt heavier in his hand than it had when it was just resting in his pocket a second before. It was as though the key was accumulating some invisible mass with every step they took away from the beach.

"Percy, let's pick up the pace a bit, I think something might be wrong with this key."

He put the key back in his pocket, but with every step the weight increased, ounce by ounce until he had to keep one hand on his waistband to prevent his pants from slipping down.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean it's getting heavier! Come on, we have to move, this thing is going to make me lose my balance."

"Here, let me carry it, birds have impeccable balance, don't you know."

"Percy, I honestly don't think you could carry it at all right now. Your beak would be dragging along the ground."

"As you say. Keep moving, the door's there, up ahead. Do you see it?"

Roger did. In the gleam of the moisture on the slick stone wall he could make out the outlines of thick oaken paneling, ghostly and luminescent in the gloom of the cavern. The roar of the river filled their ears, and it felt as though all the moisture had gone out of Roger's tongue. Worse, he was starting to get dizzy.

"Roger, are you keeping your shield up? I get the impression those things don't want us to leave," Percy said. His voice sounded very distant. He turned around to face the ledges on the opposite shore, where of course the observers were standing, staring, and sending out thoughts that made Roger start to feel certain urges – ones that made him want to do harm to Percy ... or himself.

"I... I don't feel well, Percy, I think I'm going to sit down."

"No no no, don't do that! Roger, wake up, sing that song in your head again. The one with the strange melody."

(get your motor runnin'...)

He couldn't focus. There was just no way that he could stand up to the kind of voltage the robed figures were putting out, not after all he'd just been through. After all you've just gone through, exactly. You're not going to let those deatheaters ruin your chance of saving Georgie. Not on my watch, brother, he's yours, and you are going to make it to that door. Come on, you know the words: Lookin' for adventure / in whatever comes our way... You've got to do it, Roger, right... NOW!

He gave his head a hard shake and felt the fog in his mind dissipate. He concentrated on the lyrics – I had sung them in my head and out loud countless times

over months and months of listening to my Dad's records, but I never thought that they'd play such an important role . I repeated the lines over and over in my head until the words began to sound like an alien language.

"That's it, Roger, pull yourself together, we're almost there!" Percy's voice cut through what little remained of the trance they had put him in – a bit of a sneak attack, and not very sportsmanlike, he thought – and they hustled the last hundred feet to the door, Roger's sneakers squeaking on the treacherous surface as he fought to keep his balance. The force of the key pulling him down grew stronger with every step, and it was all he could do not to go tumbling over the edge, certain to shatter his skull on a jagged outcrop before plunging into the icy black waters below.

When they were close enough to stand immediately in front of the door, Roger could see the keyhole located just below the handle, which did not protrude, and appeared to be completely two-dimensional, just like the rest of the door.

"Are you sure this is going to work?"

"We passed the challenge didn't we?"

"It isn't over yet." Roger took a deep breath. "Here goes nothing."

He pushed the key into the lock, where it sank into place with a reassuring clunk. He said a brief and mostly subconscious prayer, then gave it a twist.

Some clanky internal mechanism ground into motion, and the frame of the door rumbled out of view, revealing a black space that was somehow terrifying in its pure emptiness. He felt the sides of the opening and wasn't surprised to find zero flaws or indications that the huge panel had slid out of view before their very eyes.

"Do you really think it's safe, Percy?" Fear had crept back into Roger's voice, and his nerves were acting up in a hurry.

“All we have is faith, Roger. Everything’s going to be all right.”

Without another word, they stepped into the darkness.

CHAPTER 16

Mother Florence regained consciousness some time later, awakened by the jostling of the horses. Her mind instantly flashed to the children, but her hands were bound and she couldn't move her head. All she could see was the stony ground passing by a few feet from her face, and there was no way for her to catch a glimpse of Maisie or Hector. She could sense that they were nearby, however. And that they were alive.

Florence was aware of the fact that they had been kidnapped by Vladimir's Rangers. The story she told the children had been true all along of course, and if his pet thing – what did he call it? Henrietta? – hadn't chased her away from that house all those years ago, it would have been these men to do his bidding and harbor that secret. But what did he do with the children? she thought. Maybe there was enough evidence (in her mind) to prove that he was the force behind all those disappearances, but there had to be more layers to the plot. She hardly knew anything – nor had she really ever rationalized what she saw in that room behind the bookcase. A child's room? Bloody clothing? True, she had no idea whether it was really blood, but what else could it have

been? What about the mobile spinning over the crib? Do you remember what that was made of?

She closed her eyes and was somehow gladdened by what she heard, despite what she knew about the owners of those voices.

“Won’t be long now. See that glow just over the next ridge?”

“Vladimir’s estate?”

“Yes sir. Kept the lights on late, as promised.”

“Been a long day’s ride.”

“Yeah, s’pose he might have something cooked up and waiting for us when we get in. That’d be fine.”

The horses trod on, clip-clop, clip-clop.

“Think he’d do that?”

“Yeah, that Mandrake is actually one hell of a chef, come to mention it.”

“Heard he cooks up some other things.”

“Yeah, heard that one too.”

“Think that’ll happen to this lot?”

Martin shrugged. “Part of me could feel bad, y’know, but then hell, the money! I ain’t never seen so much gold as that last payday.”

“There’s more to life than gold, Martin.”

“Mebbe so. I haven’t it found it yet though, m’self.”

They rode on. The lights from Vladimir’s estate created a hemisphere that raised the darkness up from a glowing center. Luther cocked his head and wondered if he could hear drums beating faintly in the distance. He shook off the impression and urged his horse to move a little faster. Martin picked up on the cue and accelerated to a trot,

closing the distance between them and their destination ever more. Florence couldn't tell whether she was awake or dreaming.

She closed her eyes, and prayed that they wouldn't hurt her babies.

#

Silty light hit Roger's eyes as he slowly became acclimated to the new room in which he and Percy now found themselves. His eyes had grown so accustomed to the almost-impenetrable gloom of Charon's lair that he had to blink rapidly against the brightness. As his vision adjusted, he realized he was standing in a small library. Book-filled shelves lined the walls from floor to ceiling, and a fire crackled merrily in the hearth on the far wall. Facing the fire – and hiding its occupant – was a high-backed chair upholstered in red leather with brass buttons all along the sides. The room smelled of leather and soot.

"Percy, where are we?" Roger whispered.

"Keep your voice down," he replied. "We're standing in the presence of a very great man."

A greeting boomed out from the front of the chair: "You may approach." His voice had a grit to it that was somewhere between Clint Eastwood and Louie Armstrong. Casting a nervous glance at Percy, Roger stepped forward to get a look at the occupant of the chair. The shock he'd felt at seeing the giant mole in the first boxcar, followed by the encounter with Charon, had slightly diminished his capacity for surprise, but he still gave a start when he first gazed upon the thing in the chair.

Strange barnacle-like ruptures transformed the waxy skin of what might have passed for an otherwise-normal face in a cascading pattern all down one side. A huge welt on his forehead gave off an oily gleam in the firelight, just below where a few wispy

strands of hair drooped down. Roger's eyes wandered lower, and he saw sinewy grey tentacles slung over the front of the chair where a normal person's legs should have been. Several more ropy appendages extended from his shirtsleeves. He used one of these to light a pipe with surprising dexterity, and puffed greedily at the smoke that issued from the stem. He wore a ragged shirt that looked like something Roger remembered his mom wearing to bed in the wintertime. Roger had to stifle a shudder as the creature exhaled rich-smelling smoke, which bloomed and dispersed as it met the heat coming from the fireplace.

"Percy! How nice to see you. I see you've brought me a guest! Strange species. Human, I take it?"

"Nick, I'd like you to meet Roger. He's not from around here. We've been traveling together as of late, and we both have very important business to attend to, so if you don't mind..."

"Roger, is it? Well, pleased to meet you. I hope you've been having a pleasant stay in this land of ours."

Roger wasn't sure whether he should extend his hand or not, and said: "Er ... pleased to meet you, sir. We were hoping you could let us through to see the conductor. I need to get my brother back, you see, and..."

"If there's one thing I really savor these days," the thing broke in, smacking its lips, "it's a good game of chess. Do you play, young man?"

Roger had played in a few tournaments at summer camp in years past, and still occasionally played his dad when he felt confident enough to win, but he hadn't practiced in ages. Plus, he didn't exactly fancy the idea of sitting across a chessboard from this ghoulish sea creature sitting in front of him.

The experience he'd just gone through in the Underworld had left Roger wanting to keep my mental playing cards as close to the chest as possible. One could never be too sure who was listening out here in the Realm. [Good attitude, son.] Percy's voice came in like a well-tuned AM radio station. I guessed that owing to the fact that we were getting to know each other better, Percy was able to tap into my thoughts all the more speedily. If familiarity formed a key part of the recipe, Nick probably didn't have a clue what we were thinking. But maybe he did. I had learned how to tell when my thoughts were being invaded, at least to some degree; voices clawing for purchase, just like when we were down by the River Styx... but I wasn't picking up anything from the creature in the chair, at least not yet. I suddenly remembered that he had asked me a question.

"Well, I'm not that great, but I know how to play."

"A modest lad! That's what I like. You didn't think I'd just let you pass through and see the conductor for free, did you? I am the final challenge, after all." He said this with a trumped up air of dignity.

"That's all? If I win you'll let us pass through?"

"Sure, but before we get started, let me inform you of some rules. Are you ready?"

Here we go, he thought.

"For every move, I'm going to ask you a riddle."

I gulped. "A riddle?"

"Yes. Now set up the pieces, I haven't got all day."

He slid a low endtable out in front of the chair and plucked a board and a bag of pieces out from underneath using his grease-slicked tentacles. Something squelched beneath the fabric of his threadbare plaid shirt as he moved.

“Percy, this is nuts, who is this guy?” I didn’t care if I was being rude. This was too much.

“Roger, where are your manners?!” he asked in dismay. He turned abruptly to Nick. “Please don’t mind the boy, he’s got a bit of a peasant’s tongue. If we could just get the game underway, I’m sure we’ll be out of your... er, hair... in no time at all.” Surprisingly, Nick brushed it off with the wave of one appendage.

“They take their time, but I’ve heard most of your garden variety interdimensional human children metamorphisize into respectful adults, long as their fragile lives aren’t snuffed out too quick, that is.” He fixed one beady eye on me, as black as a shark’s. “Will you set up the board?”

I was the first to admit I didn’t have a choice, but I didn’t see what good manners had to do with it. I just wanted to beat him and never have to look at him again. The face was hideous, and I actually could make out a few of the smaller barnacle-like lumps on his face weeping a pale yellow liquid. Not for the first time, I had to suppress a gag reflex that threatened to ambush me and ruin my now long-forgotten breakfast. Anxiety and mental exhaustion were writ large on my face, and I knew Percy was praying I could only hold on a little longer.

[We’re so close son, and he’s really not that good of a player. It’s the riddles that are tough. I know you can defeat him. Dealing with his looks are half the battle, anyway.]

His black shark’s eyes
(or maybe they’re more like a doll’s)
snapped to my friend.

“Did you just... say something?” Nick asked thinly.

“Me? Nope. Not a word. Sorry!” Percy stammered. He closed his beak and looked like he’d be taking a break from talking – or thinking risky thoughts – at least for a little while. That was good. I withdrew several chess pieces from the small drawstring pouch and began placing them on the board: all the pawns first, quick and easy, then you had to make sure each player’s back row was perfect, recalling that bishops were more important than knights in the royal hierarchy and therefore securing their role as the left and right-hand men of the king and queen, respectively, if you’re white. Queen on her own color, of course, and a black square in the lower left corner completes the picture.

“All set, sir. Will you be asking me a question before my first move?”

“Riddle, my boy, and no, although I won’t have long to wait since the ball is in your court. You may begin.”

Through force of habit, I moved the pawn in front of my king two spaces forward. If I was going to have any chance of winning at all, it would have to be decisive and lightning-quick. The best method for such an attack shared its name with a famous German strategy perfected by Hitler, blitzkrieg, whose Nazi origins always made me feel a little guilty somehow for employing such a strategy myself. At any rate, most self-respecting players can spot it a mile away, and have countless recipes to block it at no strategic cost to themselves – but there are some amateurs out there who still miss it on occasion, either because it’s new to them, or they simply forget about its existence and possibility of use by the opponent until it is just too late. That was always the beauty part for me, as my Dad would have called it. The handful of times that I’d actually mated someone with blitzkrieg, they realized what was going to happen about the second that I laid my hand on the last piece to perform the coup de gras.

“You know, we had a lad on our sailing ship named Trevor. A good seaman, but I remember he had a bit of an attitude problem, much like the one I detect in you, young man. Oh, he was full of piss and vinegar, always bragging that he’d harpoon the biggest whale in the history of the business, just to make us all look bad. Never did amount to much though, although all men look and sound pretty much the same when they’ve fallen overboard and a Great White’s jaws are clamped around their thigh.” A twinkle from the fire reflected off his foul eyeballs. “The thing’d chewed off both his legs at the thigh by the time we got anywhere near ‘im. Wasn’t a damn thing we could do with a brute that size thrashing around – 18 feet if she was an inch. The beast ate its fill and then just left him there to bob in the water like a bloody cork, ‘fore we finally hauled him outta there.”

I had some difficulty figuring out how to respond, even just in terms of my facial expression. I probably looked like I had just sucked on a lemon.

“Um ... that sounds rough, sir.”

“You don’t know the half of it.” He curled one tentacle around to scratch the back of his misshapen head , then pushed a pawn forward with what seemed like a surprising lack of interest. I could make out the faint trail of slime he’d left behind as he withdrew the appendage. I was starting to think my juvenile plan might have a chance. Just don’t touch the knight. Please don’t touch the queenside knight.

“Your move kid.”

I remembered how I used to watch my grandpa and his friends play poker, trying to pick up on each other’s cues and ticks when they would lie or hint at the truth of what fortune their cards contained. Here, I had no idea what kind of emotional perceptiveness my opponent possessed, but I had what felt like a good idea of how much

– or in this case, how little – he was paying attention to the game. I tried to mimic the brusqueness with which he had shoved his pawn into play, and slid the bishop into striking position on his high right flank. It wasn't hard to appear distracted; I was still thinking with horror upon the little gem of an anecdote he had just told me. I took my hand off the piece, signalling the finality of the move.

“So you were a ... a whaler?” I asked, unsure whether I'd used the right word. It was no easy feat to engage him in conversation, but I had to keep his mind off the game.

“Yes, yes I was...” He trailed off and studied the board a little too intently for my own comfort. “Saw a lot of good men die out there, swallowed up by the hungry ocean. Not that I was spared, you understand.” He raised his eyes to look at me. “S'pose you think I'm a monster, don't you? Well, can't say I much blame you, I certainly do look a fright.” He leaned closer. “Wanna know what happened?”

I really had no desire to hear what events could have possibly transpired to leave him in such a disfigured state. Anything to keep him distracted. I needed all my focus in order to make sure that his concentration was compromised.

Honesty wasn't always the best policy if you intended on getting what you wanted in life, and right now I wanted to end this chess game and be done with these dratted challenges once and for all. “Your move,” I added, with as much nonchalance as I could muster.

He absently pushed the same pawn that he had moved out two spaces one square ahead. I considered reminding him that he had insisted on asking me a riddle after every move, but that would have been like correcting the guy who worked at the comic book store the time he undercharged me for the new Batman. I didn't know what

he had in mind (I certainly wasn't able to read his thoughts, regardless of whether he could read mine, which I doubted) other than perhaps trying to stage an attack on my bishop. As things stood, my most religious piece was not located in harm's way, and I concealed any reaction or excitement that I might have displayed in some other world where such indicators might not have mattered. He's going to fall right into my trap, I thought. Two more moves and you've got him. He's not even asking you the riddles – looks like the Bilbo and Gollum scenario won't be playing out the way you thought it would. Maybe it's just too many games for him to keep track of.

"I know what you're thinking," he said. It felt like the blood in my veins had suddenly turned to so many quarts of ice water. He knows my plan. The jig is up, as they say in those old detective shows Dad likes to watch. "And no, I haven't forgotten about the riddles. I got a bit distracted by thinking about the demise of young Trevor, but now I'm going to ask you two in a row."

"That's not fair!" Percy piped up from beside my chair. I had almost forgotten about him entirely. "You're changing the rules, Nick. I won't stand for it."

"Calm down Percy, just because this young whippersnapper made a quick move when my concentration was off doesn't mean that your team can change the rules."

"No, that's not fair," It felt like a stranger was working my tongue and vocal chords. "Once you've made your move, that's it. It's not our fault you forgot, but you can still ask me one riddle. Your loss on the first turn."

Nick looked puzzled for a moment at this act of rebellion, but after a moment a look that somewhat resembled consent – and maybe even some primitive form of admiration – played across his grotesque features.

“So be it. But don’t think I’ll be making such allowances in the future.”

“Get on with it Nick. Ask him the riddle.”

He squirmed in his armchair. The fabric that I could see when he leaned forward to stare at the board was dark with slime and moisture. I clenched my teeth to suppress a shudder.

Without further comment, he moved out a knight... but to the edge of the board. Does this guy even know what he’s doing? I wondered. Might as well just give the piece to me if that’s where he’s going to put him. I thought every chess player knew that sticking a knight to the wall was as good as paralyzing him, plus it did nothing to hinder my blitzkrieg. If he’d gone the other way, though... that would have been bad news. I kept my eyes on the board and listened to his voice as he revealed the riddle:

“I’m as large as a mountain

Though I look small as a pea

I float on forever

In a waterless sea

He grinned. “What am I?”

I raised my head to look at his crustacean-infested visage and inwardly recoiled as a faint ghost of a smile spread across his mutilated lips.

I concentrated hard. My mind transported me back to a place that I had once been, but could never return to. George and I were lying out on the grass in our backyard late on a summer’s night at a time in our lives when we were just starting to appreciate the vastness of the universe.

How big do you think a star actually is, Roger? George had asked me in a voice that was small and querulous. I didn’t know, but I told him what I had learned

from an episode of an old science show on PBS: that they were really just enormous balls of gas, and that they were probably a lot bigger in person than they looked to us down here on Earth. I'd never been that great at astronomy, but I remember thinking of the stars that lit up the night sky above us as massive, impossibly bright beach balls, just floating along in an ocean that didn't have any water...

I snapped back to the present.

"That's easy. The answer is 'stars,'" I said, now wearing a smirk to match Nick's. In reply, he gave me a look that was somewhere between a scowl and pure hatred.

"Very well. Let us play on then. You won't get off so easily next time."

I was surprised that I'd guessed the answer so quickly, but it was like the Jumble at the bottom of the comics section; sometimes the solution would click the second you looked at it.

As the game stood, I was two moves away from depriving this sea-demon of a victory and erasing the final challenge on this seemingly endless train ride – although, it hadn't occurred to me in several minutes that we might actually still be on the train, as I hadn't felt the rumble of the wheels underneath us since stepping through the door of the very first boxcar. It seemed reasonable to conclude that I might not even be in the Realm at all. How many layers are there to this place? I thought, with a rather dizzying sense of wonder. At that moment, I didn't really care – I was still trying to hold down my modest breakfast in the presence of this bizarre creature. I wondered again if there might not be some harm in having to look at such pure ugliness for an extended period of time, like a slow-acting Gorgon.

Although, I reflected, a real Gorgon would be female, so maybe there isn't that much to worry about.

I resumed staring at the board and banished the distracting thoughts from my mind. They would only serve to disconcert and terrify me if I let his ghastly appearance work its way under my skin.

“Go on, then, I haven’t got all day,” he growled.

I mimicked some fretting and second-guessing as I hovered over various pieces on the board; first the knight, then a random pawn as if I meant to build a wall for long-term defense. I couldn’t keep the charade on forever, though. My fingers grasped the queen by her dainty crown – the set was beautifully carved out of some alien wood, polished to a fine gloss with ornate detailing that went right down to the facial features of each individual piece – and I dragged her with as little confidence as possible out into the arena. She sat there in the third row, her target standing unawares on the other side of the board. The number of spaces between my assassin and the opponent’s king belied any suspicions that an attack might be imminent, but she was poised like a slingshot that must be cocked back a good distance to achieve fatal velocity.

One more move, that voice of hope said, one more move and he’s toast – as long as he doesn’t block it. I realized how sweaty my palms had gotten, and I pressed them into the cloth of my shorts.

“All right, you know the rules, even though you shirked them last time. I’m really gonna stump you, kid.” He paused to formulate the riddle, his eyes growing deep and pensive. “So, here it is:

The poor have me,

The rich need me.

I am greater than the power of Vladimir Cruor

And more devastating than the Famine...

...What am I?"

He finished the riddle and gazed at me with a misty stare that clouded his soulless shark eyes, which had managed to look so human only a moment before. I was bewildered.

"More evil than the Famine?" I repeated.

"Naturally, more evil than the Famine," he uttered, doing little to alleviate my confusion. "She's the most evil force this land has ever seen. Vladimir visits her upon the Realm at times of great upheaval. Sets everybody back in their rightful place, you see. Hungry people start to think a lot more clearly on questions like, 'who's in charge around here,' and 'wouldn't we rather obey than suffer through this?' People sort their priorities out pretty quickly when the Famine comes to town. Deep down, Vladimir doesn't consider her to be all that evil... oh, but the townsfolk do."

[Just give him a little more rope and he'll hang himself,] Percy broadcast into my head, [he's on the verge of giving away the answer! Think hard – the answer's stuck on the tip of my tongue, but I know you can get it!]

Nick fidgeted self-consciously, as if he knew he had already said too much. I racked my brain for any past experiences that might shed light on the puzzle, but could find only... nothing. The word itself, NOTHING, blooming in bright neon letters out of the black abyss of my mind. A woman's voice, saying nada over and over again until the end of time.

Another voice in my head began to speak, though this one I did not recognize:

There is nothing more devastating than the Famine. In the Realm, to the townsfolk, the theory seemed to hold true, especially given all that Nick had just told me.

The poor have... nothing. The rich need nothing. True enough anywhere, I suppose. I guess it must be one of those ‘facts of life’ that Dad’s always going on about.

And finally:

There is nothing greater than Vladimir Cruor’s power.

Could that really be the answer?

As I checked it against Nick’s criteria, it dawned on me that it was. Nothing was greater than the de facto emperor of the Realm – a fact that will have to be reckoned with in time, that same unfamiliar voice proclaimed from the back of my head. Don’t forget, he’s the one who’s holding Georgie hostage at this very moment.

I hadn’t forgotten, but there was business at hand to be taken care of. My lips moved soundlessly, and I found that I had lost my voice for a moment. I meant to say “nothing,” but nothing would come. I cleared my throat and tried again.

“The answer is ‘nothing.’”

Percy uttered a small, involuntary squawk that must have been somewhere between triumph and surprise. I’d guessed right yet again.

Nick drummed his fingers, which were really just smaller tentacles protruding from the end of his ropy and sinuous arm – or rather, arm-like growth – and gave me a look that could peel the paint off a schooner’s hull.

“So it is, so it is... You’ve played well, boy, but I think your luck is about to run out. You can’t possibly hope to guess any of the others I’ve got in store.” He sounded smug, but there was a strange noise coming from the back of his throat, as if he were gargling seawater.

The game was over and he still had no idea. I felt that old confidence seep in. There’s no way he’ll make the right move to block my plan now. His other tentacle

switched lazily through the air as he made to select a piece. He moved out a pawn... which had been standing in front of his right-hand rook, and could not possibly have mattered less.

The second he lifted his hand from the ebony-colored henchman, I pushed my queen several spaces across the board, decapitating (in my mind's eye) the pawn that guarded his king with one swift stroke. All others who might come to their majesty's assistance were hopeless blocked.

"Checkmate," I declared, using the base of my queen to knock his pawn over, which rolled to one side like the headless corpse that it was. His king had nowhere to run. The bishop covered the queen like a rebel fighter holding a Kalashnikov, ready to rain down deadly suppressing fire should his comrade fall under attack.

The sudden defeat had apparently rendered Nick speechless. He wasn't shaking with rage – but appeared to be on the verge of doing so. One of the bubbles on his face actually ruptured, sending a rivulet of amber-looking fluid on a sticky course down his misshapen cheek.

"This can't be," he murmured. "I haven't lost in twenty-five years."

"I'm afraid that's just what's taken place," Percy said, standing by my side. I focused on quelling the nausea that had had hit me after seeing his blister explode. Despite my best efforts, I could feel hot nausea brewing down below, followed by an acidic taste hitting the back of my throat.

"Percy, let's get out of here, I'm not feeling so hot," I said in a pitiful voice.

"He's right, Nick, give us the keys, we have pressing matters to attend to. We have to get to Mother Florence!" He was beginning to sound a bit panicked, as if this creature might not let us go after all. To my surprise, however, he withdrew a large ring of keys,

selecting one almost without hesitation and unlocking the loop to slide it off. This he handed to me.

“To the victor go the spoils,” he said. Again, that salty gurgling noise. My skin was crawling. [It’s time to go.]

The key felt damp, and yet another wave of revulsion swept over me to accompany the steadily creeping nausea. I was sure I’d vomit, but almost as quickly as it had come, the black feeling of despair and disgust passed, despite the fact that I was still clutching the old iron key. The handle was a flat skull that had been welded onto the barrel. I swallowed hard.

“That’s it then? We can go?” I asked.

“I honor my agreements, even if my opponents can’t always say the same. That was a low trick you played, skipping the first riddle. Don’t think I’ll make exceptions should you ever pass this way again. Now get out of my sight before I lose my temper. Take it from Percy – I can be an extremely sore loser.”

Percy nodded appreciatively. Nick turned away from us towards the fire and sulkily began to pack another pipe. It was an immense relief not to gaze at him any longer.

Behind us, a door that I had failed to notice before awaited. Perhaps it had materialized upon my ending the chess match – I couldn’t say for sure. I got up from my stool and strode over, ready to bury this episode firmly in the past, and stuck the key in below the carved doorknob. It emitted a loud crunch as the key turned and the tumblers did their work. The door swung open; as with the others, there lay only darkness ahead.

Percy and I marched through the opening to confront our fate.

#

Daniel, Cassius, and Isaac bustled about as they made their preparations to get underway. There was a military-like efficiency to their movements. They hitched up the wagon and busily laid implements upon the flatbed in back: most important were the scythes, whose long blades gleamed dully in the moonlight. Dusk had fallen but a quarter of an hour ago, but already the moon was making its presence known (not to mention felt). They also loaded rope, and some hatchets for good measure, since one could never quite tell what to expect when crossing the endless prairie at such an hour.

Daniel locked the front door of the farmhouse with a huge key.

The farmers saddled up and prepared to depart. Cassius sat in front, holding the reins in his massive fists, which were sheathed in leather gloves. He gave the leather straps a leisurely snap. The two huge steeds in front stamped and snorted before lurching forward. They were underway.

A lamp left on in one of the second-story windows to discourage any intruders glows warmly behind them, and each wonders if he'll live to see that light again. Or...

If we should die, will that lamp burn out like a life, with no one to return and replenish the fuel?

They know the danger inherent to their chosen mission, and each man makes his own preparations to face the great beyond in pursuit of their cause.

The familiar rumbling of the wagon wheels beneath the three sturdy figures is the only sound for a time; then, somewhere in the distance, the wolves begin to howl.

CHAPTER 17

“Hey, Georgie-boy! I’ve brought some new guests to keep you company!”

Vladimir’s unmistakable voice echoed down from the top of the stairs, and although George been swimming in a fog of despair, he snapped out of it at once. The sound of shuffling boots came after this proclamation – multiple men, and judging from their unsteady footfalls, they were carrying something heavy.

He got up from his cot and strode over to the bars of the cell, wrapping his hands around the cold vertical bars as he peered down the hall. Vladimir was standing off to one side, and two rough-looking men were dragging along the bodies of a woman and two children. A little boy and a girl, to be exact.

George felt his chest seize up as his mind flickered toward panic. Stars danced before his eyes as if he had just been dealt a harsh blow to the head and suddenly he felt very dizzy. Please don’t let them be dead, he thought, but to his amazement and relief, the little girl they’d brought began to stir. She seemed to realize where she was all at once; new fear dawned in her eyes, slicing through the slow return to consciousness like a knife. She looked at her mother, who had already lost one brown shoe as the pale

cowboy hauled her unceremoniously by one arm, and began to bawl. The tears came hot and fast, and soon the boy that George assumed was her brother woke, and joined her in wailing. He beat his tiny fists against the rider's shoulder, who appeared not to even notice. Under the sounds of their grief George could hear the clink of his spurs on the stone floor.

The burly pair did not speak. Vladimir called out to George again from the end of the hall; he had to raise his voice to be heard over the wails of anguish.

"You think you can teach these two some manners, George? They seem awful upset. I need you to show them that this is a nice place to live." He leered at the boy, his face illuminated by the torchlight. The cowboys – or whatever they were – finally reached the end of the corridor, and without any further ado dumped the three new prisoners in a waiting cell. The older woman slumped onto the cot like a sack of potatoes. The first man – they looked so much alike that George could barely tell them apart – slammed the door and locked it with a steely clatter. The bolt shuddered into place with a cold finality. The little boy ran to the bars of his own cell, with the hard fact of his own imprisonment now dawning on him. He stood directly across from where George was now positioned across the hall.

"Please, let me out!" he sobbed as the gruff riders marched off in silence. Throughout the whole incident, which lasted only five minutes or so, they had never uttered a single word.

"Thank you men, that'll be all for now. If you'll wait for me in the dining hall, Mandrake will see to it that a hot meal is prepared for you."

They touched the brim of their hats in acknowledgement as they passed and continued on their way up the stairs. Vladimir came down the corridor with a quick, graceful gait that almost made it look as though he were floating.

“Now then, I must politely insist that you pipe down, young man. You’ll disturb your new playmate. George, meet Hector...” Vladimir turned to the little girl, “...and you must be Maisie! I’ve heard so much about you. Your mother and I used to be good friends, you know.”

“I’m sure you’ll be excited to know that it won’t be long until we’re able to move you to your new quarters, which I have no doubt you’ll find far more comfortable and attractive.”

George was still too terrified to speak. There was nothing he could say or do that would improve the situation, it seemed. Three more people had been taken hostage by the evil king, and he remained powerless to escape. All he could do was wait... wait, and hope for Roger to arrive.

Hector continued his tirade of angry sobs, shaking the bars in frustration, looking like a miniature version of a captive King Kong. George might have been able to say something to ease his mind, but with Vladimir still in the room, he was unable to find his voice.

The king stood there and continued to leer at his newest captives.

“Settle down, son, or I’ll have to send Henrietta down here to teach you some manners. She can be very unpleasant when confronted with ill-behaved children,” he said in a voice that bristled with irritation.

“No ... not her,” George uttered in a voice that was closer to a moan of fear.

“Well, well, well! Little Georgie has something to say!” He turned towards him.

“It’s fine. She won’t come unless I decide there’s a good reason, so for now you have nothing to worry about. All will become clear soon enough, at any rate. You won’t need to worry about such trifles for much longer.”

George knew that any chance he and Roger might have of escaping and making our way home would soon vanish into thin air.

#

What greeted Roger and Percy as they eased their way through the black portal was nothing more than the engine room of the train, exactly as Roger had always imagined it when the authors of the various Westerns he read used to describe them. Shoveling coal with his back turned was a man in blue overalls and a striped cap. The conductor, he presumed.

The landscape outside rushed by as though they’d never left the train, awash in pale blue moonlight. In the distance, a couple of wolves bounded by, their heads turning sideways to glance at the train from time to time to match its speed. Their tongues flapped in the wind like red flags.

“Spect you’ll be wantin’ to stop and see Missus Florence then,” the man said without turning. Percy took a cautious step forward to address him.

“Yes sir, if it wouldn’t be too much trouble.”

“No trouble ‘tall. You made it through the challenges, so I guess I’m under contract to drop you off wherever you specify. I was sorry ‘bout what happened to Elizabeth though.” He finally turned around – to stare directly at me. “You felt the need to lash out with that blade, boy?” he asked.

Roger realized he was talking about the mole-like monster in the first car.

“Well, sir, she was about to devour us. I did what I had to do.”

The conductor went back to stoking the furnace.

“Aye, that y’did. Can’t say I blame ye – she always did have a bit of a temper. I’m sure she’ll be all right in time – just a little wounded pride, that’s all. You did well to get by.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“We’ll be making our final approach in about ten minutes. You can make y’selves comfortable by the fire, if y’like.”

Roger hadn’t noticed, but two wooden chairs were positioned neatly off to one side. The traveling companions sidled over and did as the conductor suggested. It felt wonderful to catch their breath and take a load off. The coal-burning stove finally eased the chill out of their bones that had set in while they’d been galavanting around the Underworld, and the chairs were by far the most comfortable thing Roger had had to sit on since arriving in the Realm. He suddenly realized how poorly he smelled; his body emitted a pungent mixture of sweat, and something that he had picked up in the Underworld that he thought might be sulphur. The odor could have been bottled and sold as a gag gift under the label “Old Warm Egg.”

“I should tell mention that I can’t be held responsible for anything that might happen to you out on the plains,” the conductor said in a low voice.

The flames flickered hypnotically as he hurled another shovelful of coal into the stove. The engine belched thickets of smoke into the air above the train as they rolled on through the night.

“Well, this is us.”

Roger had already begun to doze off when he suddenly felt the train slowing down by degrees. Percy was preening the feathers on his good wing and appeared lost in thought when he noticed it as well. They both turned their heads to look over the sidewall of the engineer’s booth. To Roger’s surprise, there was a rickety wooden platform beside the track, which formed a kind of primitive station. An old sign hung from a rusty nail between two poles rising from the center, which read “DEATHWATER FLATS.” The smears of red paint that formed the letters gave off the distinct impression that perhaps a mentally unsound person had drawn the sign in blood. Roger had yet to see an actual body of water in the Realm, though several craters I had spotted during the ride looked like they could have been dried-up ponds.

“You won’t see much water ‘round these parts no more, but keep an eye out for abandoned wells and the like,” the conductor muttered from beneath his cap, as if reading thoughts.

“I wouldn’t want to wind up here this time o’ night, tell ya that much.” His words had all the encouraging effect of a bad omen. “Please watch your arms and legs as you exit the vehicle, and good luck out there.”

He reached over and unlatched the low door that was built into the side of the cab, which swung outward into the night on a leather hinge. Roger stepped out onto the platform, with Percy right behind. Eyeing a couple of dust devils that had formed off the tracks to the west with suspicion, Roger remembered the mini-twister that had scooped him up and deposited him onto the train what seemed like days ago. A familiar, crawling dread was beginning to worm its way into his stomach as he realized he had absolutely

no idea what to expect out here. The conductor's warnings had not been very subtle, after all.

"Percy, we should really get moving," he said, hoping to sound more confident than he felt. Someone had to start filling the leadership role a little more frequently around here, and it looked less and less like Percy was going to be up to the challenge. He remembered with regret the feelings of anger he had experienced on the banks of the River Styx, when those demented things tried to invade his thoughts. It won't do any good to get mad at Percy – he's gotten you this far, and look at what a good guide he's turned out to be, he thought. Yes, Percy had proved to be a reliable friend, and he should have felt blessed. Instead, impatience and fear continued their inexorable drag towards the center of his head, like a nightcrawler heading for the core of a juicy apple. He tried to shake it off as they prepared to move out.

Roger turned to wave a quick farewell to the conductor, but the train had already begun to pick up steam, and all he saw was the back of his striped cap as the iron behemoth lumbered away from the platform. The ground beneath his feet rumbled mildly, but otherwise felt spongy and dead.

"This way, Roger," Percy said, and together they trod off in the direction he'd indicated.

A little ways off, Roger could just begin to see a cold glimmer of light, which split the horizon like a tiny rising sun. He had heard of mirages before, but didn't think they were possible at night.

"Percy, you see that?" he whispered excitedly.

"I see it all right, but we have to pick up the pace. Something about this doesn't feel right at all." There was a distinct note of fear in his voice, and Roger began to detect

a hint of what he was talking about. The boy accelerated to a light jog, and Percy stretched his jumps into longer bounds to match his speed.

The glow gradually grew clearer to the point where they could see what looked like sheets of fire leaping up, hungrily consuming everything in the vicinity. This was no campfire – someone had set this, fully intending for the conflagration to burn out of control. The site appeared to be completely deserted, but they scanned the area, fervently hoping their eyes wouldn't come across any charred bodies.

“Come on, Roger, this is serious!”

They closed the rest of the distance to the campsite and skidded to a halt just outside the ring of light cast by the flames.

What they saw confirmed their worst fears.

The campsite lay in utter ruin. Few traces of its original homeliness remained, and the burning object whose glow they'd seen from a distance looked like it had once been a very cozy tent. The poles that had acted as supports shuddered from the heat and finally gave way, sending up a shower of sparks as the rest of the structure collapsed in a heap. Various objects strewn about at their feet told a tragic story of the family that had lived there, up until some unnatural force had torn down everything they held dear. Off to their left, Roger spotted a doll with scorched hair. Not far from it lay a toy pistol that some clever soul had made by lashing together several twigs of different length.

“What are we supposed to do?” Roger murmured.

“Oh this is terrible, terrible!” Percy cried. He strutted about, apparently looking for any signs of life amidst the debris. “We're too late. Vladimir's forces have been here, I'm sure of it. This is his handiwork if I've ever seen it.” There was genuine anguish in his voice.

"They must be okay, Percy. He wouldn't actually hurt them, would he?"

"I'm afraid that's exactly what he might do. Vladimir never did like to tread softly when it came to making an example of someone."

"Is there any way we can find his place without her help?"

"Well, yes, I suppose it's possible... if whoever took them came on horseback, I suppose we could just follow the tracks. I don't suppose I'll ever get my wings back though..."

"They're still alive, I know it. Er... who exactly was she with?"

"Her two children, Maisie and Hector. They must be about six or seven now. Twins. If those brutes touched a hair on either one of their heads..."

"Calm down, it won't do any good to lose our heads." Roger broke off to look around. There was a fire pit next to the tent, and beside it an old rocking chair had tipped over onto its side at some point during the fray. Whoever had come here had worked efficiently and without mercy. Perhaps they had at least shown some restraint since they were dealing with women and children, but Roger had little confidence in that possibility. One thing seemed certain, however: the people who had kidnapped Mother Florence and her children meant to take them to only one place, and that was Vladimir Cruor's fortress.

Wherever they are right now, I'd bet anything they're with George. He's probably keeping them in the same cell, for all I know, Roger thought. It was weirdly comforting and depressing all at once. George would have some company to help weather the storm, at least, but having them be taken prisoner certainly had only served to make things considerably worse.

"Come on, let's look for tracks," Roger said.

Percy nodded in agreement and went to scope out the edges of the compound, keeping his beak low to the ground as he scanned for clues. He kept one wary eye on the fire, although once the tent had finally collapsed, the roaring flames had dwindled to little more than a smoldering bed of coals and roasted canvas. The corner of a pillow stuck out from the wreckage like a snapshot of the shelter and comfort the tent had once provided. It reminded Roger of a news story he had seen once about a plane disaster, where the pictures had shown people's luggage scattered amongst the wreckage, their clothes trailing out of busted zippers like spilled intestines.

The area in which they could search for tracks was fairly small, now that the blaze had died down, but they were still able to scrounge up a lead without much difficulty.

"Over here!" Roger called. "I've got something."

Percy hustled over to look.

"Two sets of prints," he said, "and they definitely left on horseback. I'd be willing to bet Vladimir sent those Rangers of his."

"Rangers?" The only Rangers he had ever heard of played hockey in Madison Square Garden.

"Yep. They take care of Vladimir's dirty business when he has, let's say, delicate work to do. He considers them very reliable."

"What exactly do they do?"

"Oh this and that," he mused, "mostly intimidation and small-scale terrorism. Vladimir uses them when he needs to keep folks in line, especially the kind of folks who are apt to get out of hand and start talking about rebellion. The Rangers have been known to abuse their power quite effectively when any of the townspeople start calling

meetings together, or anything else of that nature. Although I'm not sure you can call it an abuse of power when that's exactly what Vladimir pays them to do."

"You're serious? He sends these guys out to crack down on meetings?"

"You bet. At this point, in the Realm, you'd have to be crazy to try and get any kind of group together. Nobody can speak freely these days, and I mean even in private; the only ones who can have learned to shield their thoughts, the way you were able to in that second boxcar."

It was high time they got out of there, but in spite of all the destruction around them, it somehow seemed wrong to leave the protective orb of light that the fading embers still gave off. Roger couldn't have known that this was the faltering aura of Mother Florence's protection spell, though the Rangers had trampled down its barriers faster than a speeding mail truck running down a stray cat. The force-field had been conjured with the intention of keeping out stray wildlife (including an occasional prairie wolf who was feeling particularly bold), but it had been no match for the iron hooves of their relentless white horses.

The tracks snaked off to the east under the light of the full moon, which allowed the pair to walk beside them without much difficulty.

"With any luck, we should be there in an hour," Percy remarked, hopping several feet at a time to keep a brisk pace. Creeping tendrils of anxiety gnawed at Roger, replacing the awful trepidation that had plagued him before finding the ruined campsite

"So it all comes down to this, huh? Springing Georgie from Vladimir's mansion, then getting both of us back home to safety. We don't even have a plan though!" Roger said

"I'm hoping we'll run into a little more help on the way," Percy replied.

“Oh? What makes you so sure?”

“The Brothers Grimsrud. They might change their mind and help us. I sensed good in them.”

“Don’t be silly. They’re working with Vladimir, just like the Rangers.”

“Those brothers don’t have much to thank Vladimir for these days (not that they ever did), and it wouldn’t surprise me if they took this latest kidnapping as a motivator to settle the score.”

“What do you mean, Percy?”

“There’ve been many others like you, Roger. No one knows what happened to them, but their fates probably ended up being quite gruesome. I’ve heard he feeds them to his giant pet lizard named Henrietta, sometimes.”

“That can’t be true! What giant pet lizard?”

“Sorry – all I meant to say is, time is running short. I’m afraid he may be planning to deal with Mother Florence and her children in very short order.”

“Well, if we cut down on the mental chatter, maybe we can run a little faster.”

“Fair enough.”

Roger did his best to make his legs churn faster, all the time keeping one eye trained on the ground to pick up the prints. Percy did an admirable job of keeping up right beside him, and in his heart he applauded his efforts.

“We’ll run into some help all right. No doubt about it,” Percy said.

#

A few miles away and just a bit earlier, the Brothers Grimsrud continued their journey with a full wind in their sails. Their instruments banged a clattery rhythm in the back of

the wagon. The mansion already loomed distant on the horizon, and they knew their voyage was nearly at a close. Soon they would confront the force that had ruled them their entire lives, the man who held all power in the land they called home, and for whom they have slaved in hopes of earning their daily bread. They meant nothing to him, as yet, but they meant to make their presence known without delay.

“Did you sharpen the scythes this morning, Cassius?” Daniel asked from his post in the shotgun seat. Cassius, who was busy with the reigns, answered with a brisk nod. Isaac leaned back to check the handle of his beloved scythe, which he had nicknamed “Chopper,” noting with pride the unblemished surface of its steel blade.

“Won’t be long now, fellas,” Cassius remarked from the driver’s seat. “We’re almost at the ridge, now passing Deathwater Flats.”

In fact, the brothers passed by the location of Mother Florence’s campsite not ten minutes before the arrival by train of Roger and Percy, although they were too far away to notice the flames that ravaged the site. The Rangers, in turn had already left a half an hour prior, having done their part in kidnapping the small family. The Grimsruds, of course, had no way of knowing what had gone down just a short distance from their current position, or that Mother Florence and her children had been making their home in Deathwater Flats for the past ten years.

They rode on in silence.

There was still much work to be done.

CHAPTER 18

George scarcely had time to react before Vladimir abruptly turned and exited up the stairs, leaving the four of them to get to know each other in the confines of the dungeon. By now, Mother Florence had woken up and was sitting upright on the cot, rubbing her head with one hand. The children rushed to her.

“Mama, mama we were so scared, are you all right?!” they screamed, grasping at her for comfort.

“Hush, children, everything will work out fine, just calm down, there there.”

She turned to face George.

“Greetings, little one, and what might your name be?” she asked.

“George,” he answered. It was much easier to talk when Vladimir wasn’t around.

“George, yes... I feel like I know you already,” she said, smiling. “I’ve seen your brother in a vision. He was with a talking crow, on a train. He’s on his way here, you know.”

He couldn’t believe his ears. Roger really is coming to save me!

“I knew it!” he cried, unable to hold back. He rushed to the bars. “You really saw him?”

“Yes, I believe I did, young man. He and his friend seemed bent on coming to see me, in fact. Only, that won’t exactly be possible now, since we’ve been forced out of our home.” She cast a baleful glance in the direction of the stairway, where Vladimir had last been sighted. The creases in her face softened when she returned her gaze to the boy across the corridor.

George wasn’t sure what she meant. “Roger wanted to see you?” he asked.

“He wanted to – the bird had been wronged by Vladimir Cruor, and he had an idea that I’d be able to restore his gift of flight. The truth is I’m not sure I could’ve done much for him. Your brother, on the other hand, why... I was going to help him infiltrate this very house, to break you out of this dungeon and make it through the portal that’s set to open up tonight around midnight.”

George did his best to process this information.

“Portal? You mean like the thing that brought me here?”

“Yes, just like it. Vladimir had the whole thing arranged well ahead of time, although he meant for Roger to come through first, not you. I believe Vladimir used to kidnap children of the Realm, but they’ve become rather scarce. I’ve done my best to protect my own but...” her voice broke “I’m afraid he may have finally caught up with us.” Maisie, who had been clinging to her mother’s billowy dress, began to cry. “There, there sweetheart,” Mother Florence said, “I won’t let them hurt you. Everything is going to be all right.”

“Mother Florence?” George said, “what does he need children for?” He had a feeling she knew the answer, and the prospect of finding out terrified him. Still, he felt compelled to ask.

“Dear child, if I knew that, we might not’ve ended up in this mess in the first place, you or my family. The thing is, the people that live here have been in denial for so long that he was the one behind it, that they never confronted him about it. There’s a good reason underneath that denial, though: there’s almost no limit to the power Vladimir Cruor wields over the Realm. He controls the Harvest, after all.”

“You mean, he can change the weather?”

She reflected on this. “I’m not sure... let’s just say if he doesn’t want anything to grow, then you can be sure nothing will. They had to sacrifice their own children, just so the rest of the families might have something to put on their tables every night. This Realm has been teetering on the brink of famine for a few years now, but everyone is afraid to bear children. They know he’ll snatch them up almost as soon as they’re born. I was lucky – I happen to possess a few gifts that have allowed my children and I to maintain a low profile and stay out of sight for the most part. Vladimir must have figured out where we were hiding as an unfortunate result of your brother wanting to come see me.”

“How can that be possible?” he asked. The wealth of information she was providing made him feel ever so slightly more in control of the situation, which was needed. In fact, it went beyond that; she reminded George a great deal of his mother – what he remembered of her, anyway.

“Your brother cares tremendously about you, and I know that he will do everything in his power to bring you home, safe and sound – wherever it is that you boys

call home. He also happens to be very resourceful. The train he and the crow were riding can make unscheduled stops for special passengers, but anyone requesting special favors from the conductor must pass a series of tests in order to see their wish fulfilled. Have no illusions – many die when they attempt to pass through that netherworld of the train – but somehow the two of them were able to make it through unharmed.

“Unfortunately, the fact that they successfully managed to divert the train’s course, with the intent of getting off and coming to see me for help, led to Vladimir finding out my location by having his men track the train’s movements. It was a sad coincidence, I’m afraid, that the Rangers were able to find me before your brother could. While I was able to receive images of your brother, and understand his situation, the Rangers wield a special magic that left me with no warning of their approach – not until it was far too late, anyway.”

“How did Vladimir know Roger wanted to go see you?”

“That was the easy part – he knew your brother had taken up with Percy, who’d been waiting years to run into someone he could team up with to pass the challenges. Percy was intent on seeing me for help with his broken wings, and of course Vladimir figured your brother would probably ask me to help him bust you out of here. If Roger had made it just a little before the Rangers, I would have known Vladimir would be looking for me as well, and we’d have been able to escape... such luck was not to be, I’m afraid.”

“I’m awful sorry that we got you into this mess,” George said.

“Oh, hush! It isn’t your fault, child. Vladimir would’ve found me sooner or later, anyway. I believe he means to settle an old score with me this very evening.”

He didn't know what she was referring to, not exactly, but it sounded serious. Something terrible had happened in the past between Vladimir and this woman. He knew it in his bones, but he had a mind that she wasn't ready to divulge the details just yet.

"All right. Well, what could he possibly want with the children?"

She hugged her children closer and appeared to be on the verge of tears.

"If I knew, I'd tell you." She whispered.

"If I were you, I'd start preparing for the end."

#

Vladimir stood before a wall of whirring machinery, while Henrietta hissed contentedly at his side. Dozens of levers, pulleys, and even a few odd farm implements protruded from where they'd been jerry-rigged to the machine's guts, which held gears that turned and ground away inside. Electrical lights were strung along the top with thin wire, illuminating the scene. No one in the Realm had ever seen electricity, and would probably consider the contraption in Vladimir's basement to be some kind of devilry, or black magic, and in a way they were right. Then again, they had thought of Vladimir as the Devil for a long time now, whether or not they realized it themselves.

"This old thing has gotten us through some hard times, old girl," he remarked to Henrietta. She flicked out her tongue in agreement. "No reason to think she won't see us through again."

Electrodes encased in glass whirred and hummed with power – the machine occupied an entire wall of the basement room that formed one half of which the dungeon constituted the other – but it was not quite loud enough for George and the

others to hear, even with the gears inside clattering away. The stones in the foundation prevented any sound from leaking through, which was the way Vladimir liked it. It would not have boded well if any of his prisoners over the years had had some forewarning about what he intended to do with them.

(So many children...)

Vladimir reflected that, had any of the children known his plans, they might have made more of an effort to escape. And why should these two be any different? Because they had a powerful ally in Mother Florence, that's why. That woman could ruin everything if you didn't make sure to deal with her carefully.

"Don't be foolish," another voice pipes up. "You've run into a tremendous bit of luck, since Roger led the Rangers straight to her family's location, and now that she's under our control, what's left there for us to do?"

"Kill her?"

"You could." the voice answered; it was cold-blooded and inhuman. Henrietta's tail twirled around Vladimir's ankle.

"The machine is running on fumes you know. What are you going to feed it with, blood from colts and wolf cubs? That won't work forever. You need the children. Even the little girl."

"She'll fight us tooth and nail. There might be other complications as well."

"You would risk losing your entire kingdom over 'complications'? I think not. Your losing your grip, master. This world will fall into another's hands if you cannot maintain control over the Realm."

"Maybe so. Your wisdom has always been a great asset to this kingdom, Henrietta."

“Thank you, sire.”

“I think I’ll let you have the little boy they call Hector. You’ve always enjoyed your meals more when they put up a fight.”

Henrietta hissed with delight. “Your kindness knows no bounds, master.”

Vladimir laughed and smiled at her, grateful for such a worthy companion.

The machine continued to sputter and grind.

CHAPTER 19

Pale red lights spread into view just beyond the horizon, and it was clear they were getting close to Vladimir's compound. Percy hopped along, his strength never seeming to wane, and Roger silently saluted him once more for his efforts. He spoke aloud what they already knew:

"Roger, we're almost there. You still have something we can defend ourselves with?"

He patted his pockets and was relieved to discover the knife was still there.

"Well, that's good, but either way we're pretty much done for... unless we manage to infiltrate the house and link up with Mother Florence in time. At this point, she's our only hope."

"Why's that?"

"I think she knows what he's been up to all these years. Something about the source of his power in the Realm – and maybe even a way to stop it."

"You think she knows where he gets his power?"

“I said maybe. I’ve heard stories though – if he does have some kind of machine stashed away in that house, I’ll bet those disappearances have something to do with the way he keeps it running.”

“What do you mean, Percy?” Roger’s heart thudded dully in his chest as he tried to keep the pace. His legs were growing stiffer by the minute, and a stitch stabbed him painfully in the gut.

“I don’t know, my friend, but I can assure you it isn’t pleasant. Come on, let’s move!”

Roger sucked a few big whoops of air into his lungs. They were making good time – they had no way of knowing how long the journey would take, but it looked like the mansion was no more than a mile away, judging by how long they’d been running. Could Mother Florence really have been camping right on Vladimir’s doorstep without him ever knowing? Stranger things had happened, Roger supposed. Maybe the spell really had been enough to keep her family hidden for all that time.

A massive structure gradually drew into focus. It appeared to be some kind of gothic monstrosity, with high peaked gables, the tar on the roof black as pitch and complemented by narrow windows with panes of glass that looked to be the color of blood. A dark tower spiraled out from the center of the roof, with a single window lit ominously from within. More lights in the attic below it produced a hideous red glow that had only seemed a harmless pink when viewed from a distance. Jagged iron fencing lined the property, and his eyes scanned the barrier, already searching for a way in. He felt like a commando, risking his life to infiltrate an enemy compound for the sake of some glorious mission. This was it. He tried not to think about the fact that he and George might not make it out of here with their lives.

At last they crested a rise that provided a good vantage point over the immediate area, and Roger crawled up on his belly to survey the field below.

“How do you propose we proceed?” Percy whispered. As if Roger had any idea.

“I’m not sure – there doesn’t look to be any real way through that fence, and I think if we tried to go over we’d end up sticking ourselves.”

“Looks like the fence isn’t the only barrier we’ll have to deal with.” He was talking about the pale red aura that seemed to encircle the place. The source might have been linked to the red light emanating from the attic windows, but Roger couldn’t be sure.

“What do you think would happen if we tried to pass through it?” he asked.

“Are you sure you want to find out? Come on, I think I might know another way in.”

They got off their bellies and crept down the hillside, their footsteps masked by unhealthy-looking patches of grass that sprouted from the dust.

They descended the bluff and found themselves standing not six feet away from the edge of the red shield.

“Let’s circle the house,” Percy said.

To Roger’s surprise, a wrought-iron gate suddenly drew into focus as they rounded yet another corner. He tried the latch, and found it was unlocked.

That was when the furious voices began to flood his mind.

“Roger, remember the barrier!” Percy shouted, but it was too late.

Words and voices that were far more hostile and agitated than the ones he had heard in the Underworld seemed to overrun his head like a raging tide, borne by the electricity firing between the synapses of his brain. Everything swam in a field of red so thick that it threatened to swallow him whole.

Roger cried out to his comrade – then stared helplessly as everything went black. He was dimly aware of his friend hopping about in frantic circles as he screamed for him to get up, for goodness' sake, just please get up, but his consciousness was going the way of his vision. The trap had been as plain to see as the beak on Percy's face, and yet I'd still managed to fall right into it. The sounds and smells, the feel of the dusty ground against his cheek, all faded in rapid succession.

After a few more seconds, he was no longer aware of anything at all.

#

Vladimir sat in the dining hall, stroking Henrietta who was at his side. Mandrake stood nearby, watching the fire that he had prepared at Vladimir's behest. The only sound in the room was the roar of the flames. Then, Vladimir's deep voice filled the air.

"Won't be long now, old traveler. The witching hour is at hand," he says.

"Yes sir, one hour until midnight."

"He'll learn to like it here. Won't matter for long either way."

"Certainly not, master. What choice does he have?"

"I haven't decided which one to keep and which one to feed to Henrietta," he said, absently stroking the tip of her nose with one finger. She bent her head and sharpened a single tooth on the left side of her mouth by grinding it along the wooden leg of her master's chair; the process made a rasping noise that was enough to make Mandrake's skin crawl, though he gave no outward sign of irritation. To do so would have been ill-advised.

"I'm sure you'll make the right decision," he replied at last.

At that moment, Henrietta stopped what she was doing and flicked her nose in the air, tossing off Vladimir's hand. He gave a start, then watched with curiosity as her tongue darted out; he knew she could smell the air, and had detected possible intruders.

"Can it be, girl?" he asked, incredulous. "Mandrake, I believe our period of waiting has come to an end, and not a moment too soon!" He leapt up, full of vigor, an old man suddenly made young again by the prospect of fresh prey caught in his trap. "I'll be damned if it isn't that boy and his bird," he added.

Mandrake shuffled his feet uncertainly, not quite sure what to do.

"Shall I fetch the Rangers, master?" he asked. "They've only just retired to their quarters – it could be something slightly more dangerous than a little boy. Who's to say it's them?"

"No! The Rangers have their instructions. It's the boy, sure as I'm standing here. Grab a knife from the kitchen, and come with me!"

Mandrake had little time to fulfill the order before Vladimir and Henrietta were out of the dining room, making a mad dash for the exit to see what their trap had caught them.

Sprinting outside, the two of them looked like a young boy and his beloved dog, gone to look for treasure on a drowsy summer day.

#

George heard a commotion from his cell. Chairs scraped and multiple pairs of feet thumped the floor as unknown parties made a hasty exit. Not all of them sounded human, and hot fear began to creep into his belly as his thoughts went back to Vladimir's horrible pet. Henrietta.

“What was that?” he asked. Mother Florence’s eyes – along with her children’s – were glued to the ceiling.

“That didn’t sound good,” she said in a low voice. “I think someone activated the tripwire aura he’s got set up outside.” Her hand clutched at the fabric of her dress below the neck.

“Aura...?”

“It’s like a burglar alarm, but, well... slightly more aggressive. I’ve seen it before – a variation on the spell I used to rely on to keep intruders out of our camp. Up until recently, anyway.”

It’s Roger! George thought feverishly. He tripped the alarm – but he’s come to rescue me!

I wouldn’t be so sure of that, said another one of my voices, cynical and older somehow. How well can things possibly be going if he just set off the security system for the entire house? Panic began to creep in as I imagined what Henrietta might do to Roger, if Vladimir perceived him as a threat.

“What happens when someone sets off the alarm?” he asked, gripping the bars tighter with palms that were damp and clammy.

“Depends on how he’s got it wired. Sometimes they deliver a minor jolt, like a brief but horrible nightmare; other times it’s worse – there are poison auras that can cause a grown man to pass out and die in a matter of seconds, although some just knock you out cold. Then, whoever set the trap can go see what the cat dragged in...”

“What kind do you think he’s got up there?”

“I wasn’t able to sense much in terms of what Vladimir has set up for the house but... yes, let me see...” She retreated to the far wall of the cell and laid her hands upon

the stonework, closing her eyes to sense the invisible vibrations that only she could feel. Maisie and Hector watched her, though their eyes said they had seen her perform similar acts before.

“Good news!” she said abruptly dropping her hands from the wall. “I don’t think there was anything lethal about the aura. If your brother and his friend are out there, I think we can at least presume they’re still alive.”

George breathed a sigh of relief, but the fear refused to dissipate. His stomach felt watery and cramped, and he tried to remember how long it had been since he’d eaten.

“What are they going to do with him?”

“I’m afraid we’ll find out soon enough,” she answered. “I think it’s safe to say he may be joining us shortly.”

With that, the heavy iron door at the top of the stairs began to creak open.

CHAPTER 20

Roger was dimly aware of fingers fumbling about to get ahold of his body, though his vision remained severely impaired. He felt himself being lifted up, held by the armpits and ankles, and carried briskly off to whatever fate lay in store.

“Looks just like his brother, doesn’t he?” said a familiar voice.

[You heard that voice in a dream, Roger.] The thought came unbidden, like any other, but the sound of that mind tapping into his own was unmistakable.

[Percy! Where are you? I can’t see anything.]

[That’s all right, son, they’re taking us inside. I’m safe – I managed to burrow under your shirt and hide – but we must keep silent. If I’m discovered, then all may as well be lost – it’s the last card we have up our sleeve.]

The hands in his armpits suddenly readjusted, pinching him roughly and causing a cry to escape his lips.

“Mandrake, be careful!” a voice bellowed from in front of him.

“Sorry, master, I was about to lose my grip.”

“Never mind, let’s just get him inside. We have other business to attend to.”

[They can't hear us?]

[Not at the moment – speaking telepathically is a gift of mine, and I've chosen to share it with you. Vladimir only has a knack when it comes to reptiles, or if he gets lucky. He relies on other instruments to monitor the world around him. Mother Florence is rumored to possess similar skills – it may allow us to collaborate more effectively once we enter the house. They'll probably take you to the dungeon, but don't be afraid. I'm going to slip out once we're inside and look for the prison key.]

[You think that'll work?]

[What choice do we have? You were the one who decided to charge helter skelter into the barrier. Not that we would have gotten inside any other way, though...]

[I guess you're right. Don't mention it!]

[Enough! Vladimir may be an untalented boor and a tyrant, but anyone would be able to tell you're communicating with someone right now if they took a close look.]

He could feel Percy's rumpled feathers pressed against the small of his back as he changed positions, still heavily enmeshed in the fabric of Roger's t-shirt; he had done well to hide himself.

He may save the day after all, Roger thought.

A glimmer of light seemed to be working its way back into his vision, like a sunrise trying to shine through dark curtains. He felt the clomp of heavy boots as the men who carried him ascended several steps. Roger realized his hearing had returned as the tremor of their footsteps became actual noise in his ears. The aura had only meant to knock him out long enough to be taken into custody.

A door creaked open at the top of the steps, and the lights grew brighter, as if the doorframe were illuminated by twin torches. Roger forced himself to relax, and tried

blinking his eyes a few times to wake them up, or something. That's when it finally dawned on him that the man holding his ankles was none other than Vladimir Cruor.

Cold fear swept over him like a blanket dipped in ice water, and Roger's legs gave an involuntary spasm. There was something vile in that touch – he had felt it from the moment he picked him up – and he could feel it coming from the other man who held his shoulders as well. What's more, he could sense some other inexplicable presence nearby, one that definitely didn't sound human, judging from the hissing and the scraping patter that could only be made by four legs. When he jerked, the hands that Roger now knew belonged to Vladimir Cruor dug in deeper, and he felt ragged nails pinching skin through his socks, stifling any further movement. He lay still, not wanting to anger him and make his situation worse.

"Looks like we've got a live one here, Mandrake," the old man growled. More and more details were starting to filter into the picture Roger could see around him, and it felt like his eyelids were finally coming unglued.

"Aye, master. Might be a good idea to let Henrietta teach him a few manners when she's done with that other brat."

"Perhaps, but let's not be too hasty. We still need to find that mangy bird. I know they were traveling together – he must be somewhere on the premises. Now might be a good time to roust Martin and Luther after all." He spoke carefully, measuring each word.

"As you wish, master."

"Let's get this one downstairs first."

The pace quickened, and Roger sensed that bruises would form later from how hard their fingers pressed into his flesh. They made a turn to the left, then down a long

corridor followed by another turn. The sound of a roaring fire greeted his ears, and he could finally make out the outlines of definite objects. There was a table, one of those ridiculously long varieties that looked like it had been hewed out of a single, massive tree trunk. A row of high-backed chairs stood on each side, every single one fit for a king. He recognized the room as a dining hall, and the warmth of the fire provided him with a momentary feeling of comfort.

They paused for a break, so far as he could tell, and at that moment, Percy's body, which had up until then been enmeshed in the fabric of his shirt, suddenly rolled loose and dropped soundlessly to the floor below. With that, Percy was gone.

[Off to look for the key, I hope?]

[I won't let you down, not if I have any say in the matter. We've made it this far together, and we'll see it through to the end.]

The men carrying Roger proceeded onward, stopping only once so Vladimir could unlock an iron door with a huge ring of keys that he withdrew from his pocket. The key jangled in the lock as he worked the massive bolt, and the door itself finally slid open on creaking hinges. It reminded Roger of the entrance to a Tower of London exhibit that he had seen once with his parents on vacation.

The rivets on the door popped out in all-too-vivid detail as they passed, moving downstairs again, and made it clear that his vision had more or less returned to normal. The air temperature seemed to drop a degree or two with each step they took forward. Roger could barely move his head, but Vlad's broad back stood out before his eyes in sharp relief, framed by the denim straps of the overalls he wore. Behind him, the servant they called Mandrake cleared his throat, hawked, then blew a gargantuan wad of phlegm against the cell wall with a resounding splat.

This must be the dungeon.

“Roger?! Is that you?”

George’s voice was unmistakable. His desperate cry cut through whatever remained of the fog the trap had put him in, and he thrashed out, entering what he liked to think of as “wildcat mode.” It was enough to take Vladimir and Mandrake by surprise, and they promptly let go of the struggling boy. His feet hit the stone floor, and all he could do was stand there for a moment, too shocked to move. A beat later, and he was off like a shot toward the blurry lights at the bottom of the stairs.

“George!” Roger cried.

“Roger!” His voice responded with equal parts delight and fear. “You’ve got to get me out of here!”

At the end of the cell-lined hallway, he could see a tiny pair of hands wrapped around the bars of the cell to the right. It must be him, and he’s with Mother Florence! Roger thought excitedly. He skidded to a halt in front of the cell that he believed to contain his little brother.

What met him instead was a thing with wooden features; a mannequin with doll’s eyes that bore no resemblance to the George he knew and loved.

There was some demented creature in the cell where George should have been. Black eyes were sewn onto what looked like a canvas head stuffed with straw. A mouth gaped open to reveal a tongue that looked like it had been snipped from a bright red piece of felt. Roger’s own tongue caught in his throat, and no words would come. He could only stare at the grotesque imitation of his brother, no more than a cruel mockup created to deceive him.

Roger turned to look at the men who had brought him here. Vladimir Cruor and his Mandrake stood side by side at the end of the hall, each wearing a faint grin, their brawny arms crossed. They reeked of smug satisfaction.

“What have you done with him?” he shouted. “You assholes, where is he?”

“Your brother has been moved to a safer place,” Vladimir said in a soft voice. “In the meantime, Mandrake has fashioned a very fine replacement to keep you company. I thought it’d be nice to put you two in the same cell. Mandrake, would you be so kind as to admit the young man to his quarters?”

“With pleasure, sir,” he murmured.

Roger got into a ready stance like he might make a break for it, but Mandrake spread his arms to strike an imposing figure, his impressive wingspan blocking the corridor in a way that eliminated all chance of escape from his mind.

“I wouldn’t try it, bucko,” Vladimir said. Mandrake blocked him from Roger’s view, and he steadily bore down on the boy with outstretched arms, as though he meant to take him in a warm embrace. “That door at the top of the steps is four inches of reinforced iron, and Mandrake here isn’t as slow as you might think. Why don’t you just go quietly in... to be with your brother.” His grin widened into a weird smile. A psychopath’s smile, Roger thought. How many other boys have been “replaced” by the same freakish doll? And where the hell have they taken George? His stomach took a downward lurch, and he swallowed hard to control his gag reflex. His mind swarmed with the guilt and fear of knowing he’d come too late. He had failed him.

“Where is he?” Roger cried, now on the verge of tears. “Just let me see him, I don’t care what you’re going to do to us, I just want to see him one last time.”

Vladimir's gaze dropped to the floor. "I'm afraid that's impossible, son. He's in rehabilitation already, getting ready to be part of the great machine that runs this Realm."

"Machine?" Roger asked. "What are you talking about?"

"What do you think is the biggest factor in determining the success of a harvest?" he asked with a leer. "The weather! And who controls the weather?"

"You?"

"That's right, my boy! It's a glorious machine – I'm afraid it'd take hours to explain the exact physics of the thing, but by using currents in the air, and feeding it a very special type of fuel, I can influence the outcome of events in the Realm just by using my mind."

"You're insane," he managed to utter.

"Afraid I'm not familiar with the term. Must be something they only say back where you come from, which is... I'm not sure where, but I'm certainly glad I found you boys! Two for the price of one, wouldn't you say? An exceptionally lucky discovery."

"Tell me how to get home."

He gave a low chuckle. "I'm afraid it's far too late for that. The exit portal opens only for a few minutes at midnight, and with you both in my care, there wouldn't be any sense in entertaining such foolish fantasies, now would there?" He laughed again, a single bark that made Roger shudder. "Besides, you will be with your brother again quite soon, and I do think you two will learn to like it here." There was no doubt in his voice; only cold determination that left him feeling like his best friend had just died. He couldn't see any way out of this, not when he didn't even know where George was, unless Percy somehow managed to work a miracle.

"I'm afraid we'll have to continue this conversation some other time, young master Roger," he said. "Mandrake, please put him in the cell."

"Don't come near me. I'll go, but keep your hands off." The words came out sounding almost as fierce as he wanted them to. Mandrake also seemed to take note.

"As you wish."

He moved quickly to unlock the cell door, and the hideous button-eyed thing stepped back. Tears welled up, blurring his vision as he looked upon the mannequin with horror. It's now or never, he thought.

As Mandrake continued to fumble with the key, Roger sidled up alongside him. In one smooth motion, he elbowed him in the hip with all his strength.

Mandrake screamed and doubled over in pain. Roger turned and sprinted past Vladimir Cruor, who could only stare at the boy in numb fascination as he darted up the stairs like a grasshopper.

Roger took the stairs two at a time and gave the iron door a hard shove. To his delight, Vladimir had only been bluffing – they hadn't bothered to lock it or even latch it behind them. The incredible weight prevented Roger from opening it quickly, but Vladimir was too stunned to follow, and as he shoved it gradually yawned wide enough for him to slip through.

"Mandrake, just what the hell do you think you're doing? Henrietta's busy, get after him!"

"Yes, sir!" Mandrake groaned as he got to his feet – Roger had evidently dealt him a very painful blow directly to the pelvis – and shuffled down the corridor after him.

#

Moments earlier...

George struggled to keep his emotions in check as the Rangers' heavy boots clomped down the stairs again. Their spurs clinked against the wood.

"All right gang," the lead one announced, "Vladimir's given us some new orders. It's time to relocate."

His muscles froze with fear. Changing rooms would not bode well for him at this point in the evening. How is Roger ever going to find me in here, he thought. His opportunities for escape seemed to be diminishing by the second.

Mother Florence gripped the bars across from him and appeared to recite a silent prayer. Her children stared down at the floor, unwilling to face the tormentors. Things did not appear to be improving one bit. Oh well, I thought, we had a good run. I'm sure Roger is up there somewhere, maybe already dead, at peace. The end doesn't have to be so bad, after all. I won't care when I'm gone – my problems will all be solved.

You'll miss Dad, said another voice. This one came from deep down. But he still had a will to fight. He might not have made contact with Roger yet, but there was still time. He felt in his heart that they still had a chance. Somewhere out there a loophole was waiting that would allow them to escape. They just had to uncover it.

"Where are you taking us?" George called out. His voice shook noticeably.

"Upstairs," Martin answered gruffly.

"I won't go," he said, striking a resolute pose.

Luther and Martin exchanged a weary look, then strode over while taking out the ring of keys that Vladimir had presumably provided to them. Without another word, Martin, who was holding the keys, unlocked the door, stormed into the cell, and grabbed George by the ruff of his neck. Sharp pains shot through his shoulders at the iron grip,

the fingers encased in leather gloves digging in deep enough to cause bruises that would appear later. He gasped out, doing his utmost not to burst into tears on the spot.

As they dragged him down the corridor to face whatever destiny lay ahead, George began kicking his feet and writhing in resistance, though he quickly realized nothing would help him elude the grip of the pale rider who held him. Tears leaked from his eyes at a rate beyond his control, and he wondered with desperation what could have become of Roger. It felt like he was so close, though. Everything was finally going to be all right, and now things fell apart. He'd never felt more helpless in his entire life.

"What about the others?" he cried. "You better not hurt them!"

"Worry about yourself, you little rotter," Martin answered. He kept his eyes trained on the stairs up ahead, not sparing a glance to either side as he walked. He yanked George roughly by the arm – a bit harder and he might have dislocated the boy's shoulder.

"You're hurting me!" he yelled.

"Won't matter for long, kid. Henrietta's going to take care of everything." With those words, he finally did look down at George, and flashed a chilling grin as he did so that revealed gold teeth in the corners of his tooth-line. Torchlight glinted off each tooth with dazzling brightness, though perhaps it was his imagination given the amount of time he'd already spent in the poorly lit dungeon. His mind filled with images of medieval torture chambers that he'd read about in books, which was presumably where the two men were taking him.

At this point George had broken into a cold sweat, and his body went limp. Martin dutifully continued to drag him along, his feet bumping up the stairs, then gliding along the smooth parquet floor as he pulled him deeper into the house. Grim

visions of dancing devils appeared in the red, humming space behind his eyelids, and he feared that he might be on the verge of losing consciousness. The desperation for only one thing – to see Roger – struck him again in a wave.

They were moving upstairs now, and some modicum of strength returned to his muscles. He unglued his eyelids, wiping away the demonic images that had appeared behind them a moment ago, and saw with shocking clarity the damp stone wall that lined the stairs as they climbed. George lifted his feet so as not to let them thump painfully over each step, and Martin's grip on his arm loosened somewhat, as if in gratitude. George considered opening his mouth to speak, but knew that nothing he could say would improve the situation. It was as though the men who held him captive were the furthest thing from human beings that could possibly exist, in spite of their outward appearances.

At last, they came to a halt. Before them stood an arched door made of blood-red wood. A great iron ring was attached firmly in the middle for a handle. Below that, an oversized keyhole. Luther selected another key from his set and inserted it unceremoniously into the lock. The iron within turned clankily, and without a word, he hauled the door open by its center ring. What lay inside took George's breath away, and before he could even protest they had tossed him inside and slammed the door. He immediately got to his feet and ran back to the door, pounding his fists against the unyielding wood.

"Don't fight, it'll only make the transition harder!" The voice diminished even before the sentence ended, and George could imagine Martin looking back over his shoulder to shout this last bit of morbid advice. What the room contained that had shocked him so badly was a crib, a mobile with tiny silver airplanes, as well as a fireplace

with logs burning heartily inside. Beside the crib was a closet with the door partially opened. Gaping blackness stared back at him from the gap. George was on his own there, so it seemed.

Or am I?

The hairs sticking up on the back of his neck somehow made it clear that there was some other presence in the room. His thoughts turned with dread to Henrietta. Is she here right this minute?

“You better believe it, my dear. Where else would I be?”

A hissing voice greeted his ears that emanated directly from the closet, accompanied by a rustling of scales that sounded like someone gently shaking a rainstick to and fro.

“Please, no – keep away from me,” he stammered, doubtful that his words would have any effect.

To his abject horror, the door began to creak open. God, no, make it stop. Roger where are you?

Sure enough, a scaly head with odd feathers protruding from its snout emerged from the widening doorway, all fangs and dead black eyes. It was the face of a nightmare, and it was standing no more than eight feet away from the young boy, set to pounce.

“What are you going to do?” If his voice had quaked any harder, the words would have been unintelligible. More of the beast’s body came into view as she opened the door another few inches.

“There’s something you need to understand here, Georgie,” she hissed. “We need you. Vladimir needs you. And we’re not playing around any longer.” Henrietta’s bloated,

piebald sides scraped with a rasp against the doorframe as she finally pushed her entire girth into view. “We’ve been waiting a long time for this moment, he and I. You’re a very special boy, George. Did you know that?”

“No,” he replied, “what do you mean, ‘special’?”

“You’re the one we’ve been waiting for all these years, don’t you see! You’re the one who can salvage Vladimir’s empire, and bring this whole mess back under control! The locals have been getting a bit restless of late, you see, and...” The mobile, shifted by some faint draft whose origins remained a mystery, suddenly began to rotate. The movement was followed by a jingling tune that seemed also to come from the closet, as if this monster had a music box stashed away in there. The tune was decidedly eerie – a kind of demented “here-we go-’round-the-mulberry-bush” that set George’s skin crawling even more than it already was.

This is wrong, he thought. How can they possibly have the same nursery that I had when I was a baby?

[We have ways of seeing far beyond the normal limits], the reptile’s voice replied. [You wouldn’t believe the things we’re capable of – and the things you can be capable of, too! All you need to do is trust in our ways. Let me guide you, and everything will be all right.]

After all that I’d been through, the words sounded painfully seductive.

“What are you going to do to me?” George asked. He knew they were words of defeat, but almost wasn’t sure if he cared anymore. He wanted the whole ordeal to be over. Warm, loving thoughts of Roger – and home - were slipping further from his mind by the minute. He felt dangerously resigned to the fact that he might never see the sun

reflecting off the white paint of their house in Maine again. The thought brought fresh tears to George's eyes.

"Why don't you start by relaxing," Henrietta whispered, the words oozing out like ladled honey.

"I'm going to take excellent care of you."

CHAPTER 21

Darkness filled Roger's vision as he tried to find his way through the maze-like corridors, scanning for any sign that George might have been there. He heard the clap-clap-clap of Mandrake's footsteps in hot pursuit.

In the musty-smelling hall he could make out an arched doorway at one end, possibly leading to a set of stairs. Beside him, however, was a strange series of cupboards – they had been installed along the wall by some skilled hand, from the looks of it. Mandrake was only a few steps away. Roger dashed forward two steps, then selected the closest knob he could find. The cupboard slid open to reveal a bare shelf within. The inside smelled like rat droppings, and reminded him of the cringe-worthy odors he would sometimes encounter while crawling around the rafters of the barn back home with George. He ignored the smell, and slid the door shut as quietly as he could manage.

Boots skidded in the hall, and he knew Mandrake had arrived on the scene – and he wanted blood. You've embarrassed me in front of Vladimir, said the searching

thoughts that pecked at his mind like hot arrows. I'm gonna wring your scrawny little neck. Roger kept his guard up, and hugged his knees tighter, too scared even to breathe.

[Just stay quiet!] A new voice broke through, and there was only one creature around here that could speak to him that way at this point.

[Percy?! Where the hell are you? What is going on around here, where's Georgie? They had this horrible mannequin and he wasn't in his cell and I'm not sure if Mother Florence was down there and Mandrake is out there looking for me RIGHT NOW and...]

[Just er... remain calm. I have at least part of the situation under control.]

Heavy breathing issued from the hallway as his frazzled brain detected movement. Mandrake was inching forward, checking every space in the corridor... and it sounded like he was sniffing the air. The heavy breathing was interspersed with strangely dog-like chuffing noises as he apparently tried to *sniff* out the boy's location.

"Where are you, boy?" he growled. "I got a nose like a bloodhound, so you better come out of whatever rathole you've gone and stuck yourself into." Roger's teeth began to chatter. Shit.

Mandrake heard the clicking.

He was on the cabinet like a hawk that had spotted a mouse. The ghoulish manservant flung the cupboard door open hard enough to rip it from its hinges, where it clattered away along the floorboards of the corridor. The silty light of the hall – what little there was – illuminated Roger's pale, terrified face. It was the face of a victim completely at the mercy of their tormentor. A lecherous grin already stretched from ear to ear on Mandrake's lips, revealing teeth that actually seemed to consist of multiple rows, like a shark's, and gave off the distinct appearance that he had taken a file to them for sharpening. His eyes gleamed with murderous abandon.

His gnarled fingers unfurled and became claws that stretched out to grab Roger. He shrank back against the inside wall of the cupboard, praying for some miracle that would allow him to disappear entirely.

[Percy, what do I do?!] His mind was teetering on the sharp edge of panic. A few more seconds and he'd be no more competent than a raving madman.

[Scream at him, spit at him, do anything you can! Do everything in your power not to let him touch you!]

"Oh, Percy," he moaned out loud, his voice dripping with fear. "Where are you?"

This time he got no response.

#

"That bastard boy has thrown a wrench in my gears for the last time," Vladimir muttered, barely able to contain his rage. He was standing in front of the cell that still held three prisoners: Mother Florence and her family. All three barely appeared to be listening, their eyes glued to the grotesque George-doll shuffling about in the opposite cell. Finally, the woman was able to divert her gaze and address the king.

"I don't care what you do with me, Vladimir, just please don't harm the children," she said. "I'm begging you."

"But don't you see, Abby?" he said, using her first name, the way he had when they'd first met. "I need them for the machine. What do you think it runs on, corn oil?" He scoffed. "You could have been my queen, you know. Haven't you shouldered the burden of single motherhood long enough?"

At these words, she clutched her children closer. Their fingers dug into the cloth of her dress.

“I would rather die than stand by your side,” she whispered.

“As you wish,” he replied with a dismissive wave of his hand. He turned to leave. “You have an hour to say goodbye to them; then it will be their turn to get acquainted with Henrietta.” A burst of laughter gushed from his lips, laced with insanity. “She can be quite persuasive, you know!”

With that, he sauntered down the corridor and up the dungeon steps, out of sight. The iron door clanged shut behind him, and this time he made sure to slam the massive deadbolt into place.

There will be no more escape attempts tonight, he thought.

#

Mandrake’s fingers closed around Roger’s neck.

He hoped that dying would not be painful. He had heard stories that sometimes people saw a white light at the very end. He felt the pressure increase on the bones around his throat, and his vision began to sway and blur.

“Please... stop...” he managed to gasp out in a strangled sob. It seemed as though a powerful vacuum had sucked all the air out of the cupboard.

Then, just as the last of his vision had begun to recede into darkness, Mandrake’s hands flew off his neck in such a rapid motion that his nails left three fine scratches just along Roger’s jugular. A massive crash came not a split second later, followed by the clomp of heavy boots on the hardwood floor. His mind was blanketed with confusion, but his body knew enough to choke down big gulps of air, which even in the musty, cramped space of the cupboard tasted wonderful.

Howls of pain – presumably Mandrake’s – filled his ears.

“How does that feel, ya lout?” shouted a man with a British accent. Roger knew that voice. He heard a dull crack in the space to the left where he could not see, but knew Mandrake lay. The sound could only have been a boot colliding with his ribs.

“Why don’t you try picking on someone your own size,” another voice said.

[Percy, it’s the Grimsrud brothers!] Roger cried out in his mind. He prayed the bird could hear him.

“Brothers, please! You’re making a grievous mistake! There is still time to stop this insanit-” His voice was cut off by another dull thud as someone else decided to take a whack at him. Roger knew well the names of the three men now standing in the corridor who had saved his life: Daniel, Cassius, and Isaac.

I knew they’d come, he thought, and smiled.

#

George was in a trance. Henrietta beckoned to him with eyes shaped like almonds. George could even make out a white film glistening there, spread over the lenses like some spoiled butter. Nonetheless, his legs carried him forward.

Her jaws began to stretch, the hinges creaking audibly. Countless teeth filled the space between her lips and tongue.

[That’s right, come closer. I’m going to transform you, Georgie. You’ll soon see it’s for the best.] Strangely enough, he was starting to believe her.

[Will I ever see Roger again?]

[You may. Only time will tell if Vladimir sees fit to use you both.]

[Use us?]

[Oh yes, but don’t worry, it’s a very pleasant position to be in. The rewards will be more bountiful than you can possibly imagine. Doesn’t that sound nice, Georgie?]

[I guess...]

He was now standing right before Henrietta. The forked tongue flicked out to taste the air, thus tasting George's scent, and somewhere in the back of his mind the last dull-red flashes of fear began to fade.

[Maybe staying here won't be so bad, after all.]

[That's the spirit! Now, just a bit closer, and I'll put every last one of your fears to rest. I think you're going to like how it feels.]

[Isn't there another way?] This tiny voice that spoke up now was one of desperation. She clucked in a way that was strangely mother-like.

[George, don't you see? Vladimir can't run this empire alone, he needs young soldiers like you to help him carry on the fight!]

[Soldier?]

[Yes, George. Haven't you ever wanted to be a soldier, fighting for the greatest army the Realm has ever known?] Her fangs oozed with clear drops of liquid that could only be venom.

That's when the door shattered in a hail of splinters and mangled hinges.

George whirled around, ducking just in time to narrowly avoid a piece of twisted metal that whistled past his head. Behind him, Henrietta flinched at the massive noise and backed her hindquarters into the closet in a semi-retreat.

[What is the meaning of this?!] Her thoughts screamed out in anger and surprise.

Whoever had opened the door had done so with more than just a sturdy kick. Faint wisps of purple smoke curled around the doorframe, and George smelled something that reminded him of the time Roger singed his hair with a match, just to see

what would happen. A cough sputtered past his lips as he tried to make out the figures standing in the hazy entrance where the door had stood a second before.

There were two of them.

CHAPTER 22

From where Roger sat, crammed in the cupboard with pins and needles crawling all over his legs, the sound of the crash somewhere above was just as audible as if he'd been standing in the hallway. The brothers took a break from whaling on Mandrake long enough to consider the source of the racket, and he could picture them cocking their ears towards the ceiling in unison, just beyond the sides of his vision.

"What in the hell was that?" one of them exclaimed.

"I don't know, but we better move – the other boy may be in mortal danger." That must be Daniel, Roger thought excitedly; he could hear the grave authority in his voice, a rocky tone that seemed to emanate from deep within his throat.

[Percy, are you there?] Roger thought as hard as he could. [They've actually come to rescue us!]

[I've got some good news, kid.] Percy's voice was a clear and brilliant stream that actually seemed to convey his emotions as well. That had never happened before. There was excitement and optimism there, making Roger feel as though he was the one with a pair of wings – only, they weren't broken, and he could fly off at any second.

[Well, what is it then?] he asked. Mandrake lay puffing on the floor – Roger could see his legs, and the buckled shoes on his feet that stuck out past the open cupboard door. They twitched a little, and a shudder suddenly racked his spine.

[That crash upstairs? I think a couple more soldiers may have just joined the resistance against Vladimir.]

[The Rangers? But why would they suddenly decide to help us?]

[Maybe they were planning it all along. Maybe Vladimir did something to them once, too.]

“You’ll... you’ll pay for this, all of you. Vladimir knows how to deal with traitors to the Realm...” Mandrake spat the words through clenched teeth.

“Oh, stuff it up your ass, Mandrake,” said Isaac. He punctuated the sentence with another swift kick to the servant’s ribs. Mandrake’s feet sprang into the air, then lay still. Roger didn’t think that Mandrake felt like adding anything to his previous statement.

“My brothers, we’re wasting time. One of you stay here, the other man and I will make our way upstairs.” Roger still couldn’t really see anything, but he could sense them shuffling around self-consciously, their hunting boots lightly scuffing the stone floor.

“You don’t know what you’ll be dealing with up there,” said one. Cassius, he guessed. He was getting good at identifying them as his memory worked to pin faces to names. “All three of us should go. This one’ll be safe here on his own... for now.”

“Come off it man, you must be joking. The second we leave, Vladimir’ll be here and the boy will be done for. He needs a bodyguard. We didn’t come on this mission just to muck it up at the most critical moment.” Daniel paused. “I’m not sure you truly fathom what’s at stake here,” he added.

“And then when Vladimir comes, you think we’ll stand a chance?” Mandrake made an attempt to get up, which Isaac quashed with a boot pressed firmly against his chest. He went back down with a thump.

Roger had finally managed to rearrange the awkward configuration of limbs in a way that allowed him to peer out and get his first good look at the situation.

Three towering bodies stood over him.

“Hello, son,” Daniel said.

He stepped forward, at the same time extending a hand the size of a catcher’s mitt.

“We’ve come to send you and your brother home.”

“You’ve all got to be joking. The clear solution is to take him with us.”

Isaac said this while casting frantic glances up and down the corridor. Daniel was still staring down at Roger after saying he’d get the boys home. Home. The concept hadn’t occurred to Roger in so long that he’d almost begun to forget it even existed. Thoughts and images swirled in his mind of that beautiful place – rolling hills of uncut grass that swayed in the summer breeze, frogs casting ripples as they jumped off the bank into the pond, and in the field beyond the garden, the cemetery where he and George used to troop out with sticks of charcoal clutched in their hands to make grave rubbings. He could have that again. The brothers had filled his heart with hope.

Almost as soon as Isaac had finished what he was saying, however, the sound of hurried footsteps reached their ears, echoing spookily from some other nearby passage. Cold terror seized Roger as he felt Vladimir getting closer. He imagined it was how Theseus might have felt when he listened to the Minotaur clip-clopping around in the

labyrinth. There was no doubt that a terrible beast lived in this house, and he was out for blood.

“We have to move!” Daniel hissed. Mandrake showed no signs of resistance, aside from a poisonous glare. At last Roger popped himself out of the dank-smelling cupboard and all but collapsed on the floor, thumping his left knee smartly on the wood. Despite the flare of pain, he dragged himself to attention before the three brothers as they evaluated their escape routes.

“Where did that noise come from?” Cassius asked, his voice fierce with anxiety.

“Let’s try those stairs,” Daniel responded. He gestured at a bulge in the wall that looked like one side of a tower. Next to the corridor, an opening appeared to lead to a spiral staircase built within that same tower.

The footsteps were getting closer.

The brothers took off like a shot, and Roger scampered after them, trying to keep pace. He glanced back for one final look at Mandrake, badly beaten and lying on the floor, then bounded around the corner and up the stairs.

#

No sooner had the Grimsrud brothers and Roger disappeared from view than Vladimir came marching into the corridor. The old dungeon-keeper Mandrake lay immobile on the floor, still trying to catch his breath, and wincing from the beating the brothers inflicted. Vladimir knelt beside him, taking one hand in a way that seemed almost paternal.

“Tell me where they went,” Vladimir demanded in a sharp tone. His nostrils flared and his face looked flushed. A shine of perspiration had taken over his brow,

which was usually dry as a bone. Roger had eluded his grasp for several minutes too long already, and a black, rage-inducing frustration flowed through Vladimir's veins. His blood was hot with anger. Never in his long life had he felt so helpless to prevent a situation from spiraling dangerously out of his control.

"That way, master," Mandrake gasped in reply. "They heard a crash upstairs – I think we may be in serious trouble."

"The words of a coward. I expected nothing less from you, Mandrake. You've always been a louse." Now there was a dead look in Vladimir's eyes. "Because of you, irreparable damage may already be done. For all I know, those boys won't even be useful to me after this. How will I power my machine then? Have any of these considerations even once entered your pitiful mind?"

Mandrake regarded him with a deepening terror. Now he knew what the stakes were; now he knew the severity of his mistake in letting Roger slip past.

"The brothers are here!" he cried. "They took him, and now they're trying to get George."

"I'm not worried about that," Vladimir said, his eyes filled with ice. "What does concern me is the lack of competence in my servants. I fear several of them – not just the brothers – have already turned against me." He sighed. "Maybe my power really is waning, Mandrake."

Mandrake tried to sit up, but Vladimir forced him back down, planting a hand firmly on his chest.

"Easy there, soldier, you're in no position to go anywhere."

"But sir, it's not just the brothers! There was a loud crash upstairs, then I heard a strange sort of crackling, and I caught the scent of burning hair. Don't you know what

that means? It's the same type of spell the Rangers used to use when I would go along with them to raid farmhouses – they've turned against you as well, I fear, and they are here now! I alone have remained faithful, sire!" He seemed to have a great deal of difficulty speaking. The Grimsruds may have inflicted more damage on him than appearances would hint at, Vladimir thought.

"Henrietta will take care of them. A powerful sorceress lies hidden beneath her scaly exterior, but I don't need to tell you that."

"What are you going to do?"

"First, Mandrake, I think it's time you were held accountable for the error you committed in letting Roger slip past you. I can't have failures like that threatening my hold on the Realm, wouldn't you agree?"

"Master, what are you saying?"

Vladimir withdrew a short dagger, which he'd kept concealed behind his back.

"What I'm saying, Mandrake, is this: I've decided to officially – and permanently - terminate your employment.

Vladimir plunged the dagger deep into his chest.

Mandrake's eyes flew wide open in horror.

A sharp crack sound filled the air as Vladimir split his breastbone. A gout of blood sprayed the air as Vladimir twisted the knife deeper, burying it up to the hilt. Mandrake's lips immediately began to stain a dark red, and several drops leaked out of his mouth.

"Master... why?" he moaned, the voice of a man at death's door.

"You've failed to live up to my expectations, Mandrake. This can be the only possible ending to your tale, I'm afraid."

Sobs racked the dying man's body as he realized his moment of oblivion was close at hand. Vladimir held the knife firm. A pool of blood oozed onto the floor, already beginning to thicken. Mandrake's legs twitched as Vladimir twisted the knife even deeper – and then all was still.

Vladimir stood, leaving the silver dagger implanted in his hapless victim and former servant.

Turning back in the direction from whence he had come, Vladimir walked into the grand dining hall, then to his favorite armchair at the head of the massive table, and sat down to wait. It won't be long at all now, he thinks.

The hour of reckoning had come at last.

CHAPTER 23

Bounding up the mottled wooden steps, Roger's heart felt like it was going to explode. Furthermore, he hadn't had anything to eat since Percy's meager provisions on the train, and the lack of fuel was beginning to take a serious toll. His vision seemed fuzzy, and his breath was short. Nevertheless, he managed to tap into his last stores of energy to make the climb. The brothers' long legs allowed them to take the steps two at a time with ease, but Roger stayed close behind.

The spiral staircase carried them higher and higher until Roger was sure they had to be standing somewhere over the main roof of the building. The rafters groaned from below as fierce gusts of wind continued to pound the house. Roger tried to remain calm while they maintained our ascent. He was sick with fear for George's well-being, and he knew he shouldn't accept the fact that the brothers had shown up as definitive proof that their rescue was at hand. He wondered if the situation might not have gotten worse, in fact.

At last, they reached a small wooden landing that featured a small picture window set in the center of the wall. Beside it lay the remains of a door. Hunks of debris

littered the opening where some unimaginable force had burst through in a fit of destructive energy. The stink of burning hair filled their nostrils, and Roger felt his stomach perform a neatly executed backflip. The brothers blocked his view of what the room contained, but he already knew George was somewhere in there.

What he didn't know was what Henrietta had done to him.

"George, you in there?" he cried.

No response.

Cassius threw a poisonous backwards glance at him, one finger mashed against his lips. They crept forward, entering the room with the utmost caution. No one appeared to be inside. Before they had advanced one step closer, however, a piercing cry resounded from the depths of a closet at the back of the room.

"George!" he screamed.

Roger dashed forward, wrenching the door open with what felt like strength he'd never possessed before. Some invisible force had been holding the door shut from within, though in his fear and desperation he was able to summon enough power to overcome it. When he looked inside, however, his mind could not prepare him for the horror that his eyes were now forced to register. The brothers themselves staggered backward, retching, as soon as they had made the grievous error of seeking a better look over my shoulder.

"What the..." Roger whispered.

Inside the closet hung several objects that looked like pink pajamas – the kind with the butt-flap and the booties – only they were shriveled and gray, like no clothing he'd ever seen in his life. As shock subsided and realization set in, Roger realized he was looking at the skins of children. Somewhere beyond the wall of darkness that

surrounded the rear of the closet (though he sincerely doubted that it was just a closet, at this point), salacious sounds of dripping greeted my ears.

Numb horror filled his mind like a block of ice. Something clicked on the stones back there, and Roger instantly thought of talons.

Behind him, one of the brothers wrenched a torch from the wall, which cast warm light over the place from which the sounds had emitted, but his thoughts – and eyes – were still on the ragged pink monstrosities draped along the wall, like a housekeeper's forgotten laundry, clumsily tacked up in a hurry without forethought of wear or tear. He drained them like a spider shucking a fly, Roger thought. His eyelids fluttered and his forehead felt hot. He looked over to where the light had shone.

A lizard-like creature stood over George.

“Get away from him!” he shouted instinctively. George lay limp before a hideous beast that looked like a cross between a Komodo dragon and a flying dinosaur. Its jaws craned open, and its forked tongue lolled down like a slack red cord.

George showed no signs of life.

“Down, son, get out of the way!” Cassius roared, stepping lively to the forefront and giving Roger a brusque shove to get him moving. The thing hissed at the intrusion of the torchlight. Its head writhed on a smooth-muscle neck before snapping about in one smooth motion to face the intruders.

[Who dares disturb the extraction process?] The thought screamed into Roger's head like a runaway train, shrieking at a frequency that made his molars grind. Evidently, the brothers heard it too – they each bore identical grimaces of pain, clutching at their ears and instinctively retreating a step or two.

“It’s Henrietta, the foul lizard-slave of Cruor! Advance on her, brothers, we’ll soon weather this storm!”

They charged.

As fast as the action picked up, things changed right before Roger’s eyes. As soon as the brothers had begun to gather momentum, they suddenly staggered backwards, their hands raised as if trying to maintain balance in the face of a stiff wind; apparently Henrietta was using something considerably stronger on them.

[What are you doing to them? What are those things on the wall??] Roger cried.

[By which you mean ... ? Ah, yes! My prized possessions. You see, master Roger, Vladimir requires an abundance of willing young souls to volunteer for a... well, yes, let’s call it what it is – for a sacrifice, of sorts.] She paused, turning to look back at George’s body, who lay helpless on the cold floor. Her tongue flicked out, tasting the air, probably smelling Roger’s fear and repulsion.

[You see – Vladimir needs their blood to run the machine. Without it, all control over the Realm would be lost. So, you see, I keep these trophies as a way to honor the lives that these children have sacrificed, their own lives, Roger, can you imagine? Would that you too were to become such a hero one day.]

[Care to see a demonstration?] she asked.

Roger glanced back and saw that the bearded trio had regained some composure. Roger appeared to have diverted some of Henrietta’s attention, at least for the moment.

Her head sank lower. Roger tried to move, and found that his feet were completely immobilized. He tugged at his knees, but they refused to budge.

He watched in abject horror as one meaty lip curled back to reveal twin fangs, which dripped with venom. They closed the distance to George's arm in a liquid motion, and both fangs slowly sank into the flesh of my little brother's bicep.

Roger began to scream.

CHAPTER 24

Vladimir sat faithfully at his post and drummed his fingers on the oaken table. He rested his back against the ornate armchair, carved thousands of years ago by hands even he had forgotten. Patience had always been a great virtue of his – the decades before he seized power passed like so many minutes on a clock, and even he could not quite remember how many centuries had drifted by since the time of his own birth. His furrowed brow and gnarled fingers gave little actual indication to the tyrant king's age, but one would not be mistaken in estimating that he had looked the same way for longer than anyone else in the Realm. It was as though he was immune to time entirely.

The screams resounding from upstairs did not concern him in the least, nor did they create any further anxiety that things were getting any more out of control than they already were. Killing Mandrake had invoked a kind of calm in him, a deep and abiding sense that at least one loose end had been tied up, and the only thing left to do was wait for everything else to come to its logical conclusion. Henrietta would work her special brand of magic on the boys – or, on one of them, at the very least, he thought. Like Mandrake, she was guilty of at least a few slip-ups over the past several months –

but with her help, and a little luck, the great machine would have enough fuel to run for a dozen more harvests, if not more. The weather would bend to his touch again, once the life-force of the boys had been harnessed, and the townsfolk Realm-wide would bow to his will once more.

No great cause for concern, he thought, a smug look plastered on his face. He fingered the rim of his brandy glass – he had to summon one of the kitchen hands to pour the drink, an elderly half-breed named Burnside. Alcohol had never been a great force in his life, but Vladimir enjoyed a a fine drink to sip on from time to time. His impartiality to liquor might have been ironic, given the farmers and the crops he oversaw, but a king needed a sober hand to steady his heavy crown. With all the patience in the world, Vladimir drummed his fingers, and waited.

The knuckles of his right hand were spattered with Mandrake's blood.

CHAPTER 25

Roger tried to call his brother's name, but the sound became lodged in his throat like an oversized chunk of meat. His vocal chords seemed to freeze and atrophy as a reaction to the horror that was unfolding before his very eyes, and black spots began appearing in his vision as he struggled to hold onto consciousness. Behind him, Cassius, Daniel and Isaac clutched their heads in obvious agony, the force of Henrietta's thoughts still managing to keep them at bay. The lizard's teeth probed even deeper into Georgie's arm like hypodermic needles, and Roger prayed that whatever venom they might contain would not be lethal. George's body lay still as a corpse, and Roger's feet remained glued to the floor.

That's when he noticed two more figures draped over the west wall of the bizarre nursery, where the mobile still spun crazily in the air. Hanging on hooks like pink, custom-tailored suits were the men that Roger had heard mention of only as the Rangers, and whom Roger had grown to fear as the eventual harbingers of his doom. Their eyes, teeth, and bones were gone, as though they had never existed in the first place, and the clothes they had traveled the Realm in lay in a crumpled pile on the floor

next to their bodies. Something terrible had happened here. The Rangers had busted down the door to save George, but Henrietta had somehow disposed of them with her black magic. Roger shuddered to think what they might have experienced in their dying moments.

All these thoughts passed through his mind in a matter of seconds. Henrietta had dug her fangs in so deeply that her upper lip was now wrapped around the curve of George's bicep, the way a child's mouth might greedily envelope the spout of a water bottle on a hot day. It was then that Henrietta actually began to slurp at the small body.

Juicy sucking noises echoed throughout the chamber, reminding Roger of George's failed experiment one morning at breakfast to eat a grapefruit without the aid of a spoon. The sound was maddening, but suddenly, pure white hope filled his chest.

In that moment, his legs finally felt as though they were coming loose. Roger pulled again at his right knee, which to his delight rose an inch off the floor. It was what he imagined it might feel like to tug a log out of a puddle of softening tar. He dragged at the other leg with all his might, and felt that one come out of its sticking place as well. The more he pulled, the freer he became, and in his mind he all but shouted the lyrical shield I had come to depend on, the lyrics running into a blur. I had said that first verse over and over again so many times that the words themselves were beginning to sound like an alien language.

(Getcher-modor-rahnin,

Heddoud-ontha-hi-whey...)

Again and again, until they spiraled in and out of my thoughts, and I couldn't even be sure any longer if I hadn't begun to say the words out loud as well, images and

words and the horror of what this creature was doing to my sibling all swirling into one discombobulated mess, but I held fast.

[Roger, listen to me, this is Percy! I'm down here in the dining hall with Vladimir, setting up a little surprise. He doesn't know I'm here, but you have to listen carefully!]

[Percy, what on earth am I going to do? You have to help me, this monster is killing George!] Roger thought.

[It's not too late! Only you can get close enough to mortally wound her – your mind is not of the Realm, and she cannot control it. The brothers, and the Rangers – they spent their whole lives in this place, and she knows how to corrupt their channels of perception. But you must keep your guard up, and find a weapon – and use it – before she has managed to completely drain your brother's life force! If we can get him back to your world before the transformation is complete, I think he'll survive.]

Roger continued to struggle with his uncooperative legs while carrying on the mental conversation with Percy.

[Oh, Percy, her teeth are in his arm, I'm looking right at it...]

[The extraction process is deceptively slow. She must have spent several minutes working on the Rangers before she turned her attention to George, and then you and those bearded rescuers showed up. Roger, you mustn't waste any more time, seize a weapon and act now, while she's distracted!]

The low slurping sound went on like a dull roar in his ears. He wiggled both legs, and to his surprise was met with complete freedom of movement. Roger froze so as not to alert the beast he was loose any more than he already had, and turned his attention to the bearded trio that had so far only proven themselves capable of beating up old Mandrake – a deed Roger was grateful for, to be sure, but this room and its inhabitant

had drained away nearly all their power, leaving them no more fearsome than three hairy babies.

Cassius, their leader, was now slumped in a corner with his head in his hands, and Roger thought he could detect the thin sounds of crying. Black bristles stuck out from beneath his palms, and though his two brothers were somehow still on their feet, they covered their faces in identical fashion. Low moans of pain emitted from behind their splayed fingers. The torch they had been carrying lay on the stone floor, its flame sputtering and struggling to find purchase and stay alive on the damp stone floor. Roger's eyes traveled to Cassius's belt, and the torch light sparkled on the blade of a heavy stone axe that the Grimsrud had slung there for protection. Roger wondered what other weapons they'd brought with them.

Roger knew his only chance to save George had come at last. The grotesque bird-like lizard was draining George like a juice box, and soon there'd be nothing left but a dry, hollowed-out husk, one more skin to line the walls of this chamber of horrors. His clothes had even begun to crumple, as though the skin and bones underneath were dissolving into ash and collapsing downward.

Time was running out.

Roger gripped the head of the axe and slipped it out through the loop in Cassius's belt. The big man barely reacted. The wooden grip felt heavy and reassuring in his grip, and he hefted it around into a comfortable swinging position. The slurping sounds had abated somewhat, as though the enemy sensed that something had gone wrong. Indeed it had, for her – the lapse in concentration on keeping Roger stuck had allowed Roger to grab the axe, but now she withdrew her fangs and turned to face him. Her hideous yellow eyes gleamed in the torchlight.

[Foul human, you have meddled in our affairs for the last time!]

Roger closed the distance in two quick strides and brought the hatchet down with every ounce of strength he had.

The blow cleaved the loathsome creature's brain in two with one blow. Henrietta crumpled to the floor like a punctured balloon. There was a twitch, a slight shake of the tail – and then all was still. The voice that had screeched into Roger's head like a flock of banshees a second earlier had been silenced for all time. Blood gushed from the massive head wound in gentle spurts, splashing against the embedded blade of the hatchet.

George lay as still as the creature that had tried to kill him, and the twin fang-holes glowed an angry red on his arm. The bicep had swollen significantly, while the rest of his body looked emaciated. Roger pulled his brother away from the Henrietta's carcass and knelt beside him, water pouring from his eyes. His tears hit the stone floor with a barely audible patter.

"George, wake up, please, you have to wake up!" he wailed.

With Henrietta dead, the three brothers were able to compose themselves, and they huddled around the two boys to evaluate the damage. Roger turned to the first one who came near – Isaac – and started to pound his fists against the giant's legs.

"Where were you? You came here to rescue us and now look what's happened! He's dead, oh God, I think he's really dead..."

Isaac gripped him forcefully by the shoulders and gave him a brisk shake. Meanwhile, Daniel bent down to George to check for a pulse.

"Get ahold of yourself, boy, he's not finished yet," he said in a voice that was calm and reassuring, though by no means downplaying the severity of the situation. Isaac

continued to hold Roger in place, although their leader's words had sent another bolt of hope through him.

"George...?" he sniffed. He pulled away from Isaac and crouched by his little brother's side once more. As he leaned in closer, he realized that George was breathing, although they were the shallowest breaths Roger had ever heard a person take. His thin chest rose and fell in tiny shudders.

"We have to get him out of here," Roger said, trying to get his emotions back under control. "He'll die if you don't help us get home. Please."

"True enough, son," Cassius said.

"How do we leave the Realm?" Roger asked.

Cassius rose after appearing to check several more vital signs. Basic medical training! Roger thought. These guys are full of surprises.

"The return portal will remain open until midnight," Daniel said. "If I heard correctly, the clock chimed ten almost an hour ago, so we have no time to spare. Only..."

"What, what is it?" Roger cried. His patience had all but run out. He tried not to look at George, whose ashen cheeks had sunken in to make faint shadows as his body fought to keep breathing.

"Well... Vladimir isn't exactly in the business of letting prisoners walk for free," Daniel said. "I have a feeling he's waiting for us downstairs this very minute."

Thinking back to Percy's words, Roger already knew how right he was. But his short-term memory brought to the surface another tidbit of Percy's wisdom that had filled him with optimism and intrigue – something about a trap the bird was preparing. That, and the fact that his feathered comrade still had the element of surprise on his

side: he and Vladimir were in the same dining hall, but the evil king had by no means detected the bird's presence.

Maybe we still have a chance of getting out of here alive, after all, Roger thought.

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"Do I have to face him alone, then?" Roger demanded.

Cassius sighed, then bent down again to cradle George's head. "Of course not. All our lives have been leading to this moment, and I'll be damned if we're going to skitter off into the night and throw you and your brother to the wolves. This conflict with Vladimir goes back longer than any of us can remember, and that's saying a long way back, my son. You just happened to come on through that portal and land right smack in the middle of it. Funny how that works."

"Why, though? I still don't understand why he chose us."

"No one can say for sure, son. Our best guess is that he sensed some connection – some signal that was powerful enough to extend through the cosmosphere, or whatever it is that separates our world from yours."

Roger thought back to my father's record collection, and the fascination that that sheaf of wheat on the Traffic album cover had elicited. He remembered the countless times he had gingerly lifted the needle on his father's dusty old phonograph to hear that song from the top once more, so he could imagine the English peasants throwing their backs into the motion of the scythes as they cut barley from the stalk, wicking sweat from their brows between swings. Perhaps that had been it all along; his enchantment with an old album from the 60's had given way to a universe-bending fissure, through

which Vladimir Cruor was actually able to pick him out. His absorption with the namesake song had allowed him to do so.

“And do you know why he needs us?” Roger asked.

“I fear the details may be too graphic for you to handle,” Daniel replied, his voice cold.

“The boy is old enough, brother. He’s done more growing up over the past Realm-cycle than most other species half his age, from what I’ve read. Not bad for a regular human.” Cassius turned his face back down to the boy after this reproach. “I’m afraid that what Henrietta was doing to your brother was the same thing that she’s succeeded in doing to countless other boys and girls – some from the Realm, others from distant worlds, like you – with the aim of providing a sort of fuel for Vladimir. For him, and for the infernal machine he uses to manipulate the climate.”

“Vladimir Cruor can control that?”

“That’s right,” he replied. “Several decades ago, Vladimir decided to commission a massive project with all the gold he’d reaped from tributes paid to him by the farmers of the Realm – people like us. They built him a machine, with one grave warning. You see, the druids are a querulous people that never migrated down from the north, and no one here would have any reason to go see them unless it was for some vile purpose that inevitably ended in suffering. In this spirit did Vladimir venture to their sphere of the world, eventually returning with a team of some 700 pack mules to haul the contraption home to this very mansion, all packed in an enormous crate wrapped in chains and secured with modern-looking padlocks. This I know from the stories our parents used to tell, but no one has seen the machine for themselves and lived, other than members of Vladimir’s loyal entourage, I suppose.”

Roger threw a glance over his shoulder at the blood-white corpse of the creature he had just vanquished, and felt the hairs on his neck stand up. An acrid odor like rotting meat and decaying leaves stung his nostrils and caused him to turn back in a hurry.

“How do we stop it then?” he asked, all-too-aware of the lateness of the hour.

“I’m afraid the machine may be indestructible,” said Isaac, sounding glum.

“Now, now, brother, you know that isn’t quite true,” Cassius responded in a chiding voice. “We can conquer it with a war of attrition.” He paused briefly for effect. Roger tapped his foot impatiently for him to continue. “It was no accident that Vladimir hedged his bets by bringing two boys over to the Realm. He knew that he could double his chances of keeping the device operational with two fuel sources, in case one of you didn’t survive the extraction process, or proved incompatible as a source.”

Roger barely had any idea what he was talking about. “So?” he demanded.

“If he failed to harvest even one of you, the machine would have nothing left to run on. Vladimir would lose his grip on the seasons and weather in the Realm, and thus lose all his power.”

Daniel spoke up: “I believe he’s right, Roger. Events beyond your comprehension have been progressing towards this moment for longer than even we can remember.”

Roger couldn’t believe what he was hearing. All he wanted to do was get home with George and dissolve the foul curse that Henrietta had laid upon him - but if there’s a way to prevent future children from suffering the same fate, he thought, then I have to see this thing through to the end.

He tugged on George’s hand to try and get a response out of him, but George’s wrist hung limp in his palm.

Suddenly, he knew what to do.

“We have to get him to Mother Florence,” Roger said. “She’s the only one who can get him back on his feet, I know it.” He paused, thinking hard. “I need you three to distract Vladimir. Percy will help you. He’s in there now setting a trap. If the machine is almost dead, then Vladimir should be weak – right?”

“We were prepared for just such a confrontation, and yes, we believe that his powers may have diminished significantly along with the machine. With it, he could control not only the seasons, but the minds of the Realm’s inhabitants as well. It’s a trick he’s been using for centuries, passed down from his ancestors, who were also druids, most likely.”

These guys sure have a way of beating around the bush, Roger thought. We need a little more direct action around here.

“Well, have you brought anything with you that might help?” Roger asked. He was already crouched down by Georgie’s side, trying to loop one arm around his neck and figure out how he was going to carry him all the way down to the dungeon.

“I think we might’ve packed just the thing,” Daniel said with the ghost of a smile.

#

As it just so happened, the brothers had picked the right tools for the job – at least, that’s how Roger felt when he saw the row of three gleaming scythes leaning against the wall in the foyer where they had first come in. They had descended the stairs that led up to Henrietta’s lair like thieves in the night, and George’s pale body was draped over Cassius’s shoulder like a ghostly sack of potatoes.

“You know how to ... fight with those things?” He asked in wonder.

Isaac muttered something about “special training” in his low, gravelly voice, and went over to the wall to pick up his scythe. As he hefted it in the warm light of the corridor, Roger noticed that his name was etched in gold on the handle, just above the place where his left hand would go. Isaac stepped back and gave the blade a few lazy test swings. It whistled softly through the air, and looked impossibly sharp.

Cassius carefully removed George from his shoulder and propped him up against the stone wall at the side of the passage, then motioned for Roger to come over.

“This is it for us,” he said. “We may not emerge from that room alive, but if we do, you’ll know that things are safe. You must go to Mother Florence, now! Your brother may not have long to live!” He patted Roger on the back and helped him lift George until he was draped over one shoulder in a fireman’s carry as before. Roger could actually feel the life draining out of him, it seemed. His body felt impossibly light, and the ease with which he carried his little brother scared him deeply.

“Godspeed, young man,” Cassius said. “See you on the other side.”

They hefted their scythes into what Roger assumed was a fighting position and strode off down the long hall, towards the dining hall, and their final confrontation with Vladimir Cruor.

Roger turned back in the other direction and made his way to the cellar door that guarded the dungeon where his brother had spent God knew how many hours – practically the full duration of his time in the Realm, Roger realized. A giddy thought occurred to him: that he had probably had more fun than on this trip, though the idea that this was supposed to be some kind of rollicking adventure felt totally inappropriate. This was a matter of life and death, and if I didn’t act fast, and with impeccable judgment, I would soon be short one little brother named George.

The huge latch released with surprising ease in Roger's hand, as the door hadn't been locked since Mandrake and Vladimir had come down to introduce him to that bizarre replacement they had manufactured.

The mannequin, with those dead glass eyes, Roger remembered with ill horror. It's probably still down there. What if it attacks us? He had no idea what kind of abilities it might or might not possess. More dull fear crept into his senses, and he had to make a conscious effort to stop his knees from shaking.

The door creaked open, revealing torchlit steps that led down into that dark place – made only a few degrees brighter by the knowledge that Mother Florence and her children might be waiting down there to deliver us from evil.

No sooner had he placed his foot on the first step, than a horrible wailing rose up from the depths of the chamber. It sounded like the wails of a grieving woman, but the voice bore little resemblance to that of Mother Florence. The sound stopped him in his tracks, and sent a wave of shivers running all up and down his spine. Despite George's lack of weight, he even came close to losing his balance in that moment, which would have sent them both to take a nasty fall down the stone steps.

Then, almost as abruptly as it had begun, the wailing stopped.

"Mother Florence?" Roger called out. There was no immediate response. Cold sweat stood out on his forehead, and he redistributed George's weight on his shoulder. Again, the miserable wail rose like a siren, and he finally had to give up and put Georgie down, so great was the need

(oh God make it stop please)

to cover his ears. Outrage suddenly coursed through him without warning. He had put up with so much shit in this godforsaken place, encountering so many people

and creatures whose existence made absolutely no sense, that he was tired of being polite. Rage and sheer determination gave him a burst of energy, and he hefted George up one more time and trooped downstairs to confront the creature that was trying to scare him away.

“I’m down here, you’ve got to come quickly!” a woman’s voice said.

He raced the rest of the way down the stairs, doing his best not to take a massive spill. As he approached the end of the corridor, his vision filled with a dreadful sight.

There, between the two cells, a tug-of-war was taking place. The upper half of Mother Florence’s daughter’s body looked like it had been stretched by a team of sturdy horses, but it had lost its ability to block light, as if the integrity of the girl’s body itself had been compromised. Roger dashed forward to grab onto the girl’s hands and try and pull back.

In the cell across from Mother Florence, the mannequin stood with its burlap fingers wrapped tight around the iron bars, its haypin mouth slack and drooling with a primitive hunger. Out from its mouth came a murky beam of light that seemed to encapsulate the unfortunate girl, who by now had thinned and stretched to the point of fitting through the bars of her own cell, and extending further and further towards the gaping maw of her attacker. Florence herself was holding tight to one leg, and her son Hector had his tiny fists wrapped around the other, but it didn’t take long to surmise that they were losing the battle.

Roger’s own efforts were doing little to improve the situation. George lay in a pathetic heap on the concrete floor, arms akimbo, and black despair began to creep in. Roger had put up with far too much to give up at this stage, but there never seemed to be a way to win.

Do I even care about getting home anymore? What if George does die? What's there to go home to then? I've already lost a mom, why should I deserve to lose a baby brother as well...

The anger that had begun to ebb and fade administered a fresh injection. He let go of Maisie's hands, which dropped limply towards the floor. In a burst of motion he ran across the few remaining feet separating him from the hideous dummy. Already seeing red, he reached through the bars of his cell and folded his hands around the thing's plastic throat, pressing his thumbs deep into the space where his Adam's apple should be. Despite the artificiality of his overall appearance, the windpipe beneath his fingers felt real, and Roger thought how this is what it probably would feel like to kill a person. Not only commit murder, Roger, a voice said. Commit the murder of a being wearing Georgie's skin. What is going on here?

But he had no time for such hesitant, childish thoughts. This... this thing before him had to be taken apart, put down, laid to rest. He was through with the obstacles preventing him from saving his real brother. He crunched his thumbs down even harder, and felt something rubbery, yet lined with hard ridges like a windpipe, give way, punching downwards as though he was squeezing an unpeeled hard-boiled egg. The beam of light that had previously held such a firm grip on Maisie's body seemed to falter and weaken, eventually filtering down to a misty haze.

Roger pressed down even harder, but there was no need – the creature's eyes had already gone lifeless (if it had ever been alive to begin with), and the strange tractor beam that had extended from its mouth was now no more than a memory.

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In the blink of an eye, Maisie had returned to her normal size and was now standing inside the cell, clutching her mother's dress and weeping with great gusto. Hector looked self-conscious and afraid, as if desperate to comfort her but unsure how. Roger watched them for another moment before snapping out of his trance. He wrapped George in his arms once more and hauled him over to Mother Florence's cage. The doll that Roger had killed lay in a hopeless jumble of limbs in the opposite cell, and he resolved not to spare it another glance.

"Come here, son, you're safe for now," Mother Florence said in a warm voice. He propped George so his back was against the bars and hoped he wouldn't keel over on one side.

"Please, can you help him?" Roger begged. "I think he's dying."

"Now, now, child, there's no need to worry like that. Let me take a look at him." She gently pried Maisie's fingers from her dress, gently hushing her, then moved over to crouch beside George. She reached through the bars and shifted him around so he faced the stairs back from where we'd come from, and his head lolled on his neck as she did so.

"He's been bitten badly by that two-faced snake of a pet Vladimir keeps around here," she said, "but something tells me she's no longer a threat." Mother Florence looked up at Roger with beautiful, knowing eyes, ones that showed mild surprise at him, as if she knew the brutal means with which he had brought about that creature's demise.

[It's good she's gone. I suppose it's a blessing that she went quickly, although we all know she deserved to suffer... a protracted death might have given her the chance to warn Vladimir, however. You did well to nip that in the bud.] The same warm voice that

had spoken out loud to him a second earlier now filled his head, but Roger found the sensation extremely pleasant, like wrapping up in a down comforter on a snowy Saturday morning.

She went on: "I'll need to drain the venom from your brother now. You hold his feet. Maisie, Hector, you two come here and each grab one shoulder, there, like that." She showed them with her fingers what was needed, and Roger dutifully gripped both of George's ankles as instructed. "Now, Roger, I need you to be brave, and don't let go of his legs under any circumstances! That goes for you too, my little ones." She gave them each a reassuring pat on the back.

Then, her slender wrist extended between the bars once more to grasp George's bicep, which was red and throbbed like an overripe tomato, although the swelling did not seem quite so bad as before. She rolled up his shirtsleeve to get a good look at the twin fang marks, and pulled his arm into the cell just enough so that she could bend her head down, pressing her lips to the skin with enough pressure to form a seal. She began to pull with her mouth, cheeks flexing and puffing to draw out the toxins that were rapidly draining away any life force that might be left in him. Roger steadied my hands and tried to be brave.

Her lips let go and she turned her head to one side before letting forth the stringiest, blackest-looking stream of spit that he'd ever seen in his life. It splattered on the floor like a fat kid doing a cannonball, spreading into the cracks of the stone floor with mercury-like viscosity. George's legs bucked like twin electric eels under his brother's unsuspecting hands, and he had to move quickly to avoid getting kicked in the face.

"Hold him tightly, Roger!"

He redoubled his grip once George had stopped flailing. His chest hitched up hard, and low, racking coughs emitted from his throat.

“That... Henrietta put that inside him?”

“Yes, and you’re lucky that I was here to remove it properly. Listen carefully, Roger: he won’t be cured, not completely, until you get him out of the Realm and back where he belongs – at home, with you and your father. Do that, and the trace amounts left in his system won’t do any permanent damage. He won’t have to get any further treatment from any doctor’s in your world, either, if that’s what you’re thinking, but it is crucial that you both escape this place. Do you understand?”

He nodded, then asked: “But how do I find the return portal? There’s no way we’re going to make it back without some more help from the brothers.”

“Then go to them you must,” she said gravely. “There is little time. I sense that the final battle is already at hand.”

“But Vladimir will murder us!” he groaned, already fearing that he would not be able to do as she said. To this she did not reply, only clutching her little ones closer to the hem of her garment. The ruffles of her dress outlined their cheeks in such an angelic way that he almost wished he could just stay with her, and bathe in the sense of security she gave off.

“Go now, child, the hour grows late,” she said, gesturing with a shoo-ing motion. “Leave your brother here with me. All will be well if you can be brave a little longer.”

“How will you escape?” he asked.

“If you manage to vanquish Vladimir, all the evil manacles of the Realm that he has created will crumble, and the spell will be no more. I’ll walk out of this basement free as a bird, with my children,” she replied. His mind boggled at the thought that

they'd been tasked with vanquishing someone as obviously powerful as the evil king himself, but her mention of freedom did something to set his spirit alight. He understood the last task at hand, and felt ready to complete it.

He shouldered that heavy load in his mind and proceeded to head up the stairs. He did not look back.

Nothing could have prepared him for what he was about to witness in the great dining hall.

CHAPTER 26

In their haste to get to the dining room and confront the grim king, Isaac and Daniel bumped into their brother Cassius, who was standing stock-still just inside the room, frozen by the old man before him. No longer sitting in wait, Vladimir had elected to stand at the ready – a wise decision on his part. The brothers meant business. Their scythes gleamed, and the shine in their eyes expressed a bitter longing for violence and confrontation. Vladimir slid the old saber out from its scabbard, where it reflected the light in a different, murkier way than the brothers' weapons of choice.

"I suppose you feel I'm beginning to lose my grip on this land we call home," Vladimir said, pronouncing each word like it might be his last. "We could settle this like gentlemen. Leave the children to me, and I'll see that you live to be very rich men. I could give you a position of great power, each one of you. Think it over."

"No, you think it over, old man," Cassius said with a leer. His momentary shock at finding Vladimir ready to do battle had already faded. He has reasserted his fighting stance.

"Yes, enough prattling," Isaac said.

“You brought this upon yourself,” Daniel added.

“Well, if we can’t work this out like reasonable adults, I suppose you leave me with no choice but to defend myself,” Vladimir replied with an air of weariness, as if he had dispatched many an insurrectionist over the years. They were not his first, to be certain.

The fighters approached one another. Vladimir assumed a fencer’s graceful pose: right leg bent and leading, left leg cocked and to the side. The saber’s deadly tip led forward into the fray.

Daniel and Vladimir clashed together like two great stags locking horns. Cassius and Isaac hung back for a moment so as not to wound Daniel. Sword met scythe with a hefty clang that reverberated around the chamber, sending a shower of sparks down on the cobblestone floor. Cassius and Isaac glanced at each other, hesitant to join the battle lest they do more damage than good. Vladimir brought his sword back and swung again, then again. Daniel parried the blows, handily at first, but with each successive strike, Vladimir pushed him back two steps. His brothers retreated as well, and the space between their backs and the wall was rapidly running out. Sparing one final glance and a nod between themselves, Isaac and Cassius charged in to help Daniel.

At that very moment, Roger appeared in the doorway.

#

There was something both wonderful and terrifying about the array of fighters Roger found standing before him in that great hall of Vladimir’s. He moved through the arched doorway into the room as though in a dream. A warm glow emanated from the hearth. The battle raged.

Vladimir had the brothers pinned with their backs almost right up against the far wall, away from the fireplace. He brought down his sword again and again with a staggering amount of force for a person of such an elderly appearance. It's all they can do to keep their heads from getting chopped off, Roger realized with horror as he watched the brothers trying to defend themselves. Vladimir appeared to be attacking all three of them with equal effectiveness, and their collective spirit seemed to be waning. In spite of their size and brute strength and dexterity. There was just no way they could stand up to that barrage for long.

With yet another flurry of blows, Vladimir lashed out with a piercing lunge that managed to catch Daniel in the ribs. Roger watched, helpless, as the blade whicked through layers of leather armor and skin, causing a deep wound that would have been mortal two inches to the right. Daniel dropped his scythe and stumbled desperately out of the way, clutching the dripping, ragged tatters of his shirt. Blood flowed freely through his fingers as he staggered about like a wild beast whose flank had been sliced open by a tiger's claw. Roger opened my mouth to scream, but no sound came out. Instead, a voice filled his head, an old familiar one that rose like a calm oasis in the midst of a terrible storm.

[Don't panic, Roger, don't lose your head. The time is at hand, we can end this. Look to your left.]

He did as Percy's voice commanded. There beside the fireplace he saw a thin rope attached to a sturdy wooden fixture angling out across the floor of the hall. He followed the line with his eyes, up to the ceiling.

Roger now understood that the fire in the hearth wasn't the only source of light in the room, and he wondered how he hadn't noticed it before: above the fighters there

hung a massive chandelier, glowing with what looked like a hundred lit candles, posted in an intricate design of wooden beams and struts cobbled together by some ancient hand. It must have weighed a ton.

[Percy, what is going on? What are we going to do?]

[Patience, young one. I'm going over to that rope. You get his attention, and bring him into position. Do you understand what I'm saying?]

He did. To Roger's astonishment, a small, flat stone suddenly rolled over to one side revealing a small opening, out of which promptly stepped Percy. His jaw dropped open. For a moment he had forgotten all about the battle happening twenty feet away, and was flooded with relief to see that his old traveling companion had come to no harm.

To their right, the foursome had now been reduced to a trio of dueling warriors. Vladimir still possessed the upper hand. Daniel was now on his knees, staring down at his ribs and probing the wound with his fingers. Roger suddenly had to fight the urge to gag. Everything was happening far too quickly, and the sight of blood beginning to pool on the floor made his head spin.

That was when Daniel tottered, reached out with one hand like a blind man seeking guidance, then collapsed directly onto his side with a mighty thud. His head made a sickening crunch as it connected with the cobblestone floor. He lay still.

His brothers almost stopped fighting for a moment, but knew they would lose their lives if they stopped to help their fallen brother. A cold fact made worse by Vladimir's cold indifference. Roger stared at Daniel's enormous fallen body, pleading in his head for some sign of life, but of course there was none.

[We're out of time, George is going to die!]

Percy scampered over to the rope and fastened his beak around the line. He started grinding his ridges back and forth, using them like a four-bladed saw to attack the tough material from above and below simultaneously. Roger could just hear the faint, buzzy scratching sound it made, masked by the crackling logs. To his amazement, the rope began to fray. It twitched under Percy's beak like a gently plucked guitar string, and he could see the almost-imperceptible movements of the wooden chandelier.

The battle in the middle of the room appeared to be nearing an end, and the outcome wasn't going to be favorable for the forces of good unless something turned around in a hurry. Vladimir still hasn't noticed me, how can that even be possible? Roger thought.

He remembered that Percy had given him an order, and now was the time to fulfill it. He had to get their attention and get Vladimir under the chandelier, otherwise the whole cursed adventure was going to end in the most abject failure imaginable; George would die, and Vladimir would likely drain Roger's blood himself to feed that infernal machine he kept in his basement. He finally sprang into action.

"Hey, hey, over here, Vladimir!" he cried, waving his arms simultaneously. It seemed like the most basic approach would be the effective one. "Look over here, you bully, why don't you leave us alone already!"

Never one to lose an advantage in a fight, Vladimir maintained his concentration long enough to swing a fearsome blow that forced both the remaining brothers to raise their scythes in desperate self-defense. The saber came crashing down on their heads. The force was enough to scatter them backwards, and they crashed into the chairs around the dining table. Their huge bodies slammed into the furniture and collapsed in a pile of limbs. Their scythes clanked to the floor, and Cassius and Isaac looked too

stunned to move. The king looked confident that he had them under control for the time being.

Vladimir Cruor turned his attention to Roger.

#

“So you’re the one I’ve been looking for all this time,” Vladimir said, his voice eerily calm. “You made quite the journey to get here. You must love your brother very much.”

Roger instinctively took a step backwards. Vladimir crept toward him with cat-like slyness, as though preparing to pounce. His eyes had a kind of glaze over them, like one you might expect to see on a fresh corpse. Roger thought he could smell the rot on his breath as he advanced, shuffling like a mummy bent on exacting revenge for its tomb having been violated. Vladimir lowered the longsword to his side, though it still gleamed with its dull lethality as before; now, however, it was slick with Daniel’s blood. Roger spared a glance in the wounded Grimsrud’s direction, and his heart sank to see that he still showed no signs of movement. Roger felt an absence in the air, too, as though a crucial piece of energy had departed the universe for good.

[Something tells me Daniel’s no longer with us,] he thought to Percy, hoping he’d catch the warning in time. Cassius and Isaac were still trying to extract themselves from the pile of chairs, and Vladimir was rapidly gaining ground on the boy.

“I do love my brother, and you can’t have him!” Roger said with as much grit as he could muster.

Vladimir looked taken aback. “What did you say?”

This time Roger took a step forward, ignoring the rotten stench in the air.

“I said, he’s my brother, and I’m taking him home. If I were you, Vladimir Cruor, I’d put that rusty old sword down and just fuck off.” The shocked expression grew more pronounced. Roger had managed to catch him off-guard.

Vladimir now stood directly beneath the chandelier.

Roger didn’t dare throw a single glance back at Percy out of fear that Vladimir would follow his gaze and notice him instantly, but even still, beneath all the commotion of that great dining hall, he could hear the persistent gnawing that signaled Percy still had not managed to sever the rope. Please let this work, Roger prayed.

“Bold words, spoken in a strange tongue,” Vladimir said with a puzzled look on his face. He kept advancing with the sword. “Regardless, I’m afraid it’s time for you to die.”

“Percy, bite that thing in half, for crying out loud!” Roger yelled at the top of my lungs. He unconsciously took a half step backward and bumped into the corner of the huge dining table. At that very moment, a sharp, rubber-band twang met my ears. They both looked up, and there it was, the plan in motion.

The incomprehensible weight of the massive chandelier made the line whistle as it flickered through the large eye-screw that had previously held it aloft. For one panicked instant Roger thought it would miss him. Vladimir had just enough time to lower his gaze, and in his eyes Roger saw a strange kind of confusion. He seemed to realize his own defeat, and was completely perplexed by it.

The thick wooden fixture crashed down upon his head with terrifying momentum.

There was a sharp crack as his skull hit the floor and more or less exploded, and his body slammed down with a sickening crunch. In spite of the rapid descent, several of

the candles that made up the chandelier still flickered brightly in the relative gloom of the dining hall.

[Holy shit. Percy did you see that?]

Vladimir twitched, and then from his mouth came a moan that sounded like a lonesome prairie wolf. Roger looked a bit closer, and saw blood trailing out of his left ear.

[Is he still alive?]

[I think it's safe to say he's on his way out, son.]

Percy came out from his hiding place over by the hearth and walked over to join him. Cassius and Isaac had finally pulled themselves together, and moved over to look at the body as well.

Roger looked up at them with red eyes. It felt like days since he had slept. Time had lost all meaning on the other side, and he wondered if anything would ever be the same after all that had happened. He thought of George, sitting down there in the dungeon with only Mother Florence and her children for company, when what he really needed to see was a familiar face.

"Aren't you going to check on Daniel?" he asked, the overwhelming exhaustion reflected fully in his voice. They shook their heads in unison.

"He's gone now, Roger," Cassius said. "He died valiantly, fighting for what he believed in, and I think that because of his actions, we may be able to get you and your brother home safely."

"The truth is," Isaac went on, "you two saved us. Your friend there deserves to be called a hero." He motioned to Percy, whose chest swelled with pride.

"I don't need any praise, gentlemen. That man had plagued our land for far too long. I... in fact, I don't even know what to say right now. I can't believe he's gone."

It appeared to be true. Vladimir's body lay still, and something strange and terrible began to happen: tiny sprigs of wheat began to emerge from all over his corpse, forming in isolated patches at first, then expanding to cover his entire body before it finally burst through the ragged clothing that remained, causing it to rot and fall away. More sand-colored stalks burst forth from his mouth like a foamy tide, and his eyes seemed to dissolve into some kind of clear, viscous jelly, through which yet more blades of the tawny grass started to grow. They seemed never-ending. The survivors looked on in fascination. Percy did not utter a sound, either out loud or in his mind. But the transformation still was not finished, even as it enveloped Vladimir's corpse from head to toe. The amber colored plant, continued to lengthen and blossom, with fluttery, oat-like heads that Roger imagined would have felt fuzzy and ticklish to the touch. It also drooped and scratched along the stone floor. The chandelier was also displaying the effects of this sudden infusion of plant matter, with the substance pulsing and thrusting through the various gaps in the wooden framework of the lighting fixture. He saw that before long, the stalks would ignite in a fiery blaze.

The sweeping growth of the barley traversed the floor until it reached Daniel, then commenced the exact same process that had already more or less consumed Vladimir's entire body; Roger could hardly recognize any part of what had only moments ago been an imposing man wielding a sword. At this point, he felt relief coursing through my veins, a sort of electrical charge that bounced from ear to ear, back and forth in his skull.

The strange blades of grass covered Daniel's entire body as it had Vladimir's, and then all was still. Roger heard a sniff, and saw that an enormous tear was rolling down Cassius's left cheek. It disappeared into the bushy black growth of his beard as if it had never existed. He dragged the hairy backside of one oversized hand across his cheek, and with that, the moment belonged to the past forever more. Isaac showed no emotion whatsoever, standing stock-still with his scythe gripped firmly in one hand. He looked like he never wanted to put it down again.

"Well, he wouldn't have wanted to delay us. At least this way we don't have to bury him right away," Isaac said in a gruff voice.

"Now, or ever," Cassius replied in a voice devoid of emotion.

"I think we can all agree that there is one final, important matter at hand," Percy suddenly chimed in, his voice resonating with a strange sort of confidence that Roger hadn't heard since they'd first met. Perhaps it was because they had been conversing primarily in our heads for the past hour or so, but something had changed in the bird; he was not the same creature as the one with whom Roger entered that series of challenges in the train. That seemed like a millennium ago. "We need to retrieve this young man's brother from downstairs, and make sure they both make it to the return portal. I don't think I need to remind you that time is of the essence."

The brothers muttered in agreement, and before Roger knew it, they had left the bodies of Vladimir and Daniel behind, trooping off single-file out of the dining hall the same way they had come in. Roger spared a single glance back, and saw that the grass was still moving, albeit it very slowly. The only trace of the two bodies that remained in that room was now a pair of enormous lumps, one considerably more bulky than the other given the size of that wooden chandelier.

They marched down the hall. Cassius led the pack, scythe in hand. Isaac kept his head down, eyes trained on his boots. They made their way down the steps and into the dungeon. George sat with his back propped against the bars as before, only now Mother Florence and her children were miraculously standing outside their cell. She was crouched beside George with one hand placed reassuringly on his back, while Maisie and Hector stood by her side, twin expressions of worry on their tiny faces. She turned to greet the crew as they came down the hallway.

“Oh, you brave men, you’ve done it!” she said. “He’s really gone, isn’t he?”

“Not just gone – the Realm seems to have reclaimed him,” Cassius said.

Mother Florence gave him a knowing look. “Yes, I had expected as much. What little remains there are will be gone by tomorrow. You did well, brothers,” she said, “and you too, Roger. I heard the tremendous crash that must have ended it – your handiwork?” She sounded impressed.

“Mine and Percy’s,” he replied. “It was his idea.”

Compassion and gratitude shone in her eyes as she lowered her gaze to Percy, who stood faithfully by my side. “Even the smallest friends can possess the heart of a lion. You may have saved us all, you know. Thank you.”

“I did what I had to, Mother Florence, nothing more and nothing less,” he said in a humble voice. He sounded even wearier than Roger, which was saying something. Roger wondered if Percy might not have been wounded in the fray, but aside from the fact that he seemed to have aged about a dozen years, he didn’t appear to be in any physical pain. Roger reminded himself not to get worked up, and that the worst of the danger was now behind them.

“You deserve to be rewarded, comrade,” Florence said. “Come here. I think I know just the thing.”

Percy obediently trudged over until he was standing beside her, next to George’s place on the floor. George still gave no signs of movement, although Roger could just make out the soft rise and fall of his chest, and a thin whisper of breath rattled between his lips. They needed to get him out of the Realm and back home.

“Don’t worry, Roger, this’ll only take a moment,” she said, as though reading his thoughts. Without another word, she gathered Percy into her arms, caressing his glistening black feathers with one hand while cradling him in the other. He looked like a strange baby bird that had been delivered to a human mother by mistake.

“How long have you lived with this broken wing?” she asked in a soothing tone.

“Longer than I can remember,” his voice sounded dreamy, far away. His eyes were trained on her face with a look of sleepy wonder. “Vladimir took that away from me, and I’ve had to ride that dingy train to get around ever since.”

“The spell shall be broken, my dear.” With that, she traced her index finger along the bone in his wing that had been crooked for heaven only knew how long. To Roger’s amazement, the injured appendage suddenly began to straighten. Her finger plotted a delicate course along the entire length of Percy’s wing, and by the time it reached the very tip, the bone had become like new again, right before their very eyes. Roger’s mouth hung open in astonishment.

“How did you do that?” he blurted out.

Mother Florence made no answer, only pressing that same finger she had used on Percy to her lips for silence. Percy looked stunned, but otherwise all right. She placed him on the ground with the same care that she had probably set her own children down

thousands of times, and he weaved for a brief instant before regaining his balance.

Cassius, Isaac, and Roger all watched with fascination.

"I... I feel like a teenager again," Percy finally said. He flexed the new wing, testing it, then checked the other just to be sure that one was in order, too.

"Percy, there isn't much time. Go now, help get them to the exit tree or they'll be trapped here forever. The portal will close soon – you must hurry!" She started to try and pick George up to hand him off to Cassius, but he was still slumped back like a sack of potatoes, and when she let go of his neck, his head lolled about like a rag doll. Cassius hurried over to help, scooping him up and plopping him on his shoulders with ease. At least some color was returning to his cheeks, and the swelling had all but disappeared from the bite that Henrietta had delivered earlier.

As Cassius took George up on his shoulders, a small miracle happened: George yawned. It was a big, sleepy gulp of air that brought all the humanity rushing back into him in an instant, and Roger immediately felt gladdened.

Looks like things might turn out okay after all.

"Let's make haste gentlemen, these boys have been away from their family for too long, and I want to do something that I've been waiting to try again for ages," Percy said, with a note of anxiety, as if Mother Florence's magic might wear off at any moment.

"You'll be safe on your own?" Isaac asked Mother Florence in a gruff voice that might have been affection, or possibly mild attraction.

"Yes, I imagine we'll be home by midnight at this rate. I know a little trick that should put my campsite back together nicely, and there shan't be any threats on the open plains now that Vladimir has left us. We'd do well to hurry, though. You've done

more than you can possibly know, and I'll never be able to thank you enough. Get these boys home, and carry my blessing with you," she said, beaming.

There was no more time to waste. The five of them trundled up the stairs, leaving Mother Florence and her brood behind in the Realm, perhaps forever. Hector and Maisie waved goodbye in identical fashion as Roger walked up the stairs. Then they disappeared from view, and the men were on our way.

CHAPTER 27

As they finally exited the house, the cold night air struck Roger in a cool and refreshing wave. Everything around him drew into sharp focus, a relief after the dim lighting of the house had made everything seem so blurry before. They found themselves standing in the courtyard, that strange red border now gone, and Roger's eyes traced the moonlit fence to a gap that would allow them to leave the grounds. He wondered if Cassius and Isaac would go back into the dining hall to see if they could preserve any part of their brother's body for a more fitting funeral, but I realized I already knew the answer to that question. The wheat had consumed him and Vladimir Cruor like a fast-rising tide that covered deformities in the beach sand as though there had never been anything there at all.

"This way," Cassius said.

They followed in his tread as he marched towards the gap in the fence, and the haggard forest that lay beyond it. From this distance, the trees looked like spindly matchsticks that some giant had decided to stick in the ground as a trap. Roger tried to make out George in the moonlight, bobbing along ahead of him on Cassius's shoulder,

hoping to see some other signs of life, but in the darkness he couldn't tell. That yawn had given him all the hope and confidence he needed, however, and he marched onward through the night with a sure step.

"Not much farther now," Cassius murmured. The mood was somber.

They crossed what Roger guessed was the outer edge of a forest, walking now amongst the trees.

"Cassius, what will happen to that machine now that Vladimir is dead?" Roger asked. He doubted this was an appropriate time to pose such a question, but if he didn't ask now, he'd probably never have another chance.

"The parts will rust and deteriorate with no fuel and no one to care for it," he said matter-of-factly. "You boys were Vladimir's last-ditch effort to save his kingdom, and his own hide – you do know that, don't you?"

It hadn't really occurred to him to put it in those terms, but he understood well enough what he meant.

"In fact, I imagine that same rogue plant matter we saw rising up out of old Vladimir is slowly working its way over that infernal contraption as well. Henrietta's probably turned to dust – at least, if the stories are true, she will have – and that poor fool Mandrake, who stood about a matchstick's chance in a prairie twister of getting out of this alive, will melt into the floorboards like a spilt glass of water. That about answer your questions, son?"

It did. Roger thought back on all he'd been through, and for a brief instant he felt an urge to stay. But no, George needed him, and their father surely was in total panic at their disappearance. They had to get back.

The forest floor began to incline gently upward, and at the exact moment that Roger noticed the slope, his skin suddenly felt hot and prickly, as though they had entered a low-energy force field that caused a charge to react to his skin. To his astonishment, George lifted his head, blinking, and began to look around. Roger immediately saw recognition in his eyes and knew everything he needed to know.

“George, you’re alive, we made it!” he cried, his face already spreading into a smile from ear-to-ear. Roger dashed forward to catch up with Cassius, although he knew he wouldn’t be able to put him down just then; Georgie probably wouldn’t have been able to walk under his own power at that point, anyway. Nevertheless, I walked in stride with Cassius, gazing up at my brother, who stared back, still draped loosely over the giant’s right shoulder.

“Roger ... ?” he murmured. “Did we make it?”

“We sure did! Boy, am I glad to see you.”

“Is this ... Maine?”

“Not exactly, bud. We’re a long way from home, but we’re going to be back there in just a few minutes, safe and snug in our beds where we belong.”

“I ... don’t remember what happened,” he said, his reply punctuated by another one of those great yawns that instantly filled my heart with even more cheer.

“That’s all right, it’ll come back to you. Oh, George, it was incredible! I jumped on a train and met this talking bird, he’s right back there, his name’s Percy, and we rode the rails until we realized that we’d need to go see Mother Florence to figure out how to get you back – she’s the one who helped us out back in the dungeon, although I suppose you don’t remember much of that either – and there was a huge battle with Vladimir Cruor, the guy who kidnapped you in the first place – well, he had some help,

too, but I think everything's all right now, you don't have anything left to worry about!" I paused to take a breath, and realized that little of this would mean anything to him under the present circumstances. I was just so glad that he was alive, and above all else that he had recognized me. It hadn't occurred to me at the time, but I was frightened to death that Henrietta's poison, Vladimir's brainwashing, or both had caused him to lose his memory, and perhaps his identity. The fact that Georgie was all in one piece, both physically and mentally, put the icing on the cake. We were home free.

Right at that moment, Cassius stopped walking; we were standing directly before a massive, dead, gnarl-limbed tree.

In the center, familiar as an old friend with whom you had weathered some serious trouble, I saw that glowing blue crystal light that had brought us here in the first place – and would bring us back home again.

#

"Well, step right up. This here's the easy part," Cassius said. He sounded like he wanted to get home himself – that, and sleep for about 14 hours.

"This is where we must leave you," Isaac said from behind Roger. He placed a steady hand on his shoulder. "Everything you have done here was done for good. You have saved this place from a great deal more heartache that was to come."

[There might be one creature that can. I think you're right about the brothers though, their whole lives are here.] Percy. His voice blinked on in Roger's head like a traffic signal, and he realized how much he would miss their silent conversations. The idea formed as quickly as that.

[You could come?] Roger asked in disbelief, hardly daring to believe it might be possible. He liked having him around.

[I've grown tired of this place, and I need a fresh beginning. You go through, holding George in your arms of course so he doesn't hurt himself, and I'll be in right behind you.]

[What about your first flight?] Roger asked, suddenly remembering that Mother Florence had told him he could try it out as soon as he got out into the clean night air.

[I want it to be over there,] he said.

"What are you standing around for?" Cassius asked. He was already unloading George from his shoulders, preparing to hand him over to Roger so they could make the jump together. He began to grow nervous, and a mild sweat broke out on his neck and forehead. George felt far too light for a boy of his age, and he gathered him up in his arms, just as Mother Florence had done with Percy. He spared one last backwards glance at his companion, and prayed that he would make it through in one piece. There had been enough close calls for one day.

He stepped up to the rim of the great, dead oak, turned around, and sat on the lip so that he was now facing outwards to look at Cassius, Isaac, and Percy, who were standing on top of the roots to his left. Percy looked incredibly nervous in spite of himself.

"This is it, then," he said with a sigh, not really knowing if there was anything else to say. "Goodbye."

Like a scuba diver, Roger tipped over backwards into the tree, and just like that they were gone.

#

Impossibly bright morning sunshine blasted him in the face, and everything else that he could see appeared to be awash in the most brilliant green he had ever seen. There was

nothing to compare it to – they had gone from the full dark of midnight in the Realm to the blazing colors and heat of a July morning in New England, and Roger's heart immediately pumped itself full to the brim with joy and adrenaline. They were back. He almost started to look around in frantic search of George, when he realized his brother was still clutched tightly in his arms. Everything had gone off without a hitch, and as if to confirm that conclusion, a squawky voice piped up from below.

“Well, that beats having to ride the train everywhere you go, doesn't it?”

Percy strutted about, apparently taking in the details of his new environment with a sublime enjoyment that Roger could only try to imagine.

Roger was thrilled to be back, and glad that Percy was here too, but there was something else he wanted to see.

“Take a test flight, Percy, you've been waiting forever, you said so yourself.” He stopped prancing around and looked at Roger.

“I suppose I can't put it off forever. I'm a bundle of nerves though, what if it doesn't work?” he asked, his voice quavering with trepidation.

“Then we'll take care of you, and make sure no harm comes to you. What could go wrong now? One way or the other, you're safe here with us.”

“I'd be safe in the Realm too with Vladimir out of the way, that's not what I'm worried about... but oh well, it's now or never, isn't it? Here I go.”

Without another second of hesitation, Percy went for it. Roger and George watched him spring into the air, beating his wings like his life depended on it. In seconds he caught a gust that sent him soaring about a hundred feet in the air. George, who was now standing and laughing beside Roger like nothing at all had happened, whooped and cheered as the raven twirled higher and higher, then came back around to

make a bombing run, diving straight down towards the earth before pulling up right before the boys' delighted faces at what seemed like the last possible second.

Roger joined George, laughing and yelling in what felt like the first time in weeks.

It felt great to be a kid again.

THE END