# AMBRIL’S TALE MAY DAY

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The road followed the wall around a curve and entered a part of the forest where the trees grew so tall the branches seemed to form a sort of sky all of their own. So little light reached the forest floor that few bushes grew. It had an underwater feeling.

“This be old growth forest.” Mused Ygg staring out at the scene. “Ancient grove a trees this is.”

The car coasted to a stop at a crossroads. Ahead were heavy steel gates locked and bolted. There were keep out signs, no trespassing and private property signs tacked up all along the fence which stretched out and away into the forest. The signs were in various stages of disrepair. A big, rather newish one warned of radioactivity.

“it’s the mine! Said Sully trying to see through the old gates. “I’ve always wondered about it.”

Skarn heaved himself out of the car and stretched. He stood for a few minutes checking his watch and looking expectantly down the road. There was a stream that ducked under the road and disappeared into the forest beyond the fence.

“Who’s he waiting for I wonder? Asked Sully.

“And What’s it got to do with us?” added Ambril.

Ygg released his seatbelt and scooted up to the edge of his seat. “I don’t think it be good.“ He said as he peered over the drivers seat at the dash studying it intently. “I don’t want to be waiting around to see.”

There was a heavy steel mesh attached to the top of the front seat that separated the driver from the back seat.

Outside Skarn impatiently dialed his cell phone. “Hello…yessirree we’re here, where are you?...Oh I guess they would want to keep you close now wouldn’t they…Well what is it you be wanting from them?” Skarn walked slowly away and out of earshot. “You know I can’t do that, they’re not under arrest…No… And when do I get my money.”

“Well, I be thinking…because we’re---kids---and not handcuffed we have certain advantages over your garden variety criminal.”

“Like what sort of advantages?” Asked Sully.

Ygg by this time had slid his hand between the driver’s door and the seat. “We have small hands and we’re free to use them.” He stretched and strained…until there was a soft click and the whine of an electric motor. The seat began to move forward. Another click released the back making it fold forward. “And we be much smaller than the average thug as well!” He said as he wriggled out between the seat back and the wire mesh above it.

“You coming?” he asked as he crouched down beside the open door.

Ambril and Sully wasted no time wriggling through as well. Fortunately Skarn was still partially turned away, talking into his phone. But the forest offered them no cover. Bushes were sparse; they’d be seen almost immediately.

“Look! Down here!” Cried Ygg as he jumped into the water and waded under the bridge. Ambril gasped when she jumped in, the water was cold but not deep it came up to her knees. The bridge was little more than a tunnel for the water to flow through under the road.

“Dang it! Come on now kids it’s not safe out here! Come on back!”

The kids hastily hoisted themselves up onto a ledge on one of the supports and pulled themselves out of site just in time.

Ambril could see the reflection of Skarn’s face as he peered into the tunnel. “Hey kids! It’ll be dark soon”…She held her breath as he listened and waited. He drew his head back slowly. They could here his heavy footsteps above them.

‘Now kids! You gotta know that the town’s not safe, the forest’s not safe…I’m your best chance at survival!” He shouted and then listened.

“Tarnation, darn little runts!” He said under his breath. He stamped his foot, which eerily echoed underneath.

His phone rang. “Hello?...Chief!...Well, No we got ourselves a bit of a problem, you see…Yeah well one of the kids needed to make a pit stop…yeah…So I pulled over and they all made a run for it…yeah well I tried to go after them…Where? We’ll we’re in the forest…No outside the wall…yeah…well no---we’re near the mine.“

Ambril could hear the blare of anger through the phone even where she sat.

“Easy there, Chief…I’ll find ‘em. They can’t have gone far. It’s too scary around here.” He said uneasily as he walked slowly away.

Ygg jumped back down in the water and hunching over examined the fence where the river flowed under it. He turned and whispered to Sully and Ambril. “Hey, I’m thinking we can squeeze through here…See?” He pointed to a ragged, dented hole in the fence where the water ran through. “There’s some rocks there on the other side where we can hide.”

“But it’s the mine!” Whispered Sully tersely. “There’s all kinds of wild stories about what lives in there: Weird radioactive fish, one eyed sea monsters, poisonous gas…you know really bad stuff!” She shook her head. “Look maybe we should just go with the Deputy…our parents will come and get us eventually. We stand a better chance that way.”

“You really trust Skarn do you now?” Ygg asked skeptically. “He brought us here for money and told the chief a pack of lies about how we’re the ones who made him stop.”

Ambril mulled this over a moment. “We won’t have to stay on the Mine’s property for long we could find a way out just as soon as we get away from Skarn and find a way back through the wall. We could hide out for a bit, until things cool down and then make our way back home.”

Sully looked unconvinced. Ambril sighed. “Look, maybe I should just go on alone. Because, it’s me they have a problem with. Me and my family. I was the one they saw working the magic. I was the one who ran up just as the monster was raised. It’s me they won’t trust. You’ll have less trouble without me.”

Sully and Ygg looked incredulously at her.

“So you be thinking you’ll just find a cave and live out here happily ever after? Asked Ygg and snorted.

Aren’t you forgetting what happened out here before?” Added Sully. And that was in the daytime! Can you imagine what it’s like out here at night?” Sully shuddered.

Ambril involuntarily shivered herself.

“Nope, Noooo, No---We be staying together and naught out here. We be going back inside as quick as we can…We just be needing a safe haven---“

Sully’s face lit up. “Your Gran’s house of course!---It’s perfect! NO one goes there----The gnomes would help us…I think…We could stay in the old house. It would be like camping out!”

Ygg was thoughtful a moment then nodded slowly. “It’s a right good idea…we be not trespassing seeing it’s your family’s place.”

“Come on, let’s at least get away from Skarn.” Said Ygg. He peeped out briefly. “He’s still on his cell phone. I’m thinking we can make it---ready?”

Ygg crouched down and eased out of the tunnel, grabbed the fence and pulled it apart. He swiftly threw his backpack through and then scrambled after it. He scooted quickly over to the pile of rocks and hid. Sully was next and nearly wrecked everything when she lost her footing and fell with a splash. Fortunately Skarn had decided to search around the forest on the other side of the road and didn’t hear a thing. She got up quickly and made it through. Ambril slipped out and through the fence easily but just as she thought she was safe, her backpack snagged a rusted wire vibrating the fence enough to bring one of the signs crashing down. The noise was impossible to ignore. Ambril ran flat out toward the rocky outcropping where her friends beckoned.

The three kids held their breath. Skarn seemed to know they were behind the fence but not exactly where. He banged noisily on the fence as he scanned the forest.

“You kids are crazy!” He said kicking the fence. “Trying to walk through this place! There are worse monsters than what you saw today!” He paused to hoist his pants up over his belly and sneered, “Listen, I’m not even brave enough to come after you in there!” He said trying to sound reasonable. “How about I give you until I reach the squad car to come on out of there---no hard feelings! We’ll just go on to Quarter Moon Bay, Kay?” He turned slowly still scanning the bushes and rocks and walked slowly to is car. He stood there for several minutes, waiting. And then started to get annoyed. “You kids! Don’t know help from the hole in the ground! This is your last chance! He walked quickly back to the fence breathing hard, clearly angry. He waited a little longer and then with a final bang on the fence he yelled, “That’s fine then! You guys are on your own!” Without a backward glance, Skarn walked back to his car and started up the engine. The car pulled slowly away and bumped back down the dirt road.

“I can’t believe he thinks he can just leave us here like that!” Said Sully incensed.

Ygg straightened up. “I bet he’s worked out a real good story for the Chief, he’s good at that.”  
 Ambril was looking around them now. The landscape didn’t look so scary. “Look, the hill slopes away from here and toward the wall. If we just follow the creek down, we’ll run right into it.”

“Great! Let’s go!” Said Sully.

They wasted no time picking their way down the hillside through the rocks. They followed the creek down until it widened into a small lake the color of a tropical island postcard.

“Whoops! Be careful there!” Sully had put her foot wrong and slipped on some bright green slime growing on the lake bottom.

“This is like the stuff in the pond by my Gran’s house!” Said Ambril.

The sun was warm and the water calm and gentle. Ambril sat down on a long flat rock, which slid far out into the water.

“How about some lunch.” Ambril asked and unzipping her backpack she pulled out Betula’s goodies. They smelled and tasted delicious even if everything was slightly squashed. There was a loaf of whole wheat bread with slices of cheese and chocolate chip cookies. Sully brought out some water and fruit and Ygg brought his appetite. They took off their soggy shoes and set them out to dry in the sun. Then made short work of their little feast.

Afterwards they all lay back on the warm stone and squinted up into the deep blue of the cloudless sky. The water made such a pleasant sound. Ambril closed her eyes just for a moment. The warm sun felt so good…Her sneakers would be dry in no time…

They all dozed as the sun moved gently about its business, lengthening shadows and coaxing a soft breeze to blow across the water. Ambril listened to the sounds of the forest around her. How could she ever have been afraid? The curt chipping of an annoyed squirrel, the retort of a crow and the far off scream of a hawk…

She got up and stretched and looked around her. Ygg was nowhere to be seen. She felt relaxed after her snooze but she couldn’t shake the feeling that she was being watched. But how could that be? There was no one around. The lake water was so pristine and clear that Ambril could sense the roundness of each pebble on the lake bottom. There were streaks of brilliant green slime around and through everything.

Sully snorted gently as Ambril crouched down and nudged her awake.

Sully yawned as she struggled to a sitting position. “Where’s Ygg?”

“Went exploring maybe?” Answered Ambril. I wonder what lives in this lake?

“What, like Sea monsters or something? You have those on the brain---Everyone seems to think there are weird things are living near the mines, but I haven’t seen anything other than boring same old, same old stuff. Squirrels, birds, trees, fishes…” Said Sully staring into the trees.

“And this green slime, a lot of that…”Ambril scooted over to the edge of the water. She found the crystal clear water mesmerizing. If this is what radioactivity did to the world, bring it on, she thought to herself bending closer to the glassy surface. The strands of lime green mold were there crisscrossing the rocks below.

A glassy ball drifted into view. A glassy ball with an odd black center…it looked familiar---and sort of like---Ambril leaned in closer.

The glassy ball…blinked at her.

Her scream was so loud it created ripples in the otherwise still water. She jumped three feet up and backward. Sully screamed too as together they jumped off the rock and ran flat out toward the cover of the forest trees.

But half way there Sully tugged on Ambril’s arm. “Wait! Wait! This is stupid…my feet are getting…ripped up…because our shoes…are back there.” Sully panted. “Just what exactly are we running from?” She panted.

“It’s alive!” Ambril pointed back to the placid lake. “There was an eye…staring at me…” Ambril panted. “The slime in there…has eyes…well really one eye.” Ambril nodded her head vigorously, “Sea Monster, it’s the sea monster again!”

Ygg raced up, concerned. “What be wrong now!” He asked. He had a large drippy handkerchief, probably Unk’s judging its wild pattern and color.

“Ambril was just doing what she does best---attracting monsters.” Said Sully annoyed. “It’s a sea monster just like the one she saw back at her Gran’s place.” She sat down and began picking prickles from between her toes.

A flock of crows flew out of the trees and away. Ambril realized later that if they’d been paying attention they’d have noticed how quiet and still the forest had become just then. There was another cry of a hawk.

Ambril was embarrassed.

“Are ya sure you weren’t just---dreaming this time?” Asked Ygg skeptically. “I mean, really…a Sea Monster?”

“Sorry, you’re right…I do have this---fear of sea monsters. But I did see something…at least I think I did.”

“It could have just been a piece of plastic. This is pretty close to the Mines.” Said Sully reasonably as she scrambled back to her feet and started limping back to the lake. “Come on, let’s go and see.”

Ygg followed “I found some berries, we’re lucky it’s early for them to be so ripe.”

Ambril hesitated but slowly followed.

The shadow of a large bird flashed over Sully briefly and then over Ygg . But Ambril didn’t start getting that sinking feeling until it moved over to her.

“Sully! Ygg! Run! Run! She said frantically racing away from them.

Just in time---As Sully staggered one way the hawk swept down, talons splayed, grazing the ground barely missing her. Ambril felt a cold stabbing spike of anger. She remembered the Gray Lady’s magic presence from before.

The gargantuan predator swept past them and banked off to one side.

“You shall pay!…No one takes from me!…Breaks with me!…One comes, one must goes on!” It shrieked at her in her mind.

But its size made it slow to change course. Ambril realized she had to get it away from her friends. She was the target. And she had to get to her Ashera.

“Stay here!” She yelled behind her as she broke into a run. Her bare feet pounded the grass as she watched the hawk sweep around and come for her again. Not bothering to gain height, this time it meant to gore her with its beak. As it bore down on her the wind underneath its wings flattened the grass with each stroke.

*“fLit! The Ashera, now!”* She thought at her pack. The bag unzipped instantly and flit in his tin robot suit jumped out, the Ashera balanced on one shoulder.

The bird was close enough now that Ambril could see the crazed gleam in its glassy gray eye as Ambril willed her legs to go faster.

She had one chance, just one. *“Throw it!”* She thought at fLit just as she reached the lake and jumped out, flattening herself into a shallow dive.

fLit was two steps ahead of her as usual and had already launched the Ashera like a shoulder mounted rocket straight at her. As she entered the water her hand closed around the smooth wood cylinder. She swam frantically toward the overhanging rock and wedged herself under it as best she could. From under the water she saw the head of the hawk enter the water, searching for her, twisting itself and stretching toward her when it found her. It opened its razor sharp beak wide and---missed. The force of its maneuver had driven it too far forward. It snapped at open water. But just as Ambril was beginning to think she was safe a talon lashed out, grazing her shoulder and slashing it to the bone. The water was quickly tainted pink as Ambril grabbed at her wound and emitted a gargled, high pitch scream. The pain was like a hot brand searing the bone. She panicked when she saw the amount of blood swirling around her. Her Ashera floated free, bobbing to the surface.

Shivering with pain and shock Ambril shook herself to try and regain her focus. She pushed off, kicking upward toward it and reached for it with her good hand. She almost had it in her grasp---when it happened.

Ambril felt rather than saw the talons dig into her back and chest as she was lifted from the water. She was held so tight she could barely breathe, her eyes blurred by pain.

She watched her Ashera get smaller and smaller as they ascended, looking like just another waterlogged branch. Blood dripped down her arm following the water tracks off her fingers.

The gray hawk screeched crazily at her, “Mine! Mine you will not take them!” “Look! I’ve never even met you! You can’t punish some one for something they haven’t done yet!” She yelled at her but the gray bird just screeched its high pitched cry and climbed higher into the sky.

Ambril could see her friends stop and stare helplessly as the hawk circled above the lake. Such a beautiful blue-green color, like a jewel she thought.

Her mind suddenly became very calm as she watched the colors slowly drain away from the landscape, and then a chill gray mist swirled in and around her.

It was cold, very cold with stabbing shards of icy pain. Soon all the color of the forest below her was gone---except the lake. The lake remained a brilliant blue green gem. She watched, her mind detached as the lake seemed to come alive. She thought to herself that it must be a dream as it reached up to her and plucked her out of the sky---She was falling now safely wrapped in a soft, wet green, the pain ebbing away. The lake had a warm, wet magic sense to it. It smelled like summer rain. Her fall slowed and came to a stop as she neared the lake’s surface. Just beneath it she could see a large transparent bubble floating with a black ball in the center. It blinked at her.

That snapped Ambril back to reality. She gulped in air her head finally clearing. But reality made no sense. She really was wrapped with some sort of green slime and was hovered inches above a large eye in the middle of the lake. Luckily her wound seemed so tightly bound by the slime that it was no longer bleeding.

Looking toward the shore Ambril saw her Ashera bobbing about thirty feet away. “My Ashera!” She said frustrated. How would she ever extricated herself and get to the Ashera before the hawk came back for more? Immediately, though a rolling bulge erupted near the Ashera and moved swiftly toward Ambril, the Ashera riding the top of the wave. It slowed as it neared Ambril and her Ashera floated to her.

‘Megern---megern---megern—Me Gern! You Am---you am---you am---you Ambril!” A voice hummed through her.

“Wait---did you just say you were---“

“Stay away from her! You overgrown vulture!” Shouted Sully from the shore as she threw a rock toward what appeared to be a long gray streak in the sky. The killer hawk was back and ready for more.

Ambril swiftly pointed the Ashera at the maniacal bird and focused on the bird with all her might. The ball hit the bird in the middle of the chest sending a spray of sparks in all directions stunning it. Another tentacle reached up and wrapped around the bird. With a loud squawk and a shower of feathers the bird was plunged into the lake. The water boiled, a fountain of wet feathers shot twenty feet in the air and a wing coated with bright green slime flailed wildly for a second before getting pulled back. Then it became quiet as scrawny looking bird emerged, its feathers matted and its wings pinned by bright green slime. It was so helpless it could only blink furiously at Ambril.

“Let her rip!” Screamed Sully as she clapped from the shore.

The slime creature did just that. It wound up for its throw and released the hawk into the wild blue of the sky. The hawk tumbled end over end as bits of slime rained down over the forest. It seemed to go up and up and up until it simply disappeared into the blue.

“*Bye bye---bye bye--- good bye*!” A voice sang out in Ambril’s mind..

“So--- she’s gone then?” Asked Ambril though she already knew the answer. There was no sense of the gray hawk’s spiky cold magic.

“Hey,” Yelled Ygg from shore. “Can you be getting that thing to bring you back or will it be keeping you as a pet?”

“*Um…Do you want to meet my friends*?” She thought at the eye.

The eye bobbed up and down and they began moving smoothly toward the shore.

*“So…Who are you?*” Ambril thought at the sea monster. “*Did I hear you say Gern? As in my father’s experiment?”*

“*Yeses---yeses---yes*!” Gern communicated with a soft gentle resonance, which moved through her body as it she was a musical instrument. Like with fLit, It was a voice you felt rather than heard.

“*Thanks, really thanks…I think I saw you before, in my Gran’s lake? Was that you*?”

Gern made a sound like a giggle. “*Yeses, it me*.”

It set Ambril down gently on a large slab of a rock by the shore. Ygg and Sully came running up.

“Are you all right? The Gray Hawk / Lady again! Is she gone? And who is this then---” Sully said turning to the lake apprehensively. “Your friendly neighborhood---lake monster?” Sully turned back to Ambril and examined her shoulder. “Boy that’s bad, Ambril, we’re gong to have to do something about that right now.” Sully pointed to where the blood had begun to ooze out again.

“It’s not a lake Monster, its name is Gern, like in my Dad’s last experiment.” Said Ambril smiling.

“Really? So your---Ambril!“

Ambril had gone very pale and had begun to sway. Looking at her wound had made Ambril woozy. She knew the cut was deep and wouldn’t heal without help. But aside from a few rumpled band-aids in her backpack, they had no help.

Ygg seemed to follow her thoughts. “Try using your Ashera, it be worth a try.” Ygg nodded to the waterlogged tube in Ambril’s god hand.

Ambril looked dubious as she shook it experimentally. It squelched as a few drops of water flew out. She knew healing herself was going to be tough. But she had no other choice. She felt dizzy and tired but taking a deep breath she said, “I hope it still works,” she touched her shoulder with it and closed her eyes. The usual gray fog surrounded her. She could see Ygg and Sully near her but something was different. The lake seemed to be on fire, and glowed brilliantly with magical energy, in the center of which was a large floating eye.

“I help---elp---elp---you,” Gern thought at her. A tentacle reached up and touched the Ashera. Ambril was jolted nearly off her feet by a massive infusion of energy. It was so powerful it seemed to burn her shoulder, searing the injury. Ambril was so shocked she released the Ashera and opened her eyes.

“Wow! You know lit up like a light bulb there for a second.” Said Sully, “But Hey! I think it worked! Look!”

Ambril didn’t have to look to know that something had changed for the better. The pain was gone and when she flexed her fingers everything seemed to be working. The wound itself was nothing but a crooked thread of scar tissue.

“Feeling better then?” Asked Ygg looking at her closely.

“Yeah, I think Gern had more than a little to do with that.” Said Ambril smiling at the bobbing eye watching her from below the surface. They all sat down on the warm slab of rock to discuss what had happened and what to do next.

“Well first things first, introductions all around right? Then you know the drill, explanations, theories closely followed by anxiety attacks…O.K.?” said Sully.

“This Gray Lady, What’s she after? I don’t get it!” Ygg scratched his head.

“So this is Gern, huh? Your Dad’s experiment, and Gern, stands for what?

“G.E.R.N. G-E-R-N Generation of Energy in Rhythm with Nature. I think it is.”

“But I thought he was working on some new kind of solar panel or…a wind machine?” Sully paused to peer closely at the eye bobbing in front of her. “Where are the moving parts?”

“I think that was what my Dad was talking about in his Lab book. He kept talking about something unexpected occurring, something he wasn’t prepared for.” Ambril smiled at the slime monster.

“My Dad was trying to create a bio-mass energy source that would regenerate itself. But somewhere, somehow along the way Gern developed into a being.”

“So your Dad is God then.” Said Sully skeptically.

“Not hardly, I think of it this way,” speculated Ambril. “My Dad took a life form, slime mold in this case, and…infused it with what he called ‘natural energy’ we call it magic; and it developed the capability to communicate and think like us.”

“Presto chango! Is it magic or is it science?” Said Ygg studying the slimy creature in front of them.

“I think my Dad would have preferred science but…” Ambril shrugged not really having an answer to that one.

Sully slowly tentatively extended her hand. “Hi, I’m Sully, this is Ygg.”

Gern’s eye bobbed up and down as two slime tentacles appeared and wrapped themselves around Sully’s hand and, because Ygg’s hands were both shoved in his pocket, Ygg’s leg.

Ygg groaned involuntarily. “Sorry, it be just so…slimy.”

“Shhh, you’ll hurt its feelings.” Said Ambril

With that Gern giggled. “Me Gern---megern---megern---me Gern.”

Ygg and Sully jumped in surprise.

“Um---Hi there…G---Gern.” Said Sully startled.

Ambril wasn’t sure quite where to begin. “Ah—Gern, do you remember my Dad?” She asked.

“*Yessee---he wake---wake---wake me. He teach---teach---teach---me*.” Gern’s voice resonated through the three kids.

“What happened to my Dad?”

The eye seemed to grow sad. “I live---live---live in lab with him. He study---study---worry---worry. I study---study—worry---worry.”

“What was he studying and worrying about?”

“*Magic---gic---gic containment*.”

“Moroz’s magical containment? Why?” Asked Ambril

“*Just in case---case---casey*. *Feldez want to---want to---want to but Bren Silva no want—no want---no want.”*

“Feldez wanted to what?” Put in Ygg.

“*Moroz---Moroz---Moroz.”*

“Feldez wanted Moroz? Did he want to set him free?”

“*No free---free---free---more know---know---know his power*.”

“But Ambril’s Dad had already discovered you, why did they need Moroz’s power?”

“*Me too real---real---too alive*.” Continued Gern. “*Became fre---fre---friends.”*

“So Feldez tried to find another source of power, they wanted to find out more about Moroz’s energy source at the Old Council Hall that night.”

“*Me not know---know---know what happened*.” Gern looked very sad now and seemed to quiver. “*They too far---far---far away*.” The eye blinked sadly. *Could not help---help---help.”*

“But Moroz wasn’t there at the Old Council Hall was he? Did they ever find out where his cell was?” Asked Ambril.

*“No---no---no they not.”*

Ambril sighed, another dead end. She was about to turn away when Gern continued.

“*They not know---know---know, but Gern know know---know---now*.”

Ambril stopped and starred at Gern.

“Wait did you just say…Do you know where Moroz is?” Asked Sully.

“*I search for him---him---him---after sadness. Long---long---long time. I find him.”* The eye squinted in distaste. “*Tastes bad---bad---bad. Earth poisoned---poisoned---poisoned there.”*

“Where is it? Where’s Moroz?” asked Ygg impatiently.

“*Moroz---Moroz---Moroz is in old town---old town---old town, under circle stone---stone---stone*.”

The three just stared at Gern dumbfounded. It made perfect sense of course.

“But I thought the Old Town was torn down when they built the new town.” Said Sully incredulously.

“That’s what everyone be thinking.” Said Ygg slowly. “That’s what they wanted everyone to think.”

*“It hidden---hidden---hidden in forest.”*

“Does anyone else know this?” Asked Ambril.

Gern was silent a moment. ”*Don’t know---know---know,”* Here the eye squinted. “*Tastes nasty---nasty---yuk.”*

Sully said slowly. “Look, you know where Old Town is…is there any way you can take us there or…show us the way?”

Gern blinked rapidly a few times. “*I go---go---go through earth. You not squeezy---eezy---eezy enough.”*

Ambril sighed. They seemed to be really getting somewhere but now were suddenly a million miles away.

“Great, so we now know where Moroz is, but---not really.” Said Sully looking confused.

Gern looked from one to the other bobbing slightly. “*Me want to help---elp---help.”*

Ambril smiled at the bobbing eye and shook her head. “You’ve been great Gern, really thanks a lot…But right now, unless you can get us to Old Town---“

“Or even just into town!” Said Sully looking as if a light bulb had appeared above her head. “Do you remember when we were in the old council hall what was on the wall?”

“Yeah, there be lots of roots and earth coming out of one, as if we were underground…and on the others some pictures and some sort of mural I think, a map---“

“Right, do you remember what the map was of?” Asked Sully excitedly.

Ygg snorted. “I think it be a map of the Trelawnyd Valley, just like the one in Ms. Breccia’s room, so what? There be nothing special about that.“

“Are you going to tell us Sully?” Asked Ambril.

“Well it’s a map all right, ” Sully squealed excited. “It’s a map with Old Town on it!”

“Are you sure?” Asked Ambril skeptically.

Sully looked disgusted. “It has to be, it’s dated 1787, Didn’t you notice?”

“I be too busy noticing the sticky sketch of Moroz to be perfectly frank with you.” Said Ygg, annoyed.

Sully paid no attention and continued. “The new city wasn’t built until 1849 right? So the village shown there must be Old Town!”

Ygg and Ambril just stared at her. “She’s right! It has to be Old Town.” Ambril said finally.

“So we just have to get another look at that map!” Said Sully triumphantly.

“Is that all,” said Ygg skeptically. “So we somehow find our way over a twelve foot wall, sneak through a hostile town, break into the school and then into a padlocked high security room, that be it then?”

Sully just shrugged and nodded.

“Do you have any other better ideas?” Asked Ambril.

Ygg sighed and shook his head slowly.

“Then I guess that’s what we’re going to have to do.” Ambril said resignedly.

The glassy eye bobbed furiously up and down again. “*Gern can---can---can help you.”*

Ambril shook her head ruefully. “Thanks, Gern but unless you can get us back into town I don’t think there’s---“ She gently started disentangling herself from her green friend.

“*Can---can---can I can*!”

“No, no no…We aren’t …squeezy enough, remember?” Put in Sully squishing up her face.

“*Run---run---run—river!”*

Ambril stopped unwrapping Gern’s tentacle. “What?” asked Ambril.

Gern raised a tentacle out of the water just enough to break the surface. It ran through the lake, down the stream and off in the distance Ambril suddenly saw a bright green tentacle wave back at her from the other side of the wall.

“So, how far can you stretch Gern?” Ambril asked dumbfounded.

“No stretch, me here---here and there---there.”

“You be miles long then.” Said Ygg, clearly impressed.

“So…you are, connected to the gazebo right now?” Asked Sully.

Gern just bobbed up and down again.

“Can you get us back to the gazebo somehow?”

Gern continued to bob.

“We’re not going to have to squeezy---eezy through the ground at all then?” Asked Sully hopefully.

Gern stopped for a moment clearly thinking “*No---no squeezy needed-eeded---eeded.”*

“It’ll be a slimy ride.” Sully mused and smirked as she watched Ygg squirm.

“Come on, it’ll be fun!”

Ygg still didn’t look convinced. “No offence Gern, I just be not a fan of slugs and---slime and the like.”

They stuffed their shoes into their backpacks. Ambril found that the Ashera was none the worse for wear and looked brighter and shinier than ever. She threw it in her backpack and zipped it closed. The three lined up on the rock overhang and waited as Gern pulled a large tentacle above the water just in front of them. Ambril tested it with her foot. It felt like runny Jell-O and smelled like--- summer rain, Gern’s magical scent.

“We could just jump on with both feet!” Said Sully and did just that. Her feet disappeared entirely as she slowly sank up to her knees. “Or…maybe not.” She continued pulling out one foot and then the other. There was a squelchy sound as she freed each leg and crossed them under her. “Try easing yourself on.”

Ambril slid herself gently behind Sully and felt Ygg grab her elbow tightly as he clambered on himself.

“Everyone ready?” Asked Ambril.

“As ready as we’ll ever be.” Said Ygg grimly.

Ambril noticed he did not let go of her arm.

Gern gently raised the tentacle behind Ygg and lowered it in front of Sully to get them going. And they were off. It was a bit like a water skeeter, skimming along just on top of the water, The water sprayed out in a V on either side of them. The slime was smooth and spongy at the same time making it extremely comfortable as they coasted through the late afternoon. The tree shadows made patterns on the water as they swished through.

A roar of water just ahead made Ambril stiffen. It was just like in the movies, The river ahead just seemed to disappear over a rock---They were coming to a waterfall!

“Uh oh!,” Sully yelled at Ambril. “Do you think Gern knows what gravity can do to those of us who aren’t as squeezy as it is?”

But Ambril had no time to think about this as all three of them launched into free fall. About twenty feet below there was a frothing pool of water. Praying it wasn’t filled with sharp rocks Ambril shut her eyes. In an instant she---bounced. Opening her eyes she found that Gern had made a slime trampoline for them just under the water. All three of them bounced up three or four times and then found themselves off again.

The forest was changing again as they neared the wall. The trees were not as tall here, gone was the underwater feeling. They slid by a meadow and startled some deer contentedly grazing. Ambril was beginning to really enjoy the trip until they rounded a bend and headed straight toward the Trelawnyd Wall

“Uh oh! Gern! No squeezy please! I’d really like to keep all my limbs!” Shouted Sully as they barreled down the slime slide toward the wall.

Ambril was so relieved when a tentacle reached out and effortlessly removed a massive steel grate from the wall.

“Hold your breath guys! We be going in!” Ygg yelled.

Ambril barely had enough time to do so before she was sucked under the wall and squirted into a small lake on the other side. Ambril found herself wading toward her Gran’s gazebo.

“We made it! Phew! I have to admit I was a bit worried there, right at the end and---well---almost the entire time really. But Gern did it!” Said Sully as she schlepped out beside her. A moment later a relieved looking Ygg turned up on Ambril’s other side. “Dry land, It be a site for---slimed--- eyes!” He said wiping his face.

“And a sore rump!” Said Sully limping a little. I got bumped around a bit there under the wall.”

Ambril suddenly heard a familiar tink-tink of ceramic boots, “And here you all are dripping slime all over me tidy garden!” It was Baldot who scurried down the gazebo steps grumpy as usual with Bummil in tow. “It’s gonna leave a mark! Bummil, Git it over here!” He waved them over to a pebbly area by the pond. “Give me those packs.”

Bummil turned back toward the garden and yelled. “Juggg! Here boy!”

The clank something heavier sounded as the old water jug Ygg had repaired with fixit juice stumped up and hopped over to his friends. Baldot stowed the backpacks under the gazebo steps and then nodded to Bummil.

“Close your eyes and hold your noses.” Said Bummil backing up quickly. The water jug scrunched down suddenly and then belched a stream of water over the three kids. It was like a spring rain thought Ambril as she felt the slime slough off her and run back into the pond. In a few minutes the water stopped and Ambril, though completely wet through was de-slimed.

“Ah, that was it, I could smell the slime from the end of the garden.” As Ambril brushed the water from her eyes she saw Koda walking toward them down the garden path in his hand a burlap bag.

“Miss Fern asked me to come and …supervise garden clean-up.” Koda frowned at the gnomes who in turn frowned back.

“We naught be needing another grouchy boss, we already have one.” Said Bummil nodding at Baldot.

“That be for sure.” Chimed in Boocher as he stumped up.

“Koda! We have a problem!” Said Ambril as she tried unsuccessfully to wring out her pants while still in them.

“We think some one is going to try and release Moroz from the Old Town Circle Stone.”

“Who?”

“Feldez.” Said Ambril confidently.

Koda looked at her doubtfully. “When?”

“We think as soon as he can…maybe tonight.”

“We need to get to Old---I mean the school house as soon as possible, can you help us?” Asked Ambril.

Koda looked them over thoughtfully. “Well,” he said slowly. “I take you but not like that, Rosebud no like a soggy basket.”

Ygg tried shaking himself like a dog without much affect other than annoying Sully and Ambril. “Sorry, sorry, then any chance of getting dry in a hurry?” He asked.

Bummil looked thoughtful. “We could try the Windbog.”

Baldot looked at him as if he were crazy. “Better you than me, I haven’t the staying power to listen to that.” And he stumped back up the steps.

Bummil shrugged, “It’s all in what you feed it, really.” He said motioning to the kids to follow him down the garden path. The kids, still barefoot ,padded down the path. The garden was looking infinitely better. The pathways were swept clean and smooth, the plants pruned and well tended. Ambril was impressed.

“You guys have really been working hard here.” She said feeling guilty; after all it was her family’s estate. “Um---thanks.”

“Don’t you be thanking us, we’re not doing this for the likes of you.” Said Bummil crossly. “The plants be needing a bit of attention is all.”

They continued walking briskly down one path and then another until Bummil stopped in front of a marshy area filled with reeds. The carving on the rock in front of it said ’Windbog Extremus’ The leaves were large, wrinkled and rubbery looking.

“Here we be.” There was a large pile of musty old books stacked nearby. Bummil went over and rummaged through them pulling out a large mildewed one with what looked like a bite out of one side. “Just the thing,” Bummil said looking it over. “Economic trends of the twentieth century. It went on and on for nigh on an hour about the eighteen hundreds.”

Bummil lugged the book closer to the swamp and circling around like a shot-put thrower heaved the tomb into the middle of the bog. There was a gurgling sound as the book slowly settled itself into the mud and disappeared with a burp.

“Look we’re in a real hurry to get going.” Said Sully impatiently. “Maybe we should just start walking, we’ll dry eventually.”

‘Be patient, it won’t be long.” Said Bummil watching the marshy pool.

It suddenly began to bubble and froth. The limp, rubbery leaves began slowly to inflate like balloons. There was the gentle hum of group discussion, which seemed to come from the burbling mud.

“Now you have to disagree!” Said Bummil as he plugged both his ears.

“What?” Asked Ambril

“Just say something like ‘I don’t believe you!’” Bummil replied. As he did so a large blast of hot air squirted out of one of the balloons and he was nearly blown off his feet. He grabbed a hold of a nearby vine.

“Now you try it.” He nodded encouragingly to the bog.

Ambril turned toward the bog slowly feeling silly but before she could come up with a challenging statement Sully yelled, “That’s Nonsense!”

Immediately the kids were blasted with a whoosh of wind and treated to a lengthy debate concerning the origins of the great depression. It died out a minute later. Ambril already felt less damp.

“Come on now, get insulting!” Said Bummil taking a firmer grip on the vine.

“Ridiculous! That be a lie!” Shouted Ygg.

Another blast of hot air and a strident lament concerning Reaganomics swirled around them, plus a lecture on Ygg’s grammar. Sully giggled.

“That’s Tripe! You can’t prove that!” Screamed Ambril feeling her nearly dry hair.

This went on until they all felt entirely dry.

“Well, that did the trick!” Said Sully trying unsuccessfully to comb out her hair with her fingers then giving up.

“It’s all in what you feed it.” Said Bummil with a wise nod. “Baldot chose one on the origins of fairy superiority.” He shook his head ruefully. “That be a bad afternoon for all.”

“Well thanks Bummil, let’s go find Koda!” Said Ygg the three of them raced back down the path.

They found Koda pulling weeds near the gazebo. “Rosebud waiting.” He said and handed them their backpacks. They barely had time to put on their shoes before the bicycle wheeled itself onto the grass. “I no have time to ride with you, Rosebud take you there herself.” Said Koda nodding at the bike.

Rosebud nodded pertly at the three kids

Ambril sighed and braced herself as they walked over. Rosebud didn’t look too pleased to see her. “Hi…hi there Rosebud, it’s nice to see---“

She wasn’t allowed to finish. Rosebud whipped out vines grabbed them and then jammed them none too gently inside the basket. It was a very tight fit.

“Easy there, Rosebud.” Said Koda warningly. But Rosebud did not seem to hear him.

“But, wouldn’t it look better if one of us at least pretended to ride the bike?” Asked Sully eying the large flower bud dancing over her head.

“She knows the way,” Said the big man and shrugged. He nodded farewell just as the bike jerked forward and accelerated down the path. “You be there no time!” Yelled Koda before the garden flashed past and they were suddenly in the darkening forest. The sun had set and the shadows had gained in strength flattening and obscuring the landscape. The bike skidded and bumped along mercilessly. Ambril felt like she was in a large wicker blender as they sprayed gravel around a tight curve and took some air over an old log.

“She’s off the trail!” Shouted Ygg.

“She’s off her rocker!” Sully yelled back.

“No, look! She knows what she’s doing!” Ambril nodded with difficulty to the track ahead of them. There was just one long narrow groove they were following.

‘I think---Oww!---best not to talk, I think I just bit my tongue.” Said Sully.

Ambril had no sense of where they were or how long they were in the bike basket but all of a sudden they burst through a hedge and out onto the school playground. Without ceremony Rosebud ejected them onto the grass near the front steps.

Ambril lay still for a minute just wanting to make sure there were no broken bones and then raised her head. Rosebud was just disappearing back into the forest.

“Sorry, I don’t think she’s ever going to forgive me for zapping her with the Ashera that once.” Said Ambril getting slowly to her feet.

“Too true.” Mused Ygg as he picked out a small branch from his shirt-pocket. “That much be clear.”

”You could have warned us.” Sully said walking unsteadily toward the front steps.

Ygg shook himself and stared up at the old building. “Anyone figured a way in yet?”

Ambril stopped. “Wait, I…I was thinking on our way here---“

“How did you manage that?” Cut in Sully. “I was absolutely petrified.”

“I was just thinking that maybe we should split up.” Ambril continued. “You know you guys find your way into the school, and I go try to find Feldez.” Said Ambril with a shrug. “Feldez doesn’t know we know, right? He could just be going on about his business…taking his time…what reason does he have to do this thing tonight?”

“Because he knows we’re on to him and that we’re bound to get someone to listen…eventually.” Said Sully.

“He thinks we’re out of the way, safely in the care of some social worker in Quarter Moon Bay.” Ambril reasoned. “He also thinks that after what happened today that no one is going to take our rants and ravings seriously, at least not right away.”

“So you think he’s just finishing up dinner and about to switch on the TV, be that it?” Asked Ygg incredulously. “But what if’n it be different? What if he’s making his way right now to Old Town?”

“That’s why you guys need to at least find out where Old Town is---“

“And you go off and face Feldez alone?” Asked Sully her hands on her hips. “No way.”

“That be too dangerous.” Put in Ygg. “You can’t be going alone.”

Ambril sighed. “Look I have to go warn my family.” She pleaded. “My Mom must be a mess by now…and my brother…is probably this minute packing up his stuff to leave for good.” Ambril tried to keep her voice steady. “I have to go and at least explain---“

“Then we’ll all go, we’ll stay together,” cut in Sully resolutely. “Look Ygg and I may not be the best body guards but we’re here, right Ygg?”

Ygg was silent a moment.

“We know everything there is to know about what’s been going on and we’re still here… we’re not letting you go all by yourself…Ygg? You’re supposed to back me up here.” Said Sully getting annoyed.

Ygg remained thoughtful for a moment before he said slowly “You know, there be something you aren’t telling us.” He shifted uneasily. “Or some one you be not telling us about.” He nodded to Ambril’s backpack. ‘I’m right good at spotting magical energies, well most of the time. I be thinking this long while that the bright spot of it in your backpack be the Ashera…but…back at the lake…I noticed that it not be right.” He continued watching Ambril closely. “There were two there. One in the lake and another still in your pack.”

Ambril stiffened and felt suddenly torn between her wanting to protect fLit and wanting to finally be able to tell her friends this last secret. She had hated keeping it. She stood there a moment fighting a silent war within herself when suddenly she heard her backpack unzip and fLit hovered just off her left shoulder.

A swift swipe of harp strings and then, “*you’re not as slow as some of your kin, I have observed.*” fLit thought at them all.

Sully’s face was a classic picture of surprise, her mouth formed a perfect ‘O’. Ygg blanched at the sudden intrusion into his brain and then immediately took on the relaxed but ready position of a warrior.

“Ambril? What the heck…I…I don’t understand…Who’s this?” Sully stammered utterly bewildered.

Ambril heaved a huge sigh of relief. “I’m sorry, really sorry guys but fLit and I had an agreement.” Ambril’s words erupted in a jumble. “It was to protect the Ledrith Glain, that’s been fLit’s job---“

“fLit? But that not be a fairy name.” said Ygg.

“No, that’s your robot’s name…you mean he’s been inside the robot this entire time?” Asked Sully incredulously.

“Not the entire time…but---“ Ambril shrugged sheepishly.

“*I commanded Ambril to keep my identity secret*.” Said fLit folding his arms and looking superior. “*It was necessary to be as invisible as possible. The less you human and earth-kind knew of me, the better*.”

“We’d a kept your silly secret if’n it was right and true, even for fairy-kind such as you.” Muttered Ygg his eyes narrowing.

“How are you doing that?” Asked Sully. “You and Gern, you know that whole being in my head talking without words…thing?”

fLit looked at her. “*You all appear to be receptive to magic and its use*.” Here he shrugged. “*Not as superior as a fairy but still*…”

Ygg snorted. “So predictable, thinking you be better than all of us…” He was now glowering at the arrogant fairy.

“O.K. yeah, he’s insufferably arrogant and just as grumpy as a gnome.” Ambril said as she waved her hands between them to intervene. “I’ve gotten used to it, sort of---but we need him now right? How about fLit and I go to my house to find Feldez…and you two take a look at that map?” Asked Ambril abruptly changing the subject.

Ygg took a step back as if he needed more space to see if the fairy could be trusted.

Sully looked at Ambril thoughtfully. “So you think this little guy will be enough back-up?” She asked skeptically. “I mean I know he’s supposed to have a lot of magical fire-power and everything but fairies don’t have much of a reputation for loyalty to other magical beings other than their own kind.”

“They be thinking they be above everyone.” Said Ygg flatly.

“Come on Ygg! Stop insulting him, you hardly know him!” Said Ambril reproachfully. “And the answer is yes I do trust him, he saved my life once…though it might have been the Ledrith Glain he was saving really…but still…”

Surprisingly Sully said, “O.K.”

Ygg looked at her stunned, “O.K.?”

“Yeah, Ambril thinks he’s O.K., so I guess I do too.”

Ygg looked at Ambril and then at the fairy. “It be your funeral if’n anything happens to our friend on your watch, you be hearing me?” Ygg said belligerently.

fLit snorted but said nothing.

Ambril sighed, relieved. “Right, then…I’m off to warn my family. If Feldez is there, I’ll send fLit to tell you, how’s that? If he isn’t there we’ll come right back here.”

“*Great, I’m your little errand boy now*?” said fLit incensed.

“Look you signed on to help, and that would really help…as a favor?”

fLit rolled his eyes at her and dropped his head resignedly.

Ambril shouldered her backpack again. “O.K., good luck, by the way.” Said Ambril as she turned toward Circle Park and her bike. There was no response but as Ambril got on her bike she looked back and saw they were gone.

“*They went around back talking about a broken window near the gym.*” A xylophone chord or two sounded in her head.

“*They just need some time to get used to you. I think it felt like you were spying on them*.” Thought Ambril back at him.

“*Why would anyone spy on them? They’re so boring,*” said fLit genuinely curious.

“*Forget it, just forget it.*” Thought Ambril at him as she rode along the darkened streets and on up the hill to her house. As she coasted into the driveway she thought about it was just a house, not her home.

“Is that her?”

“Ambril! Where’d you come from? We thought you were still in Quarter Moon Bay?”

It was Betula and Sid who came out from the shadows and stood in the warm light shining through the kitchen windows.

“What, did you break out of jail, huh?” Red hopped excitedly next to Betula.

“Pipe down there, Red, we have some serious business here!” Said Betula.

“We were waiting for Feldez…its Aster, she’s in a bad way.” Croaked Sid. In his arms he cradled a small form wrapped in a blanket. Ambril peered in between the folds and saw a large fat squirrel with a white ruff around its neck. It groaned a little as the light seemed to hurt her eyes.

“Maybe Ambril can help, Sid. She helped Red out.” Exclaimed Betula

“You’re here for Feldez’s help? Why?” Asked Ambril.

“Feldez knows more about dark magic than anyone in town.”

“And that’s important because…” Asked Ambril still mystified. But then suddenly remembered the squirrel she had released from the Morte Cell. And said “Oooohh…I see,” Or at least she thought she did. Aster is no ordinary squirrel. “She’s an…Animalfia?”

Betula nodded.

“So’s Sid of course.” Added Red.

“Oh right…I think I remember seeing you and …um…Aster before.” Thinking about Chao Feng talking to a crow and a squirrel in front of his shop.

Sid’s nod was curt. “We haven’t much time…will you help her?” He pleaded.

“I don’t know if I can do much of anything.” Ambril looked at the small inert fuzzy form, but then thought about the kind of help they’d get from Feldez.

“So Feldez isn’t here?” She asked.

“Not yet, he’s down at the Library with Dr. Afallen.” Said Sid.

“Trying to figure out how to undo this.” Put in Red.

Ambril wondered if that was what he was really doing and sighed. “O.K., I can’t promise anything but I’ll try.”

Ambril slid her Ashera out from her pack. It shone in the dim light, the etched lines vibrating slightly in sync with some ancient rhythm of life.

There was a sharp intact of breath all around. “Glory be, that sure is pretty,” Whispered Betula. “Child, I believe you’ve done some growing today.”

Ambril lost no time and taking the small furry animal in her arms she went inside.

She gasped as the being was almost entirely encased in thick threads of curse. And they seemed to be growing, using the animal’s energy it seemed to be binding it ever more closely.

“*I was afraid of this. The curse of the Dullaith is fast-acting. She’s too far-gone, Ambril…You should just let her go…Even if you are able to bring her back to life, and she may not heal properly. She’ll be…damaged*.” He said sadly.

Ambril looked at the small creature dying in front of their eyes and thought of the anxious faces of her friends who even now surrounded her.

*“You know it may not be just her life we let go if we don’t try.”*

The fairy turned and looked at her dismissively. “*You and your thoughtfulness. Do you think that the power of your Ledrith Glain is limitless? Look at it*!” He was angry.

Ambril looked down and was surprised to see that the Ledrith Glain was dimmer.

“*It isn’t permanent…yet…the Ledrith Glain has the power to refuel itself by tapping into the emotional strength of those around it*.” He continued. “*The most powerful emotion, of course is love*.” He added simply.

“*Well then, there seems to be a lot of that around at the moment, let’s get started.”* Ambril thought at the fairy.

“The fairy folded his arms in protest. “*I can’t stop you but I will warn you, there may be a point where you may have to use your own life energy to fully heal her.”*

“*You mean it will…start to draw off my own energy. Can it---kill me*?”

“*Not kill, more like weaken. But if you continue weakening yourself you will eventually have to choose between your friend’s life and your own*.”

Then the fairy sniffed and turned away. “*I won’t wish you good luck as I don’t approve, I just hope you have the good sense to know when you must stop*.”

And then there was silence. fLit had left her on her own. Resolutely she pointed the Ashera at the furry creature in her arms and felt the pulse of magical energy roar down her arm and focus itself like a laser. Slowly the black threads began to thin and fade. As she worked Ambril began to notice something about the energy beam. It seemed to be radiating colored light. A subtle shade of red brought a whiff of red cherry candy, the smell of fresh baked bread and a soft yellow glow, the nutty scent of roasted nuts and a warm brown glow seemed to be gaining in flavor and color and around and above it all was a warm green scent of the forest. She wondered who that was.

“*That’s you stupid*.” A clang of wind chimes followed the fairy’s retort. “*Stay focused.*”

Ambril jumped a bit startled and then bent to her task. The threads of curse were nearly gone now. She looked down at the Ledrith Glain and saw that it was beginning to flicker.

When it darkened she could feel a draw on her own heart. She looked again at the still form and for the first time could see the long threads connecting the furry animal with shadows below.

She would have to cut them clean and for that she knew she needed more energy. She looked around furiously for another source…and found it close at hand.

There were bright spots of energy glowing all around her. She could see Betula, Sid and Red clearly but realized that they couldn’t see her at all in the fog. Maybe they were listening though.

“*I need to borrow some of your energy, O.K.?”* She thought at them.

There was no response but after a moment Ambril could sort of feel a positive answer. She would have to take that as a yes. Ambril felt a sudden drag on her heart again and looking down saw the Ledrith Glain was almost completely depleted. She hastily gathered energy from those around her and using the Ashera like a laser sword cut the black curse threads from under the furry animal.

The small creature in her arms arched its back as if electrocuted and fell back, inert in her arms. For a moment Ambril was afraid, so afraid that the shock of cutting the curse threads had been too much but then she could make out the squirrel’s gentle and rhythmic breathing. The squirrel was---sleeping. She smiled as she opened her eyes.

In the low light of the night Ambril could just barely make out the happy, though exhausted smiles all around her.

“You did it child, you did it!” Betula squeezed her shoulder hard.

“I had to take energy from you all, did you feel it? I tried to warn you.”

Sid and the others nodded and smiled.

“You did well kid. Here, I’ll take it from here.” Sid hugged the squirrel close. “She needs rest now but tell your Mom she’ll be back to work before too long.”

“What, Aster works for my Mom?” Ambril protested.

Sid gave her a narrow glance. “Well sure she does, she’s your housekeeper.”

Ambril was stunned. “That’s Mrs. Sweetgum?” She thought about the big teeth and white scarf she always wore around her neck. Her fondness for hazelnut scones and almond tarts---of course! But suddenly Ambril felt light headed. She needed some recharging; it was time for some food and fast.

The beak nosed thin man looked at her carefully. “Ambril, I thank you.” He said his bright black eyes twinkled a little as he turned toward the road. “Now you go and get some grub.” Suddenly the high beams of a car swept over him. It was Feldez’s car. He emerged and walked rapidly toward them. As he did so, a swirl of emergency lights lit up the driveway as an ambulance pulled in behind him.

“I’ve brought help with me.” He beckoned to Sid.

“No worries, Ambril got it done.” Said Betula smiling.

Feldez was shocked, he peered at the tiny squirrel. “Ambril? Did this?”

Betula heaved a heavy sigh. “I’d say you two need to do some talking and soon. You both have your signals crossed big time.”

Feldez was listening to the Animalfia’s chest and feeling her limbs. “She appears to be much improved…definitely on the mend.”

His head came up and he looked hard at Ambril. Ambril couldn’t tell if it was fear or anger behind that look.

“But she still has a long way to go. I’d like to see her in the hospital under a nurses care for a few days.” Finished Feldez. “Why don’t we get her in the ambulance and---“

“Hold on, let’s try this---“ interjected Betula. “Why don’t we, meaning Sid and I take Aster down in the ambulance? I’m thinking Sid and I can help her change over before we get there. And you two---“ she pointed at Feldez and Ambril. “Start talking to each other for a change,” Betula walked over to Sid and patted his arm. “Ready?”

“Yep.” He said simply and together they walked toward the waiting ambulance.

The ambulance doors slammed shut and the van pulled out and headed back down the hill. Feldez turned toward Ambril and waved her ahead of him toward the house. But Ambril stopped in front of him, stubbornly refusing. Her face screwed up in anger and disgust. “I thought you’d be there already, getting ready.”

“As usual I haven’t the faintest idea what you are talking about. I suggest we go inside and discuss this.” His voice was crisp as he again offered her the stairs.

Ambril shook her head. “You first.” She didn’t want to turn her back on him.

Feldez rolled his eyes but walked briskly into the house.

As Ambril pulled the door closed behind her she heard a strange plunk-plunk sound overhead she turned toward the stair just in time to see a suitcase roll down the last few steps and crash into a large pile of bags and boxes at the bottom of the stairs.

“There, that’s most of it.” Ambril’s mother came into view carrying a large satchel stuffed with clothes, hats and…a set of crochet mallets.

Behind her came Zane with a couple of suitcases.

Her mother gasped when she saw Ambril. “Honey! You’re O.K.! I …We were so worried about you! We were just going to grab a few things and pick you up on the way out of town!” Her mother raced over engulfing her in a hug.

Ambril could tell she had been crying. Her mother’s body shivered a little before she released her daughter. “I could not believe the things those people were saying about you! These people who I…I grew up with, whom I’m related to…I mean really, is this Salem? Do we burn witches here?” Her mother wiped her eyes. “They---they accused you of raising that Dullaith to take revenge on the town for your Dad’s death…As if you would ever do that…stupid, stupid people!” She released her daughter to look her full in the face accusingly.

“I don’t know just what you were doing out there, scaring everyone half to death…the Chief said it was some sort of a practical joke that you and your friends staged.” She paused to shake her daughter gently. “My you kids are good with special effects aren’t you…is that how you got it to look so real?”

Here she took her daughter’s hand and half dragged her over to the stairs. “Anyway, the Chief seemed to have gotten the town calmed down…for now.” Her mother’s voice was brittle. “Come on, we have a new plan…this family has had enough of this town…for good…we’re going to get out of here and then Feldez will join us later---“

Ambril slowed to a stop, “Mom, wait---I’m sorry…but you have to hear the truth.” Began Ambril and wriggled free of her mother’s grasp. She slowly pulled out her Ashera and held it up for all to see. “Do you remember this?”

“That’s the Derwyn Ashera. That is what I’ve been looking for!” Said Feldez walking quickly over to Ambril and holding out his hand. “So that’s what you’ve been using…It’s too powerful for a child.” He said impatiently nodding to the Ashera. “Give it to me now and I’ll take care of everything.”

“Not on your life! It’s not yours, you’re not a Derwyn!” She pulled away from him and approached her mother again. “Do you remember how it hit me on the head when it fell out of the cupboard?”

Ambril’s mother stared at it and slowly began to nod. “Yes the day we left San Francisco, I remember.”

“Well that’s when it chose me I guess. Gran had it last and then it was passed to me.”

Feldez lowered his hand, his eyes narrowed as he watched her closely.

“This is what I used on the Dullaith Mom…That Dullaith was real, it wasn’t a prank.” Come on you know it was, you could feel it couldn’t you?”

Her mother chose to ignore the last part. “You?” Her mother was aghast. ‘You did that, in front of the whole town? Are you crazy? Knowing what happened to your father? Knowing what your father did?” Her voice stretched and tightened into a high pitched screech. “Did you want everyone to see your fearsome magical powers? Were you even thinking just a little about how this would affect the rest of your family?”

She looked at Zane. “You were right…the villagers will never accept magic, at least not as they are now, scared and in the dark…of course they’re going to overreact.”

Zane looked uncomfortable but just shrugged.

“And it wasn’t like that, Mom, we weren’t showing off. We had to keep that beast from hurting anyone.”

“We? You mean you and your friends?” Ambril’s mother looked horrified. “Oh no, we definitely are leaving tonight, that’s for sure…Are they all magic wielders too?”

“No, well yes but…we’re just beginners really.” Said Ambril. “And we had some help. There are these gnomes and sugar ani---“

“I don’t want to hear another word!” Ambril’s mother strode over to her daughter and put out her hand. “I want that Ashera! Right now! You are too young for this! I’m a Derwyn AND I’m your mother!”

Ambril pulled away. ‘No, I…I can’t do that, not yet…I’m not…done.” Ambril sighed, she didn’t want to fight with her mother. It was just as Zane had predicted. Her mother upset, her family ostracized and then there was Feldez. “I’m sorry Mom, I really am but this is bigger than our family.”

Her mother went rigid, her face white with a little pink spot on each her cheeks. “You sound just like your father! Always going on about doing the right thing, for everyone but himself!” She cried. “But I’m done with Magic, I'm done with saving this stupid, stupid town! If he hadn’t tried to make a better world for them all…he’d…he’d still be here with us!” Her mother suddenly crumpled and fell back sobbing on the sofa.

Her heart broke as she watched her mother’s shoulders heave. She couldn’t stand it any more. She turned on Feldez. “This is your fault! Today you put the entire town, including my Mom at risk! All for a little fame and glory? Is that it?”

Feldez stood up, his face ashen. “Are you accusing me of raising that Dullaith? Is that what this is about?”

“You are the one with the Dullaith head on your computer! You were there that night the first Dullaith was raised in the forest and at the library when the Dorcha Blade was stolen! Of course it’s you!” Screamed Ambril. “You had access to the janitor’s closet and the high security area in the Archives!” She snorted derisively.

Feldez’s voice was barely in control. “Give me that Ashera now!” He lunged for it but as his hands closed around it a bolt of energy shot through it. He shot across the room and hit the wall. He slumped to the floor staring at her dazedly.

The room was shockingly silent for a moment. Ambril stared dumbly first at Feldez and then at her Ashera. Then Feldez spoke quietly, “so it is true, the Ashera has chosen.” His face suddenly softened as he struggled to his feet.

“It was you in the forest that first night.” He continued flexing his hands and rubbing his arms as if it were numb.

Ambril nodded watching him warily. He put his hands out palms up. “I see now, I have my answer.” He smiled ruefully. “That was some wallop. How did you manage that?” He asked.

Ambril shrugged noncommittally not wanting him to know she had no idea. “You need to tell my mother what you’ve been up to.” She said. “How you’ve been raising Dullaiths and trying to free Moroz---“

Feldez’s laughter startled her. It was so…natural. And something else, he looked more relaxed than she had ever seen him

“I have not been the one raising Dullaiths or trying to free Moroz.”

“But you have! You were trying before…my Dad said in his lab book---“

Feldez held up his hands in defeat. He looked honestly relieved. ”But I do owe you an explanation. This time---the truth---for once.” He smiled sadly at Ambril’s Mom still huddled on the sofa. “It all started with a bet---a cup of coffee I think it was, between friends and rivals. Bren and I were both interested in alternative energy then, searching for the safest, most efficient means of providing energy to the world…or at least our little part of it.” He went on.

“Bren won, of course…he was a brilliant man, your father, when he produced G.E.R.N.” Feldez shook his head clearly impressed. “An incredible achievement really and one the world will never know about.” He paused lost in a swirl of memories then continued resolutely. “I continued my experiments when it became obvious that Gern could not be asked to perform as Bren had hoped.

I was interested in another form of self-generative energy sources and had found some half finished formulas among the writings of Moroz, a powerful figure in Trelawnyd’s history.” He bent his head.

“Most of Moroz’s work had been forgotten. But there was a certain mysterious appeal…” his voice trailed off and he paused again to stare out the window before recovering himself. “Moroz was intrigued with the concept of robotic life forms. As I was only interested in a small part of his work, that of the robot’s energy source, I thought we could easily control it…But---as Ambril has guessed… it didn’t go that way.”

Feldez sighed heavily and his shoulders drooped. Ambril could see the last vestiges of his masquerade slip off him.

“Bren tried to talk me out of it…several times… But I wouldn’t listen---I was so certain---so right---I couldn’t---wouldn’t see the dangers.” His voice was anguished and filled with guilt. “We met at the Old Council Chamber one night.” Feldez smiled mirthlessly remembering.

“Bren came armed with containment workings which I scoffed at.” Feldez shifted his weight from one foot to the other. “I began the workings before he had the protective wards in place. Halfway through I could see something happening, something meaningful…and then…by mistake… the tiniest mistake…I raised a Dullaith.”

Ambril’s mother half rose form the sofa, shock making her jaw slack.

“I’m so sorry Tylia.” Feldez looked sorrowfully at Ambril’s mother as she sat back down on the sofa and gathered herself in to as small a space as possible.

“We both realized the danger immediately and worked to contain the beast. Bren had almost everything in place when the Dullaith…surprised us. It charged at Bren and quickly overpowered him.” Feldez raised a hand to half cover his face. “I frantically finished the workings…but it was too late, Bren was gone.” Feldez hung his head his entire body seemed bowed by the force of the memory.

“I…sustained some injuries as well. They were extensive enough to make me lose consciousness. Dr. Afallen worked tirelessly on me and was eventually able to eradicate the curse but I was unconscious for several weeks.” Feldez’s hands shook as he straightened his collar.

“This is the part I am least proud of.” He swallowed hard before continuing. “When I finally came around, I discovered I had been made a hero. They told me that rumors were flying all around town and people were starting to get ugly. So the authorities decided to put forth some sort of explanation, they decided that Bren, who had been very secretive regarding Gern, had raised the Dullaith and lost control of it and that I had stepped in and taken it down.”

Feldez started pacing in front of the sofa. Ambril’s mother’s eyes never left his face her expression was unreadable.

“They told me it would do great harm to the community if I refuted their story. Bren was dead and you, Tylia and your family had left town.” Feldez stopped pacing and stared pleadingly at Tylia. “I argued and argued with them but I was weak and…well…they got their way.”

“So we let matters rest. People did seem to forget about it. But I couldn’t. So when I ran into you in San Francisco, I thought that here was my chance to make it right. I could tell that all of you had been suffering as much as I had---I thought that we could try and…heal each other and that one day we could come forward and clear Bren’s name…that the real story would come out, the truth.”

His face tightened with that familiar stress and fear again. “But it wasn’t quite the stuff of fairy tales was it.” He continued.

“Then the May Day threats began. Some of Moroz’s writings went missing from the library archives and a couple of my old lab books were stolen from my home office.”

Zane came and sat down next to his mother and pulled a little green book from his pocket.

“They began to make demands---for massive amounts of Glain…it was impossible. We tried reasoning with them, making contact with them---“

“In the janitor’s closet?” Interrupted Ambril.

Feldez nodded. “But they never showed. They just increased their demands.

“That first night when you arrived---I had no idea a Dullaith had been raised until I sensed it around your car.” He stared at Ambril uncomprehendingly. “Or that it was you that we had to thank for taking it down.”

He nodded to her Ashera. “You had that to help you of course---but still…it was quite a feat for one so young.” He waited hopefully for Ambril to elaborate but she held back---still hesitant to trust him.

“We found the circle workings behind the Tupelo’s shack and realized we were up against formidable opponents. We stepped up security at the library---“

“Which was no help at all right? They got what they wanted.” Put in Zane derisively.

“Still, we tried. We also stepped up security for May Day and thought we had it covered. But we got a little too comfortable at the end.”

Feldez let out a long sigh of relief. “You know it feels good to talk about this, finally.”

Ambril was taken off guard by his candor. She wasn’t sure if she believed everything he had said but parts of it certainly rang true. She looked down at the Ashera still in her hand and suddenly remembered her friends. Feldez’s confession had put their mission right out of her mind. It came rushing back now. So…If it wasn’t been Feldez pulling the strings behind the curtain…Who was it?”

“So do you know who’s behind all of this?” She asked.

Feldez raised his head and looked vacantly past her before he shook his head sadly. “What we do know is this: It’s someone who has time on their hands, an interest in research, science and experiments. Also some one who has access to the school.”

“Like a teacher?” Asked Zane.

“Or just some one who works there…it could even be a student though that would be a long shot. It would have to be a really exceptional student.”

“So…they want to free Moroz…how come?” Asked Zane.

Feldez shrugged. “Could be any reason really but probably a desire for real power. Moroz was a formidable magic-wielder. Some one might assume that freeing him would make him feel beholden to them enough to perform tasks for them---“

“Like a genie in a bottle kind of thing? Three wishes?” Asked Ambril.

Feldez shrugged again. “It’s just speculation, but something tells me they aren’t interested in clean, renewable energy as we were.” His smile was lob-sided. “They no doubt have more nefarious schemes in mind.”

Feldez was silent for a moment. It took a while for Ambril to process all of what Feldez had just told them. She had to admit, his explanation made sense She watched him out of the corner of her eye. He did look …more human.

Feldez smiled wryly at her. “For a while there I thought that you might be involved in this…you always seemed to be there at the right time …asking all the wrong questions.” Feldez’s smile thinned. “I thought you were angry at how your father had been treated.”

“Some of the villagers thought that too apparently,” mused Ambril. What a waste of time it had been, she suspecting Feldez and Feldez suspecting her…if they had just talked about it earlier they’d have been a lot farther along.

The phone rang and with it reality broke over them. Feldez stiffened, probably out of habit and picked up the phone. “Yes? Oh, she isn’t stable yet? What a heart condition?” He looked quickly at his watch. ‘I’ll be right down.”

Feldez got up swiftly from the sofa and buttoned his suit coat. “Listen, we have much more to discuss. I will make you this promise that I will make give a full and honest account of Bren’s death to the press,” he looked at them Ambril and Zane briefly but lingered on Tylia. “I do hope that we might be able to…somehow continue building a family together…I really do.” He said softly.

Ambril’s Mom looked so fragile and small tucked up in a corner of the sofa. Her eyes were big with anxiety and worry as she looked up at Feldez.

“So…what about us then, Feldez?” She asked softly. “Was it all a lie? You know, that we…loved each other?” Her voce broke over the last sentence.

Feldez stood there looking at his fiancé for a long time. “I’m …I’m not sure Tylia…I wanted to make things right…and you know I do care for you…I am also prepared to go through with it all, truly…honestly. My offer…still stands.”

Ambril’s mother’s eyes filled with tears briefly. Her shoulders rounded as she swiftly wiped her eyes. But slowly they squared. Her head came up and her eyes cleared. No---no I don’t’ think that would be wise, for you to---go through with it.” She said resolutely. “You don’t love me---and strangely---it’s clear now---I thought I loved you but I think I just needed you.” She took a deep breath as she slowly disentangled herself and rose from the sofa. She went to Feldez and kissed him on the cheek. “I guess we both were thinking the wrong things, weren’t we.” She said as she gave him a stiff hug.

The air felt thick with the tattered remains of their plans and future. Everything forward was fuzzy but the past was clear---finally Ambril took a deep breath, she knew the truth about her father and soon everyone else would too.

The phone jarred them out of the reveries again. Feldez picked it up and said smoothly. “I’m on my way, yes I’m leaving right now.” He put the phone down and turned toward the door. “Please don’t make any hasty decisions. Let’s think this through together tomorrow when we’ve all gotten a good night’s rest---O.K.?” He stood in the doorway and looked pleadingly at Ambril’s mother.

Ambril’s mother just shrugged noncommittally.

“Well, I’ll be back as soon as I can.” He nodded to them and smiled. Ambril was shocked again at how different he was.

The door clicked shut and they were alone. Ambril stood looked at the giant mound of suitcases and bags in the middle of the floor.

“Well, I think Feldez is right about one thing, we all need a good night’s rest.” Said Ambril’s Mom as she yawned and stretched. Ambril could see that the day had certainly taken its toll on her mother, she looked bent and tired as she padded slowly over to the stairs. “Upstairs to bed everyone, on the double.”

“Mom I really need to---“

“We’re still going to have to leave this place.” Zane blurted out.

Ambril’s mother looked insulted. “What? You heard Feldez, he’s going to tell the truth about your father and---“

“And what will this town do with that? You know how this town reacts to anything to do with magic---they’re scared of it, probably too close to it seeing as many of them have magical tendencies they’ve suppressed…”

Zane fumbled with the little green lab book he still had in his hand. “Dad even had trouble with it, he called it “natural energy.” He scoffed. “They’ll treat us like social misfits if we stay---and Feldez too. Because whoever is doing this has figured out that we’re the perfect scapegoats. They’ll do whatever they want and find a way to make us look responsible.” He gave Ambril a hard stare. “And then this town will go wild, there’s no telling what sort of exorcism they’ll turn to…they’ll want to hurt us all.” He smacked the little book with the back of his hand. “No, it’s better if we just leave now…tonight.”

Ambril let this sink into her system for a bit. She could see his point of view, after what she had gone through that day…the look of frenzied fear and hatred on the townspeople’s faces…but still, there was a flaw in his logic.

“Zane, my friends are here, your friends are here.” She looked at her Mom, “And for the first time in a long time, our family can hold its head up again.” She shook her head emphatically. “Your thinking is a little too narrow. Given time the town will forget again.” Ambril folded her arms. “I don’t expect to be loved by everyone here, just the ones who mean something to me---you, Mom, Ygg, Sully Betula and maybe a few others---I know they won’t turn their backs on me---“

Zane snorted, “Yeah, but everyone in town will turn from them!” He pointed his finger accusingly at Ambril. “You’ll ruin their lives---make them endure hundreds of slights, those little conversations they have everyday with the postman, the kids around the block? Gone, they’ll be stared at and gossiped about, maybe accused of things they didn’t do. And it’ll all be your fault because they’re friends with YOU.” He turned his back on her and folded his arms.

But Ambril wasn’t giving up. “That may be true now---but…if we can find out who’s behind this and---stop them---maybe they’ll see that there are two sides to magic and that we’re on their side.”

But Zane just looked disgusted. “You aren’t getting it! These people see magic, ALL magic as something that shouldn’t exist. They don’t understand it and don’t want to. Look, even Dad felt the need to disguise it, sugar coat it to make it more acceptable. Even in his own lab book!” He blew his breath out in one long burst. “People do weird things when they’re scared, crazy things… They’ll substitute hideous lies for improbable truths, anything to make things appear normal.” Zane took his sister’s shoulders and shook her once. “Don’t you get it? We have to get out of here!”

Ambril’s mother cleared her throat. She had been silent while they had been arguing. Both Ambril and Zane looked around. There was something new in the set of her shoulders and the way she held her head. “I see now, how foolish I have been. I see that now.”

“To come back here? No Mom how could you know.” Said Zane.

“No Zane, No---not to come back---but to pack up and leave again.” Her eyes were clear as she patted her son’s shoulders. “Look at what I’ve done to you…I’m…I’m ashamed.” She wiped her eyes quickly. “I’ve taught you how to slide around your problems. To ignore them as long as you can and, when the elephants in the room grow too large, to just leave.” She nodded her head. “But now I get it…all those elephants, those problems, they never go away really, they just follow you around…Yep, we have to stay, for ourselves, for each other. We have to stay and deal with this---“ She reached out and squeezed Ambril’s shoulder. “We’re going to fight them.”

“Fight them? With what?” Asked Zane incredulously.

‘With the truth of course, not just the truth about Dad but our truth---the little ones about who we are. We’re good people just like them, we’re good neighbors, great friends, fellow shoe shoppers, we’ll live our lives with them.” She smiled to herself. “They won’t believe it at first, they’ll be suspicious and skeptical, it will take time certainly to show them that though we’re a little bit different, we’re also a lot the same.”

Zane looked a little bit scared of this new side to his mother. “But---“

“No buts, we’re staying!”

“But we can’t stay here in this house.” Said Ambril.

“Well you are right about that, we’ll---well---I’ll think of something, for now maybe we can camp out at Betula’s for awhile.” She reached out and pulled her son and daughter to her. “No matter what, we’ll figure this out---together, we’re a family.”

It was a brief hug a second or two later Zane pushed himself away, his face red.

“I’ve still a few more boxes,” he said moving awkwardly toward the stairs.

“Well, I think it can wait until morning, don’t you?” Said Ambril’s Mom.

Zane slowed a moment and then shrugged. “I guess.”

“Mom, I just need to go down to school and---“

“Not on your life! You’re not leaving my sight!” Interrupted Ambril’s Mom. She took a firm grip on the back of Ambril’s shirt and propelled her upstairs.

“So we’re leaving tomorrow morning right?” Asked Zane.

“We’re leaving this house to find a home.” Answered Ambril’s Mom. She watched both her and Zane walk to their rooms. “I’m suddenly so tired…but it’s a good tired.” She yawned. “Let’s get some sleep and work out our next move tomorrow over breakfast.”

Just before Ambril’s door closed her mother added. “But just to be clear, I’m keeping half an eye open so don’t even think about sneaking out, Ambril.” She said warningly.

Ambril leaned heavily against her door and took stock of her situation. She would have to wait at least a half an hour before her mother was settled. And then she stood a very slim chance of actually making it out. Her mother, however tired she was would be on the alert.

Her thoughts flew to Ygg and Sully, were they all right? Did they make it into the school in one piece? She had to find a way out---“

The sound of an electronic buzzer sounded in her head. “*Very touching family moment back there, but it did drag on in the middle.*” fLit thought at her. “*With regards to breaking out of here, I had hopes you were getting smarter but I see that was only temporary*.” He added disdainfully.

Ambril was annoyed. “*Don’t be so smug, if you have a plan, let’s hear it*!” She thought back at him.

But fLit couldn’t help himself and floated in front of her looking superior. “*I’ll just give you a little hint then shall I? How did you get out of here before*?”

“*You mean the time you screwed up and I nearly fell down the lad---oh! The ladder*.” She had forgotten all about it. But hadn’t the gardeners found it yet?

She raced over to her window and pushed it open. The tree branches were so thick she couldn’t see it, but after groping around, her hand found the smooth top rung. Ambril didn’t even stop to change socks. She was out the window and down the ladder in a shot.

Toward the bottom she remembered what had happened the last time and jumped down past the last few rungs. In a few seconds she had launched her bike down the hill, squinting into the shadows as she picked up speed. Ruefully she thought about her Mom and wished she had remembered to leave a note for her. But, if all went well, she’d be back before morning with things all taken care of. She smiled as she took the corner leading into the alleyway but she brought her bike quickly to a halt in the shadows when she heard rather than saw them.

Some one was wrestling in the dark just in front of her.

“That’s it! You’re coming with me! And the way I’m feeling you won’t be out until Christmas!” Ambril recognized Skarn’s voice, angry and aggressive. He seemed to be holding down a struggling figure much smaller than him.

“Let me up---You’re not going to get what you want from me this way!” It sounded like Riley.

“Oh yeah? We’ll see about that! I have enough on you---“

There was a sharp smacking sound as Skarn slumped forward for a moment and Riley broke free. He started running down the alley. Skarn staggered up with his hand on his face and then lunged after the fleeing figure. They soon disappeared around the corner. Ambril was relieved she’d had enough sense to steer herself into the shadows. If Skarn had seen her…well she didn’t even want to think about that.

Cautiously she pushed off again, this time keeping close to the shuttered buildings and detouring around the streetlights.

All was quiet when she reached the school and stowed her bike under a bush. She whipped around to the back of the school hoping that Ygg and Sully had left her some clues as to how they had gotten inside…if they had managed it.

On the playground, under a flood light Ambril saw something large and yellow. As Ambril drew nearer she could see it was a big yellow arrow pointing at a half opened window. It said ‘Ambril, meet us by the janitor’s closet’.

“Subtle huh!” Riley came up behind her out of breath. “They must have gotten in through the art supply closet.”

“Riley! What are you doing here! And what’s with Skarn? Why is he chasing you?”

“What do you mean?” He asked warily.

“I was riding down the alley a minute ago and saw you two fighting. You need to stay clear of him. That guys nothing but a liar and a kidnapper---“

“A kidnapper? Skarn?“

“Yeah he was supposed to take us to Quarter Moon Bay this afternoon but instead we wound up in front of the Mines waiting for his accomplice.”

“His accomplice? You mean, the Chief?”

“No, No, we don’t know who it was.” Sid Ambril ruefully---that would have been really good information to have.

“Wow, big day for you, first fighting a Dullaith, kidnapped and then escaping the police and now breaking into the school! You are well on your way to becoming a hardened criminal.”

Riley said with a laugh. “But you’re right about Skarn he’s a jerk. He likes to gamble I guess. He wanted me to fix it so that Lance wouldn’t be able to play ball today. I told him no-way but he kept on me.” Riley shrugged. “I couldn’t do that even to Lance and that made Skarn pretty angry.”

Ambril was disgusted. “Yep he’s a first class jerk.”

“So what are you guys doing here?” Riley asked as they walked toward the school and the open window.

“Well…it’s a long story---ending with we have to break into the janitor’s closet. Riley, you shouldn’t be here anyway---it sounds like you’re in enough trouble.”

“Well, well a two fer! Nothing better! Skarn bellowed from the side of the schoolhouse. He charged at them. “I’m getting a bonus this month for sure!”

Ambril looked anxiously at the window, it was set too high off the ground.

“Here, I’ll give you a boost!” Said Riley He bent down and offered her his hands. Ambril put her foot in them and felt herself lifted immediately. She grasped the windowsill and scrambled inside.

Ambril was about to shut the window when she heard Skarn say, “Now we have things to settle, boy!” You’re going to feel some real pain now!”

Skarn was still about twenty feet away when Ambril stuck her hand down to Riley. “Riley, come on! Give me your hand!” She yelled.

She grabbed it and pulled hard while he hoisted himself up and through the window just as Skarn hit the wall. Ambril could see his fingers on the windowsill.

Quick, shut it!” She yelled.

Riley lunged toward the window and dropped it onto Skarn’s fingers. A squeal of pain followed by the disappearance of his fingers made it safe for Riley to close it and lock it.

Ambril struggled to her feet.

‘This ain’t over for either of you! That’s breaking and entering, defacement of public property, there’s a brick missing here! Evading arrest---“ Skarn continued to bellow a list of offense as the two staggered out into the dark hallway.

“O.K. Riley, I don’t want you to get into any more trouble---you need to get as far away from me as you can. Or you’ll be blamed for this too.” Said Ambril.

Riley laughed. “So what’s new? I’ve been blamed for stuff I didn’t do my whole life, remember my brother is…Lance.” He smiled. Besides, with Skarn out there on the prowl, I wouldn’t get far.” Riley looked at her critically. “So what gives with the sudden interest in law-breaking? You don’t seem the type.”

They were making their way down the stairwell. The shadows made even this familiar place spooky. Ambril felt really glad that Riley was with her. “We have to figure out where Old Town is.” Ambril whispered.

“Oh, what’s in Old Town?” Riley asked suddenly very close to her.

Ambril could smell rotting fruit on him again. Didn’t Lance ever let up? “We just want to---check---something.” She said lamely. They had reached the bottom of the stairs and saw Ygg and Sully framed in the light coming through the front hall windows.

Sully turned and saw them at the same time. “Hey you made it!---Who’s that with you?” Sully’s voice reverberated down the empty hall.

Ambril and Riley ran the rest of the way. “It’s Riley---Skarn was chasing him so he came in with me and…it’s not Feldez after all,” said Ambril all in a rush.

She hurriedly filled them in on what had happened at her house as best she could what with Riley standing right there.

“Wish I’d been there too, that must have been tough!” Sully said.

“We donna have to do this tonight now.” Said Ygg.

A huge booming sound echoed through the hall making them all flinch. “I know you’re in there you little runts!” Skarn’s voice was right outside the main doors.

“Uh oh! Look let’s see if we can sneak out the back, we’ve tried and tried and can’t get the dang closet door open,“ said Sully.

“Hold on---Here, this’ll help!” Riley picked up the padlock and spun the face. “This happens to be my old lock. I lent it to Bert today. It saved him a trip to the hardware store. He and I are friends, sort of. He’s fished me out of more dumpsters than I can count.”

Another booming thud made the front door flex.

“He’s breaking down the door, hurry!” Yelled Sully frantically.

With a final spin the lock clicked open. Riley pushed the door open wide.

“Come on! Quick he be almost through!” Yelled Ygg.

Just as Ambril skittered through the doorway she saw a portion of the door give way. Skarn’s angry face was framed by the ragged hole. Without another thought they plunged into the dark. Riley snapped the door shut behind them. And restrung the chain on the inside of the door. He was just in time, with a creaking sound they could hear the front door surrender and bang open. It was Skarn’s heavy breathing that made Ambril hold her breath. He was right outside.

“It’s just a question of time kiddies, before I find you and then---then you’ll all pay!” He sneered.

Ambril realized that the room had just one window, a dirty, dingy transom window just above the door; the hard, clean light of a flashlight illuminated it briefly briefly. Ambril prayed he wouldn’t notice the chain and lock were missing.

Skarn seemed to stand there forever, just breathing…then he snorted in a disgusted way and slowly moved down the hallway.

Ambril exhaled slowly. But with Skarn, went the light. They were left in oppressive darkness. In the close room Ambril picked up the scent of dark magic, not recent as it was faint.

Someone lit a match. In its glow, Riley’s face smiled. “I think we’ll have to risk a little light,” he whispered as he lit an old-fashioned kerosene lantern.

“We need to be keeping that low,” whispered Ygg. “Let’s be finding what we need then we’ll put it out right quick before Skarn comes back.”

“He’s not going to leave---he’s already called for back-up. If we get out of here we’ll just get escorted to jail.” Sully kneaded her hands fretfully.

“You know, I’m thinking that be not true. Skarn doesn't want the Chief to know what he’s been up to.” Ygg shook his head. “He be here on his own.”

Ambril thought about this and had to agree. Skarn would probably lose his job if the Chief ever found out about what he had been up to the past day or so.

“O.K., while we’re here, what is it you’re looking for?” Asked Riley as he carefully threw the light of the lantern forward and shielded the rest with his jacket.

“Over here! Bring the lantern here!” Said Sully. She was pointing to the large tile mural on the wall. “Now here’s the town---see the date?” She pointed confidently at the image on the wall underneath in scrolly writing it said:

The Town of Trelawnyd, 1753

“See! This is Old Town!” She said excitedly. “The new town was built around the time of the Gold Rush around 1849 right?”

Ambril slowly nodded. But looking at the map confused her. Everything seemed to be out of scale. The Buildings were larger than the trees.

“Well, you be right there, but it be nought helpful.” Said Ygg squinting at the map. “Everything’s…catawampus.”

Sully stared at the mural for a long moment. “Now hold on, maybe we can still figure it out…we just need something familiar, a landmark or two…” She continued to stare hard at the mural.

“So…Old Town, I thought it had been all torn down when they rebuilt the town.” Asked Riley

Ambril hesitated, again still unsure of him. “We think it still exists, it’s just been hidden and forgotten.” She said lamely.

Riley nodded slowly still looking at the map.

“Come on, we have to tell him---he’s here anyway and whether he likes it or not, a part of this now.” Said Sully turning to their awkward friend. “It’s about the Dullaiths and this really powerful guy who ran the mines once.” She continued.

“Moroz?” Guessed Riley.

Sully nodded. “We think some one is trying to free him.”

“Free him? He must be dead by now!“ Riley exclaimed.

“With magic, he could be still living.” Said Ygg.

Riley was silent while be absorbed this. “It always gets down to magic in this town doesn’t it? And you think he’s in Old Town?” Finished Riley softly.

“It’s the last place, that we know of anyway, where he could be imprisoned.” Said Ambril. “Whoever’s behind the Dullaith business, we think they must be heading to Old Town to try and free Moroz.” She continued. “That’s why we need to get to Old Town and try and stop them.”

Riley looked impressed for a moment and then laughed softly. “Yeah, I get it now…so you’re what…saving the town…just for fun?” He asked finally.

“Fun? You call being chased by monsters, supersized hawks and riding on lake monsters…O.K. the lake monster part was really fun…but the rest…you call that fun?” Asked Sully incredulously.

“And my family is being blamed for raising the Dullaiths and the rest of it, because of what happened to my Dad. So, we have to get to the truth.” Added Ambril simply.

Riley looked at her surprised. “Well, that may not be intentional you know, your family being blamed. I wouldn’t…It could have been just an accident right? I mean who would go after you and your family? ---You’re so…nice.”

He smiled at her in a way that made Ambril feel---uncomfortable but---good.

Meanwhile Sully had turned back to the mural. “Hey, I thinking I’ve found something, look here!” She coughed as she brushed off some of the dust and dirt from the wall. “See? ---Riley bring that lantern over here.” She said beckoning to him.

Ambril followed Riley and watched as Sully vigorously rubbed the wall with her sleeve. “See, right there!” She pointed to a gazebo with vines growing over it. Underneath it was the word---

“Derwyn,” Ambril breathed. “It’s my Gran’s house!”

“Now we just need one other landmark…” Said Sully squinting at the wall.

They were all silent a moment. The mural was so hopelessly dusty, but she though she saw something farther up the wall. There was a small building with a weather vane of a wolf, a crow and a dragon. “It’s Koda’s barn! Right there!” She said pointing.

“That ‘s it! That’s what we need! So…Old Town is east of the road and between the Derwyn Estate and Koda’s farm! We did it!” Crowed Sully.

But Ambril had her misgivings as she surveyed the map.

Ygg standing next to her sighed heavily “That be one big piece of possibility.” He said slowly. “There must be acres of forest there. We’ll never be finding it tonight or even next week.”

Even Sully looked crestfallen as the realization sank in.

“But it’s a start.” Said Ambril “Maybe we can organize search parties starting tomorrow… Raising a Dullaith has to take a boatload of energy. The people behind this must be as tired as we are.”

They all stood lost in thought staring at the mural in silence. But were jolted back to reality by a series of distant thuds as if a pile of boxes fell over and an angry yelp, which sounded like Skarn.

“Well I guess we should start thinking about how to get out of here.” Said Riley matter-of-factly.

“Well there be just the one door.” Said Ygg

“Still I can’t help but think,” said Riley as he held the lantern high looking above them all at the archway. “Why would you label this an entrance unless---“

They all turned and stared upward at the words running along the archway, which framed the back wall. The brighter light of the lantern brought out images that had not been visible before. Ambril could see the curling lines of the ancient Celts winding around some images. On one side were three dogs running and then on the other were three faces.

“They look a little like…turnips don’t they?” Mused Sully and stretched as she pointed

“What…did you say…turnips?” Asked Ambril as she peered at where Sully pointed. There on the archway were the unmistakable faces of the three creatures Ambril had met at the Gazebo.

“The aunties!” She cried and then laughed. One of them even had glasses. They were even knitting.

“What, you your Aunties? They look like turnips do they?” Asked Sully.

“No, there were these strange beings I met when I was waiting for you at the Gazebo one day…I just forgot to tell you about them.” Ambril got an idea and dove into her backpack to retrieve her Ashera in what was now a practiced move.

“Wow, you carry that with you all the time?” Asked Riley behind her. “That was what you used on the Dullaith at the park, right?”

“It’s my Ashera, right.” Said Ambril distractedly. “Now I’m not sure exactly what I did the last time to get their attention…” Ambril thought at the Ashera, sending it a mental image of the three Aunties.

“Wait! I want to see this!” Sully grabbed Ambril’s elbow.

“Me to!” Ygg grabbed the other one.

“Great idea, But I have to warn you, they’re a little—impolite. Ready?”

“yep!” Said Sully as Ygg nodded with her.

Ambril shut her eyes and that now familiar gray fog swirled in. Sully and Ygg blinked and looked around. Ambril could see the bright glow of fLit at her feet still in her backpack.

“Whoa! Look at that!” Ygg was pointing at the dirt wall.

The dirt had fallen away and had been replaced with a round door. It was supported by a thick web of knobby roots and vines woven around it. Ambril just stood there absorbing the scene, collecting herself.

“I told you---she’s just downright soft in the head.” Said a scratchy voice.

“And she’s brought some friendies with her. They’re just as daft and dumb, I say…” Another mumbled.

There they were, three large knobby lumps knitting industriously. One was staring at them through large spectacles.

This one spoke next. “Well, it won’t be long now, she’s on her way.”

The biggest lump suddenly grabbed the glasses and gave Ambril a long searching stare. “Ummm, yes she’s to the underworld without a change of undies sure enough.” The biggest one mused. “And who’s the earth-kind? He looks like a plodder to me.”

Rude little rutabagas aren’t they?” Ygg mused.

The right one snatched the glasses away from her sister. “Ah the other one’s a dear though! So chirpy and cute!”

“Still this one’s such a scrawny little slip of a thing, you’d of thought a hero would be a bit…better fed.” She shook her head in a disgusted way. “Shame, that.”

Ambril had quickly gone from startled, to uncomfortable, to downright insulted. “We are standing right here, you know! You could be a little more polite!”

The three Aunties jumped at that.

“Look there! I forgot she could talk like a right normal person!”

“Bless her. She does try, even though she is still a bit thick.” Said the smallest one looking through the glasses once again at her.

“Why do you have to talk like that about me?” Asked Ambril.

“Why not Lovie? it’s the truth.” Nodded the biggest one.

“We’s never lies.” The middle one nodded slowly.

“No we never does,” said the smallest one. “But things change on us, then it looks like we do!”

The bigger one looked peeved and snatched the glasses back. She stared again at Ambril and then frowned, disappointed. “Too true, only one way---straight through on into it ---“

“Maybe she’s gets through it then?” Asked the middle one doubtfully.

“Oh yes, I think so…maybe…with help.” Said the big one her eyes enlarged ten fold by the glasses scrutinized Sully and Ygg.

Ambril sighed she had had enough of this. “So is this a way out then?” She asked.

“A way out and a way in Lovie.” The smaller one nodded at her.

“Good, my friends and I need to get out of here---“

“A way out and a way into everywhere, Lovie.” The smaller one said as if she hadn’t spoken.

Ambril stopped to consider this for a moment.

The middle one asked dubiously. “Are you sure she’s the one?”

“Of course, of course! You can see it all over and through her, it’s woven right in.” The smaller one offered her sister the glasses.

“Well…we just want to get out of this building, can you help us?”

The middle one blinked at her behind the glasses. “Didn’t I just say to her the chutes goes everywhere? She huffed. “Maybe if I spell it? Listen up. It starts with an ‘EV’ then you ad a ‘VREE’ and end with a ‘WHAR’…Evvreewhar…see?”

All three aunties nodded as if it was perfectly clear.

Ambril sighed. “Alright, O.K., so I open this door---“

“No we’s open the door.”

“You open the door for us---and then what?”

“Well, nothing of course as we’s can’t open the door for you.” Said the middle one shaking her head.

“Why not?” Asked Ambril exasperated.

“Well, You’d get lost wouldn’t you? Without a proper guide.”

“What---what about that one there, he’d do.” Said the larger one pointing toward Ambril’s feet with her glasses.

“What, that one? You sure?” Said the middle one squinting.” Yoo-hoo there boy, you Tylwith Teg!”

They all looked expectantly at Ambril’s feet.

“He’s as daft as she is!” The larger one exclaimed.

“Not daft, just not interested.” Surmised the middle one.

“Beneath him he things, as usual, snobby lot.” Sniffed the smallest one.

“Rotter,” nodded the larger one.

Ambril looked down at the backpack at her feet. “*fLit, they’re talking to you! Can you help us*?” She thought at him.

The sound of a crash landing echoed painfully through her head, and then, “*No*.” “*What? Why you can’t help us? We’re really in jam here-*--“ said Ambril.

“Oh lookie, they’re talking! That’s so sweet a human-kind and a fairy…friends! How long’s it been since that’s happened?” The Smaller one perked up.

“Never happened.”

“Sure it has, once…maybe?”

The bigger one shook her head with assurance. “Never”.

“*Just ignore them. Can you get us through that door*?”

fLit flew out of the backpack in a fury and kicked her hard in the nose.

“Easy there bug boy!” Shouted Ygg.

“Oh, see there, you spoke too soon, they’re never friends.” Said the bigger one still knitting furiously away.

“*Of course I can do it! I’m a fairy for Tylwith sake! It’s just that---I won’t.”* He folded his arms and looked obstinate.

“Figures.” Snorted Ygg.

Ambril was incensed. “*Why? Is it because it’s ‘beneath*?” She said derisively as she rubbed her nose.

“*No, no it’s that*---” fLit shook his head slowly. “*It’s just that once something---went wrong. I lost someone in there; someone very close to me. It was their first time in the chutes and something came---and---just forced us apart.” fLit’s expression was bitter. “There are forces in there that are…evil. I’ve been searching for her ever since. Look I don’t know what happened but what I do know is that I don’t want that to happen to you*---.” He paused here and sighed.

Ambril was touched and more than a little surprised, he can’t possibly mean---

“*It’s for the Ledrith Glain’s sake, of course*.” He added.

“*Sure, of course*.” Said Ambril hurriedly. “*But it was just the one time, right that things went wrong. How many other times did it go without a hitch*?” She asked curiously.

fLit shrugged, “*A couple…thousand…I guess*.”

“*Really? I’d say you have a pretty good safety record, myself*.”

fLit kept his head down. “*I acted rashly. I was careless, I didn’t think…*”

“*Come on, which means you’ll be, we’ll all be extra careful this time.”* Thought Ambril encouragingly.

She was interrupted by a massive shuddering thud on the door. It startled Ambril so much that she opened her eyes. The gray fog vanished and she was standing in a very dark place…again.

“I know you’re in there, I could here you whispering and giggling. Saying bad things about me right? Well now you’ve broken into a high security area. After today, they’ll lock you up and throw away the key!” Another thud and then a splintering crack. Ambril briefly saw the glint of an ax blade.

“Wow, that was so weird, the fog and the---“ Said Sully.

“You’re never getting out of jail any of you! Cuz, I’ll be right there, standing guard the whole time!” Sneered Skarn. “I’m gonna enjoy this!”

“fLit come on, get us out of here! That guy is completely crazy!” blurted out Ambril right out loud.

Another blow of the ax made the door shiver like an aspen tree the center panel splintered out and a chink of light then an eye were visible briefly.

fLit suddenly flashed into view. “*It’s on your head if anything goes amiss!”* His chimes echoed loudly through her head and by the startled looks on the other kids faces, they had heard it as well.

“Riley! There’s no time to explain! Just grab my hand and don’t let go!” Said Ambril hurriedly grabbing fLit’s leg

“I’m coming in kiddies, better be saying your prayers!” Bellowed Skarn.

Ambril could see he was almost through. Riley grabbed her hand and took Sully’s other hand. Ygg was at the end. Ambril tugged on fLit’s leg. “Ready!”

“*On my mark! We’ll have to go through all at once, everyone stay together!*” fLit’s voice resonated through their heads.

“Oh my, he’s one of them worrying chaps, isn’t he?” Said the larger Auntie.

“*No matter what, don’t let go! You hear?”* fLit’s vibrated so loudly through her head it throbbed. *“Especially you at the end, the earth-kind*

“I be not stupid, fairy-kind I hear ye.” Ygg growled back at him.

“Just to the circle stone outside, right fLit?” Yelled Ambril as she stashed her Ashera and swung her backpack onto her shoulders.

“Wait! Can you take us right to Old Town?” Interrupted Sully.

fLit looked put out but nodded yes.

“Great! That solves that problem!” Said Sully happily.

“*Everyone close your eyes and hang on!”* Resonated flit. “*On my mark, everyone is to jump*!” fLit turned and nodded to the Aunties.

The larger Auntie paused and reached up and wrapped an old knarled tendril around the doorknob. The door swung upward revealing a tunnel like chute. An air current smelling of dank caves assailed them.

“Nasty things aren’t they? Little Tylwith Tegs! So rude! Not even an "if you please"---or "When you have a minute!” said the middle one grumpily.

“Nary a thank you to boot!” Said the larger one bitterly.

Flit ignored them. “*Ready*? *One, Two, Mark!”*

Ambril jumped upward and felt the whoosh of air as they half fell half slid into the chutes.

“Thanks!” She yelled back at the Aunties but they were falling too fast her words slipped away. They hurtled down the tunnel-like chutes. They seemed to be made of an intricate webbing which seemed to thrum and glow with magic. There were breaks and tears in the webbing offering views into the world beyond. Ambril stared out into a seemingly endless cavern. There were chutes all around them some winding upward, some downward and others branching out al around. fLit just ahead of her was carefully steering them gracefully along. After another few minutes of gliding though, Ambril began to wonder why they hadn’t arrived at their destination.

“*Hey fLit, where are we, the center of the Earth*?” She thought at him.

fLit snorted “*You human-kind are always think so small. This is the universe.*” He said disparagingly as he bore hard to the left.

*The whole Universe? But why are we traveling through the Universe just to get a few miles into the forest?”* She asked.

“*Because it doesn’t work that way*.” fLit answered annoyed once again. “*Just as the Gray Lands cannot process time, the chutes cannot process space*. *It works on the connections of spirit. You know, Memories. Since Old Town is very old, we’ve had to go a long way out to pick up its connections.*” He explained cryptically.

“I don’t know any Gray Lands.” Ambril thought back.

“*You’ve met the Gray Lady right*? *She is Mistress of the Gray Lands, the Land of In-Between.”* fLit continued.

“*Oh, the Gray Hawk / Lady, the one who tried to kill me twice*?” Asked Ambril.

fLit snorted again. “*More than twice, you just don’t know about the other times. You’ve been carefully protected from harm.*”

“*What? Come on, I would have known or at least sensed when someone tried to kill me.*” Thought Ambril slightly unnerved. “*And who’s been protecting me*?” Ambril imagined a cadre of FBI Agents.

“*They’ll come forward when or if you need to know, I’m sure.*”

“So how do you know all of this?” Ambril thought at him.

“*It’s all written on your Ashera, of course.*” Said fLit pulling downward as they raced through a particularly narrow tunnel. “*And yes, I’ll show you sometime, but you have to leave me alone, I have to concentrate!”*

Ambril shut her mouth. The walls of the cavern seemed to be thinning. Ambril could see trees sailing by them and a familiar night sky. But as they dove into a shadowy tunnel, everything seemed to go…amiss.

In the dark, Ambril felt Riley’s grip tighten and a knife like pain in her other hand. Her hand went numb.

“fLit! Where are you!“ She screamed. She was spirally airborne when she struck wet grass and rolled several times before coming to rest against a rock. She lay there stunned for a moment and then struggled to her feet.

“fLit! fLit! Riley!” There was no answer. She realized that she could be anywhere in the universe but as she looked around her at the familiar grass and uncomfortably hard rocks she began to feel better. The stars looked right, the moon had the right shape and size. “Ygg? Sully, where are you?”

“Ambril? There you are!” It was Riley standing before her, his face half in shadow.

“Boy am I glad to see you! I thought we were all lost for a second there.” Breathed Ambril relieved. “Are the others with you?” She asked looking around him into the shadows. “And where the heck is fLit?”

“The fairy? Oh…He’s safe…for the time being.” Said Riley with a brief smile. “I don’t know where the others are, but probably close by.” He continued. “Why don’t you bring out that fancy medallion of yours, it’ll give off a little light.”

Are you O.K. Riley? you sound a little funny.” Said Ambril bringing out her Ashera. “And how do you know about my Ledrith Glain?” She asked staring at him curiously.

Riley looked different too, cocky and arrogant. More like fLit than the cowering kid Ambril had seen mocked by his older brother many times over the past few months.

The Ashera glowed brilliantly in the gloom giving off sparks of energy.

“Now your…Ledrith Glain did you call it? Bring that out too and we’ll be able to see better where we are and our path home.” Riley continued reasonably.

Ambril still suspicious could hardly argue with him. The Ashera’s glow was reassuring but now nearly enough. The bright shimmer of her medallion made her blink as she pulled it out from under her shirt.

Riley squinted at it. “Why don’t you take it off and hold it away from you, that way it won’t be so blinding.” He said and moved closer.

Ambril did find the Ledrith Glain’s light glaring. But she hesitated to take it off.

“Come on, it’s just until we figure out where we are and how to get home.” Said Riley reassuringly as he shielded his eyes from the light.

Ambril hesitantly took the Ledrith Glain chain from around her neck and wrapped it around her wrist. She held it out away from herself. “There, that’s a little better.” She said.

“Yeah it is,” Riley said as he looked around. They were in the middle of a clearing. There was forest as far as the eye could see. But Riley pointed almost immediately to an old Redwood in front of them. “I think I recognize that tree, it’s maybe a mile or two from the wall.” He said confidently. A breeze brought the strong smell of rotting fruit to Ambril. She wrinkled her nose. Poor Riley.

Ambril let out a sigh of relief “That’s great news! She said. “Now, maybe we should start looking for the others.” She wheeled around pointing her Ledrith Glain into the shadows. It cut through the gloom easily revealing nothing but ordinary trees and bushes.

“I think…maybe…not.” Said Riley he had come up behind Ambril. With the flick of his wrist he cut the Ledrith Glain’s chain from her wrist and then captured it with a black cup on a chain.

“What the…Hey that’s…” Said Ambril still shocked and confused. She reached out toward the Ledrith Glain and grabbed for it but ended up grabbing the knife instead as Riley jerked it away and pocketed the medallion. The knife slit her finger sending a searing up her arm. It continued to throb and build. She doubled over in pain.

Riley laughed dryly. “Oops, that’s going to leave a mark. But not for long as---it’s gonna kill you.” He sneered.

Ambril looked over at him. Gone was her joking, smiling friend. The new Riley’s smile was bitter, his face hard.

“Riley, what---what are you doing? That’s the---Dorcha Blade isn’t it.”

He said nothing as put away the knife and folded his arms. He sneered at her, waiting for her to realize…

“it was you then,” whispered Ambril, still cradling her hand. “It was you all along! You were behind---all of it? I can’t believe it!” She continued. “All the threatening messages---and it was you at the Tupelo’s shack who conjured the first Dullaith, you weren’t trying to help them!”

Riley smiled proudly. “My first.” He shrugged. “It was just a practice one. I didn’t expect much, it took me a long time but I finally snagged your friend, the fairy…”

“fLit! You almost killed him that night!” Ambril yelled angrily. She looked around realizing that she hadn’t seen fLit since they had arrived. “Where’s fLit? What’d you do to him?” She accused.

Rile continued to smile at her as he slowly held up a small black box. In it, frozen in pain, was fLit. Ambril lunged for the box her Ashera slashing the air in front of her until it hit with a clang the sharp edge of the black dagger in Riley’s hand. She felt the impact run down her spine making her dizzy.

Riley laughed dryly. “I wouldn’t try that again if I were you, this knife has centuries of curses built into it. Your no match for this.” Riley sneered.

Ambril looked down at her Ashera and was relieved to see it was intact. The knife had dimmed it slightly but not damaged it.

Riley still held the black box.

Ambril couldn’t help herself. “Look, he’s my friend! You can’t do that to him again!” She lunged at Riley her former friend. But Riley just jumped out of the way and waved the knife in her face.

“You want another little cut do you?” He cracked. “I bet the first one is really taking hold about now.”

He was right. Ambril could barely lift her hand. The numbing sensation was moving past her wrist. She wrapped her arm around her body trying to warm her hand.

“Then the Playground, it was you again then too?”

Riley nodded and then grimaced. “Poor Lance, he caught me doing some workings in the grocery store room, you know Feldez’s old lab? That’s why he went after me that day in the alley throwing tomatoes. So on the playground, I decided to scare him a little to get him off my back.”

Ambril sighed heavily thinking about how wrong she had been about everything. “And then at the Library, how could you hurt someone like Dr. Afallen?” Accused Ambril thinking of the happy little man whizzing around the library archives.

“Hey, I didn’t mean for him to get hurt. He just surprised me when I was getting the knife out of the vault. I had to eradicate his memory.” He said sheepishly. “The explosion was just a smoke screen, really.”

“And Red! What did he ever do to you?” Ambril said disgusted.

Riley snorted. “You’re missing the point here, it’s not what Red and the rest of Trelawnyd did to me, its what they didn’t do.” Riley cried angrily. “When did they ever try to include me in anything? I wasn’t invited to their birthday parties or backyard barbeques, I didn’t get asked to play kickball.” Riley flailed his arms helplessly. “Nothing! Ever! I was never a part of any one’s circle of friends, ever, EVER!”

It was dark but Ambril could feel his anger. “Thanks to my brother and sometimes my Dad, I’m the town joke.” His voice broke a little as he said this.

“So you did this to get back at everyone, is that it?” Said Ambril disparagingly. “You are just shooting yourself in the foot, you know that. That town is your home! It’s where you belong!” Ambril took a step toward him in spite of herself.

“Take it from me, I know, I’ve spent the past ten years getting carted from place to place, running from where I come from…and who I am.” She stood in front of him willing him to understand. “You can’t run from this, you have to face it. Talk to your family…tell them what you’re feeling and how you’re hurting---“

But Riley backed away his face hardening once again. “You don’t think I haven’t tried that? I’ve talked to Lance and my parents again and again.” His face was a tight mass of anguish. “They never ever saw me…as anything other than embarrassing…but now,” his face filled with resolve. “Now, they will. I’ll show them how valuable I am.” He nodded simply. “And for once, they’ll respect me. And see that I’m not someone to be ignored.” He continued. “With Moroz to guide me---“

“What? You think that releasing Moroz will get you noticed? In a good way?” Ambril scoffed, “Listen I’ve seen Moroz. He’s not even human anymore. The last thing he’s going to want to do is to help a kid take revenge on Trelawnyd!”

Riley was incensed. He balled up his hands into fists and spat out, “You’re lying!” No one has seen Moroz for 150 years!” His tone sounded jealous but Ambril brushed it away.

“Look, you can’t control a being like Moroz, no one can.”

It was Riley’s turn to scoff. “Come on, how powerful can he still be? He’s been locked away alone in the dark…I’ll release him, and get him to explain some of his formulas and then he’ll crawl off to die somewhere.” Riley yawned and started fiddling with the fairy box.

“You know I am sorry about this, Ambril. I don’t---hate you as much as the others. But---I have to do this.” He straightened up and began backing away from her.

“So here’s some advice---this one will be the big one, the king Dullaith. You won’t be able to vanquish him without your Ledrith Glain. So…just let him take you quickly. There’ll be less pain…I think.” He turned his back on her and hunched over and inward.

“Good Bye Ambril.”

A searing blue light pierced the night sky sending shock waves rolling out into the forest and a wall of power and the stench of rotting fruit hit Ambril hard. The same smell Riley had always carried with him, his magic going bad perfectly camouflaged by all the garbage he’d been forced to swim in.

Ambril stumbled backward. Bad or not, he had grown powerful. The fairy box glowed a deep blue spitting sparks like a firecracker. Within seconds, the Dullaith had formed. Riley had been right, this Dullaith was enormous and hugely powerful. Its magical sense overwhelmed her for a moment, forcing her back toward the trees; but only for a moment.

Images of her friends and her family flashed through her mind. And it hit her, if she didn’t figure out how to take it down it would go after them and every magical being in Trelawnyd, snuffing them out one by one.

She tried straightening up but almost fell over because of the pain. The icy numbness had crawled up to her elbow, she would had to do something about her hand first. Taking her Ashera she placed it in her wounded hand and pressed her deadened fingers around the wooden cylinder. Closing her eyes brought the gray curtain down instantly. She saw the curse threads wriggling through her hand and stretching up her arm. She tried focusing on all of them at once stretching her mind wider and wider and then pulsed a strong shot of magic through them. The affect was immediate. The curse threads sparked and fizzled and faded away. At the same time, however Ambril felt a pull at her heart. She gasped at the sudden loss of energy. So this is what Riley meant, Without the Ledrith Glain and its steady source of power, she’d have to be very careful in how she’d use her power as each hit would sap her own strength.

She opened her eyes and flexed her fingers, the wound now forgotten. Staring directly at her was the King Dullaith. It towered over her, its four horns were wreathed in skulls. He wore them like a crown. The skulls writhed and snapped. She shuddered as she wondered if her skull would be added to the crown. Her Ashera glowed bright as if it was anxious for a fight. The oppressive stench of rotting flesh assailed her, pressing on the edges of her thoughts. With effort she forced it back.

The King Dullaith had started moving toward her the slithering crackle growing louder as it came. It began to rise as if to get above her but as it did Ambril caught sight of the Morte Cell, fizzing and sparking directly below the Dullaith’s enormous head.

Ambril braced herself and let it come for her. She knew she wouldn’t get a second chance and worked at keeping her mind clear. Ambril took a deep breath and held it, waiting. The Dullaith was nearly on top of her, its jaws began to open as a dense black smoke enveloped her. Ambril brought up her Ashera quickly and aimed. A short burst of energy shot out and hit one of its glowing eyes. The energy sizzled and boiled out from the eye cavity extinguishing the magic in its web like skin wherever it touched.

Ambril wasted no time. Her eyes began to water so she closed her eyes and lunged underneath the foul smelling creature heading toward the sparking blue box. She gasped as she mustered a laser like beam of energy and swung the Ashera in a wide arc. She found her target. She slashed at it black threads binding the cell to the creature until it broke free and fell into her hands. She was dizzy from holding her breath and drained from the tremendous loss of energy. She stumbled and fell as she made her way out. Crawling in the end until she found a rock to prop herself up with. She brought the Morte Cell and her Ashera together briefly and popped it open. fLit fell out into her hand. She shot him with as much energy as she dared and then unceremoniously stuffed him into her shirt pocket.

“*Just rest, I’ll handle it*.” She thought at him hoping it sounded more confident than she felt.

She was winded and her hands were shaking but she smiled as she watched the Dullaith crazy with pain ram into the trees on the other side of the clearing. She had done some damage. Now if she could only recover in time for its next assault.

She closed her eyes again and breathed deeply trying to quiet the fears in her mind. The gray curtain immediately came down. She saw in amazement a million tiny dots of light. She guessed they were bugs. She experimentally tried drawing off a little of their life energy herself and was rewarded by an instant hit of well being. But some of the little lights winked out making her feel pretty monstrous herself. She also noticed something else. The Dullaith glowed a brilliant cool blue, just like the Morte Cell. And its energy ball was massive.

Could she use its power against itself? Could she use it to replenish herself?

The tinkle of bells and flit whispered in her head. “*Must not use its energy for yourself*.” fLit coughed. “It’s tainted. *Will then become like them, a Dullaith*.”

“*Thanks, now back to resting*.” She thought back at him. Despite his arrogance and annoying behavior she had really grown attached to him, in fact she thought with surprise, they were friends.

All right so she’d have to be careful how she handled its energy but there was hope again, a chance she could do it. A loud racking cough startled Ambril. The monster was close now. Dizzy and weak she staggered to her feet.

The creature seemed to be sniffing, vacuuming up as much air as possible. She turned back to the battle at hand. The great roiling blue ball of energy was very close now. She reached out in her mind and ripped a massive energy ball from it. For a moment she balanced it between her hands trying desperately not to absorb it herself. It was so tempting, all that power so very close.

All she had to do was draw it to herself---but then she’d be just like them, the shadowy, insatiable creatures whose only goal was to grab more and more energy and power. No, that was not for her. With effort she refocused on the monster’s face and flung the monster’s own power into at it. The force of the impact sent the creature reeling. It’s one remaining eye winked out and one of its horns sloughed off, falling tip first and narrowly missing Ambril. She lunged out of its path and then stumbled down onto one knee.

The creature finally came to rest just twenty feet away from her. She could feel it breathing, trying to rejuvenate itself. She did so as well but only for a little bit until her head cleared again. The beast was up almost immediately and began hunting her again.

She looked down at her trusty Ashera still sparking with life. The delicate tracery of lines and images glowed brighter, one of the images seemed to glow brighter than the rest. It was the image of the Cerberus.

Ambril remembered their promise of help, when all hope was lost, that they would come for her. But these were the dogs of the underworld. How much could they be trusted? Would it be better to be eaten by a Dullaith or the Cerberus? She decided that if they smelled even a little better, she’d go the way of the dogs.

She could see the creature gather itself and then suddenly without warning sprang up and over. It rose twenty feet in the air directly above her. She could see into it’s empty shell, the roiling black clouds of smoke seemed to form faceless figures who beckoned to her, clawed at her.

Then the monster lunged in a downward rush. She braced herself for and curled into a ball. Her brain filled with a shower of brilliant streams of light. This must be it, the end, with her last thought she formed the word Cerberus in her mind and brought forth its image.

A shockwave of energy vibrated all around her. The Dullaith, froze in mid attack and let out an agonized scream of pain.

The Cerberus came out of nowhere. The smell of fire and deep caverns filled the air. Their gigantic jaws ripped and tore away at the Dullaith. She was showered with skulls. They bounced off her and wherever they landed sank slowly into the earth.

In moments it was over, a gentle night breeze blew the rancid stench of the Dullaith away. Ambril filled her lungs for the first time since the Dullaith appeared and realized too late she had missed her chance to escape. Slowly the gigantic dogs turned toward her, their razor sharp teeth clearly visible through their fiery breath. The largest of the three was the first to reach her.

“It is done.” It said his red eyes boring through her.

“Nearly gone, she is,” said another as it came up to stand by its brother. He sniffed her gently.

“There is another, there,” said the third. It nodded to Ambril’s pocket. fLit struggled to climb out. He made it into Ambril’s hand but fell to his knees, exhausted.

The Cerberus were silent as they stood over them. Ambril raised her Ashera to them, it still glowed bright and true. The largest of the three dogs crinkled its eyes at her almost in a smile as he bent his great head toward her and breathed out a massive stream of flames.

She flinched as they engulfed and consumed them expecting to be burned. But the fire felt warm and invigorating. More like a summer breeze than a burning at the stake. The warmth blew through her, inside her and around and re-sharpened the edges of her mind. She felt her heart-beat slow to normal. Time seemed suspended.

The Cerberus, gigantic dog beasts stood before her but when they moved Ambril caught a glimpse of something else. There seemed to be a human face briefly visible under the dog’s head and the sinuous lines of a human body winking in and out behind the dog’s form.

The largest one nodded to her slowly. “You have come far since our last meeting, Ashera.” Its voice had a deep resonance to it. “May you find solace in these words through the dark times ahead.” He spoke the words with kindness, their power obvious.

**“There must be loss before the found is treasured.**

**Bonds forged will not be forgotten.**

**When all hope is lost---we come.”**

He bent his head toward her. “Ashera, the last you know. It is but a reminder---that at the end---when all hope is lost---we will come.” He nodded to her once more and then raising his great head he looked into the forest and was gone.

It was as if someone had flicked a switch off. The night rushed in. The stars blinked on and the dark foreboding forms of the trees grew up around her. She shivered. She got to her feet. The Cerberus had revived her, she no longer felt dizzy and weak.

“Are *you O.K.?*” fLit thought at her. He was buzzing just inches from her.

“*Yeah, you*?” She thought back and smiled.

The fairy nodded and then admitted sheepishly. “*That kid took me again.”*

“*I felt his power when he raised that Dullaith. He’s a pretty impressive magic wielder.*” Ambril thought back.

“*Still he’s just a mere human-kind*…” Said fLit reverting back to his old self.

Ambril sighed and rolled her eyes, some things would never change.

“AAAAAAAMMMMBBBRRILLLL!!!!” Sully’s voice echoed across the clearing. Ambril could make out two small shadows detach themselves from the trees.

“Over here!” She screamed. And made her way over to them.

“Ambril! Here you are! What happened and where’s Riley? We saw you two sliding off sideways into the trees. So we slid sideways after you, but you weren’t anywhere to be found!” Sully grabbed Ambril and gave her a huge hug.

“We smelled rather than saw the Dullaith and bushwhacked our way over here as fast as we could. Said Ygg coming up behind Sully. “So where’d did Riley get to?”

Ambril extricated herself from Sully’s hug. “It…it was Riley. It was him all along.” She said quietly. “He’s the one who raised the Dullaiths and everything else.” Here she wrinkled her nose. “Do you remember how he always smelled like rotting peaches?” She shook her head slowly at them. “It wasn’t the dumpster he’d just crawled out of that made him smell that way, it was his magic going bad!”

Sully and Ygg just stared at her open-mouthed.

“And to think that I took his side all the time. I tried to…protect him.” Said Sully wonderingly.

A massive thudding vibrated through the clearing something was moving quickly through the forest toward them.

The trees shuddered violently at the end of the clearing as a massive chicken leg appeared and clumped itself down in the moonlight. The shadowy form of a house burst through the greenery.

“*What is that*?” A stunned fLit thought at her as he stared at the crazily twisting chimney.

“*That’s our ride*!” Ambril said as she waved madly at the towering chicken-legged house. She thought it was the most beautiful house she had ever seen.

“Hey! Over here!” She yelled loping toward it.

“Well glory be! Look at you! Thought I’d find you half dead at best what with the smell of Dullaith and strong dark magic all around. But here you be just buzzing with life!” A voice rang out over the meadow as the house lurched toward them and lowered. Hendoeth stood framed by the warm light of her open doorway. “And not just your ordinary, everyday life energy either. My but you do have some explaining to do.” Hendoeth nodded as she jumped off the porch. But then she caught sight of fLit and froze. “Is that a fairy I see with you?” Hendoeth squinted in the moonlight. “It’s getting Curiouser and Curiouser.” She mused.

“Hendoeth this is fLit.”

fLit made a cursory bow but stared in frank curiosity past her into her house. There framed in the doorway was an assortment of furniture---waving and smiling.

Hendoeth nodded warily at him and said to the kids, “here you go, best cure for bad-magic there is!” She handed mugs of hot chocolate all around and then shooed them toward the front porch. “Get your kiesters inside there and set a spell.” She said. ”We’re a fer piece from the wall and we got to git you home to your families lickity-split !”

“Riley said it wasn’t far---“

Hendoeth snorted. “Well. Riley’s wrong. Unless he has a something up his sleeve, he’ll be camping out in the forest tonight.”

As they trooped up the steps Ambril looked up at the house. Fowlclun twitched his lacey curtains and bowed the porch into a smile.

“Hey Fowlclun!” Ambril waved at him.

A hollow cackle blew through the curtains and made the lantern by the door flicker. The doorway was blockaded by furniture.

“Ambril! Are these your friends? Anyone want a scone or a cookie?” Maple wiggled a bit as she stretched herself up to offer them a platter of goodies.

“Hi Maple, how are things?” Asked Ambril smiling down at the table as she picked out a scone.

“”We can’t complain, it’s a much smoother ride now that Fowlclun’s leg healed, there’s been a lot less breakage.” Smiled Ester swishing her feathers.

“Well, actually there are several matters still to be complained about regularly. Not the least of which is the fact that we are all still furniture!” Said Cerreg his grandfatherly chimes sounding off key.

Ester rolled her eyes but said nothing.

“This is Ygg and Sully---and oh, I nearly forgot---this is fLit.” Ambril made introductions all around.

“So---flit is it?” Hendoeth put her hand on her hips and scrutinized him. “Maybe this little guy can shed some light on---“

But fLit had caught sight of something. He zoomed past her making a beeline for a crystal flower sitting on the counter.

A symphony of joyful sounds erupted. Tweek lit up like an amusement park ride sparkling and twinkling back at fLit.

Ambril walked over. “*So, you know Tweek*?” She asked him.

fLit looked up briefly. “*She’s…my friend.*” He said simply. “*The one I lost in the chutes.” He laid a hand gently on glittering jeweled surface. “Finally! I’ve been looking for her for ages.*” The fairy looked over the cut stone carefully. “*Now how do we get her out of here?”*

“She was a someone once then?” Asked Hendoeth behind Ambril.

fLit nodded emphatically. “*Of course, she’s a fairy*. *Ssshh!*” He waved them back. “*She’s telling me her story.*” He listened closely to Tweek, adding his own sounds to hers occasionally. At last he straightened up his face sad. *“Apparently she was captured by a human-kind and enslaved*.” He said sadly. “*He kept her for years and siphoned off her life energy when he needed it.”* He cocked his head his face anxious. *“When she was finally freed, she found too much of herself had been lost and she was stuck---in-between.*” He said.

“Well we’ll just have to figure out a way to bring her back!” Said Sully peeping out from behind Cerreg “Maybe something in the Astarte will help.” She mused taking a bite out of her scone.

“Does she ken the name of the evil man who be catching her?” Asked Ygg.

There was a jumble of violins and tubas playing. First fLit and then Tweek. Finally they were silent. fLit sat back on his heels, stunned. “*She says it was…Moroz*.”

Ambril felt heaviness in her stomach.

“All roads point to Moroz, don’t they?” Mused Sully as she brushed the crumbs from her lap.

“So what be Riley’s interest in Moroz?” asked Ygg.

“Power I guess.” Ambril shrugged. “He thinks that when he releases him, Moroz will be so grateful he’ll share all his secrets with him.” Ambril sighed.

“And how does he think he’ll release Moroz? He’ll need loads of magic to counteract the wards and protections they put on his prison.”

Ambril took a deep breath. “He has it now, he has my Ledrith Glain.”

Sully gasped. “What? I thought you couldn’t give that away even if you wanted to?” Asked Sully shocked.

“He used the knife from the library, the Dorcha Blade, to cut it away and capture it with that little cup thing on the handle.”

Ygg shook his head. “That Ledrith Glain holds a powerful lot of magic. We must be making our way to Old Town then and stop him.”

“He’s a really powerful magic-wielder, Ygg. I don’t know if we’re enough, really. I felt him when he raised that Dullaith.” Ambril sighed.

“Now don’t you fret none, powerful in magic he may be but he’s got a heck of a hike before he reaches the wall.” Piped up Hendoeth.

“And you’re not alone, you know. We’ll get some heavy magic guardians on alert early tomorrow.” She nodded her head wisely. “Besides, that Ledrith Glain of yours must have been plenty used up after taking down that Dullaith in the middle of town, right? Chances are it won’t have enough spark left in it anyway to get the job done. It’ll take some time to recharge, that is unless he knows something the rest of us don’t know.”

Ambril wasn’t sure. “I wouldn’t put it past him. He’s been studying Moroz’s notes and formulas.”

“Well studying and knowing how to use it are two different things aren’t they?” Hendoeth nodded her head thoughtfully. “But just in case, we’ll get working on something after we drop you off.”

Ambril felt a little better but something kept gnawing at her. She just wouldn’t feel safe again until Riley had been stopped and Moroz’s prison was further protected from entry.

Hendoeth came and put her arm around her shoulders. “First time I set eyes on you---I knew that adventure would fly at you and stick like glue.” She said her eyes twinkling at her. “There’s just something---big about you.”

Ambril looked down at her skinny kid body skeptically.

Hendoeth smirked. “No—I mean big happenings, they swirl all around you.” She nodded again. “As a matter of fact, I’m plum worried you’re gonna out-adventure all of us!” She cackled.

Ambril smiled up at her and then looked outside at the passing treetops and the moon beyond. Fowlclun clucked softly. She felt like she’d had a lifetime’s worth of adventure all in one day. All she really wanted…was to be home in her own bed.

As if in response to her thoughts, Fowlclun began to slow down.

Hendoeth brushed down her apron and walked briskly to the front door. “Good we’re almost there. Now don’t you fret no more, you hear?” she said bracing herself with the boot-rack. “Everyone grab a’ hold of something, we’re going in now and it can be a bit bumpy.”

Ambril felt a mild squeezing sensation. And then a jolt. All the china rattled and Fowlclun crowed. Then it was done.

Hendoeth straightened and shook herself. “Don’t ever get any easier getting through that old wall.”

Fowlclun veered sharply to the right, took a few more steps and then stopped. Ambril could feel the house lower itself. She looked out to see the moonlight glancing off the top of a very familiar Gazebo.

Hendoeth opened the door to reveal the stone path leading past the gazebo to the main house. But something had changed…in the dim light the garden looked more than well cared for, that was to be expected what with the gnomes working night and day on it. No it was the main house. There was a light on in the living room and the air was heavy with the smell of lavender and fresh baked bread.

They had all piled out on the front steps by that time. Ambril paused, uncertain. “Wait! No one lives---”

“So will you ever be coming down from there? Or are you just gonna stare at the moon all night?” A grumpy voice called out from the garden. It was Baldot. “Hurry up now, me boots are getting muddy! You’re all expected at the big house!” He groused.

“Hey, that be…” said Ygg to himself as two figures emerged from the shadows along the driveway; one of them massive. Then he said then more loudly. “Hey, Unk!” He jumped off the steps and ran toward him.

“Dad? Hey Dad! Look I…I can explain…well at least some of it…I think.” Stammered Sully as she jumped down the steps herself and trotted over to the smaller, normal looking figure dwarfed by Unk.

But Ambril hung back a moment. She reached out in her mind and found a small too bright spot. “*You Coming*?” She thought at the fairy.

“*No, I think I’ll stay here with Tweek for a while*.” He thought back at her.

Ambril felt a surprising emptiness in the pit of her stomach. A little while back she’d have given anything for a little privacy. But now she knew she would miss him, annoying or not he was her friend.

She sighed softly, “*O.K. then…I’m glad you found Tweek. I know you’ve been searching for her a long, long time*.” She slowly walked down the steps. “*Maybe I’ll see you around…sometime.*”

She started walking up the path toward the main house when something poked her in the eye. It turned out to be a fairy boot.

The blaring of car horns resonated through her head. “*Look Dopey, I just meant I’ll stay with Tweek tonight. We have a lot to catch up on. I’ll see you tomorrow morning, that’s all.*” He grimaced at her. “*You aren’t getting rid of me so easily, we have to get the Ledrith Glain back*.”

“*Right! Right*!” Said Ambril rubbing her eye. What was it she had been feeling sad about?

“*Tomorrow then*.” Said fLit as he darted away.

As she turned back to the house, a grouchy voice said, “Finally!” Baldot had waited for her. “We got the Eee-lectricity working this afternoon…water works a treat thanks to your slimy friend.” Baldot nodded toward the pond.

Several tentacles glistened in the moonlight as they waved at her.

”---He’s a whiz with plumbing that one is.”

Suddenly Ambril stopped in her tracks, her insides suddenly frigid. “Wait…do you mean… that somebody is living here now?”

Baldot surveyed her disparagingly. “For being such a great magic wielder---you’re sure slow.” He cocked his head at the front door. “Now you just take a gander. What do you see?”

Ambril didn’t want to see really---she knew it was silly but she had always had in the back of her mind that her family would once…”

In the doorway stood a woman in an apron so big for her it wrapped around twice. She had her hair carelessly pulled back, little wisps of it escaped and flew around as she turned her head.

“Ambril? Ambril! There you are!“ She shrieked as she ran down the steps. “A man named Sid came to us earlier and told us that you were alright and on your way back…just not where you were.” She ran down the path and gathered her daughter up in a hug.

“Mom! What are you…wait…are we?”

“Yes, yes! Isn’t it great?” but her mother pulled her back frowning. “And you have a lot of explaining to do! Didn’t you hear me say you couldn’t leave the house? Huh?”

Ambril looked sheepishly at her mother and shrugged. “Sorry, I---I couldn’t let my friends down.”

“Well I would like to ground you…forever…but Betula and that strange man Sid have been telling me about all the good things you’ve done.” Her mother said begrudgingly. “So, I guess I’ll just have to decide what to do tomorrow after you’ve had a chance to tell me---ouch!” Her mother stumbled over a ceramic gnome on the front porch.

“These little men are absolutely everywhere! In the house---in the garden---in the upstairs bathroom!” Said her mother rubbing her chin. “I remember Gran had a few but---“She paused to brush a strand of hair from her face as she looked around. “It’s amazing how well the house looks. It even smells clean. It’s as if some one has been getting it ready for us.”

Ambril’s eyes widened as she saw Bummil break his stance and roll his eyes at her mother.

Ambril jumped and said, “You never know, Mom, they might…well…grow on you, Mom.” She hastily shooed her mother into the house.

Ambril gasped as she followed her mother inside. Gone were the cobwebs and piles of junk. The hole in the roof had been repaired and there was the smell of freshly scrubbed wood in the air. “Wow, this place looks great!” She said. There were more gnomes on the stairs. One of them winked at her as Zane sauntered casually down the steps.

“Hey, you nearly scared Mom to death you know with your vanishing act.” He wrinkled his nose at her. “I put your stuff in the small bedroom, it has a nice view of the garbage cans.” He continued nonchalantly “Mom’s gonna call about the furniture tomorrow, so we’re camping out tonight.” He said leading the way down the hallway and into the kitchen.

Betula smiled at Ambril from the stove. “Well look who’s here!”

Whatever she was stirring smelled fabulous and she was suddenly ravenous.

Betula read her mind. “You sure do work up an appetite saving the day don’t you?” She chuckled and nodded to the kitchen table. “Get yourself a bowl and I’ll fill it with this tasty soup. I brought some cherries and some artichoke bread to go with it too.” She twinkled at Ambril. “It’s real fresh just like you like it, and there are cookies for later.”

Ambril smiled gratefully and grabbed a bowl and spoon. She sat down on a rickety old stool that looked like it had spent the last twenty years in the rain, which it probably had, and ate along with everyone else. She could see Ygg and Unk outside on the patio steps, Ygg talking more than eating, Unk listening and smiling. Sully and her Dad were huddled on a bench near the fireplace. A moment later a tall, gaunt man dressed in black slid into the room. He gave Ambril a one eyed grin and a nod by way of a greeting.

“How’s…Aster. I mean Mrs. Sweetgum doing?” Ambril asked between spoonfuls.

“She’s asleep in her own bed, in a couple of days she’ll be back to work, I’m sure.” He smiled.

“That’s great news!” Said Ambril’s Mom, “we’ve missed her haven’t we?”

Both Ambril and Zane nodded vigorously.

“So, what happened to Feldez?” Asked Sid as he picked at a piece of bread.

Zane snorted, “Feldez? Who knows? He left and didn’t come back, as usual.“

“Oh! I thought you knew!” It was Sully’s Dad who had gotten up suddenly and had begun to unfold the newspaper he had had tucked under his arm. “Look!”

**PROMINENT DOCTOR CONFESSES**

**Dr. Feldez Petri, Trelawnyd’s most eminent scientist and medical professional has graciously come forward to set the record straight regarding his colleague and close associate, Dr. Bren Silva. Dr. Petri tells us that on the night of Dr. Silva’s death certain events occurred which, he claims, were inaccurately reported at the time.**

**He wishes all Trelawnyd residents to know that it was he that inadvertently raised the Dullaith that night, not Dr. Silva. All who know him feel certain that he must have done so in the name of scientific research and the furtherance of humanity. But that though he was able to finally subdue the creature, his heroics came too late and Dr. Silva, involved only in attempting to control and bring down the creature, had already succumbed to the monsters vicious attacks.**

**Indeed, Dr. Petri was in a coma himself for many months following his Herculean deed. And as it took him some time to realize the error in the accuracy of the incident’s report he offers this as his excuse for his tardiness in setting the record straight.**

**He wishes to extend his full apologies to the Silva family who recently moved back to Trelawnyd and also points out that at no time were any of the family involved in any of the Dullaith raisings, which occurred recently. Indeed he went so far as to say that we are all indebted to the Silva family as one of its members was responsible for vanquishing the monsters that have so terrorized our fair city.**

**On behalf of our entire community we wish to extend an acceptance of his confession and hope that his leave of absence does not mean he will be vacate his hometown for long. Best wishes to the Silva family, Tylia Derwyn Silva, Bren’s widow and their two children, Ambril and Zane. Welcome Home!**

There was a photograph of Feldez staring out from the page, the caption read:

***Dr. Petri plans to take an immediate leave of absence from his administrative post at Trelawnyd General Hospital***

Her mother had come to read the article over Ambril’s should. She half smiled.

“So, he’s moving on…I guess.” Said Ambril.

Her mother nodded. “Yes---and so are we!” Her mother’s eyes were clear and her smile sincere.

Betula came up behind them. “Tylia, I’ve been meaning to talk to you about these soaps and charms you’ve been making. Now you know that little bit of space between Larch’s market and my shop? Why don’t we open up a little---”

Ambril later remembered that conversation but the sickening lurching feeling, downward and to the right that happened just then wiped it temporarily from her memory.

“What was that?” cried Sully walking unsteadily towards her. She could see Ygg and Unk looking at her through the window, stunned.

“It be not a good thing I’ll wager.” Said Baldot folding his arms and looking up at Ambril from the hearth.

Away in the thickest part of the forest, the moon shone down on a thin figure bent over the central ring of an ancient circle stone. Half hidden in the shadows were the hulking remains of an old village.

The youth seemed to be trying to ignite something, as there were blue sparks flying all around him repeatedly. Finally a massive blue bolt of energy began streaming out of the center of the stone circle followed by a series of shockwaves and the sound of thunder.

The boy threw himself away from the stone; scrambling for safer ground. The stone began to quiver and shake as if under tremendous pressure. Then with a booming crack the stone split itself in two leaving a gaping fissure running through its center.

Black smoke and a fizzing, crackling sound escaped the void. A long, sinuous finger slithered up and out of the hole. Many followed it, flailing dark and shiny in the moonlight, each one seeking a purchase in the weathered stone.

They struck out at the boy who frantically crawled backward and into the shadows, just as something heaved itself into the moonlight. It was certainly not human. It had a thick metallic mass for a body pieced only by glowing eyes and a narrow gash below for a mouth. It lifted itself up and out its tentacles attached Medusa like to its head and at the bottom where its feet once were.

It blinked owlishly up at the night sky but flinched in pain. Hunching over it crawled and slithered into the shadows.

The boy walked out from the other side of the circle stone. “Wait! You are Moroz, and I…I’m the one who freed you. I…I command you to pledge yourself to me.” He said his voice shaky. “In return I’ll---“

A low guttural sound something like a laugh escaped from the shadows. “You…command me, boy?” A racking cough followed.

Without warning a tentacle snaked out of the shadows, gathered the boy up and tossed him twenty feet across the stone. The boy landed with such force he rolled several times before coming to a stop at the edge of the smoking fissure. He lay motionless, unconscious.

The monster was on the move again. Moroz made a slithering grating sound as he made his way toward the forest surrounding the clearing. He paused just as he reached the edge of the forest.

“Still…he might be useful.” He mused. Several metallic tentacles snaked back toward the boy binding him securely. As Moroz crawled into the deepest shadows of the forest he dragged behind him the still form of a young boy.